PEOPLE OF THE BIBLE

Forty Lives That Point to God



Real people with real failures,
and the faithful God who never let them go.

ANDREW DOMINGUEZ

TRINFINITY
Enterprises

People of the Bible

Forty Lives That Point to God

Andrew Dominguez

People of the Bible: Forty Lives That Point to God

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Independently published.

Trinfinity Enterprises, Dayton, Nevada.

A note before you begin. This book is written to teach the Bible and encourage faith. It shares my understanding of Scripture and is offered for study and spiritual growth. It is not counseling, medical, legal, or financial advice. If you are facing a crisis, a health problem, or a legal or money problem, please reach out to a qualified professional as well as your pastor and church family. To the fullest extent the law allows, Andrew Dominguez, Trinfinity Enterprises, and Andrew Dominguez's heirs, estate, successors, and assigns accept no liability for how this material is used.

A Note on the Bible Translation Used in This Book

My preferred Bible for personal study, teaching, and research is the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). I chose it because it is a word-for-word translation in today's language, built on the ancient Scripture sources: the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I prepared the SLB myself, and the Scripture in this book is taken from it.

Where a literal phrase would mislead an English reader, the SLB gives the writer's meaning in plain words. Words added for sense are set in bold italics so you can see what is in the original and what is not.

The complete Steadfast Literal Bible is free to read, search, download, and print at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb. If you want to check a verse in its full setting or read the translation's preface and principles, that is the place to go.

Above all, my desire is not to promote one translation over another, but to faithfully teach the Word of God, encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, and help readers grow in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the Lord.

May every page of this book direct attention not to the translation itself, but to the truth of God's Word and the One whom it reveals.

Contents

Before You Begin....1

Part One: In the Beginning

Chapter 1: Adam and Eve: Made in His Image....5
Chapter 2: Noah: Faithful in a Faithless World....9
Chapter 3: Abraham: The Friend of God....12
Chapter 4: Sarah: Nothing Too Hard for the LORD....16
Chapter 5: Jacob: The Man Who Wrestled With God....19
Chapter 6: Joseph: From the Pit to the Palace....22
Chapter 7: Job: Faith in the Dark....25

Part Two: Out of Egypt and Into the Land

Chapter 8: Moses: The Reluctant Deliverer....29
Chapter 9: Joshua: Strong and Courageous....32
Chapter 10: Rahab: Scarlet Cord, Changed Life....35
Chapter 11: Deborah: A Mother in Israel....38
Chapter 12: Gideon: The Least in His Father's House....41
Chapter 13: Samson: Strong Body, Weak Heart....44
Chapter 14: Ruth: Loyal Love....47

Part Three: Kings, Prophets, and Exiles

Chapter 15: Hannah: A Prayer Poured Out....51
Chapter 16: Samuel: Speak, LORD, Your Servant Is Listening....54
Chapter 17: Saul: The King Who Started Well....57
Chapter 18: David: A Man After God's Own Heart....60
Chapter 19: Solomon: Wisdom That Was Not Enough....63
Chapter 20: Elijah: Fire From Heaven, Whisper in the Cave....66
Chapter 21: Elisha: A Double Portion....70
Chapter 22: Jonah: The Runaway Prophet....73
Chapter 23: Jeremiah: The Weeping Prophet....76
Chapter 24: Daniel: Faithful in Babylon....79
Chapter 25: Esther: For Such a Time as This....83
Chapter 26: Nehemiah: Prayer and a Trowel....87

Part Four: In the Days of Jesus

Chapter 27: Mary: The Servant of the Lord....92
Chapter 28: John the Baptist: He Must Increase....95
Chapter 29: Peter: The Rock Who Cracked and Was Restored....98
Chapter 30: John: From Son of Thunder to Apostle of Love....102
Chapter 31: Mary Magdalene: First Witness of the Risen Lord....105
Chapter 32: Martha and Mary: The Friends at Bethany....108
Chapter 33: Thomas: From Doubt to Worship....111

Chapter 34: Judas Iscariot: Close to Jesus, Far From Him....114
Chapter 35: Nicodemus: The Teacher Who Came by Night....117
Chapter 36: Zacchaeus: The Day Salvation Came to His House....120

Part Five: The Early Church

Chapter 37: Stephen: Full of Faith and Power....124
Chapter 38: Barnabas: The Son of Encouragement....127
Chapter 39: Paul: The Persecutor Who Became an Apostle....130
Chapter 40: Priscilla and Aquila: A Home Open for the Gospel....134
The One They All Point To....137
Appendix A: Timeline of the People in This Book....140
Appendix B: A Forty-Day Reading Plan....142
Appendix C: Words to Know....145
About This Book....146
Scripture Index....147

Before You Begin

> *For whatever things were written beforehand were written beforehand for our instruction, so that through the endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we may have the hope.*
>
> Romans 15:4 (SLB)

The Bible is not a book of rules with a few stories sprinkled in to keep us awake. It is, for the most part, a book about people. Real men and women with names, families, hometowns, jobs, fears, and failures. A farmer's wife who could not have children. A shepherd boy who killed a giant and later took another man's wife. A fisherman who swore he would die for Jesus and then denied Him three times before the sun came up. A tax collector who climbed a tree because he was too short to see over the crowd.

Translating the Steadfast Literal Bible and writing a study on every book of the Bible, I was struck by how honest Scripture is about the people God used. They were ordinary men and women who doubted, stumbled and still found God faithful. I wrote this book so readers can see how God works through imperfect people.

God put their stories in His Word on purpose. Paul said so plainly: the things that happened to Israel "happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition" (1 Corinthians 10:11). Their lives are mirrors and maps. In them we see ourselves, and we see the way home.

What You Will Find in This Book

This book walks through forty people of the Bible, from Adam and Eve in the garden to Priscilla and Aquila in the early church. A few chapters cover two people together, because the Bible tells their stories together, but each chapter centers on one life or one household.

Every chapter follows the same simple pattern:

1. **At a Glance.** A short box gives what the name means, when and where the person lived, where to read their story, and what they are best known for.
2. **What Happened.** I retell the story in plain words, in the order the Bible gives it, with the references so you can read it for yourself.
3. **What God Did.** This is the most important section. Every one of these people is in the Bible because God was at work in their life. The hero of every chapter is God.
4. **What We Learn.** A few plain lessons for our own walk with God.
5. **Study Questions.** Questions for your own reading or for a small group.

Heroes With Feet of Clay

You will notice something as you read. Almost nobody in this book is a spotless hero. Noah got drunk. Abraham lied about his wife, twice. Jacob was a schemer. Moses killed a man. Samson could not keep

away from the wrong women. David committed adultery and arranged a murder. Elijah ran for his life and asked God to let him die. Peter denied the Lord. Thomas doubted.

The Bible does not hide any of that, and I have not hidden it either. That honesty is one of the reasons I trust the Bible. Legends polish their heroes. The Bible shows them with the dirt still on their boots.

But the point is not their failures, and the point is not their successes either. The point is the God who stayed faithful to them. The writer of Hebrews lists many of these same people in what is often called the Hall of Faith, Hebrews 11, and then says they are a "cloud of witnesses" around us (Hebrews 12:1). Then he tells us where to look: "looking to the founder and perfecter of the faith, Jesus" (Hebrews 12:2). Every life in this book, in one way or another, points to Him.

Who Is In and Who Is Out

Choosing forty people out of the Bible means leaving out many others I love. Isaac, Aaron, Miriam, Caleb, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Ezra, Timothy, Lydia, and dozens more could easily fill another book. I chose people whose stories are told at some length, who cover the whole sweep of the Bible from Genesis to Acts, and who show us something about God that we need to see. Several of the people left out still show up inside other chapters. Isaac is in Abraham's and Jacob's chapters, Aaron and Miriam in Moses' chapter, and Timothy in Paul's.

The chapters run in roughly the order the people lived, grouped into five parts:

- **Part One: In the Beginning**, the people of Genesis, plus Job, who most likely lived in the days of the patriarchs.
- **Part Two: Out of Egypt and Into the Land**, from Moses to Ruth.
- **Part Three: Kings, Prophets, and Exiles**, from Hannah and Samuel to Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.
- **Part Four: In the Days of Jesus**, the people who walked with Him, believed in Him, doubted Him, and in one case betrayed Him.
- **Part Five: The Early Church**, the first believers who carried the good news out into the world.

The last chapter, **The One They All Point To**, steps back and looks at Jesus Himself, the One every one of these lives was leading toward.

At the back you will find a timeline of everyone in the book, a forty-day reading plan that takes you through each person's story in your own Bible, a list of words to know, and an index of every Bible verse cited, with page numbers.

A Word About Dates

The Bible gives us many careful time markers, and Bible scholars have worked hard to line them up. Even so, dates before about 900 B.C. are approximate, and good scholars disagree on some of them, especially for Abraham, the Exodus, and the judges. In this book I use the dates that follow the Bible's own numbers most closely. For example, 1 Kings 6:1 says Solomon began building the temple 480 years after Israel came out of Egypt, which puts the Exodus at about 1446 B.C. Where a date is uncertain, I say "about." For the people before the flood, and for Job, I give no date at all, because we simply do not know.

A Few Notes Before We Start

Scripture quotations in this book come from the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). Words set in bold italics inside a quotation are words added in English to make the sentence read clearly. When I do not quote a passage, I give the reference so you can read it for yourself, and I hope you will. Don't take my word for anything in this book. Open your Bible and check it, the way the Bereans did in Acts 17:11.

I capitalize the pronouns that refer to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit (He, Him, His, You, Your) as a sign of reverence. Inside a Scripture quotation, I leave the capitals exactly as the translation prints them.

When the Bible tells us what a person thought or felt, I say so. When it does not, and I am filling in what a person might have felt, I try to make that clear with words like "imagine" or "I suspect." I would rather leave a gap than put words in the mouth of someone God has already described for us.

One last thing. You can read this book straight through, but you do not have to. Every chapter stands on its own. If you are walking through a hard season and need to sit with Job, or Hannah, or Elijah, go there first. These are not just stories about long ago. The same God who met them is ready to meet you.

Part One: In the Beginning

Chapter 1: Adam and Eve: Made in His Image

> *And God created mankind in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*
>
> Genesis 1:27 (SLB)

At a Glance

Names: Adam means “man” or “humankind,” and is close to the Hebrew word for ground (adamah). Eve means “living,” because she was “the mother of every living ***one***” (Genesis 3:20).

When: At the beginning, before any dates we can count.

Where: The garden in Eden, then the land east of it.

Where to read it: Genesis 1:26-5:5; Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, 45-49; 1 Timothy 2:13-14.

Known for: The first man and woman, the first sin, and the first promise of a Savior.

Every one of us has a family tree, and every family tree runs back to the same two people. Before there was a nation of Israel, before there was a single city, before anyone had ever told a lie or buried a child, there was a man and a woman in a garden, walking with God in the cool of the day.

Their story is short. It takes up only a few chapters at the front of the Bible. But nearly every page after it depends on what happened there. If you want to understand why the world is the way it is, why people do what they do, and why Jesus had to come, you have to start with Adam and Eve.

Looking back at the seasons I drifted from God, I can see the pattern of Genesis 3. It did not start with a decision to walk away. It started with telling myself one small compromise would not hurt. Seeing Eve's temptation reminds us to stop compromise at the first thought.

What Happened

On the sixth day of creation, God did something He had not done with anything else He made. He spoke within Himself: “Let Us make mankind in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). The sun, the seas, the animals, all came by His word. But man came by His hands and His breath.

> *And the LORD God formed the man **of** dust from the ground, and He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.* (Genesis 2:7)

God placed the man in a garden He had planted in Eden, “to work it and to keep it” (Genesis 2:15). Adam had a job before he ever had a problem. Work is not part of the curse. Work came first, and it was good.

God gave Adam one command. He could eat from every tree in the garden except one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. “in the day you eat from it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17).

Then, for the first time in the creation story, God said something was not good: “It is not good ***for*** the man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). God brought the animals to Adam to name, and as Adam worked his way through them, it became clear that none of them was a match for him. So God put Adam into a deep sleep,

took one of his ribs, and built a woman from it. When Adam woke and saw her, he spoke the first poem in the Bible:

> *And the man said, "This **one** this time **is** bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh; this **one** shall be called 'Woman,' because from man this **one** was taken."* (Genesis 2:23)

The two of them were naked and were not ashamed (Genesis 2:25). Nothing stood between them and each other, and nothing stood between them and God.

Then the serpent came. Genesis 3 does not tell us everything about him, but the rest of the Bible does. Revelation 12:9 calls him "the ancient serpent, who is called ***the*** devil and Satan." His first words to Eve were a question that made God's word sound small and harsh: "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?" (Genesis 3:1). Eve answered, and even added to God's command, saying they could not even touch the tree. Then the serpent told the first outright lie: "You shall not surely die" (Genesis 3:4).

Eve looked at the fruit. It was good for food, pleasing to the eye, and desirable to make one wise. She took it and ate, "and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate" (Genesis 3:6). Notice that little phrase, "with her." Adam was not off in another part of the garden. He was standing right there.

Immediately their eyes were opened, just as the serpent promised, but what they saw was their own shame. They sewed fig leaves together and hid among the trees. When God came walking in the garden and called, "Where ***are*** you?" (Genesis 3:9), Adam blamed the woman, and the woman blamed the serpent.

God pronounced judgment. The serpent would crawl in the dust. The woman would bear children in pain, and there would be struggle in her marriage. The ground would fight the man, producing thorns and thistles, and he would eat by the sweat of his face until he returned to the dust he came from. Then God drove them out of the garden and placed cherubim with a flaming sword to guard the way to the tree of life.

Life outside the garden was hard from the very start. Their firstborn son, Cain, murdered their second son, Abel. Later God gave them another son, Seth, and through his line came Noah, Abraham, David, and, many centuries later, Jesus. Adam lived 930 years, and then, just as God had said, he died (Genesis 5:5).

What God Did

God made them in His image. Before Adam and Eve did anything right or wrong, God gave them a dignity no animal shares. Every human being you will ever meet, of every color, age, and ability, carries that image. That is why murder is so serious (Genesis 9:6), and it is why even the person you like least is worth treating with respect (James 3:9).

God came looking for them. When they hid, God did not wait for them to come crawling back. He went to them. "Where ***are*** you?" was not a question from Someone who did not know. It was the call of a Father inviting His children to come out of hiding. From the first chapter of human sin, God has been the One who seeks.

God gave a promise right in the middle of the curse. Before God said a word to Adam or Eve about their punishment, He spoke to the serpent:

> *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you **on the** head, and you shall bruise him **on the** heel.* (Genesis 3:15)

Bible teachers have long called this the first gospel. A descendant of the woman would one day crush the serpent's head, though He would be wounded in the process. Paul tells us who that Seed is: Jesus, "born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4), who through His death destroyed "the one who holds the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:14).

God covered their shame. Fig leaves were their own attempt. God replaced them: "the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and He clothed them" (Genesis 3:21). For there to be skins, something had to die. From the very beginning, God was showing that sin is covered by a sacrifice He provides, not by anything we stitch together ourselves.

God kept them from living forever in their sin. Sending them out of the garden looks harsh at first. But God said He did it so they would not "take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever" (Genesis 3:22). To live forever in a fallen body, in a fallen world, with no way back, would have been the real disaster. The way back to the tree of life would come later, through the cross, and Revelation 22:2 shows that tree again in the new creation.

What We Learn

1. **Doubt usually starts with a question about what God said.** The serpent did not start by denying God. He started by twisting God's word. When you hear yourself thinking, "Did God really say that?", go back and read what He actually said.
2. **Sin promises more than it delivers.** The fruit did open their eyes, but not to what they expected. Every temptation is a little like that. It tells the truth just enough to make the lie believable.
3. **Blame is the first fruit of guilt.** Adam blamed Eve, and in a way he blamed God too: "The woman whom You put with me" (Genesis 3:12). Real repentance stops pointing fingers and says, "I did it."
4. **We are all in Adam, and we can all be in Christ.** Paul puts the two side by side. "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22). Adam's choice brought death to the whole human family. Jesus, whom Paul calls "the last Adam" (1 Corinthians 15:45), obeyed where Adam failed and brings life to everyone who belongs to Him.
5. **God's first word after our failure is not the end of the story.** The same chapter that tells of the fall also gives the first promise of a Savior. If you have made a mess of your life, the God of Genesis 3 is still the God who seeks, covers, and promises.

Study Questions

1. Genesis 1:27 says God made man and woman in His image. How should that truth change the way you treat people you disagree with?
2. Read Genesis 3:1-6. What steps do you see in Eve's temptation? Where do you see the same steps in your own life?

3. Why do you think Adam and Eve hid instead of running to God? What makes us hide from Him today?

4. Read Genesis 3:15 and 3:21. What do these verses tell you about God's heart toward sinners?

5. Read Romans 5:17-19. What did Adam bring into the world, and what does Jesus bring?

Chapter 2: Noah: Faithful in a Faithless World

> *And Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. These **are** the generations of Noah. Noah **was** a righteous man; blameless he was in his generations; with God Noah walked.*
>
> Genesis 6:8-9 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Noah sounds like the Hebrew word for rest or comfort. His father Lamech named him hoping he would bring relief from the hard work of the cursed ground (Genesis 5:29).

When: Before the flood, ten generations after Adam. No dates can be counted with confidence.

Where: Somewhere in the ancient Near East. The ark came to rest "on the mountains of Ararat" (Genesis 8:4), in the region of modern eastern Turkey and Armenia.

Where to read it: Genesis 5:28-9:29; Matthew 24:37-39; Hebrews 11:7; 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5.

Known for: Building the ark, surviving the flood, and receiving God's covenant sealed with the rainbow.

Most of us met Noah in a children's picture book, with a smiling old man, a cheerful boat, and giraffes poking their heads out the window. That picture is not wrong, exactly, but it leaves out almost everything that makes Noah's story worth telling. The flood was not a cute story. It was the most terrifying judgment the world has ever seen, and Noah lived through it because God chose to show him grace.

What Happened

By the time of Noah, the world had gone bad all the way down. Genesis does not soften it:

> *And the LORD saw that the evil of mankind **was** great on the earth, and every inclination of the thoughts of his heart **was** only evil all the day.* (Genesis 6:5)

The word that keeps coming up in Genesis 6 is violence. The earth was "filled with violence" (Genesis 6:11). Cain's murder of Abel had become a way of life. God was grieved in His heart that He had made man on the earth (Genesis 6:6). He decided to wipe out mankind and start over.

But there was one exception. "Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD" (Genesis 6:8). The word for favor there is the word for grace. Noah did not earn his way out of the flood. He found grace. Then the next verse tells us what that grace produced in him: he was righteous, blameless in his generations, and "with God Noah walked" (Genesis 6:9), the same phrase used of his great-grandfather Enoch (Genesis 5:24).

God told Noah to build an ark, a huge wooden box about 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high, using the common length of a cubit at about eighteen inches. That is roughly the length of one and a half football fields. It had three decks, rooms inside, a door in the side, and a covering of pitch inside and out (Genesis 6:14-16). Into it would go Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives, and pairs of every kind of land animal and bird, with seven pairs of the clean animals (Genesis 7:2-3).

We are not told exactly how long the building took. Many have guessed it took decades, based on Genesis 5:32 and 7:6, but the text does not say. What it does say is short and powerful: “And Noah did according to all that God commanded him; so he did” (Genesis 6:22). Peter tells us that Noah was also “a herald of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:5). All those years of hammering were also years of warning. Nobody listened.

When Noah was six hundred years old, the rain came. “all the springs of ***the*** great deep were split open, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened” (Genesis 7:11). It rained forty days and forty nights, and the waters rose over the highest mountains. Everything with the breath of life on dry land died. “Only Noah was left, and those who ***were*** with him in the ark” (Genesis 7:23).

Then comes one of the most tender lines in the Old Testament: “And God remembered Noah” (Genesis 8:1). In the Bible, when God remembers someone, it does not mean He had forgotten. It means He acts on their behalf. God sent a wind, the waters went down, and the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. Noah sent out a raven, then a dove, and then the dove again, which came back with a fresh olive leaf in its beak. The third time, the dove did not come back at all. After more than a year inside the ark, Noah’s family stepped out onto a washed world.

The first thing Noah did was build an altar and offer sacrifices to the LORD (Genesis 8:20). God answered with a promise. He would never again destroy all life with a flood, and He set His rainbow in the clouds as the sign of that covenant (Genesis 9:8-17).

The story does not end on that high note, though. Noah planted a vineyard, drank too much of the wine, and lay uncovered in his tent. His son Ham saw him and told his brothers, while Shem and Japheth walked in backward and covered their father without looking (Genesis 9:20-27). The man who stood alone against a wicked world could not stand against a jug of wine. The Bible tells us that too.

What God Did

God judged sin seriously. We live in a day when people like to imagine a God who never gets angry. The flood says otherwise. God is patient, but He is not careless about evil. Peter tells us the flood is a preview of a greater judgment still to come, when the present heavens and earth will be judged by fire (2 Peter 3:5-7).

God gave grace before He gave instructions. The order in Genesis 6 matters. First Noah found favor. Then God told him to build. Noah’s obedience was a response to grace, not a way to earn it. That is the pattern all through the Bible.

God provided one way of escape. There was one ark with one door. Everyone inside was saved, and everyone outside was lost. Peter connects the ark to salvation in Christ (1 Peter 3:20-21). Just as Noah’s family was carried safely through the waters of judgment inside the ark, everyone who is in Christ is carried safely through the judgment their sins deserve.

God shut the door. Genesis 7:16 contains a small detail with a big meaning: “and the LORD shut ***it*** behind him.” Noah did not have to close the door himself and hope it held. God closed it. Our safety in Christ rests on God’s hands, not ours.

God made a covenant with all creation. The rainbow covenant was not only with Noah but with "every living being" (Genesis 9:10). Every rainbow since is a reminder that God keeps His word, even to a world that does not deserve it.

What We Learn

1. **You can walk with God even when nobody else does.** Noah's generation was wicked from top to bottom, yet he walked with God. Do not wait for the culture around you to change before you live faithfully.
2. **Faith often looks foolish before it looks wise.** Hebrews 11:7 says Noah built the ark "having been divinely instructed concerning the things not yet seen." For years, Noah looked like a fool building a boat on dry ground. Then it rained.
3. **Jesus said the days before He returns will be like the days of Noah.** People were "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage" (Matthew 24:38). Life looked normal right up to the day the door closed. I believe the next great event on God's calendar is the Rapture of the church, when Jesus takes His people to be with Him before the time of judgment called the tribulation (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; 5:9). Just as Noah was lifted above the waters of judgment, God has promised to keep His church from "the hour of testing which is about to come upon the whole inhabited world" (Revelation 3:10).
4. **Great faith does not make a person sin-proof.** Noah's drunkenness came after his greatest victory. Some of our most dangerous moments come right after God has done something great through us. Stay humble and stay alert.

Study Questions

1. Genesis 6:8 says Noah "found favor." Why does it matter that grace comes before obedience in Noah's story?
2. Noah obeyed God for many years without seeing any sign of rain. What has God asked you to keep doing even though you cannot see the result yet?
3. Read Matthew 24:36-42. What did the people of Noah's day miss? How can you stay ready for Jesus' return?
4. What does the detail "the LORD shut ***it*** behind him" (Genesis 7:16) tell you about your security in Christ?
5. Why do you think the Bible includes the story of Noah's drunkenness right after the flood?

Chapter 3: Abraham: The Friend of God

*And he believed in the LORD, and He counted it to him **as** righteousness.*

Genesis 15:6 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Abram means "exalted father." God changed it to Abraham, "father of a multitude" (Genesis 17:5).

When: About 2166 to 1991 B.C., following the Bible's own numbers. Many scholars place him a few centuries later.

Where: Born in Ur of the Chaldeans in southern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), then Haran, then Canaan, with a stay in Egypt.

Where to read it: Genesis 11:26-25:11; Romans 4; Galatians 3:6-9; Hebrews 11:8-19; James 2:21-23.

Known for: Leaving home at God's call, believing God's promise of a son, and offering Isaac on Mount Moriah.

Three of the world's great religions claim Abraham as their father. Jews call him father by birth. Muslims honor him as a prophet. Christians call him the father of all who believe. Very few people in history have cast a shadow that long. Yet when we meet him in Genesis 11, he is just a name in a family list, a man with a wife who cannot have children, living in a city that worshiped the moon.

Abraham's life is the story of what happens when God speaks to an ordinary man and that man believes Him.

What Happened

Abram's family came from Ur, a wealthy city on the Euphrates River. Joshua tells us plainly that Abram's family "served other gods" there (Joshua 24:2). Abram did not go looking for the true God. The true God came looking for him.

> *And the LORD said to Abram, "Go for yourself from your land and from your kindred and from the house of your father, to the land which I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great; and be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who disdains you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."* (Genesis 12:1-3)

Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out (Genesis 12:4). He did not know where he was going (Hebrews 11:8). He just went. When he reached Canaan, God appeared to him again and promised, "To your seed I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7). Abram built an altar there. Everywhere Abram went, he left a trail of altars behind him.

His faith was real, but it was not steady. A famine drove him to Egypt, and there, afraid the Egyptians would kill him to take his beautiful wife Sarai, he told her to say she was his sister. Pharaoh took her into his palace, and God had to strike Pharaoh's house with plagues to get her back (Genesis 12:10-20). Years

later Abraham told the same lie again, to Abimelech king of Gerar (Genesis 20). The father of faith was also a man who was afraid.

There were also moments of real greatness. When Abram and his nephew Lot had too many flocks to share the same land, Abram let Lot choose first, and Lot chose the well-watered plain near Sodom (Genesis 13). When Lot was taken captive by raiding kings, Abram armed 318 of his own servants and rescued him (Genesis 14). Afterward, he gave a tenth of everything to Melchizedek, the mysterious king of Salem and "priest of God Most High" (Genesis 14:18), and refused to keep even a sandal strap from the king of Sodom.

Year after year went by, and still no son. One night God took Abram outside and told him to look up and count the stars, if he could. "So will your seed be," God said. And then comes one of the most important verses in the whole Bible: Abram "believed in the LORD, and He counted it to him ***as*** righteousness" (Genesis 15:6).

Even after that, Abram and Sarai grew impatient. At Sarai's suggestion, Abram took her Egyptian servant Hagar as a second wife, and Hagar bore him a son, Ishmael (Genesis 16). It was the custom of the time, but it was not God's plan, and it brought years of conflict into the family.

When Abram was ninety-nine, God renamed him Abraham and gave him the sign of circumcision. He promised that Sarah, now ninety, would bear a son within the year. Abraham fell on his face and laughed (Genesis 17:17). So did Sarah, when she overheard the same promise (Genesis 18:12). But God did exactly what He said, and they named the boy Isaac, which means "he laughs."

Then came the hardest test of Abraham's life. God told him to take Isaac, "your only ***son***, whom you love" (Genesis 22:2), to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering. Abraham rose early in the morning and went. On the third day, as they climbed the mountain, Isaac asked the question that must have torn his father's heart: "Look, the fire and the wood, and where ***is*** the lamb for a burnt offering?" (Genesis 22:7). Abraham answered, "God will see to the lamb for Himself for a burnt offering, my son" (Genesis 22:8).

Abraham bound Isaac, laid him on the altar, and raised the knife. At that moment the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and stopped him. Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in a thicket by its horns, and he offered it in place of his son. He named the place "The LORD Will See" (Genesis 22:14). The idea is that the LORD sees ahead and sees to it. That is why many English Bibles render the name "The LORD Will Provide."

Abraham lived to be 175. When Sarah died, he bought a burial cave at Machpelah near Hebron, the only piece of the Promised Land he ever owned. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him there beside her (Genesis 25:9).

What God Did

God chose and called him. Abraham did not climb up to God. God came down to Abraham, a man from an idol-worshiping family. Salvation always starts with God's call.

God counted his faith as righteousness. Genesis 15:6 is the verse Paul builds on in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. Abraham was declared right with God before he was circumcised and four hundred years before the law of Moses was given. That means he was saved the same way anyone is saved: by trusting God's promise. Paul says that this was written not "on account of him alone," but for us also, who believe in Him who raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 4:23-24).

God bound Himself with a covenant. In Genesis 15, God had Abram cut animals in half, as men did in that day when they made a binding agreement. Normally both parties walked between the pieces, as if to say, "May this happen to me if I break my word." But only God passed between them, as a smoking oven and a flaming torch (Genesis 15:17). God took the whole weight of the promise on Himself.

God kept His promises to Abraham's family. God promised Abraham land, descendants, and blessing to all nations. The rest of the Old Testament is the story of God keeping the first two promises with Israel. And the third promise comes true in Jesus, Abraham's descendant, through whom people from every nation are blessed (Galatians 3:8, 16). I believe the land promise to Israel still stands, too, because God's gifts and calling are irrevocable (Romans 11:29).

God provided the Lamb. On Mount Moriah God provided a ram in Isaac's place. About two thousand years later, on a hill in the same region of Jerusalem, God provided His own Son. Abraham's words to Isaac turned out to be a prophecy: God Himself would see to the Lamb. John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

What We Learn

1. **Faith means taking God at His word before you see it.** Abraham left home without a map and waited twenty-five years for a son. Faith is not a feeling. It is trusting that God will do what He said.
2. **Running ahead of God makes a mess.** The Hagar plan seemed sensible at the time. It caused heartache for generations. When God's timing feels slow, the answer is to wait, not to manufacture the promise ourselves.
3. **God can use people with real flaws.** The same man who lied about his wife twice is called "a friend of God" (James 2:23). God's grace is bigger than our worst moments.
4. **The things we love most belong to God.** Abraham's test on Moriah was not about whether he loved Isaac. It was about whether he loved God more. Hebrews 11:19 says he reasoned that God could even raise Isaac from the dead.
5. **Real faith shows up in obedience.** James points to Moriah as proof that Abraham's faith was alive (James 2:21-23). We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.

Study Questions

1. Read Genesis 12:1-4. What did Abram have to leave behind? What might God be asking you to leave behind?
2. Why is Genesis 15:6 so important to the New Testament? Read Romans 4:1-5 and talk about it.
3. Abraham lied about Sarah twice, out of fear. What fears tempt you to cut corners with the truth?
4. Read Genesis 22:1-14. How does this story point ahead to the cross?

5. Is there anything in your life you are holding more tightly than you hold God?

Chapter 4: Sarah: Nothing Too Hard for the LORD

> *Is anything **too** wonderful for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, when the time revives, and Sarah **will have** a son.*
>
> Genesis 18:14 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Sarai probably means "my princess." God changed it to Sarah, "princess," because she would "become nations" and kings would come from her (Genesis 17:15-16).

When: About 2156 to 2029 B.C., following the Bible's numbers. She was ten years younger than Abraham.

Where: Ur, Haran, Canaan, Egypt, and finally Hebron, where she died.

Where to read it: Genesis 11:29-23:20; Isaiah 51:2; Romans 4:19; 9:9; Hebrews 11:11; 1 Peter 3:5-6.

Known for: Waiting most of her life for a child, laughing at God's promise, and giving birth to Isaac at ninety.

The very first thing the Bible tells us about Sarah is painful: "And Sarai was barren; she had no child" (Genesis 11:30). In her world, that was not just sad. It was a public shame. A woman's worth was often measured by the sons she gave her husband, and Sarah had none.

Then God promised her husband that he would become a great nation. Imagine being the wife in that story. Every time Abraham talked about God's promise, Sarah had to wonder, "How? Through whom?" For twenty-five years, the answer seemed to be, "Not through you."

My wife and I met through friends in 1988, she agreed to one date, and we married in 1990. Thirty-six years later, looking at our two grown daughters and our granddaughters, I see how much God built from a small beginning. Nothing is too hard for the Lord (Genesis 18:14).

What Happened

Sarah went everywhere Abraham went. She left Ur and Haran with him. She lived in tents for the rest of her life. And twice she was put in danger because her husband was afraid. In Egypt and again in Gerar, Abraham told her to say she was his sister, and both times she was taken into a king's household (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18). Both times God stepped in to protect her when her own husband did not.

After ten years in Canaan with no child, Sarah came up with a plan. She gave her servant Hagar to Abraham, hoping to have a family through her (Genesis 16:1-2). It was a common custom in that part of the world, and it worked, in a way. Hagar became pregnant. But then Hagar began to look down on Sarah, and Sarah turned bitter. She blamed Abraham, she treated Hagar harshly, and Hagar ran away into the wilderness. The plan that was supposed to fix Sarah's pain only deepened it.

Thirteen more years passed. Then one hot afternoon, three visitors came to Abraham's tent at the oaks of Mamre. Abraham hurried to welcome them, and Sarah baked bread. As the men ate, one of them, the

LORD Himself, asked, “Where ***is*** Sarah your wife?” Then He said that by this time next year, Sarah would have a son.

Sarah was standing at the tent door, listening. She was about eighty-nine years old, long past the age of childbearing, and she laughed to herself. “After I have become worn out, will I have pleasure, and my lord is old?” (Genesis 18:12).

The LORD heard the laugh she thought nobody heard. He asked Abraham why Sarah laughed, and then He asked the question that sits at the heart of her whole story:

> *Is anything **too** wonderful for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, when the time revives, and Sarah **will have** a son.* (Genesis 18:14)

Sarah was afraid, and she denied it. “I did not laugh.” But the LORD said, “No, but you did laugh” (Genesis 18:15). He did not let her pretend, but He also did not take back the promise.

A year later, the impossible happened. “And the LORD visited Sarah just as He had said” (Genesis 21:1). At ninety years old, Sarah held her own son in her arms. They named him Isaac, “he laughs,” and this time Sarah’s laughter was pure joy: “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh for me” (Genesis 21:6).

Sarah lived to be 127, the only woman in the Bible whose age at death is recorded (Genesis 23:1). Abraham wept for her and buried her in the cave at Machpelah.

What God Did

God chose to work through Sarah, not around her. When Abraham asked God to accept Ishmael as the son of promise, God said no. The covenant would come through Sarah’s son (Genesis 17:19-21). Sarah was not a side character in God’s plan. She was essential to it.

God protected her when others failed her. Twice her husband handed her over to save himself. Twice God sent plagues and warnings to bring her back. God sees the people who are hurt by the failures of those who should have protected them.

God gave her a new name. Abraham was not the only one renamed. God called her Sarah and said she would be the mother of nations and kings. The promise was personal.

God turned her laughter of doubt into laughter of joy. God does not ignore our doubts, but He also does not let them have the last word.

God did what only He could do. Paul says Abraham considered “the deadness of the womb of Sarah” (Romans 4:19) and still believed. Isaac’s birth was not just a happy surprise. It was a miracle of life out of death, and it points ahead to a greater birth, when another child would be born to a woman by the power of God.

What We Learn

1. **Waiting is one of the hardest parts of faith.** Sarah waited twenty-five years after the first promise. If you are waiting on God for something, you are in good company. Waiting is not wasted when it is spent with God.
2. **Trying to force God's promises usually hurts people.** The Hagar plan wounded Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Abraham. When we take control of what God has promised to do, we often create new problems.
3. **God hears our private doubts.** Sarah laughed "within herself" (Genesis 18:12), and God still heard it. You do not have to hide your doubts from God. He already knows. Bring them to Him honestly.
4. **Nothing is too hard for the LORD.** This is the question God asked Sarah, and He asks it of us too. Your situation may be past what any human can fix. It is not past God.
5. **God remembers the faith we did have.** Hebrews 11:11 says that by faith Sarah received power to conceive, "since she considered Him faithful who had promised." The Bible remembers her faith, not just her laugh. God is kinder in His record of us than we often are of ourselves.

Study Questions

1. Read Genesis 16:1-6. What was Sarah feeling when she made her plan with Hagar? Have you ever tried to "help God out"? What happened?
2. Sarah laughed when she heard God's promise. What promise of God is hard for you to believe right now?
3. Read Genesis 18:14. Name one situation in your life where you need to remember that nothing is too hard for the LORD.
4. How does God's protection of Sarah in Egypt and Gerar encourage people who have been let down by others?
5. Read Hebrews 11:11-12. Why do you think the writer of Hebrews remembers Sarah for her faith?

Chapter 5: Jacob: The Man Who Wrestled With God

> *And he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men, and you have prevailed."*
>
> Genesis 32:28 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Jacob means "he grabs the heel," a Hebrew way of saying "he trips up" or "he cheats" (Genesis 25:26; 27:36). God renamed him Israel, because, God said, "you have striven with God and with men, and you have prevailed" (Genesis 32:28).

When: About 2006 to 1859 B.C., following the Bible's numbers.

Where: Canaan, especially Beersheba and Bethel; Paddan-aram (near Haran) for twenty years; Egypt at the end of his life.

Where to read it: Genesis 25:19-50:14; Hosea 12:2-4; Romans 9:10-13; Hebrews 11:21.

Known for: Taking Esau's birthright and blessing, the ladder at Bethel, wrestling with God, and fathering the twelve tribes of Israel.

If you have ever felt that you are too much of a mess for God to use, meet Jacob. He was a liar, a cheat, a manipulator, and a man who played favorites with his own children. And God put His own name on him. For thousands of years since, God has called Himself "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6). Not the God of Joseph, the faithful son. The God of Jacob, the schemer.

What Happened

Jacob's struggle started before he was born. His mother Rebekah was carrying twins, and they fought inside her so hard that she asked the LORD what was happening. God told her that two nations were in her womb, and "the elder will serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). When the twins were born, the second came out holding his brother's heel, and so they named him Jacob.

Esau grew up to be a hunter, a man of the open field, and his father Isaac's favorite. Jacob was a quiet man who stayed near the tents, and he was Rebekah's favorite (Genesis 25:27-28). One day Esau came in from the field starving, and Jacob had a pot of red stew ready. He offered a trade: the stew for Esau's birthright, the firstborn son's double share and leadership of the family. Esau, thinking only of his stomach, swore it away (Genesis 25:29-34).

Years later, when Isaac was old and nearly blind, he planned to give his final blessing to Esau. Rebekah overheard and came up with a plan. She dressed Jacob in Esau's clothes, covered his smooth arms with goatskins, and sent him in with Isaac's favorite meal. Isaac was suspicious, but he blessed Jacob anyway. When Esau came in and found out, he wept bitterly and vowed to kill his brother once their father died (Genesis 27).

Jacob fled for his life toward his uncle Laban's home in Haran. On the first night, alone in the wilderness with a stone for a pillow, he dreamed of a stairway reaching from earth to heaven, with angels going up and down on it, and the LORD standing above it. God repeated to Jacob the same promises He had made to Abraham, and then added a personal one:

> *And look, I **am** with you, and I will keep you in all **places** where you go, and I will bring you back to this ground; for I will not forsake you until I have done what I have spoken to you.* (Genesis 28:15)

Jacob woke up and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I, I did not know ***it***" (Genesis 28:16). He named the place Bethel, "house of God."

In Haran, the cheater met a better cheater. Jacob fell in love with Laban's younger daughter Rachel and agreed to work seven years for her. On the wedding night, Laban slipped his older daughter Leah into the tent instead. The next morning Jacob woke up married to the wrong woman. Laban gave him Rachel too, but only for seven more years of work (Genesis 29). Over the next twenty years, Jacob's family grew to eleven sons and a daughter, born to Leah, Rachel, and their two servants, and much heartache came with them. Rachel and Leah competed for their husband's love the whole time.

Finally God told Jacob to go home. On the way, he heard that Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred men. Terrified, Jacob sent his family across the Jabbok River and stayed behind alone. That night "a man wrestled with him until the going up of the dawn" (Genesis 32:24). Jacob would not let go. The man touched Jacob's hip and put it out of joint, and still Jacob held on: "I will not let you go unless you have blessed me" (Genesis 32:26). The man asked his name, and then gave him a new one. Jacob would now be Israel. Jacob named the place Peniel, "face of God," because, he said, "I have seen God face to face, and my life has been delivered" (Genesis 32:30). He limped for the rest of his life.

The next morning, Esau ran to meet him, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him, and they both wept (Genesis 33:4). The brother Jacob feared had forgiven him.

Jacob's later years were full of grief. His daughter Dinah was violated, and two of his sons took bloody revenge (Genesis 34). Rachel died giving birth to his twelfth son, Benjamin (Genesis 35:16-19). And Jacob repeated his parents' mistake by openly loving Rachel's son Joseph more than the others. The brothers sold Joseph and told Jacob he was dead, and Jacob mourned him for more than twenty years. In the end, though, God brought Jacob to Egypt, where he saw Joseph alive again. Before he died, he blessed each of his twelve sons, and from them came the twelve tribes of Israel.

What God Did

God chose Jacob before he did anything. Paul points out that God spoke before the twins were born, when they had not done "anything good or evil," so that God's purpose would stand, "not of works but of the ***One*** calling" (Romans 9:11-12). Jacob did not earn God's choice, and neither do we.

God met him at his lowest point. Jacob was not seeking God at Bethel. He was running from the mess he had made. That is exactly where God showed up, with promises instead of a lecture.

God let Jacob reap what he had sown. Jacob deceived his father with goatskins and a disguise. Laban deceived Jacob with a veil on his wedding night. Later Jacob's own sons would deceive him with Joseph's coat dipped in goat's blood (Genesis 37:31-33). God loved Jacob, but He did not shield him from the consequences of his choices. He used them to shape him.

God broke Jacob's strength to give him a new name. Jacob had always gotten his way by grabbing and scheming. At the Jabbok, God touched his hip and left him limping. From then on Jacob could not run or fight on his own strength. He could only cling. That is when God blessed him.

God kept every promise. At Bethel God promised to be with Jacob and bring him back. Twenty years later He did exactly that. And at the end, when Jacob thought he had lost Joseph forever, God gave him back not only his son but grandsons as well (Genesis 48:11).

What We Learn

1. **God's grace is bigger than our worst character flaws.** If God can be "the God of Jacob," He can be your God too.
2. **Favoritism wounds families.** Isaac favored Esau, Rebekah favored Jacob, and Jacob favored Joseph. Each time it tore the family apart. Parents, love your children openly and fairly.
3. **Sometimes God has to wound us before He can bless us.** The limp was God's gift to Jacob. A season of weakness may be the very thing that teaches you to hold on to God.
4. **Hold on to God in prayer.** Hosea says Jacob "wept and sought His favor" (Hosea 12:4). Bring your fears to God honestly, and do not let go.
5. **Reconciliation is possible.** Jacob spent twenty years afraid of his brother, and in the end Esau ran to embrace him. Whom do you need to go and make peace with?

Study Questions

1. Read Genesis 25:27-34. What do Jacob and Esau each value most? What does that tell you about each of them?
2. At Bethel, God met Jacob when he was running from his own sin. Has God ever met you in a similar place?
3. How did Jacob reap what he had sown? Read Galatians 6:7 and talk about it.
4. Read Genesis 32:22-32. Why do you think God left Jacob with a limp?
5. Is there someone you need to reconcile with, the way Jacob did with Esau? What first step could you take?

Chapter 6: Joseph: From the Pit to the Palace

> *And you, you planned evil against me; God planned it for good, so as to do as **it is** this day, to keep alive a numerous people.*
>
> Genesis 50:20 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Joseph means "may He add," from Rachel's prayer that God would add another son (Genesis 30:24).

When: About 1915 to 1805 B.C., following the Bible's numbers.

Where: Canaan, then Egypt, where he became second in command to Pharaoh.

Where to read it: Genesis 37-50; Psalm 105:16-22; Acts 7:9-16; Hebrews 11:22.

Known for: His coat, his dreams, being sold by his brothers, rising to rule Egypt, and forgiving the brothers who betrayed him.

Joseph's story takes up more of Genesis than any other person's except Abraham's. It reads like a novel, with betrayal, temptation, prison, dreams, a rise to power, a family reunion, and tears. And in all fourteen chapters, God never once appears in a vision to Joseph the way He did to Abraham and Jacob. Yet God's hand is on every page. Joseph's life is one of the clearest pictures in the Bible of how God works through ordinary events, even evil ones, to bring about His good purposes.

What Happened

Joseph was Jacob's eleventh son and the firstborn of Rachel, the wife Jacob loved. Jacob made no secret that Joseph was his favorite, and he gave him a special tunic, often called a coat of many colors. His brothers hated him for it, and they "were not able to speak to him in peace" (Genesis 37:4).

It did not help that Joseph had two dreams and told his family about both. In one, his brothers' sheaves of grain bowed down to his sheaf. In the other, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bowed down to him. Even his father rebuked him (Genesis 37:5-11).

One day Jacob sent seventeen-year-old Joseph to check on his brothers, who were pasturing the flocks far from home. When they saw him coming, they said, "Look, this master of the dreams is coming" (Genesis 37:19). They stripped off his coat and threw him into an empty pit. Then, at Judah's suggestion, they sold him for twenty pieces of silver to a caravan of traders headed to Egypt. They dipped his coat in goat's blood and let their father believe a wild animal had torn him apart.

In Egypt, Joseph was sold as a slave to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. Four times in Genesis 39, we are told the LORD was with Joseph, and Potiphar put him in charge of everything he owned. But Joseph was handsome, and Potiphar's wife tried day after day to seduce him. Joseph refused: "And how shall I do this great evil, and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9). One day she grabbed his garment, and he ran out of the house without it. She used the garment to accuse him of attacking her, and Potiphar threw him into prison.

Even in prison, "the LORD was with Joseph" (Genesis 39:21). The jailer put him in charge of the other prisoners. Two of them, Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker, each had a troubling dream, and God gave Joseph the meaning. The baker would be executed, and the cupbearer restored. It happened just as Joseph said. Joseph asked the cupbearer to remember him to Pharaoh, but the cupbearer forgot all about him for two more years (Genesis 40:23-41:1).

Then Pharaoh himself had two dreams that no one in Egypt could explain: seven thin cows eating seven fat cows, and seven thin heads of grain swallowing seven full ones. The cupbearer finally remembered Joseph. Joseph was shaved, dressed, and brought before Pharaoh, and his first words gave all the credit to God: "***It is*** not in me; God will answer ***for*** the welfare of Pharaoh" (Genesis 41:16). Seven years of plenty were coming, followed by seven years of severe famine. Joseph advised Pharaoh to store grain during the good years. Pharaoh put Joseph, now thirty years old, in charge of all Egypt, second only to himself.

The famine came, and it reached Canaan too. Jacob sent ten of his sons to Egypt to buy grain. They bowed before the governor of Egypt, never guessing it was the brother they had sold. Joseph recognized them immediately. Over two trips, he tested them, to see whether they had changed. When he threatened to keep Benjamin, Rachel's other son, as a slave, Judah, the same brother who had suggested selling Joseph, offered to stay as a slave in Benjamin's place (Genesis 44:18-34).

Joseph could not hold back any longer. He sent everyone else out of the room and wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it. "I ***am*** Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt," he said. Then, before they could even begin to be afraid, he told them how he saw it:

> *And now, do not be grieved, and let it not burn in your eyes that you sold me here; because for preservation of life God sent me before you.* (Genesis 45:5)

Joseph brought his father and the whole family down to Egypt and settled them in the land of Goshen. Jacob lived another seventeen years. When he died, the brothers were afraid Joseph would finally take his revenge. Joseph wept again, and said the words that sum up his whole life: "And you, you planned evil against me; God planned it for good" (Genesis 50:20).

What God Did

God was with Joseph in every place. In the pit, in Potiphar's house, in prison, and in the palace, God was there. Joseph's circumstances changed again and again. God's presence never did.

God used the evil done to Joseph for good. This is the great theme of Joseph's life. His brothers meant to destroy him, and they were responsible for that sin. But God took their evil act and wove it into His plan to save many lives, including theirs. Romans 8:28 is Joseph's life in one verse.

God gave him wisdom and favor. Joseph did not interpret dreams by his own skill. He said so to Pharaoh. God gave him understanding and made everything he did succeed.

God preserved the family of promise. Without Joseph in Egypt, Jacob's family might have starved, and the line that led to David and to Jesus would have been lost. God was protecting His promise to Abraham.

God changed the brothers' hearts. Judah, who once sold his brother for silver, offered his own freedom for Benjamin's. God was at work not only in Joseph but in the men who wronged him. Interestingly, it was through Judah, not Joseph, that the line of kings and the Messiah would come (Genesis 49:10).

What We Learn

1. **Being faithful does not guarantee being treated fairly.** Joseph did the right thing with Potiphar's wife and landed in prison for it. Doing right is still right, even when it costs us.
2. **Run from temptation.** Joseph did not stay to argue with Potiphar's wife. He ran. Paul gives the same advice: "Flee sexual immorality" (1 Corinthians 6:18).
3. **God's delays are not God's denials.** The cupbearer forgot Joseph for two years. Those two years were not wasted. God was getting the timing exactly right.
4. **Forgiveness looks at the bigger story.** Joseph could forgive because he saw God's hand above his brothers' hands. That does not make evil good. It means evil does not get the final word.
5. **Joseph points us to Jesus.** Joseph was loved by his father, rejected by his brothers, sold for silver, falsely accused, and then raised to the place of highest authority, from which he saved the very people who rejected him. Jesus walked the same road, all the way to the cross and the throne.

Study Questions

1. What mistakes did Jacob and Joseph each make in Genesis 37 that fed the brothers' hatred?
2. Read Genesis 39:7-12. What helped Joseph say no to temptation? What can you learn from how he handled it?
3. Joseph waited years in prison for something he did not do. How do you keep trusting God in a season of unfair treatment?
4. Read Genesis 50:15-21. How did Joseph's view of God make it possible for him to forgive?
5. Make a list of ways Joseph's life is like Jesus' life. Which one stands out to you most?

Chapter 7: Job: Faith in the Dark

> *And I, I know **that** my Redeemer lives, and last He will stand on **the** dust. And after my skin has been struck off, this, and from my flesh I will see God*
>
> Job 19:25-26 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: The meaning of Job is uncertain. Some connect it to a Hebrew word for "enemy" or "hated one," others to a word meaning "where is the father?"

When: Unknown. The book gives no king or nation to date it by, but Job offers sacrifices for his family as a father did before the law of Moses, and he lived about 140 years after his trials (Job 42:16). Many scholars place him in the days of the patriarchs.

Where: The land of Uz, probably east of Israel near Edom or Arabia.

Where to read it: Job 1-42; Ezekiel 14:14, 20; James 5:11.

Known for: Losing everything, refusing to curse God, wrestling honestly with suffering, and hearing God speak from the whirlwind.

Sooner or later, everyone asks the question that hangs over the book of Job: "Why do good people suffer?" Job asked it louder and longer than anyone in the Bible. He never got a simple answer. What he got was better. He got God.

I have placed Job here, at the end of Part One, because I believe he lived in the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But his story could belong to any century, including ours.

What Happened

The book opens by telling us four things about Job. He was "blameless and upright, and fearing God and turning aside from evil" (Job 1:1). He had seven sons and three daughters. He was enormously wealthy. And he was so devoted that after his children's feasts, he would rise early and offer sacrifices for them, just in case they had sinned against God in their hearts.

Then the curtain pulls back, and we see something Job never saw. The angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came with them. God pointed to Job: "Have you set your heart on My servant Job?" Satan sneered that Job only served God because God protected him. Take away his blessings, Satan said, and see "if he does not curse You to Your face!" (Job 1:11). God allowed Satan to test Job, but set a limit: he could not touch Job himself.

In a single day, the reports came one on top of another. Raiders stole his oxen and donkeys. Fire from heaven burned up his sheep. Another band took his camels. And then the worst news of all: a great wind struck the house where all ten of his children were feasting, and they were all killed. Job tore his robe, shaved his head, fell to the ground, and worshiped:

> *And he said, "Naked I came out from the womb of my mother, and naked I shall return there. The LORD has given, and the LORD has taken; let the name of the LORD be blessed."* (Job 1:21)

Satan came back and said that if God would touch Job's own body, Job would turn. God allowed it, but said Satan must spare his life. Job was struck with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. He sat in the ashes, scraping himself with a broken piece of pottery. His wife said, "Curse God and die." Job answered, "Shall we also accept the good from God, and not accept the evil?" (Job 2:10).

Three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, heard of his trouble and came to comfort him. At first they did the best thing they could have done. They sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights without saying a word, "for they saw that the pain was very great" (Job 2:13).

Then they opened their mouths. For most of the book, the three friends argue in long speeches that God always punishes the wicked and blesses the righteous. So, they reasoned, Job must have done something terrible. If he would only confess it, God would restore him. Job insisted he had not. He poured out his pain, his confusion, and at times his anger. He wished he had never been born. He demanded that God tell him what he had done wrong. And yet, in the middle of his darkest words, flashes of astonishing faith broke through, like his words in Job 19:25-26 that open this chapter: he knew that his Redeemer lives, and that in his flesh he would see God. A younger man, Elihu, spoke next, and pointed Job toward God's greatness and His purpose in suffering.

Finally, the LORD Himself answered Job out of a whirlwind. He did not explain about Satan or the test. Instead He asked Job a long series of questions. "Where were you when I founded the earth?" (Job 38:4). Can you command the morning? Can you send the lightning? Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Did you give the horse its strength? God walked Job through the wonders of creation until Job saw how small he was and how great God is.

Job answered humbly: "By the hearing of the ear I had heard of You, and now my eye has seen You" (Job 42:5). He repented of speaking about things he did not understand.

Then God turned to the three friends and said He was angry with them, because they had not spoken what was right about Him, as Job had. God told them to offer sacrifices, and to ask Job to pray for them. When Job prayed for his friends, the LORD restored his fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before. He had seven more sons and three more daughters, and his daughters were the most beautiful in the land. Job lived another 140 years and saw four generations of his family.

What God Did

God set the limits. Satan could do nothing to Job without God's permission, and he could not go one inch past the line God drew. Our suffering may be real and terrible, but it is never outside God's rule.

God was proud of Job. It was God, not Satan, who brought Job up. God was confident Job's faith was real, and Job proved Him right.

God allowed Job to speak honestly. Much of what Job said was raw and angry. Yet God said Job had spoken what was right, while the friends with their neat answers had not. God would rather hear our honest cries than our pious-sounding mistakes.

God answered with Himself. God never explained the reason for Job's suffering. He showed Job who He is. When Job saw God, his questions did not all get answered, but they no longer needed to be.

God restored him. James says, "You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the outcome of ***the*** Lord, that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful" (James 5:11). The end of Job's story shows what God's heart was all along.

What We Learn

1. **Not all suffering is punishment for sin.** Job's friends were wrong. Jesus corrected the same mistake when His disciples asked whose sin made a man born blind (John 9:1-3). Be very slow to tell a hurting person why they are hurting.
2. **The best comfort is often silent.** The friends were at their best during the seven days they said nothing. Sometimes the most loving thing you can do is sit on the ground beside someone and stay.
3. **You can bring your hardest questions to God.** Job's faith was not quiet, but it was faith. He kept talking to God, not just about Him.
4. **There is more going on than we can see.** Job never learned about the conversation in heaven. We may not understand our suffering in this life. That does not mean it has no purpose.
5. **Our Redeemer lives.** Job longed for a Redeemer and a mediator between him and God (Job 9:33; 19:25). We know His name. Jesus is the One who stands between us and God, and He lives forever.

Study Questions

1. Read Job 1:20-22. How could Job worship on the worst day of his life?
2. What did Job's friends get right, and what did they get wrong? How can you be a better friend to someone who is suffering?
3. Have you ever been told, or thought, that someone's suffering was their own fault? What does Job teach about that?
4. Read Job 38:1-11. Why do you think God answered Job with questions instead of explanations?
5. Read Job 19:25-27. How does Jesus fulfill Job's hope?

Part Two: Out of Egypt and Into the Land

Chapter 8: Moses: The Reluctant Deliverer

> *And there has not arisen again a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face*
>
> Deuteronomy 34:10 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Moses sounds like a Hebrew word meaning "to draw out," because Pharaoh's daughter drew him out of the water (Exodus 2:10). It may also echo an Egyptian word for "son."

When: About 1526 to 1406 B.C., following the Bible's dating of the Exodus to about 1446 B.C. (1 Kings 6:1).

Where: Egypt, the land of Midian, Mount Sinai, and forty years in the wilderness. He died on Mount Nebo, looking into the Promised Land.

Where to read it: Exodus 2-40; Leviticus; Numbers; Deuteronomy; Acts 7:17-44; Hebrews 3:1-6; 11:23-29.

Known for: Leading Israel out of Egypt, receiving the Ten Commandments, and writing the first five books of the Bible.

Moses is the towering figure of the Old Testament. He led two million people out of slavery, stood face to face with the most powerful king on earth, climbed a mountain wrapped in fire to receive God's law, and wrote the first five books of the Bible. Jews still call him "Moshe Rabbenu," Moses our teacher.

But when God first called him, Moses spent most of the conversation trying to get out of it. That is one of the most encouraging things about him.

What Happened

Moses was born at a terrible time. The Israelites had multiplied in Egypt, and a new Pharaoh, afraid of them, had made them slaves and ordered every Hebrew baby boy thrown into the Nile. Moses' mother hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer, she put him in a basket made of reeds, sealed it with tar, and set it among the reeds at the edge of the river. Pharaoh's own daughter found him, felt sorry for him, and raised him as her son. In one of the Bible's quiet ironies, she hired the baby's own mother to nurse him (Exodus 2:1-10).

Moses grew up in Pharaoh's palace and was "instructed in all the wisdom of ***the*** Egyptians" (Acts 7:22). But he never forgot who his people were. At forty, he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, looked around, killed the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand. When the killing became known, Moses fled to the land of Midian (Exodus 2:11-15). There he married Zipporah, the daughter of a priest named Jethro, and spent forty years tending sheep.

One day, near Mount Horeb, also called Sinai, he saw a bush on fire that did not burn up. As he went closer, God called to him from the bush and told him to take off his sandals, because he was standing on holy ground. God said He had seen the misery of His people and was sending Moses to bring them out of Egypt.

Moses had an excuse ready for everything. Who am I? God said, “I will be with you.” What is Your name? God answered, “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14). What if they do not believe me? God gave him signs. I am not eloquent. God said, “Who has made a mouth for mankind?” (Exodus 4:11). Finally Moses just asked God to send someone else (Exodus 4:13). God was angry, but He gave Moses his brother Aaron to speak for him, and Moses went.

Pharaoh refused to let Israel go and made their work even harder. Then God sent ten plagues on Egypt: blood, frogs, gnats, flies, the death of livestock, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and finally the death of every firstborn son. On that last night, every Israelite family killed a lamb and painted its blood on the doorframe of their house. When the LORD saw the blood, He passed over that house (Exodus 12:13). That night Pharaoh let them go.

He changed his mind almost immediately and chased them with his chariots, trapping them against the Red Sea. Moses told the people, “Do not be afraid; station yourselves, and see the salvation of the LORD” (Exodus 14:13). He stretched out his hand, God divided the sea, and Israel walked through on dry ground. When the Egyptians followed, the waters returned and covered them.

Three months later, Israel camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. God came down on the mountain in fire and smoke, and the whole mountain trembled. He spoke the Ten Commandments to the people and called Moses up to receive His law. Moses was on the mountain forty days. While he was gone, the people convinced Aaron to make a golden calf, and they worshiped it. Moses came down, saw them, and smashed the stone tablets. Then he went back up and begged God to forgive them, even offering to have his own name blotted out of God’s book in their place (Exodus 32:32).

Moses also asked to see God’s glory. God hid him in a cleft of the rock, covered him with His hand, and passed by, proclaiming His own name: compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (Exodus 34:6). When Moses came down, his face shone so brightly that the people were afraid to come near him.

The next forty years were a long, hard walk. The people grumbled about food, water, and Moses’ leadership. When the spies came back from Canaan, ten of them said the land could not be taken, and the people refused to go in. God sentenced that generation to wander in the wilderness until they died. Moses carried them the whole way, interceding for them again and again.

Yet Moses himself did not enter the land. At Meribah, when the people complained for water, God told him to speak to the rock. Instead, in anger, Moses struck it twice and said, “Listen, please, you rebels! From this rock shall we bring out water for you?” (Numbers 20:10). Water came out, but God told Moses that because he had not treated Him as holy before the people, he would not lead them into the land. At 120 years old, Moses climbed Mount Nebo. God showed him the whole land, and there Moses died. God Himself buried him, and “no man knows his burial place until this day” (Deuteronomy 34:6).

What God Did

God protected him from his first day. A reed basket, a curious princess, and a quick-thinking sister. God was at work before Moses knew His name.

God revealed His name. At the burning bush, God told Moses His covenant name, the LORD, connected with "I AM." Jesus would later use the same words of Himself: "before Abraham came into being, I am" (John 8:58).

God used Moses' weakness. Moses did not think he could speak well. God did not argue with Moses about his ability. He promised His presence. The power of the Exodus was never in Moses.

God saved His people by the blood of a lamb. The Passover is one of the clearest pictures of the gospel in the Old Testament. Paul says it plainly: "For also our Passover was sacrificed for us: Christ" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

God spoke with Moses as a friend. "And the LORD would speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend" (Exodus 33:11). Few people in history have known God that closely.

God brought him into the land after all. Moses did not enter Canaan in his lifetime. But about fourteen hundred years later, he stood on a mountain in that very land, talking with Jesus about His coming death in Jerusalem (Luke 9:30-31).

What We Learn

1. **God's call is not about our ability.** Moses had a list of reasons he could not do it. God's answer to every one was, in effect, "I will be with you." That is still His answer.
2. **Leading God's people is hard, and it requires prayer.** Moses spent much of his life on his face before God for people who complained about him. Pray for your leaders. They carry more than you know.
3. **Anger can cost us dearly.** One angry moment at Meribah kept Moses out of the land. Take your frustration to God before it comes out of your mouth.
4. **God shows Himself to those who ask.** Moses asked to see God's glory, and God answered. Ask God to show you more of Himself.
5. **Moses points to a greater Prophet.** Moses promised that God would raise up a prophet "from your brothers, like me" (Deuteronomy 18:15). Peter said that Prophet is Jesus (Acts 3:22-26). Moses was faithful as a servant in God's house; Jesus is faithful as the Son over it (Hebrews 3:5-6).

Study Questions

1. Read Exodus 3:11-4:13. Which of Moses' excuses sounds most like you? How does God answer it?
2. What does the name "I AM WHO I AM" tell you about God?
3. Read Exodus 12:1-13. How does the Passover lamb point to Jesus?
4. Read Exodus 32:30-32. What does Moses' prayer for the people teach you about praying for others?
5. Why do you think God took Moses' action at Meribah so seriously?

Chapter 9: Joshua: Strong and Courageous

> *Have I not commanded you? Be strong and be bold. Do not be terrified, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God **is** with you in every **place** where you go.*
>
> Joshua 1:9 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Joshua means "the LORD saves." Moses gave him this name, changing it from Hoshea, "salvation" (Numbers 13:16). It is the same name as Jesus, which comes to us through Greek.

When: About 1500 to 1390 B.C., following the Bible's numbers.

Where: Born a slave in Egypt; served Moses in the wilderness; led Israel into Canaan and died in the hill country of Ephraim.

Where to read it: Exodus 17:8-16; 24:13; 33:11; Numbers 13-14; 27:15-23; Deuteronomy 31:1-8; the book of Joshua; Hebrews 4:8; 11:30.

Known for: Leading Israel across the Jordan, the fall of Jericho, and "I and my house, we will serve the LORD."

Following a legend is one of the hardest jobs in the world. Ask any coach who took over after a championship coach retired. Joshua had to follow Moses, the man who spoke with God face to face. And he had to finish the job Moses could not: actually bringing Israel into the land.

Three times in the first chapter of his book, God tells him to be strong and courageous. I suspect Joshua needed to hear it more than once.

What Happened

Joshua grew up as a slave in Egypt and walked out with Moses in the Exodus. The first time we meet him in the Bible, he is already a fighter. When the Amalekites attacked Israel, Moses sent Joshua to lead the army, while Moses stood on a hill with his hands raised. As long as Moses' hands were up, Israel won (Exodus 17:8-13).

From then on, Joshua was Moses' assistant. He went partway up Mount Sinai with Moses (Exodus 24:13). And when Moses met with God in the tent of meeting, young Joshua "would not depart from the midst of the tent" (Exodus 33:11). He wanted to be where God was.

When Israel reached the edge of Canaan, Moses sent twelve spies to scout the land, one from each tribe. Joshua and Caleb were two of them. All twelve agreed the land was good, flowing with milk and honey. But ten said the people were giants and the cities were walled, and Israel could never win. Joshua and Caleb tore their clothes and pleaded with the people:

> *If the LORD delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land which flows **with** milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD; and you, do not fear the people of the land, for they **are** our bread. Their shade has turned aside from over them, and the LORD **is** with us; do not fear them.* (Numbers 14:8-9)

The people picked up stones to kill them. God stepped in. Because of their unbelief, that whole generation would die in the wilderness over the next forty years. Only Joshua and Caleb would live to enter the land.

Forty years later, Moses laid his hands on Joshua and commissioned him as Israel's new leader. After Moses died, God spoke to Joshua directly: "Just as I was with Moses, I will be with you; I will not let you go, and I will not forsake you" (Joshua 1:5).

Joshua sent two spies into Jericho, where a woman named Rahab hid them (her story is in the next chapter). Then he led the people to the Jordan River. It was harvest season, and the river was flooding its banks. As soon as the priests carrying the ark of the covenant stepped into the water, the river stopped flowing and piled up far upstream, and all Israel crossed on dry ground (Joshua 3:14-17). Joshua had twelve stones taken from the riverbed and set up as a memorial, so that when children asked, "What are these stones?" their parents could tell them what God had done.

Near Jericho, Joshua met a man with a drawn sword. Joshua asked whether he was for Israel or for their enemies. The man answered, "No, for I ***am*** the commander of the army of the LORD" (Joshua 5:14). Joshua fell on his face and worshiped, and was told to take off his sandals, just as Moses had been told at the burning bush.

God's battle plan for Jericho must have sounded strange. March around the city once a day for six days, with priests blowing trumpets, while everyone else stays silent. On the seventh day, march around it seven times, then the priests blow a long blast, and everyone shouts. They did exactly that, and the walls fell flat (Joshua 6).

Not every battle went so well. At the small town of Ai, Israel was beaten, because one man, Achan, had secretly kept some of the treasure from Jericho that God had said was to be devoted to Him. Joshua dealt with the sin, and then Israel took Ai (Joshua 7-8). Later, Joshua was tricked by the Gibeonites, who pretended to come from a distant country, because he and the leaders "did not ask the mouth of the LORD" (Joshua 9:14). But when five kings attacked Gibeon, Joshua kept his word to defend them, and God fought for Israel with hailstones and by making the sun stand still in the sky (Joshua 10:12-14).

Over the next years, Joshua led Israel in taking much of the land and dividing it among the tribes. Near the end of his life, at about 110 years old, he gathered all Israel at Shechem and reviewed everything God had done for them. Then he put the choice before them plainly:

> *And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that* ***were*** *on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are dwelling. And I and my house, we will serve the LORD.* (Joshua 24:15)

The people promised to serve the LORD, and "Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua" (Joshua 24:31).

What God Did

God trained him for years before He used him. Joshua spent about forty years as Moses' assistant. Those years in the tent of meeting and on the battlefield were God's preparation.

God kept His promise to the faithful spies. Joshua and Caleb were the only adults from the Exodus generation who entered the land. God remembered their faith for forty years.

God went before them. The river stopped. The walls fell. The sun stood still. Every victory in the book of Joshua came from God. As Joshua told the people at the end, "the LORD your God, He ***is*** the One who fights for you" (Joshua 23:3).

God kept every word. At the end of the conquest, the book says something remarkable: "Not a word fell of every good word which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel; everything came ***to pass***" (Joshua 21:45).

What We Learn

1. **Courage comes from God's presence, not our own strength.** God never told Joshua to be strong because Joshua was strong. He told him to be strong because "the LORD your God ***is*** with you in every ***place*** where you go" (Joshua 1:9).
2. **Stay close to God's Word.** God told Joshua to meditate on His law day and night (Joshua 1:8). Success in God's eyes comes from obeying what He has said.
3. **Ask God before you decide.** Joshua's mistake with the Gibeonites came when he trusted his own eyes and did not pray. Many of our worst decisions come the same way.
4. **Hidden sin hurts the whole family.** Achan's secret brought defeat on everyone. Sin is never as private as we think.
5. **Every generation must choose.** Joshua could not choose for Israel, but he could choose for his own house. You cannot make anyone else follow God. You can decide that you and yours will.
6. **Joshua points to Jesus.** Their names are the same. Joshua led God's people into the Promised Land and gave them rest from their enemies. Hebrews says that rest was only a picture (Hebrews 4:8-10). Jesus leads us into the real and lasting rest with God.

Study Questions

1. Read Joshua 1:1-9. Why do you think God told Joshua three times to be strong and courageous?
2. Joshua stayed in the tent of meeting when Moses left (Exodus 33:11). What does that tell you about him? How can you stay close to God's presence?
3. What "memorial stones" can you point to in your life, times when God clearly worked?
4. Read Joshua 9:14. Have you ever made a decision without asking God? What happened?
5. Read Joshua 24:14-15. What would it look like for your household to "serve the LORD" this week?

Chapter 10: Rahab: Scarlet Cord, Changed Life

> *And we heard, and our heart melted, and there did not rise up any more spirit in any man because of you; for the LORD your God, He **is** God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.*
>
> Joshua 2:11 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Rahab means “wide” or “broad.”

When: About 1406 B.C., at the fall of Jericho.

Where: Jericho, a walled city just west of the Jordan River near the Dead Sea, and afterward among the people of Israel.

Where to read it: Joshua 2; 6:17-25; Matthew 1:5; Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25.

Known for: Hiding Israel’s spies, the scarlet cord in her window, and becoming an ancestor of King David and of Jesus.

Rahab is one of the most surprising names in the Bible. She was a Canaanite, from the very people Israel was coming to conquer. She was a prostitute, and the Bible never lets us forget it; even in the New Testament she is “Rahab the prostitute” (Hebrews 11:31). And yet she is one of only two women named in the great list of faith in Hebrews 11, and she appears in the family tree of Jesus Christ in the first chapter of the New Testament.

If you think you have gone too far for God to take you in, Rahab’s story is for you.

What Happened

Before Israel crossed the Jordan, Joshua sent two spies to look over the land, especially Jericho. They went to the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there (Joshua 2:1). Her house was built into the city wall, which may be why the spies chose it. People came and went at a place like that without many questions.

Someone noticed, though. The king of Jericho heard that Israelite spies were in the city and sent men to Rahab’s door demanding that she hand them over. Rahab had already hidden the spies on her roof under stalks of flax laid out to dry. She told the king’s men that yes, the men had come, but she did not know where they were from, and they had left at dusk when the city gate was being shut. “Pursue after them quickly,” she said, “for you will overtake them” (Joshua 2:5). The king’s men rode off toward the Jordan, and the gate was shut behind them.

Then Rahab went up to the roof and talked with the spies. What she said was remarkable for a Canaanite woman. She told them she knew the LORD had given Israel the land. The whole city was terrified. They had heard how the LORD dried up the Red Sea forty years before, and how Israel had defeated the kings

on the other side of the Jordan. Then she confessed her faith: "for the LORD your God, He ***is*** God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath" (Joshua 2:11).

She asked them to promise to spare her and her family: her father, mother, brothers, sisters, and everyone who belonged to them. The spies agreed, on three conditions. She must tie a scarlet cord in the window through which she let them down, she must bring her whole family into her house, and she must not tell anyone their business. Anyone who went out of her house into the street would be responsible for their own death. Rahab agreed: "According to your words, so ***let*** it ***be***" (Joshua 2:21). She let them down by a rope through her window, told them to hide in the hills for three days, and then tied the scarlet cord in the window.

Some time later, Israel marched around Jericho for seven days. On the seventh day the walls fell. Before the city was destroyed, Joshua sent the two spies to bring out Rahab and all her family, just as they had sworn (Joshua 6:22-23). The city was burned, but Rahab was spared, "and she has dwelt in the midst of Israel to this day" (Joshua 6:25).

The Bible picks up her story again centuries later, in Matthew's list of the ancestors of Jesus: "and Salmon fathered Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz fathered Obed by Ruth, and Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David the king" (Matthew 1:5-6). The Canaanite prostitute married an Israelite named Salmon. Her son was Boaz, the kind man who later married Ruth. Her great-great-grandson was King David. And from David's line came Jesus.

What God Did

God reached into an enemy city to save one woman. Jericho was under God's judgment for its sin. Yet God's eye was on one household inside that wall. He has always been searching for people who will turn to Him, wherever they are.

God used the news of His works to awaken faith. Rahab had never seen the Red Sea part. She had only heard about it. But the report of what the LORD had done convinced her that He was the true God. "So faith ***is*** from report, and report through ***the*** word of God" (Romans 10:17).

God honored her faith. Hebrews 11:31 says, "By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who disobeyed, having received the spies with peace." James says she showed her faith by her actions (James 2:25). She believed, and her belief made her risk her life.

God gave her a sign of safety. The scarlet cord in her window is a little like the blood on the doorposts at the Passover. Everyone under its protection was safe from the judgment falling on the city. Many Bible teachers have seen in it a picture of the blood of Christ, which shelters all who trust in Him.

God gave her a new life and a new family. Rahab did not just survive. She was brought into Israel, married, and became part of the family line of the Messiah. God does not merely forgive us. He adopts us.

What We Learn

1. **Nobody is beyond God's reach.** Rahab came from the wrong nation and the wrong way of life. God saved her anyway. Never write anyone off, including yourself.

2. **Faith is believing what God has done and acting on it.** Rahab heard about God's power and drew a conclusion: the LORD is God. Then she acted on it, at great risk. Real faith always moves.
3. **Bring your family.** Rahab's first concern was not only her own safety but her family's. When you find safety in God, your heart naturally turns to the people you love.
4. **Your past does not decide your future.** The Bible keeps calling her "Rahab the prostitute," not to shame her, but to show how far grace can carry a person. She went from the wall of Jericho to the family tree of Jesus.
5. **A word about her lie.** People often ask whether Rahab was right to lie to the king's men. The Bible praises her faith and her protection of the spies. It never praises the lie itself. God worked through a new believer who did not yet know His ways well, as He often does. Her story is not a lesson in deception. It is a lesson in faith that grows.

Study Questions

1. Read Joshua 2:8-11. What did Rahab know about God, and how did she learn it?
2. Why do you think Hebrews and James both point to Rahab as an example of faith?
3. What do you think the scarlet cord meant to Rahab and her family as the walls of Jericho fell?
4. Read Matthew 1:1-6. What does it tell you about God that Rahab is in the family line of Jesus?
5. Who in your life do you need to stop writing off as "too far gone"?

Chapter 11: Deborah: A Mother in Israel

> *So may all Your enemies perish, O LORD! And those who love Him **be** like the going out of the sun in its might. And the land was at rest forty years.*
>
> Judges 5:31 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Deborah means "bee."

When: The time of the judges, probably in the 1200s B.C. on the Bible's dating, though exact dates are uncertain.

Where: She judged Israel under a palm tree between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim. The battle was fought at Mount Tabor and along the Kishon River in the Jezreel Valley.

Where to read it: Judges 4-5; compare Hebrews 11:32 on Barak.

Known for: Judging Israel, calling Barak to battle against Sisera, and her victory song in Judges 5.

The book of Judges is one of the darkest books in the Bible. Over and over, Israel turned away from God, was crushed by an enemy, cried out to God, and was rescued by a leader God raised up, only to fall away again after that leader died. Judges ends with the sad line that "in those days ***there was*** no king in Israel; each man did what ***was*** right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

In the middle of all that darkness stands Deborah, a woman who listened to God when the men around her were slow to act. Her story is short, but it shines.

What Happened

After the judge Ehud died, Israel did evil again, and God let them fall under the power of Jabin, a Canaanite king who ruled from the city of Hazor. His army commander was a man named Sisera, who had nine hundred iron chariots, the ancient equivalent of tanks. For twenty years Jabin "oppressed the sons of Israel with force" (Judges 4:3).

At that time, Israel was being judged by Deborah, a prophetess and the wife of Lappidoth. She held court under a palm tree in the hill country of Ephraim, which came to be called the palm of Deborah, and the people of Israel came to her to settle their disputes (Judges 4:4-5). She was both a judge and a prophetess, someone through whom God spoke.

God gave Deborah a message for a man named Barak. She sent for him and told him that the LORD commanded him to gather ten thousand men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun at Mount Tabor. God would draw Sisera and his chariots to the Kishon River and give them into Barak's hand.

Barak's answer was hesitant: "If you will go with me, then I will go; and if you will not go with me, I will not go" (Judges 4:8). Deborah agreed to go. But she told him that because of the way he was going about it, the honor of the victory would not be his. "into the hand of a woman the LORD will sell Sisera" (Judges 4:9).

Barak gathered his ten thousand men on Mount Tabor. Sisera brought out his nine hundred chariots. Then Deborah gave the word: "Arise, for this ***is*** the day on which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. Has not the LORD gone out before you?" (Judges 4:14). Barak charged down the mountain, and the LORD threw Sisera's army into a panic. Deborah's song tells us more about how it happened: "From heaven they fought; the stars from their highways fought with Sisera" (Judges 5:20), and "The wadi Kishon swept them away" (Judges 5:21). Most scholars think a sudden storm flooded the Kishon, and the heavy chariots bogged down in the mud. The army that had terrified Israel for twenty years was wiped out.

Sisera jumped off his chariot and ran on foot. He came to the tent of a woman named Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, whose clan was at peace with King Jabin. Jael invited him in, gave him milk to drink, and covered him with a rug. When he fell asleep, she took a tent peg and a hammer and drove the peg through his head (Judges 4:17-21). When Barak came looking for Sisera, Jael showed him the body. Deborah's prophecy had come true: the victory belonged to a woman.

Then Deborah and Barak sang a song of praise, recorded in Judges 5, one of the oldest poems in the Bible. In it Deborah describes herself this way: "until I arose, Deborah, until I arose, a mother in Israel" (Judges 5:7). The song praises God, honors the tribes who came to fight, shames the ones who stayed home, and ends with a prayer that God's enemies would perish and those who love Him would shine like the rising sun. After that, "the land was at rest forty years" (Judges 5:31).

What God Did

God raised up a leader when His people cried out. This is the pattern of Judges. Israel's sin brought trouble, but when they cried to the LORD, He heard and sent help. God's patience with His people is astonishing.

God spoke through Deborah. Deborah did not invent her battle plan. It was God's word. Her authority came from the fact that God was speaking through her, and she spoke His word faithfully.

God won the battle. Iron chariots were no match for the God who commands the rain. Judges 4:15 says plainly, "the LORD threw Sisera and all the chariots and all the camp into confusion." Barak's men fought, but God gave the victory.

God kept His word in an unexpected way. Deborah said Sisera would fall to a woman. Barak may have assumed she meant herself. It turned out to be Jael, a woman nobody expected, in a tent nobody was watching. God often keeps His promises in ways we would never have guessed.

What We Learn

1. **God uses those who will listen and obey.** Deborah's strength was not in a sword. It was in hearing God and saying what He said. That kind of faithfulness is available to every believer.
2. **Hesitation can cost us the joy of obedience.** Barak did obey, and Hebrews 11:32 includes him among the people of faith. But his hesitation meant the honor went to someone else. When God makes His will clear, go.

3. **Encourage others to do what God has called them to do.** Deborah did not grab the role God had given Barak. She called him to it, went with him, and told him when to charge. Sometimes our part is to be the voice that says, "Today is the day. God has gone before you."
4. **Celebrate what God has done.** After the battle, Deborah sang. We should never let God's victories in our lives pass without praise.
5. **A word about leadership.** Bible-believing Christians hold different views on the roles of men and women in church leadership. Deborah's story does not settle that debate on its own, and I will not try to make it do so here. What it clearly shows is that God honored a woman who served Him faithfully, at a time when Israel needed someone to hear Him.

Study Questions

1. Read Judges 2:16-19. What pattern do you see in the book of Judges? Do you see that pattern in your own walk with God?
2. What made Deborah someone the people trusted to settle their disputes?
3. Read Judges 4:6-9. Why do you think Barak would not go without Deborah? What does God's answer show?
4. Read Judges 4:14. Deborah said, "Has not the LORD gone out before you?" Where do you need to hear that today?
5. Read Judges 5:1-5. What can you learn from Deborah's song about praising God after a victory?

Chapter 12: Gideon: The Least in His Father's House

> *And the angel of the LORD appeared to him, and he said to him, "The LORD **is** with you, O mighty man of valor."*
>
> Judges 6:12 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Gideon means "one who cuts down" or "hewer." After he tore down Baal's altar, he was also called Jerubbaal, because his father said, "Let the Baal contend against him" (Judges 6:32).

When: The time of the judges, probably the 1100s B.C. on the Bible's dating.

Where: Ophrah in the tribe of Manasseh; the battle was in the Jezreel Valley near the hill of Moreh.

Where to read it: Judges 6-8; 1 Samuel 12:11; Psalm 83:9-11; Isaiah 9:4; Hebrews 11:32.

Known for: The fleece, the three hundred men, and the trumpets, torches, and jars that routed the Midianites.

The first time we meet Gideon, he is hiding. He is beating out wheat in a winepress, a pit dug in the ground for crushing grapes, so the enemy will not see him. And the angel of the LORD sits down under a nearby oak and greets him with words that must have sounded like a joke: "The LORD ***is*** with you, O mighty man of valor" (Judges 6:12).

Gideon did not feel mighty. He did not feel brave. And as far as he could tell, the LORD was not with anyone. That is exactly where his story begins.

I did not come out of seminary. I spent my working life in the natural gas industry, with computers and guitars as hobbies. When I started writing Bible studies and then translating the Steadfast Literal Bible, I could see why someone might ask, like Gideon, why God would use someone like me (Judges 6:15). God equips ordinary people who are willing.

What Happened

Once again Israel had done evil, and God had given them into the hand of Midian for seven years. Every harvest, the Midianites and their allies swept in from the east on camels, "like the abundance of locusts for multitude," and stripped the land bare (Judges 6:5). The Israelites hid in caves in the mountains.

When the angel greeted him, Gideon answered with a hard question: if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all the wonders our fathers told us about? God did not argue. He simply said, "Go in this strength of yours, and you shall save Israel from the palm of Midian. Have I not sent you?" (Judges 6:14). Gideon protested that his clan was the weakest in Manasseh, and he was the least in his father's house. God answered, "Surely I will be with you" (Judges 6:16).

Gideon asked for a sign, and the angel reached out the tip of his staff and touched the meat and bread Gideon had brought, and fire sprang up from the rock and consumed them. That night God gave Gideon his first assignment: tear down his own father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it.

Gideon obeyed, but he did it at night, because he was afraid of his family and the men of the town. In the morning the townsmen wanted to kill him, but his father Joash defended him: if Baal is a god, let him defend himself (Judges 6:25-32).

When the Midianites gathered again, the Spirit of the LORD came on Gideon, and he blew a trumpet to call Israel to fight. Then, still uncertain, he asked God for another sign. He would lay a fleece of wool on the threshing floor overnight. If the fleece was wet with dew and the ground around it dry, he would know God would save Israel through him. In the morning he wrung out a whole bowl of water from it. Then he asked God not to be angry with him, and asked for the reverse: let the fleece be dry and the ground wet. God did that too (Judges 6:36-40).

Gideon gathered thirty-two thousand men. God said that was too many, "lest Israel glorify itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me'" (Judges 7:2). Gideon told anyone who was afraid to go home, and twenty-two thousand left. God said ten thousand was still too many. He had Gideon bring them down to the water and watch how they drank. Three hundred lapped the water by bringing it to their mouths with their hands. The rest knelt down to drink. God said, "By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you" (Judges 7:7).

That night God gave Gideon one more encouragement. He told him to slip down to the edge of the enemy camp. There Gideon overheard a Midianite soldier telling his friend about a dream of a loaf of barley bread tumbling into the camp and flattening a tent. His friend said it could only mean "the sword of Gideon" (Judges 7:14). When Gideon heard it, he worshiped.

He divided his three hundred men into three companies and gave each man a trumpet and an empty clay jar with a torch hidden inside. In the middle of the night they surrounded the camp. At Gideon's signal, they blew the trumpets, smashed the jars so the torches blazed out, and shouted, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" (Judges 7:20). The Midianites woke in a panic, and the LORD set every man's sword against his companion throughout the camp. The whole army fled, and Israel chased them to the Jordan.

After the victory, the men of Israel asked Gideon to rule over them and to start a royal family. He gave the right answer: "the LORD shall rule over you" (Judges 8:23). But then he asked each man for a gold earring from the plunder, and he made a gold ephod, a priestly garment, and put it in his town. "and all Israel prostituted themselves after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his household" (Judges 8:27). He also had many wives and seventy sons, and one of those sons, Abimelech, later murdered all but one of his brothers to make himself king (Judges 9). The man who began by tearing down an idol ended by setting one up.

What God Did

God saw what Gideon could become. God called a frightened man a mighty man of valor. He was not describing what Gideon was. He was describing what Gideon would be once God was with him.

God was patient with Gideon's fear. Gideon asked for sign after sign. God did not scold him. He gave the signs, and then, without being asked, gave him the encouragement of the Midianite's dream. God knows how we are formed; He remembers that we are dust (Psalm 103:14).

God made the army smaller on purpose. Three hundred against an army "like locusts" left no doubt about who won the battle. God often brings us to the end of our own resources so that His power will be seen.

God won with clay jars. Paul may have had Gideon's jars in mind when he wrote, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). The light only shone out when the jars were broken.

What We Learn

1. **God calls people who feel small.** Gideon called himself the least. God called him anyway. Your weakness is not a barrier to God's call. It may be the very reason He chose you.
2. **Obedience often starts at home.** Before Gideon fought Midian, God sent him to tear down the idol in his father's yard. Our first battles are usually the ones closest to us.
3. **Be careful about putting out a fleece.** God graciously answered Gideon, but Gideon already knew what God had said. Asking for signs is not wrong in itself, but it should never become a way to delay obeying what God has already made clear in His Word.
4. **The end of the race matters.** Gideon's victory was followed by an idol that ensnared his family. Finishing well takes as much faith as starting well.

Study Questions

1. Read Judges 6:11-16. Why do you think God called Gideon a "mighty man of valor" when he was hiding?
2. Gideon asked, "Why has all this found us?" Have you ever asked God a question like that? How does God answer Gideon?
3. Read Judges 7:2. Why did God want a smaller army? Where might God be teaching you to depend on Him instead of your own resources?
4. Read 2 Corinthians 4:7. How do Gideon's broken jars help you understand that verse?
5. What can we learn from the way Gideon's life ended (Judges 8:22-27)?

Chapter 13: Samson: Strong Body, Weak Heart

> *And Samson called out to the LORD and said, "Lord GOD, remember me, please, and strengthen me, please, only this time, O God, that I may be avenged **with** one vengeance for my two eyes on the Philistines."*
>
> Judges 16:28 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Samson probably comes from the Hebrew word for "sun," and may mean "little sun" or "sunny."

When: The later time of the judges, about 1100 to 1050 B.C., during the Philistine oppression.

Where: Zorah and Eshtaol in the tribe of Dan, near the Philistine cities of Timnah, Ashkelon, and Gaza on the southern coast.

Where to read it: Judges 13-16; Hebrews 11:32.

Known for: His Nazirite vow, his great strength, his long hair, Delilah, and pulling down the temple of Dagon.

Samson is the strongest man in the Bible and, in some ways, one of the weakest. He could tear a lion apart with his bare hands, but he could not say no to his own desires. He was set apart for God before he was born, and he spent most of his life acting as if that did not matter. And yet God used him, and he is listed among the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. Samson's story is a warning and a comfort at the same time.

What Happened

Israel had done evil again, and the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years. In the town of Zorah lived a man named Manoah and his wife, who could not have children. The angel of the LORD appeared to her and told her she would have a son. He would be a Nazirite, set apart to God from the womb. He must never drink wine, never eat anything unclean, and never cut his hair. "And he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines" (Judges 13:5). Notice the word begin. Samson would start the job. Someone else would finish it.

The boy was born, and "the LORD blessed him" (Judges 13:24). The Spirit of the LORD began to stir him. But the first thing Samson wanted as a young man was a Philistine woman from Timnah. His parents begged him to marry an Israelite, but he said, "Take her for me, for she is right in my eyes" (Judges 14:3). That phrase, "right in my eyes," would describe all of Israel by the end of Judges.

On the way to Timnah, a young lion attacked him, and the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and he tore the lion apart with his bare hands. Later, he found bees and honey in the lion's carcass, scooped some out, and ate it. Touching a dead body broke his Nazirite vow, but he told no one. At his wedding feast he gave the Philistine guests a riddle about the lion and the honey, and when they forced his bride to get the answer out of him, he went out in a rage and killed thirty Philistines to pay the wager (Judges 14).

From there it became a cycle of revenge. His father-in-law gave Samson's wife to another man, so Samson tied torches to the tails of three hundred foxes and burned the Philistines' fields. The Philistines burned

his wife and her father to death. Samson struck back with a great slaughter. When the men of Judah handed Samson over to the Philistines bound with new ropes, the Spirit of the LORD came on him, the ropes melted like burned flax, and he killed a thousand men with the jawbone of a donkey (Judges 15). Then, exhausted and thirsty, he cried out to God, and God split open a hollow place and water came out (Judges 15:18-19). For twenty years Samson judged Israel.

Then he fell in love with a woman named Delilah in the Valley of Sorek. The Philistine rulers each offered her eleven hundred pieces of silver to find out the secret of his strength. Three times she asked, and three times Samson lied to her, and each time she tried his answer while Philistines waited in the room. You would think he would have caught on. But she nagged him day after day until "his soul became impatient to the point of dying" (Judges 16:16), and he finally told her everything. He was a Nazirite, and if his hair were cut, his strength would leave him.

While he slept on her lap, she had his hair shaved off. Then she called out, "The Philistines ***are*** upon you, Samson!" He woke up and thought he would shake himself free as before. But then comes one of the saddest sentences in the Bible: "he did not know that the LORD had departed from on him" (Judges 16:20). The Philistines gouged out his eyes, took him to Gaza, bound him with bronze chains, and made him grind grain in the prison like an animal.

But Judges 16:22 adds a small line of hope: "And the hair of his head began to grow again when it had been shaved." The Philistines gathered for a great feast in the temple of their god Dagon to celebrate their victory, and they brought Samson out to make fun of him. He asked the boy who led him by the hand to let him feel the pillars that held up the building. About three thousand people were on the roof. Samson prayed the prayer that opens this chapter, asking God to remember him and strengthen him just once more. Then he pushed with all his might. The temple fell, and "the dead whom he put to death in his death were more than those whom he had put to death in his life" (Judges 16:30).

What God Did

God set Samson apart before he was born. Samson's calling was a gift, not a reward. His strength did not come from his hair. It came from the Spirit of the LORD, and the hair was the sign of his vow.

God worked even through Samson's failures. Judges 14:4 says the LORD was "seeking an occasion against the Philistines" through Samson's wrongheaded marriage. That does not make Samson's choices right. It means God's purposes are bigger than our mistakes.

God answered his prayers. Samson prayed twice in his story: once for water at Lehi and once for strength in Dagon's temple. Both times, God answered. Even a man who had wasted so much could still call on God and be heard.

God's patience was long, but it had an end. The LORD left Samson when he gave away the last mark of his vow. God is merciful, but He does not let His people treat holy things as toys forever.

God remembered him. Blind and shamed, Samson asked God to remember him, and God did. The writer of Hebrews remembers him too, among those who "out of weakness were made strong" (Hebrews 11:34).

What We Learn

1. **Gifts are not the same as godliness.** Samson had great gifts and a great calling, but very little self-control. Talent can take you places character cannot keep you.
2. **Sin rarely destroys us all at once.** Samson did not lose everything in one night. He broke his vow a little at a time: the lion's carcass, the wedding feast, the visits to Gaza, the games with Delilah. Small compromises add up.
3. **It is possible to drift from God and not even know it.** "He did not know that the LORD had departed from on him." That should sober every one of us. Check your heart before the crisis comes.
4. **It is never too late to call on God.** Samson's hair began to grow again in prison. If you have fallen far, God can still hear your prayer. The path back starts with "Lord GOD, remember me, please."
5. **Samson points to a greater Deliverer.** Samson only began to save Israel, and he did it by giving his life. Jesus finished the work of salvation, and He too won His greatest victory in His death. But unlike Samson, Jesus never sinned, and He did not stay dead.

Study Questions

1. Read Judges 13:2-5. What was special about Samson from before his birth? What has God given you that you might be taking for granted?
2. Samson said, "She is right in my eyes" (Judges 14:3). How does that attitude show up in our culture today? In your own life?
3. Why do you think Samson kept going back to Delilah even after she betrayed him three times?
4. Read Judges 16:20-22. What do these verses teach you about drifting from God, and about God's mercy?
5. Read Judges 16:28-30. What does Samson's final prayer teach you about coming back to God?

Chapter 14: Ruth: Loyal Love

> *And Ruth said, "Do not urge me to forsake you, to turn back from after you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people **will be** my people, and your God my God."*
>
> Ruth 1:16 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: The meaning of Ruth is uncertain. Many connect it with a Hebrew word for "friend" or "companion."

When: "In the days of the judging of the judges" (Ruth 1:1), probably the 1100s B.C. She was the great-grandmother of David, who was born about 1040 B.C.

Where: Moab, east of the Dead Sea, and then Bethlehem in Judah.

Where to read it: The book of Ruth; Matthew 1:5.

Known for: Her loyalty to her mother-in-law Naomi, gleaning in the fields of Boaz, and becoming the great-grandmother of King David.

The book of Ruth sits right after Judges, and the contrast is striking. Judges is full of war, idols, betrayal, and men doing whatever was right in their own eyes. Ruth is a quiet story about a grieving widow, a loyal daughter-in-law, a field of barley, and a good man who did the right thing. It is only four chapters long, but it shows us that even in the darkest times, God is at work in ordinary kindness.

What Happened

During a famine in Israel, a man from Bethlehem named Elimelech took his wife Naomi and their two sons to live in Moab, a neighboring country that worshiped other gods. There Elimelech died. The two sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Then, about ten years later, both sons died too. Naomi was left with no husband, no sons, and no grandchildren, in a foreign land.

When she heard that the LORD had given His people food again, Naomi decided to go home to Bethlehem. Her daughters-in-law started out with her, but she urged them to go back to their own mothers and find new husbands. Orpah kissed her goodbye and went back. Ruth would not. She clung to Naomi and said some of the most beautiful words in the Bible:

> *And Ruth said, "Do not urge me to forsake you, to turn back from after you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people **will be** my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and thus may He add, for death **alone** will separate between me and you."* (Ruth 1:16-17)

So the two widows came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. The whole town was stirred, and the women asked, "Is this Naomi?" Naomi's name means "pleasant." She told them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara," which means "bitter," "for the Almighty has made ***it*** very bitter for me" (Ruth 1:20).

The two women had nothing to live on. God's law told farmers not to harvest the edges of their fields or pick up what fell behind the reapers, but to leave it for the poor, the foreigner, and the widow (Leviticus 19:9-10). So Ruth went out to glean. And, as the book puts it, "her chance happened ***upon*** the portion of the field of Boaz" (Ruth 2:3). It was an accident only from Ruth's point of view. Boaz was a wealthy man and a relative of Naomi's dead husband.

Boaz came out from town and greeted his workers with "The LORD ***be*** with you!" and they answered, "The LORD bless you!" (Ruth 2:4). Right away we know something about this man. He noticed Ruth and asked who she was. When he heard, he told her to stay in his field, keep close to his young women, and drink from his water jars. He told his young men not to touch her. Ruth fell on her face and asked why he would notice a foreigner. Boaz said he had heard everything she had done for Naomi, and he blessed her: may you have a full reward "from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge" (Ruth 2:12). Then he quietly told his workers to pull out some grain from their bundles and leave it for her.

When Ruth came home that evening with about a bushel of barley and told Naomi whose field she had worked in, Naomi's bitterness began to lift. She said Boaz was one of their "redeemers" (Ruth 2:20). In Israel, a close relative could act as a family redeemer. He could buy back land a poor relative had to sell, and in some cases he could marry a childless widow to carry on the dead man's family name.

At the end of the harvest, Naomi sent Ruth to the threshing floor at night, where Boaz was sleeping beside his grain. Ruth uncovered his feet and lay down. When he woke at midnight, startled, she said, "spread your wing over your maidservant, for you ***are*** a redeemer" (Ruth 3:9). It was a request for marriage, and she used the same word, wing, that Boaz had used when he blessed her. Boaz was moved by her kindness in choosing him rather than a younger man, and promised to do everything she asked. There was only one problem. Another relative was closer in line.

The next morning Boaz sat at the town gate and met the closer relative in front of ten elders. The man was ready to buy Naomi's land until he heard that buying it meant marrying Ruth, and then he backed out. He took off his sandal as a sign of the agreement, and Boaz redeemed the land and took Ruth as his wife (Ruth 4:1-10).

God gave Ruth a son, Obed. The women of Bethlehem told Naomi that this child would restore her life, and that her daughter-in-law who loved her was better to her than seven sons. Naomi took the baby and held him in her lap. The book ends with a short family tree: Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse was the father of David (Ruth 4:17-22).

What God Did

God brought a foreigner into His family. Moabites were not supposed to enter the assembly of the LORD (Deuteronomy 23:3). Yet God welcomed Ruth because she took refuge under His wings. From the beginning, God's plan was to bless all nations through Abraham's family.

God worked through what looked like chance. Ruth "happened" to glean in Boaz's field. Boaz "happened" to come out that day. God is never named as doing a miracle in this book, but His hand is behind every step.

God used the law to care for the poor. The gleaning laws and the redeemer laws were God's ways of looking after people who had fallen through the cracks. Ruth and Naomi were saved by people who obeyed what God said.

God turned bitterness into blessing. Naomi came home empty and called herself bitter. She ended the book with a grandson in her lap. God was not finished with her when she thought He was against her.

God was building the line of the Messiah. Ruth is one of four women named in Matthew's family tree of Jesus (Matthew 1:3-6), and like Rahab, she was a foreigner. The baby in Naomi's lap was the grandfather of King David, and David's greater Son would be Jesus.

What We Learn

1. **Loyal love is a choice.** The Hebrew word that runs through this book is hesed, steadfast love or loyal kindness. Ruth showed it to Naomi. Boaz showed it to Ruth. God showed it to all of them. Hesed is love that keeps its promises when it would be easier to walk away.
2. **God sees faithfulness in small places.** Ruth's great deed was not slaying a giant. It was staying with a grieving old woman and working hard in a field. God noticed, and so did Boaz.
3. **Bitterness is not the end of the story.** If you feel like Naomi, empty and dealt with bitterly, hold on. God may be preparing something you cannot see yet.
4. **Be a Boaz.** Boaz was generous, kind, careful about doing things the right way, and faithful to God's Word. Every church needs people like him.
5. **Boaz points to our Redeemer.** Boaz was a close relative who was willing and able to redeem, and he paid the price to bring Ruth into his family. Jesus became our relative by taking on human flesh, and He paid the price to redeem us, "not with perishable things, silver or gold," but with His own precious blood (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Study Questions

1. Read Ruth 1:16-17. What did Ruth give up to go with Naomi? What did she gain?
2. Naomi said, "the Almighty has made ***it*** very bitter for me." Have you ever felt that way? How does the rest of the book answer her?
3. Read Ruth 2:1-12. What do you notice about Boaz's character?
4. Where in your life might God be working through what looks like chance?
5. How does Boaz, the family redeemer, help you understand what Jesus has done for you?

Part Three: Kings, Prophets, and Exiles

Chapter 15: Hannah: A Prayer Poured Out

> *For this lad I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition which I asked from Him. And also I have lent him to the LORD; all the days that he is, he **is** asked for the LORD. And he bowed down there to the LORD.*
>
> 1 Samuel 1:27-28 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Hannah means “grace” or “favor.”

When: About 1110 B.C., near the end of the time of the judges.

Where: Ramah (also called Ramathaim-zophim) in the hill country of Ephraim, and the tabernacle at Shiloh.

Where to read it: 1 Samuel 1:1-2:21.

Known for: Praying for a son, giving Samuel back to the LORD, and her song of praise.

Some of the greatest stories in the Bible begin with a woman who could not have children. Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Samson’s mother, Hannah, and Elizabeth all carried that ache. Hannah’s story lets us see the ache from the inside more than any of the others. We see her tears, her prayer, and her joy. And we see that her private prayer at the tabernacle became the doorway to one of the great turning points in Israel’s history.

For years I tried to control my drinking, and it failed. On May 29, 2020, my wife took me to my first 12-step meeting, and I finally gave up trying to manage it on my own. Like Hannah pouring out her soul before the Lord (1 Samuel 1:15), real change started when I put everything in God's hands.

What Happened

Hannah’s husband was a man named Elkanah, and he had two wives. His other wife, Peninnah, had children. Hannah had none. Every year Elkanah took his family up to Shiloh to worship and sacrifice at the tabernacle. When he gave out portions of the sacrifice for the family meal, he gave Peninnah and her children their share, but he gave Hannah a double portion, because he loved her.

That only made things worse. Peninnah was her rival, and she “provoked her ***with*** provocation, in order to make her fret” (1 Samuel 1:6), year after year. Hannah would weep and refuse to eat. Elkanah tried to comfort her in a way only a husband could: “Am I not better to you than ten sons?” (1 Samuel 1:8). He meant well. It did not help.

One year at Shiloh, after the meal, Hannah got up and went to the tabernacle. Eli the priest was sitting on a seat by the doorpost. “And she ***was*** bitter of soul, and she prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly” (1 Samuel 1:10). She made a vow. If God would look on her misery, remember her, and give her a son, she would give him back to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor would ever touch his head.

She prayed silently. Her lips moved, but no sound came out. Eli watched her and decided she was drunk. He scolded her: put away your wine! Hannah answered with dignity. She was not drunk. She was a woman deeply troubled, and in her words, "I have poured out my soul before the LORD" (1 Samuel 1:15). Eli's tone changed completely. He blessed her: "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant your petition which you have asked from Him" (1 Samuel 1:17).

Then comes a small detail that tells us everything about her faith. She went her way, ate something, "and her face was no longer ***sad***" (1 Samuel 1:18). Nothing had changed yet. She was not pregnant. But she had given her burden to God, and she left it there.

"And the LORD remembered her" (1 Samuel 1:19). Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, saying, "For from the LORD I asked for him" (1 Samuel 1:20).

Now came the hard part. Hannah stayed home until Samuel was weaned, which in that culture could mean around age three. Then she took him up to Shiloh with a sacrifice, brought him to Eli, and kept her vow. She reminded Eli that she was the woman who had stood there praying, and told him, in the words that open this chapter, that she was giving the boy back to the LORD for as long as he lived.

Then Hannah prayed again, this time out loud, in a song of joy (1 Samuel 2:1-10). She praised God as holy, as a Rock, as the One who knows everything. She sang about how God turns things upside down: the mighty are broken and the weak are made strong; the full go hungry and the hungry are satisfied; the barren woman bears seven children. "The LORD makes poor and makes rich; He brings low, also He exalts" (1 Samuel 2:7). And she ended with a prophecy: the LORD "will give strength to His king and exalt the horn of His anointed" (1 Samuel 2:10). Israel did not even have a king yet. The word anointed is the Hebrew word messiah.

Every year after that, Hannah made a little robe and brought it to Samuel when she came up with her husband for the yearly sacrifice. Eli blessed Elkanah and Hannah, and God gave Hannah three more sons and two daughters. "And the lad Samuel grew up with the LORD" (1 Samuel 2:21).

What God Did

God heard a silent prayer. Eli could not hear Hannah's prayer and misunderstood it. God heard every word. He understands the prayers we cannot even put into sound.

God remembered her. As with Noah and with Rachel, "God remembered" means God acted. Her years of waiting were not years of God forgetting.

God used one woman's prayer to change a nation. Israel was in a dark place. The priesthood under Eli's sons was corrupt (1 Samuel 2:12-17). Through Hannah's son, God would raise up the prophet who would anoint Israel's first two kings. A private prayer at Shiloh became a turning point in history.

God gave more than she asked. Hannah asked for one son and gave him away. God gave her five more children. You cannot out-give God.

God put a prophecy of the Messiah in her mouth. Hannah's song looks ahead to God's anointed King. About a thousand years later, Mary, the mother of Jesus, sang a song that echoes Hannah's in many places (Luke 1:46-55).

What We Learn

1. **Bring your deepest pain to God.** Hannah did not hide her bitterness. She poured out her soul before the LORD. God invites the same honesty from us (Psalm 62:8).
2. **Leave your burden with Him.** Hannah's face changed before her circumstances did. Prayer is not only asking. It is trusting God with the answer.
3. **Keep your promises to God.** Giving up Samuel must have been the hardest thing Hannah ever did. She did it anyway. The vows we make to God matter.
4. **Be careful how you judge people.** Eli mistook a praying woman for a drunk. Before we jump to conclusions about someone's behavior, we should ask what they might be carrying.
5. **God lifts up the lowly.** Hannah's song is a theme that runs through the whole Bible, all the way to Jesus, who said the last will be first and the first last. If you feel overlooked, God has not overlooked you.

Study Questions

1. Read 1 Samuel 1:1-8. What made Hannah's situation so painful? How did the people around her respond?
2. Read 1 Samuel 1:9-18. What do you notice about how Hannah prayed? What changed in her after she prayed?
3. Have you ever given God something that was very hard to give? What happened?
4. Read 1 Samuel 2:1-10 and Luke 1:46-55. What do the two songs have in common?
5. Is there a burden you need to "pour out" before the LORD today?

Chapter 16: Samuel: Speak, LORD, Your Servant Is Listening

> *And the LORD came and stood and called as time **after** time, "Samuel, Samuel." And Samuel said, "Speak, for Your servant is listening."*
>
> 1 Samuel 3:10 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Samuel sounds like the Hebrew for "heard of God" or "his name is God." Hannah named him so, saying, "For from the LORD I asked for him" (1 Samuel 1:20).

When: About 1105 to 1015 B.C.

Where: Born in Ramah; raised at the tabernacle in Shiloh; later judged Israel in a yearly circuit of Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah, and lived in Ramah.

Where to read it: 1 Samuel 1-25; 28; Psalm 99:6; Jeremiah 15:1; Acts 3:24; 13:20; Hebrews 11:32.

Known for: Hearing God's call as a boy, being Israel's last judge and a great prophet, and anointing Saul and David as kings.

Samuel stands at the hinge of Israel's history. Before him, Israel was a loose collection of tribes led by judges. After him, Israel was a kingdom. He was the last of the judges and one of the first of the great prophets. He anointed Israel's first two kings. And through it all, he was known for one thing: when God spoke, Samuel listened.

What Happened

Samuel grew up in the tabernacle at Shiloh, serving the LORD under Eli the priest, wearing the little robe his mother made him each year. Eli's own sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests too, but they were wicked men. They stole the best parts of the sacrifices and slept with the women who served at the entrance of the tabernacle (1 Samuel 2:12-22). Eli scolded them, but he did nothing more.

In those days, "the word of the LORD was rare" (1 Samuel 3:1). One night, while Samuel was lying down in the tabernacle near the ark of God, he heard someone call his name. He ran to Eli, who was old and nearly blind, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Eli said he had not called him and sent him back to bed. It happened a second time, and a third. Samuel "did not yet know the LORD" (1 Samuel 3:7), so he did not recognize His voice. Finally Eli realized it was the LORD calling the boy. He told Samuel that if he heard the voice again, he should answer, "Speak, LORD, for Your servant is listening."

The LORD came and stood and called, as before, "Samuel, Samuel." And Samuel answered. The first message God gave him was hard: God was about to judge Eli's house because his sons had made themselves contemptible and Eli had not restrained them. In the morning, Samuel was afraid to tell Eli. But Eli insisted, and Samuel told him everything. Eli answered, "He ***is*** the LORD; let Him do what is good in His eyes" (1 Samuel 3:18).

From then on, “the LORD was with him and did not let any of all his words fall to the ground” (1 Samuel 3:19). All Israel, from Dan in the far north to Beersheba in the south, knew that Samuel was a prophet of the LORD.

Not long after, Israel went to war with the Philistines and carried the ark of the covenant into battle like a lucky charm. Israel was crushed. Hophni and Phinehas were killed, and the ark was captured. When Eli heard the news, he fell backward off his seat, broke his neck, and died (1 Samuel 4).

Twenty years later, Samuel called the nation to repentance: if you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, put away the foreign gods and serve Him only. The people did. When the Philistines attacked them at Mizpah, Samuel offered a sacrifice and cried out to the LORD, and the LORD thundered against the Philistines and threw them into confusion. Samuel set up a stone and called it Ebenezer, “stone of help,” saying, “Until now the LORD has helped us” (1 Samuel 7:12).

Samuel judged Israel all his life. When he grew old, he made his sons judges, but they “did not walk in his ways,” and took bribes (1 Samuel 8:3). So the elders of Israel came to Samuel and demanded a king “to judge us like all the nations” (1 Samuel 8:5). Samuel was hurt, and he prayed. God told him, “they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from reigning over them” (1 Samuel 8:7). God told Samuel to warn them what a king would do, and then to give them what they asked for.

Samuel anointed Saul as Israel’s first king. At Saul’s public coronation, Samuel gave a farewell speech. He asked the people to testify if he had ever taken anything from anyone, cheated anyone, or taken a bribe. They said he had not (1 Samuel 12:3-5). Then he promised them, “far be it from me to sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you” (1 Samuel 12:23).

Saul soon disobeyed God, and Samuel had to deliver the hard message that God had rejected him as king. Samuel grieved over Saul for a long time. Then God sent him to Bethlehem, to the house of Jesse, to anoint the next king. Samuel looked at Jesse’s tall oldest son and thought surely this was the one. God corrected him with words we still need to hear (1 Samuel 16:7). Seven sons passed by, and God chose none of them. The youngest, David, was out keeping the sheep. When he came in, God said, “Arise, anoint him, for this ***is*** he.” Samuel anointed him in front of his brothers (1 Samuel 16:12-13).

Samuel died some years later, while David was still running from Saul, “and all Israel gathered together, and they mourned for him” (1 Samuel 25:1).

What God Did

God answered a mother’s prayer with a prophet. Samuel’s very life was an answer to prayer. God had plans for that boy long before he heard his name in the dark.

God called him personally. God did not send Samuel a letter. He called him by name, twice: “Samuel, Samuel.” God still calls people personally.

God spoke when His word was rare. In a time of spiritual famine, God broke the silence through a boy who was willing to listen. Revival often begins that small.

God kept His word through Samuel. God let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. That does not mean Samuel was perfect. His own sons went astray. It means the message God gave him came true.

God looked at the heart. In choosing David, God taught Samuel, and us, that He does not judge by height, looks, or résumé. He sees what is inside.

What We Learn

1. **Listening is the beginning of serving.** "Speak, for Your servant is listening" is one of the best prayers a believer can pray. Most of us talk to God more than we listen to Him. We hear Him most clearly today through His written Word.
2. **Tell the truth, even when it is hard.** Samuel's first assignment was to give bad news to the man who raised him. He was afraid, but he did it. Faithfulness sometimes means saying what people do not want to hear.
3. **God cannot be used as a lucky charm.** Israel carried the ark into battle without repenting, and lost. God is not a tool we use to get what we want. He is the King we obey.
4. **Keep praying for people who disappoint you.** Israel rejected Samuel's leadership, but he said it would be a sin to stop praying for them. Who do you need to keep praying for?
5. **Remember how far God has brought you.** Samuel's Ebenezer stone said, "Until now the LORD has helped us." Set up your own reminders of His help.

Study Questions

1. Read 1 Samuel 3:1-10. Why do you think Samuel did not recognize the LORD's voice at first? How do we learn to recognize God's voice today?
2. Samuel's first message from God was hard to deliver. Have you ever needed to tell someone a hard truth? How did you handle it?
3. Read 1 Samuel 8:4-9. What was really wrong with Israel's request for a king?
4. Read 1 Samuel 12:23. Why did Samuel see prayerlessness as a sin?
5. Read 1 Samuel 16:7. How does this verse challenge the way you look at other people, and at yourself?

Chapter 17: Saul: The King Who Started Well

> *And Samuel said, "Does the LORD have delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in listening to the voice of the LORD? Look, to listen **is** better than sacrifice, to pay attention than the fat of rams."*
>
> 1 Samuel 15:22 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Saul means "asked for." Israel asked for a king, and God gave them Saul.

When: Reigned about 1050 to 1010 B.C.

Where: From Gibeah in the tribe of Benjamin. He fought the Philistines and others throughout Israel and died on Mount Gilboa.

Where to read it: 1 Samuel 9-31; 1 Chronicles 10; Acts 13:21.

Known for: Being Israel's first king, his disobedience, his jealousy of David, and his death on Mount Gilboa.

Saul's life is one of the saddest stories in the Bible. He started with every advantage. He was tall, handsome, and humble. The Spirit of God came on him. He won great victories. The people loved him. And he ended his life alone on a battlefield, rejected by God, having consulted a medium the night before, falling on his own sword.

How does a man go from there to there? The Bible shows us, step by step, and the steps are not dramatic. They are small acts of disobedience, excused and explained away, until his heart was hard.

What Happened

Saul was the son of a wealthy Benjaminite named Kish. The Bible says "there was not a man from the sons of Israel better than he," and he was a head taller than everyone else (1 Samuel 9:2). We first meet him searching for his father's lost donkeys. After days of looking, his servant suggested they ask the prophet in the nearby town. That prophet was Samuel, and God had already told Samuel that the man he was about to meet would be Israel's king.

Samuel anointed Saul privately with oil. Saul's response was humble: "***Am*** I not a Benjaminite, from the smallest of the tribes of Israel?" (1 Samuel 9:21). When the time came for Samuel to present him to the nation, Saul could not be found. He was hiding among the baggage (1 Samuel 10:22).

His first test came quickly. The Ammonites besieged the town of Jabesh-gilead and threatened to gouge out the right eye of every man there. When Saul heard, the Spirit of God rushed upon him. He rallied Israel, rescued the town, and refused to punish the men who had sneered at him as king. "For today the LORD has worked salvation in Israel," he said (1 Samuel 11:13).

But the cracks showed early. Before a battle with the Philistines, Samuel told Saul to wait seven days at Gilgal until Samuel came to offer sacrifices. The Philistines gathered a huge army, and Saul's men began to slip away. On the seventh day, Samuel had not yet arrived, so Saul offered the burnt offering himself.

As soon as he finished, Samuel walked up. Saul had excuses: the people were scattering, you did not come, the Philistines were gathering. Samuel told him he had acted foolishly, and that his kingdom would not last. “The LORD has sought for Himself a man according to His heart” (1 Samuel 13:14).

Then God gave Saul a clear command: destroy the Amalekites completely, the people who had attacked Israel from behind in the wilderness, and everything that belonged to them. Saul won the battle but kept King Agag alive and kept the best of the sheep and cattle. Then he set up a monument to himself at Carmel (1 Samuel 15:12). When Samuel arrived, Saul greeted him cheerfully: “I have carried out the word of the LORD.” Samuel asked, “And what ***is*** this voice of the sheep in my ears?” (1 Samuel 15:14).

Saul blamed the people. He said they had kept the animals to sacrifice to God. Samuel answered with the words that open this chapter: to listen to the LORD, to obey His voice, is better than sacrifice. Then he said, “Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, so He has rejected you from ***being*** king” (1 Samuel 15:23). Saul admitted he had sinned, “because I feared the people,” but his main concern was that Samuel would still honor him in front of the elders (1 Samuel 15:24, 30).

From that day, the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the LORD tormented him (1 Samuel 16:14). His servants found a young musician to play the harp and calm him. That young man was David. Saul loved him at first. But after David killed Goliath, the women of Israel came out singing, “Saul has struck his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (1 Samuel 18:7). Saul was furious. “And Saul was eyeing David from that day and onward” (1 Samuel 18:9).

For years, Saul tried to kill David. He threw a spear at him twice while David played the harp. He sent him on dangerous missions, hoping the Philistines would kill him. He hunted him through the wilderness with three thousand men. He even killed eighty-five priests at Nob because one of them had helped David (1 Samuel 22:18). Twice David had the chance to kill Saul and refused, because Saul was the LORD’s anointed. Both times Saul wept and admitted David was more righteous than he, and both times he went back to hunting him.

At the end, with the Philistine army camped against him and God no longer answering him by dreams or prophets, Saul disguised himself and went at night to a medium at Endor, though he himself had banned mediums from the land. He asked her to bring up Samuel. To the woman’s shock, Samuel appeared, and told Saul that the next day he and his sons would die (1 Samuel 28). The next day, on Mount Gilboa, Israel was routed. Saul’s son Jonathan was killed, and Saul, badly wounded, fell on his own sword (1 Samuel 31:4). The chronicler sums it up: “And Saul died for his unfaithfulness” (1 Chronicles 10:13).

What God Did

God gave Israel what they asked for. The people wanted a king like the nations. God gave them one, and Saul was exactly what they asked for: tall, impressive, a warrior. Sometimes God’s judgment is to give us what we demand.

God equipped Saul fully. Saul did not fail because God set him up to fail. God changed his heart, gave him His Spirit, and gave him victories (1 Samuel 10:9-10). Saul had everything he needed to obey.

God valued obedience over religious show. Saul tried to cover disobedience with sacrifice. God would not accept it. He wants our hearts, not just our rituals.

God was patient, and then He was firm. Saul had chance after chance. When he kept choosing his own way, God gave the kingdom to someone else. God's patience is long, but it is not endless.

God protected His chosen king. Through all of Saul's jealous rage, God kept David safe. Saul could not stop God's plan.

What We Learn

1. **Partial obedience is disobedience.** Saul did most of what God said. He called it obedience. God did not.
2. **Excuses are a warning sign.** Every time Saul was confronted, he had a reason: the people, the pressure, the circumstances. A heart that always has an excuse is a heart that is not repenting.
3. **Fear of people is a trap.** Saul admitted he disobeyed because he feared the people (Proverbs 29:25). When pleasing people matters more than pleasing God, we will compromise.
4. **Jealousy eats a person alive.** Saul's jealousy of David consumed the last part of his life. When someone else is blessed, celebrate it. Their success does not take anything away from you.
5. **A good start does not guarantee a good finish.** Saul started humble and Spirit-filled. Stay close to God every day. The race is not over until it is over.

Study Questions

1. Read 1 Samuel 9:21 and 10:20-24. What do you notice about Saul at the beginning? What changed?
2. Read 1 Samuel 13:8-14. Why do you think Saul could not wait? When is waiting on God hardest for you?
3. Read 1 Samuel 15:13-23. How did Saul explain his disobedience? Do you hear yourself in any of his excuses?
4. What did Samuel mean when he said "to listen ***is*** better than sacrifice"?
5. Saul was jealous of David. Is there someone whose blessing you find it hard to celebrate? What would help?

Chapter 18: David: A Man After God's Own Heart

Create for me a pure heart, God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Psalm 51:10 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: David probably means "beloved."

When: Born about 1040 B.C.; reigned about 1010 to 970 B.C., seven years in Hebron and thirty-three in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:4-5).

Where: Born in Bethlehem; lived in the wilderness and among the Philistines while running from Saul; reigned from Hebron and then Jerusalem.

Where to read it: 1 Samuel 16-31; 2 Samuel; 1 Kings 1-2; 1 Chronicles 11-29; many of the Psalms; Acts 13:22, 36.

Known for: Killing Goliath, writing psalms, becoming Israel's greatest king, his sin with Bathsheba, and God's promise of an everlasting throne.

David is the most fully described person in the Old Testament. We know about his boyhood, his friendships, his marriages, his battles, his worship, his worst sins, his family heartbreaks, and his last words. We have more than seventy psalms with his name on them, so we even know what he prayed. God called him "a man according to My heart" (Acts 13:22). That does not mean David was perfect. It means that when he fell, he fell toward God.

What Happened

David was the youngest of Jesse's eight sons, the one left out in the field with the sheep when Samuel came to anoint a king. God chose him over all his older brothers, and "the Spirit of the LORD rushed on David from that day and onward" (1 Samuel 16:13).

Not long after, the Philistines lined up for battle against Israel in the Valley of Elah. Every day their champion, Goliath of Gath, more than nine feet tall, came out and challenged Israel to send a man to fight him. For forty days, nobody went. Then David, sent by his father to bring food to his brothers, heard Goliath's challenge and was indignant: "For who ***is*** this uncircumcised Philistine, that he has defied the battle lines of the living God?" (1 Samuel 17:26). He told Saul that God, who had rescued him from the lion and the bear while he kept sheep, would rescue him from this Philistine. He refused Saul's armor, took his staff, his sling, and five smooth stones, and went out. He told Goliath, "I am coming to you in the name of the LORD of armies" (1 Samuel 17:45). One stone, and the giant fell.

David went from shepherd to hero overnight. Saul's son Jonathan loved him "as his own soul" and made a covenant with him (1 Samuel 18:1-3). But Saul's jealousy turned to murderous rage, and for years David lived as a fugitive. He hid in caves and deserts, gathered a band of four hundred outcasts, and even pretended to be insane among the Philistines. Twice he spared Saul's life. "Far be it for me from the LORD," he said, "that I should do this thing to my lord, to the anointed of the LORD" (1 Samuel 24:6). Many of his psalms come from those years of running, crying out to God for help.

When Saul and Jonathan died on Mount Gilboa, David did not celebrate. He wrote a lament: "How the mighty have fallen!" (2 Samuel 1:19). He became king over Judah in Hebron, and seven years later over all Israel. He captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites and made it his capital, the City of David. He brought the ark of God into the city, dancing before the LORD with all his might (2 Samuel 6:14).

David wanted to build a temple for God. God said no; David's son would build it. But then God made David a promise far greater than any building:

> *And your house and your kingdom will be established forever before you; your throne will be established forever.'* (2 Samuel 7:16)

At the height of his power, David fell hard. One spring, when kings went out to war, David stayed home. From his roof he saw a woman bathing. Her name was Bathsheba, and she was the wife of Uriah, one of his most loyal soldiers. David sent for her and slept with her, and she became pregnant. David tried to cover it up by bringing Uriah home from the battle so it would look like the child was his. Uriah refused to go home to his wife while his fellow soldiers were in the field. So David sent him back to the front with a sealed letter to the commander Joab: put Uriah in the fiercest fighting, and then pull back from him. Uriah was killed. David married Bathsheba. "And the thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of the LORD" (2 Samuel 11:27).

God sent the prophet Nathan to David with a story about a rich man who stole a poor man's only lamb. David was furious and said the man deserved to die. Nathan said, "You ***are*** the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7). David did not make excuses. He said, "I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Samuel 12:13). Nathan told him that God had taken away his sin and he would not die, but the child would die, and the sword would never depart from his house. Psalm 51 is the prayer David wrote after Nathan came to him.

The rest of David's life showed the truth of Nathan's words. His son Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar. Her brother Absalom murdered Amnon. Later Absalom led a rebellion and drove David out of Jerusalem. When Absalom was killed in battle, David wept, "My son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died, I myself, in your place!" (2 Samuel 18:33). Even at the end, another son, Adonijah, tried to seize the throne. David made sure Solomon, the son of Bathsheba, was anointed king. He gathered materials for the temple, charged Solomon to walk in God's ways, and died "in a good old age, satisfied ***with*** days, riches, and honor" (1 Chronicles 29:28).

What God Did

God chose the overlooked. Even David's father did not think to bring him in from the field. God looked at his heart.

God fought for David. The victory over Goliath, as David said himself, belonged to the LORD (1 Samuel 17:47). David's courage came from knowing God's power, not his own.

God made an everlasting covenant with him. God promised that a descendant of David would reign forever. That promise points to Jesus, "son of David" (Matthew 1:1). The angel Gabriel told Mary that God would give her Son "the throne of David His father" (Luke 1:32).

God confronted David's sin. God loved David too much to let him hide. He sent Nathan. God's rebuke is a gift.

God forgave him completely, but did not erase the consequences. David was forgiven the moment he confessed. But the damage he did to his family played out for years. Both are true.

What We Learn

1. **Big faith comes from knowing a big God.** David did not look at how big Goliath was. He looked at how big God is.
2. **Honor God's timing.** David was anointed king years before he took the throne, and he refused to grab it by killing Saul. Do not force what God has promised.
3. **Idleness invites temptation.** David's fall began when he stayed home from the work he should have been doing. Guard your free time and your eyes.
4. **Sin always costs more than we planned.** David's one night with Bathsheba led to deception, murder, a dead child, and a broken family.
5. **Real repentance does not hide.** When confronted, Saul made excuses. David said, "I have sinned." That is the difference between the two kings. Read Psalm 51 and make it your prayer when you need it.
6. **Worship with your whole heart.** David danced, sang, wrote, wept, and prayed before God. His psalms still teach the church how to pray.

Study Questions

1. Read 1 Samuel 17:32-47. Where did David's confidence come from? What "giant" are you facing?
2. David refused to kill Saul even when he had the chance. What does that teach about trusting God's timing?
3. Read 2 Samuel 11. List each step David took into sin. Where could he have stopped?
4. Compare David's response to Nathan (2 Samuel 12:13) with Saul's response to Samuel (1 Samuel 15:24-30). What is the difference?
5. Read Psalm 51:1-12. Which line do you most need to pray today?

Chapter 19: Solomon: Wisdom That Was Not Enough

> *And give to Your servant a listening heart to judge Your people, to discern between good and evil; for who is able to judge this great people of Yours?*
>
> 1 Kings 3:9 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Solomon comes from the Hebrew word shalom, "peace." Through Nathan the prophet he was also named Jedidiah, which means beloved of the LORD (2 Samuel 12:24-25).

When: Reigned about 970 to 930 B.C.

Where: Jerusalem. His kingdom stretched from the Euphrates to the border of Egypt (1 Kings 4:21).

Where to read it: 2 Samuel 12:24-25; 1 Kings 1-11; 2 Chronicles 1-9; Proverbs; Ecclesiastes; Song of Songs; Matthew 6:29; 12:42.

Known for: Asking God for wisdom, building the temple, writing proverbs, and turning to other gods in his old age.

Solomon had everything. He had wisdom from God Himself, wealth beyond counting, peace on every border, a temple that was one of the wonders of the ancient world, and a reputation that brought a queen from the far south to see if it was true. He wrote three thousand proverbs and more than a thousand songs. If any man in the Bible should have finished well, it was Solomon.

He did not. His life is proof that knowing what is right is not the same as doing it, and that a divided heart can undo the greatest gifts.

What Happened

Solomon was the second son of David and Bathsheba, born after the death of their first child. The prophet Nathan brought word that the LORD loved him (2 Samuel 12:24-25). When David was old and his son Adonijah tried to take the throne, Nathan and Bathsheba went to David, and David had Solomon anointed king.

Early in his reign, Solomon went to Gibeon to offer a thousand burnt offerings. That night the LORD appeared to him in a dream and said, "Ask what I shall give you" (1 Kings 3:5). Solomon said he was like a little child who did not know how to go out or come in, and he was responsible for a great people. He asked for an understanding heart to judge them and to tell good from evil. God was pleased. Because Solomon had not asked for long life or riches or the death of his enemies, God gave him "a wise and discerning heart," and riches and honor as well (1 Kings 3:12-13).

His wisdom was tested right away. Two prostitutes came before him with one living baby and one dead one, each claiming the living child was hers. Solomon called for a sword and ordered the baby cut in two, half for each. One woman said, go ahead. The other cried out to give the baby to the other woman rather

than kill it. Solomon knew immediately who the real mother was. All Israel heard of it, "and they were afraid before the king, for they saw that the wisdom of God ***was*** within him to do justice" (1 Kings 3:28).

Under Solomon, Israel reached its golden age. "Judah and Israel dwelt in security, each man under his vine and under his fig tree" (1 Kings 4:25). God gave Solomon wisdom, and "breadth of heart like the sand which ***is*** on the shore of the sea" (1 Kings 4:29). People came from every nation to hear him.

In the fourth year of his reign, Solomon began building the temple in Jerusalem, on Mount Moriah, where Abraham had once offered Isaac and where David had built an altar (2 Chronicles 3:1). It took seven years. When it was finished, the priests brought the ark into the Most Holy Place, and the cloud of God's glory filled the house so completely that the priests could not stand to minister (1 Kings 8:10-11). Solomon knelt before all Israel and prayed one of the great prayers of the Bible. He knew no building could hold God: "Look, the heavens and the heavens of the heavens cannot contain You; how much less this house which I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). He asked God to hear every prayer made toward that place, by Israelites and foreigners alike, and to forgive.

The queen of Sheba came with a great caravan to test him with hard questions. When she had seen it all, she said the half had not been told her, and she blessed the LORD his God (1 Kings 10:1-9). Jesus later mentioned her: she came from the ends of the earth to hear Solomon's wisdom, "and look, ***something*** greater than Solomon ***is*** here" (Matthew 12:42).

But there were warnings in God's law for kings. A king must not multiply horses, or wives, or silver and gold for himself (Deuteronomy 17:16-17). Solomon multiplied all three. He had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horsemen. Silver was as common as stones in Jerusalem. And he loved many foreign women: "seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines" (1 Kings 11:3).

The result was exactly what God had warned. "And it was at the time of the old age of Solomon, his wives turned aside his heart after other gods; and his heart was not complete with the LORD his God, like the heart of David his father" (1 Kings 11:4). The man who built God's temple built shrines for Chemosh and Molech, the gods of the Moabites and the Ammonites, on the hill east of Jerusalem.

God was angry with Solomon, "because his heart had turned aside from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice" (1 Kings 11:9). God told him that the kingdom would be torn away from his son. For David's sake, one tribe would remain with his family. After Solomon died, that is exactly what happened. Ten tribes broke away under Jeroboam, and the kingdom was never united again.

What God Did

God loved him from birth. Solomon was born of a marriage that began in sin. Yet God sent a prophet to say He loved this child. God's grace is not limited by the circumstances of our birth.

God gave him wisdom when he asked. Solomon's request pleased God, and God answered more generously than he asked. James says the same offer stands for us: "if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask from God" (James 1:5).

God filled the temple with His glory. The cloud that once led Israel through the wilderness came to rest in the house Solomon built. God chose to dwell among His people.

God warned him. God appeared to Solomon twice. The second time, He told him plainly that if he turned to other gods, Israel would be cut off and the temple would become a heap of ruins (1 Kings 9:6-9). Solomon could never say he was not warned.

God kept His promise to David even in judgment. Because of His covenant with David, God did not take the whole kingdom from Solomon's line. The thread of promise, leading to Jesus, was kept unbroken.

What We Learn

1. **Ask God for wisdom.** Solomon's first prayer is a good one for any of us. We all face decisions that are bigger than we are.
2. **Wisdom must be lived, not just known.** Solomon wrote, "My son, do not forget my instruction" (Proverbs 3:1). Then he forgot it himself. Knowing the Bible is not the same as obeying it.
3. **The heart drifts slowly.** Solomon's heart turned "at the time of the old age." It probably did not happen in a day. Small compromises, especially in our closest relationships, can pull us away from God over years.
4. **Things cannot fill a heart made for God.** Ecclesiastes, traditionally linked to Solomon, reads like the testimony of a man who tried everything: pleasure, building, wealth, work, wisdom. His conclusion: "fear God and keep His commandments, for this ***is*** all of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13).
5. **Someone greater than Solomon is here.** Jesus is the true Son of David, the true wise King, and the true builder of God's house. Paul says that Christ is the One "in whom all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge are hidden" (Colossians 2:3). Unlike Solomon, His heart never turned aside.

Study Questions

1. Read 1 Kings 3:5-14. Why was God pleased with Solomon's request? What would you ask for?
2. Read 1 Kings 8:27-30. What does Solomon's prayer teach you about God and about prayer?
3. Read Deuteronomy 17:14-20 and 1 Kings 11:1-8. How did Solomon break the rules God gave for kings?
4. What "small compromises" might be pulling your heart away from God?
5. Read Matthew 12:42. In what ways is Jesus "greater than Solomon"?

Chapter 20: Elijah: Fire From Heaven, Whisper in the Cave

> *And Elijah drew near to all the people and said, "How long **will** you **be** limping on the two crutches? If the LORD **is** the God, walk after Him; and if the Baal, walk after him." And the people did not answer him a word.*
>
> 1 Kings 18:21 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Elijah means "my God is the LORD," which is exactly the message of his life.

When: About 875 to 850 B.C., in the reigns of Ahab and his son Ahaziah over the northern kingdom of Israel.

Where: From Tishbe in Gilead, east of the Jordan; ministered across Israel, from the brook Cherith to Zarephath near Sidon, Mount Carmel, and Mount Horeb (Sinai).

Where to read it: 1 Kings 17-19; 21; 2 Kings 1-2; Malachi 4:5-6; Matthew 17:1-13; Luke 1:17; James 5:17-18.

Known for: The drought, the widow of Zarephath, fire on Mount Carmel, running from Jezebel, the still small voice, and going up to heaven in a whirlwind.

Elijah bursts onto the pages of the Bible with no introduction. One verse he is not there, and the next he is standing in front of the most wicked king Israel had yet known, announcing that it will not rain until he says so. For the next few chapters he calls down fire, outruns chariots, raises the dead, and defeats 450 false prophets. And then, right after his greatest victory, he runs for his life and asks God to let him die.

James says Elijah was "a man of like nature to us" (James 5:17). That is good news. His God is our God.

What Happened

Ahab was king of Israel, and he "did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him" (1 Kings 16:33). He married Jezebel, a princess from Sidon, who brought Baal worship into Israel and set out to kill the prophets of the LORD. Baal was supposed to be the storm god, the one who sent rain.

So God struck at Baal right where he claimed to be strongest. Elijah told Ahab, "***As*** the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew and rain these years, except according to my word" (1 Kings 17:1). Then God sent Elijah into hiding by the brook Cherith, where ravens brought him bread and meat morning and evening.

When the brook dried up, God sent him to Zarephath, a town in Jezebel's home country. There he met a widow gathering sticks to cook a last meal for herself and her son before they starved. Elijah asked her to make him a small cake first, and promised that her flour and oil would not run out until the rain came. She did, and they did not. Later, when her son died, Elijah carried him upstairs, stretched himself on the boy three times, and cried out to God, and the LORD brought the child back to life (1 Kings 17:8-24).

In the third year, God sent Elijah back to Ahab. Ahab greeted him, "***Is*** this you, troubler of Israel?" Elijah answered that it was Ahab, not he, who had troubled Israel by forsaking the LORD (1 Kings 18:17-18). He challenged Ahab to gather all Israel and the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.

There he put the question to the people that opens this chapter: how long will you go on "limping on the two crutches"? The people said nothing. So Elijah proposed a test. Each side would prepare a bull on an altar, but put no fire under it. "the god who answers by fire, he ***is*** the God" (1 Kings 18:24).

The prophets of Baal went first. From morning until noon they called, "O Baal, answer us!" Nothing happened. Elijah mocked them: shout louder, maybe he is thinking, or busy, or traveling, or asleep. They shouted and cut themselves with swords until the blood flowed, and raved on until evening. "there was no voice, and there was no one answering, and there was no attention" (1 Kings 18:29).

Then Elijah rebuilt the broken altar of the LORD with twelve stones, one for each tribe. He dug a trench around it and had them pour four large jars of water on the offering and the wood, three times, until the water filled the trench. Then he prayed a short, simple prayer that God would show that He is God in Israel. "And the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and the water which ***was*** in the trench it licked up" (1 Kings 18:38). The people fell on their faces and cried, "The LORD, He ***is*** the God! The LORD, He ***is*** the God!" (1 Kings 18:39) The prophets of Baal were seized and put to death.

Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bowed down with his face between his knees, and prayed for rain. Seven times he sent his servant to look toward the sea. The seventh time, the servant saw a little cloud, as small as a man's hand. Soon the sky was black with clouds and wind, and a heavy rain fell. The hand of the LORD was on Elijah, and he ran ahead of Ahab's chariot all the way to Jezreel (1 Kings 18:41-46).

Then Jezebel sent him a message: by this time tomorrow, you will be dead like the prophets you killed. And the man who had faced 450 prophets ran. He went a day's journey into the wilderness, sat under a broom tree, and asked to die: "***It is*** enough now, O LORD; take my life, for I ***am*** not better than my fathers" (1 Kings 19:4).

God did not scold him. He let him sleep. An angel woke him and gave him bread and water, twice, and in the strength of that food Elijah traveled forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God. There God asked him, "What ***is there*** for you here, Elijah?" Elijah poured out his complaint: I have been zealous for You, Israel has killed Your prophets, and I alone am left, and they want to kill me too.

God told him to stand on the mountain. A great wind tore the rocks, but the LORD was not in the wind. Then an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. Then a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire, "a sound of a thin silence" (1 Kings 19:12). When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out to the mouth of the cave. God gave him new work to do: anoint new kings, and anoint Elisha to be prophet after him. And God told him he was not alone: seven thousand in Israel had never bowed to Baal (1 Kings 19:18).

Elijah's ministry went on for years more. He confronted Ahab after Jezebel had a man named Naboth murdered for his vineyard (1 Kings 21). At the end, Elijah and Elisha crossed the Jordan, which parted when Elijah struck it with his cloak, and as they walked, "a chariot of fire and horses of fire" came

between them, “and Elijah went up in the whirlwind to the heavens” (2 Kings 2:11). Like Enoch, he never died.

What God Did

God showed He alone is God. The drought and the fire on Carmel were aimed straight at Baal. The god of storms could not make it rain or send a spark. The LORD did both.

God provided in hidden places. Ravens at a brook. A widow’s jar. Bread baked on hot stones under a broom tree. God fed His prophet in ways nobody would have planned.

God answered prayer. James uses Elijah as his example of prayer: “he prayed with prayer that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the earth ***for*** three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain” (James 5:17-18).

God cared for a worn-out servant. After Carmel, Elijah was exhausted, frightened, and depressed. God’s first answer was sleep and food. Then a gentle voice. Then new work and the truth that he was not alone.

God took him home. Elijah went to heaven without dying. Centuries later he appeared with Moses on the mountain where Jesus was transfigured (Matthew 17:3), and Malachi promised he would come before the great day of the LORD (Malachi 4:5). The angel Gabriel said John the Baptist would come “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17).

What We Learn

1. **You cannot sit on the fence with God.** Elijah’s question still stands. If the LORD is God, follow Him.
2. **Pray boldly and keep praying.** Elijah’s prayer for fire was short, and his prayer for rain took seven tries. Both are prayer.
3. **Spiritual highs are often followed by lows.** Elijah’s darkest moment came right after his greatest one. If you are discouraged after a victory, you are not the first.
4. **Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is rest.** God’s answer to Elijah’s despair started with sleep and a meal. Take care of the body God gave you.
5. **God often speaks quietly.** He can send fire. But He met Elijah in a sound of thin silence, what many English Bibles call a still small voice. Make room in your life to hear Him.
6. **You are not alone.** Elijah thought he was the only faithful one left. God had seven thousand. Do not let discouragement convince you that you are the last believer standing.

Study Questions

1. Read 1 Kings 18:21. Where are you tempted to keep “limping on the two crutches,” trying to follow God and something else at once?
2. Read 1 Kings 18:36-39. What do you notice about Elijah’s prayer? How is it different from the prophets of Baal?
3. Read 1 Kings 19:1-8. Why do you think Elijah fell so low after such a great victory? How did God care for him?

4. What do the wind, earthquake, fire, and “sound of a thin silence” teach about how God works?

5. Read James 5:16-18. What encouragement does Elijah’s example give you about your own prayers?

Chapter 21: Elisha: A Double Portion

> *And he said, "Do not be afraid, for more **are** those who **are** with us than those who **are** with them." And Elisha prayed and said, "LORD, please open his eyes, that he may see." And the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; and look, the mountain **was** full of horses and chariotry of fire all around Elisha.*
>
> 2 Kings 6:16-17 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Elisha means "God saves" or "my God is salvation."

When: About 850 to 795 B.C., from the reign of Ahaziah to the reign of Joash, kings of Israel.

Where: From Abel-meholah in the Jordan Valley; ministered all over Israel, including Jericho, Bethel, Shunem, Mount Carmel, Samaria, and Dothan.

Where to read it: 1 Kings 19:16-21; 2 Kings 2-9; 13:14-21; Luke 4:27.

Known for: Asking for a double portion of Elijah's spirit, and many miracles of mercy, including the widow's oil, the Shunammite's son, and Naaman's healing.

Elijah was thunder and fire. Elisha was more like steady rain. Where Elijah's ministry was a few dramatic confrontations, Elisha's was a long life of serving ordinary people: a poor widow, a family that gave him a room, a group of prophets who lost an axe head, a foreign general with leprosy. Elisha shows us that God's power is not only for the mountaintop. It is also for the kitchen, the workshop, and the sickroom.

What Happened

After Elijah's night in the cave at Horeb, God told him to anoint Elisha son of Shaphat as the prophet who would follow him. Elijah found Elisha plowing a field with twelve pairs of oxen, which tells us his family was well off. Elijah threw his cloak over him. Elisha understood. He asked only to kiss his father and mother goodbye. Then he slaughtered his oxen, cooked the meat using the plow as firewood, and fed the people. There was no going back. He "arose and walked after Elijah and served him" (1 Kings 19:21).

For several years he was Elijah's servant. When the day came for Elijah to be taken up, Elijah told him three times to stay behind, and three times Elisha refused: "***As*** the LORD lives, and ***as*** your soul lives, I will not leave you" (2 Kings 2:2). After they crossed the Jordan, Elijah asked what he could do for him. Elisha asked for "a double portion of your spirit" (2 Kings 2:9). In Israel, the firstborn son received a double share of the inheritance. Elisha was asking to be Elijah's true heir. Elijah said it was a hard thing, but if Elisha saw him taken, it would be his. Then the chariot of fire came, and Elijah went up in the whirlwind. Elisha saw it and cried, "My father, my father, the chariotry of Israel and its horsemen!" (2 Kings 2:12). He picked up Elijah's cloak, struck the Jordan, and asked, "Where ***is*** the LORD, the God of Elijah?" (2 Kings 2:14). The water parted, just as it had for Elijah.

The miracles that followed fill the next several chapters of 2 Kings, and many of them are acts of kindness to people in need. He healed the bad spring at Jericho with a bowl of salt (2 Kings 2:19-22). He saved a

prophet's widow from having her two sons taken as slaves to pay her debts. He told her to borrow every empty jar she could from her neighbors, shut the door, and pour her small flask of oil into them. The oil kept flowing until the last jar was full. She sold it, paid her debt, and lived on the rest (2 Kings 4:1-7).

In the town of Shunem, a wealthy woman and her husband built a small room on their roof for Elisha to stay in whenever he passed through. To thank her, Elisha promised that she would have a son, and a year later she did. Years later, the boy collapsed in the field with a pain in his head and died in his mother's lap. She laid him on Elisha's bed, saddled a donkey, and rode to find the prophet at Mount Carmel. Elisha came, went into the room, shut the door, prayed, and stretched himself on the child, and the boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes (2 Kings 4:8-37).

He made a poisoned pot of stew safe to eat. He fed a hundred men with twenty small loaves of barley bread and had some left over (2 Kings 4:38-44). He made an iron axe head float when one of the young prophets lost a borrowed one in the Jordan (2 Kings 6:1-7).

The most famous of his miracles involved Naaman, the commander of the army of Aram, which the SLB calls Syria, Israel's enemy. Naaman was a great man and "a mighty man of valor," but he was "leprous" (2 Kings 5:1). A young Israelite girl, captured in a raid and now serving Naaman's wife, told her mistress that the prophet in Samaria could heal him. Naaman came with horses, chariots, and a fortune in gifts and stood at Elisha's door. Elisha did not even come out. He sent a messenger: go wash in the Jordan seven times. Naaman was insulted. He had expected the prophet to come out, call on his God, and wave his hand over the spot. Were not the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel? His servants reasoned with him: if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? So Naaman went down and dipped seven times in the Jordan, "and his flesh returned like the flesh of a young lad, and he was clean" (2 Kings 5:14). He came back and confessed that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel. Elisha refused to take any payment. His servant Gehazi ran after Naaman, lied, and took silver and clothes for himself, and Naaman's leprosy came on him instead (2 Kings 5:20-27).

At one point the king of Aram was so frustrated that Elisha kept warning Israel's king of his battle plans that he sent an army to capture the prophet at Dothan. In the morning, Elisha's servant woke to find the city surrounded by horses and chariots. "Alas, my lord! How shall we do?" (2 Kings 6:15). Elisha gave the answer that opens this chapter, and prayed that God would open the young man's eyes. "and look, the mountain ***was*** full of horses and chariotry of fire all around Elisha" (2 Kings 6:17). Elisha then prayed that the enemy soldiers would be struck with blindness, led them into Samaria, and, instead of letting them be killed, had the king feed them a great feast and send them home (2 Kings 6:18-23).

Elisha also anointed Jehu as king to bring God's judgment on the house of Ahab (2 Kings 9). He lived to be an old man. Even after he died, when a dead man's body was thrown into his tomb and touched his bones, the man came back to life (2 Kings 13:20-21).

What God Did

God called him from the plow. Elisha was a farmer with a good future. God called, and he burned the bridge behind him. God often calls people in the middle of ordinary work.

God passed His work from one generation to the next. Elijah's ministry did not end when he left. God raised up a successor. The question at the Jordan, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?", was answered: right here.

God cared about small needs. A widow's debt. A borrowed axe head. A pot of stew. God's power through Elisha was often aimed at very ordinary problems. He still cares about the details of our lives.

God reached a foreigner. Naaman was an enemy general. God healed him and he came to faith. Jesus pointed to Naaman in His hometown synagogue as proof that God's grace reaches beyond Israel (Luke 4:27). The people were so angry they tried to throw Him off a cliff.

God's armies surround His people. The servant at Dothan saw only the enemy. When God opened his eyes, he saw the hills full of God's fiery chariots. We often do not see how much protection surrounds us.

What We Learn

1. **Count the cost and commit.** Elisha burned his plow. Following God is not something to try out with one foot still back home (Luke 9:62).
2. **Stay close to the people God uses to train you.** Elisha would not leave Elijah's side. There is great value in learning from faithful older believers.
3. **Pride can keep us from God's help.** Naaman almost went home a leper because the cure was too simple and too humble. The gospel is like that. We want to do something great. God says, believe and be washed.
4. **Greed can ruin a good servant.** Gehazi had walked with Elisha and seen great miracles, and he still sold his integrity for silver.
5. **Pray for open eyes.** When fear surrounds you, ask God to let you see what is really there. "More are those who are with us than those who are with them."
6. **Elisha's miracles point to Jesus.** Feeding a hundred with a few loaves, raising a widow's son, cleansing a leper: these sound familiar because Jesus did them too, and more. Elisha was a servant. Jesus is the Lord.

Study Questions

1. Read 1 Kings 19:19-21. What did Elisha leave behind to follow God's call? What might God be asking you to leave?
2. Read 2 Kings 4:1-7. What does the story of the widow's oil teach about bringing small needs to God?
3. Read 2 Kings 5:9-14. Why did Naaman almost refuse to be healed? How does pride keep people from God today?
4. Read 2 Kings 6:15-17. What fears are you facing that might look different if God opened your eyes?
5. Who is an "Elijah" in your life, someone you can learn from? Who might you be an "Elijah" for?

Chapter 22: Jonah: The Runaway Prophet

> *And he prayed to the LORD, and he said, "Please, LORD, was this not my word while I was still in my land? Therefore I hastened to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that You **are** a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in steadfast love, and **One who** relents concerning the evil."*
>
> Jonah 4:2 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Jonah means "dove."

When: About 785 to 750 B.C. He prophesied in the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (2 Kings 14:25), who reigned about 793 to 753 B.C.

Where: From Gath-hepher in Galilee, a few miles from Nazareth. He fled from Joppa toward Tarshish, and finally preached in Nineveh, the great city of Assyria, on the Tigris River in modern Iraq.

Where to read it: 2 Kings 14:25; the book of Jonah; Matthew 12:39-41; 16:4; Luke 11:29-32.

Known for: Running from God, being swallowed by a great fish, preaching to Nineveh, and being angry at God's mercy.

Most people know the part of Jonah's story with the fish. Fewer remember how it ends: with a prophet sitting on a hill outside a city that just repented, angry enough to die because God did not destroy it. The fish is not the main point of the book of Jonah. The main point is God's heart for people we would rather see judged, and our own hearts, which are often much smaller than His.

I drifted from God more than once, including in 2000 and again in 2013. I knew what He expected of me and still went my own way. Running from God never brought the freedom I thought it would. It only added distance until I turned back. Like Jonah, I learned that God is patient enough to bring His wandering people home (Jonah 2).

What Happened

The word of the LORD came to Jonah: "Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before Me" (Jonah 1:2). Nineveh was one of the great cities of the Assyrian Empire, and the Assyrians were the terror of the ancient world. They were known for their cruelty to conquered peoples, and within a few decades they would destroy the northern kingdom of Israel. Jonah did not want to go. So he went in the opposite direction. He went down to Joppa, bought a ticket on a ship bound for Tarshish, probably in far-off Spain, and went down into it to go to Tarshish "from before the LORD" (Jonah 1:3).

God hurled a great wind onto the sea. The storm was so violent that the ship was about to break apart. The sailors, who worshiped many gods, each cried out to his own god and threw the cargo overboard. Jonah had gone down into the bottom of the ship and was fast asleep. The captain woke him: get up and call on your god! The sailors cast lots to find out who was responsible, and the lot fell on Jonah. He told

them the truth: "I ***am*** a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of the heavens, who made the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:9). He told them to throw him overboard and the sea would calm down.

The pagan sailors did not want to do it. They rowed hard to get back to land and could not. Finally they prayed to the LORD not to hold them guilty, and threw Jonah into the sea. The sea stopped raging. The sailors feared the LORD greatly, offered a sacrifice, and made vows to Him (Jonah 1:16). The runaway prophet had led a ship full of pagans to worship the true God without even trying.

"And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the inward parts of the fish three days and three nights" (Jonah 1:17). From inside the fish, Jonah prayed. His prayer in chapter 2 is a psalm of thanks, full of phrases from the book of Psalms. He describes sinking down to the roots of the mountains with seaweed wrapped around his head, and God bringing up his life from the pit. It ends with the great line, "Salvation ***belongs*** to the LORD" (Jonah 2:9). Then the fish vomited Jonah onto dry land.

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time. This time he went. Nineveh was so large it took three days to go through it. Jonah walked a day's journey into the city and preached a message of just a handful of words: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overturned" (Jonah 3:4).

What happened next is one of the greatest revivals in history. The people of Nineveh believed God. They declared a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least. When the word reached the king, he got up from his throne, took off his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. He ordered everyone, people and animals, to fast, wear sackcloth, call out to God, and turn from their evil ways and their violence. "Who knows? God may turn back and relent" (Jonah 3:9). And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way, and God relented of the disaster He had said He would bring on them, and He did not do it (Jonah 3:10).

That should have been the happy ending. Instead, "it was evil to Jonah, a great evil, and he burned ***with anger***" (Jonah 4:1). And now Jonah admitted why he had run in the first place. He knew God was gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. He had been afraid God would forgive them. "And now, LORD, please take my life from me, for my death ***is*** better than my life" (Jonah 4:3).

God asked him a simple question: "Do you do well to burn ***with anger***?" (Jonah 4:4). Jonah did not answer. He went out east of the city, built a shelter, and sat down to see what would happen. God appointed a plant to grow up over him and shade his head, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. Then God appointed a worm to attack the plant, and it withered. God sent a scorching east wind, and the sun beat on Jonah's head until he was faint, and again he asked to die.

God's final words to Jonah close the book. You cared about the plant, which you did not plant or grow, which came up in a night and died in a night. "And I, should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who do not know ***the difference*** between their right hand and their left, and much livestock?" (Jonah 4:11). The book ends with that question hanging in the air. We never hear Jonah's answer.

What God Did

God pursued His runaway servant. God sent the storm, the lot, and the fish. He would not let Jonah go. It was not to punish him but to bring him back.

God used Jonah even while he was running. The sailors came to fear the LORD because of Jonah's disobedience. God is never limited by our failures.

God gave a second chance. "And the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second ***time***" (Jonah 3:1). Many of us are living in our second, third, or hundredth chance.

God had mercy on Nineveh. A cruel, violent, pagan city repented, and God spared it. His mercy reaches people we would never choose.

God reasoned with an angry prophet. God did not strike Jonah down for his bad attitude. He asked him questions, gave him shade, and taught him with a plant and a worm. God is patient with our small hearts.

God gave a sign of the resurrection. Jesus said the only sign His generation would get was "the sign of Jonah the prophet. For just as Jonah was in the belly of the sea monster three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights" (Matthew 12:39-40).

What We Learn

1. **You cannot outrun God.** Jonah went down to Joppa, down into the ship, down into the sea. Running from God is always a downward road. And God is there too (Psalm 139:7-10).
2. **Our disobedience affects others.** A whole ship nearly sank because of one man's running. Our choices are never just about us.
3. **God is more merciful than we are.** Jonah knew good theology. He could recite God's mercy. He just did not want it given to his enemies. Is there someone you secretly hope God will not forgive?
4. **Watch what you care about.** Jonah cared more about a plant that shaded his head than about a city full of people. Our comforts can matter more to us than people's souls.
5. **Salvation belongs to the LORD.** Jonah said it from inside the fish. Nineveh showed it in sackcloth. God saves whom He will, and He delights to do it.

Study Questions

1. Read Jonah 1:1-3. Why did Jonah run? Read Jonah 4:2 for his own answer.
2. Have you ever tried to run from something God asked you to do? What happened?
3. Read Jonah 1:4-16. How did God use even Jonah's disobedience to bring the sailors to Himself?
4. Read Jonah 3:5-10. What made Nineveh's repentance real?
5. God's last question to Jonah has no answer in the book. How would you answer it? Is there a "Nineveh" in your life?

Chapter 23: Jeremiah: The Weeping Prophet

> *The steadfast loves of the LORD, for we are not finished, for His compassions do not come to an end.* ***They are*** *new in the mornings; great* ***is*** *Your faithfulness.*
>
> Lamentations 3:22-23 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Jeremiah probably means "the LORD lifts up" or "the LORD establishes."

When: Called in 627 B.C., the thirteenth year of King Josiah (Jeremiah 1:2), and ministered for more than forty years, past the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

Where: From Anathoth, a priests' town a few miles northeast of Jerusalem; ministered in Jerusalem; was taken to Egypt against his will at the end.

Where to read it: The book of Jeremiah; Lamentations (traditionally his); 2 Chronicles 35:25; 36:12, 21-22; Matthew 16:14.

Known for: Preaching for forty years to people who would not listen, his tears, his hope of a new covenant, and seeing Jerusalem fall.

Imagine preaching faithfully for forty years and seeing almost no one respond. Imagine being beaten, thrown in prison, lowered into a muddy well, called a traitor by your own people, and finally watching the city you love burn, exactly as you warned. That was Jeremiah's life.

He is often called the weeping prophet, and he earned the name. But Jeremiah's tears were not weakness. They were the tears of a man who felt what God feels about sin and about His people. And in the darkest hour of Israel's history, Jeremiah gave some of the brightest promises in the Bible.

What Happened

Jeremiah was the son of a priest named Hilkiah. When he was still young, the word of the LORD came to him:

> *"Before I formed you in the belly I knew you, and before you came forth from* ***the*** *womb I consecrated you; a prophet to the nations I appointed you."* (Jeremiah 1:5)

Jeremiah protested, "Alas, Lord GOD! Look, I do not know ***how*** to speak, for I ***am*** a youth" (Jeremiah 1:6). God told him not to say he was only a youth. He was to go wherever God sent him and say whatever God commanded. Then the LORD touched his mouth and said, "Look, I have put My words in your mouth" (Jeremiah 1:9).

Jeremiah's message was hard. The people of Judah had forsaken God. They had committed two evils, God said: they had forsaken Him, "a spring of living water," and dug for themselves "cisterns, broken cisterns, which cannot hold the water" (Jeremiah 2:13). Unless they repented, God would bring an enemy from the north, Babylon, to destroy Jerusalem and carry them away.

Under good King Josiah, there was a brief reform. But after Josiah died, his sons turned back to idols, and Jeremiah's preaching put him in constant danger. He stood in the gate of the temple and told the people not to trust in the temple itself, as if God would never let it fall while they kept lying, stealing, and worshiping Baal (Jeremiah 7:1-15). For that sermon the priests and prophets seized him and said he deserved to die (Jeremiah 26:8-11). He was beaten and put in stocks (Jeremiah 20:2). His own family plotted against him (Jeremiah 12:6). God even told him not to marry, as a living sign of the coming disaster (Jeremiah 16:1-4).

King Jehoiakim had Jeremiah's scroll of prophecies read to him while he sat by a fire in the winter palace. Every few columns, the king cut off that part of the scroll with a knife and threw it into the fire, until the whole scroll was burned (Jeremiah 36:22-23). God told Jeremiah to write it all again.

Jeremiah did not hide how much it hurt. In some of his most honest prayers, he complained that God had overpowered him and that he had become a laughingstock. He decided he would stop speaking God's name. "and it becomes in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary of holding ***it*** in, and I am not able" (Jeremiah 20:9). He even cursed the day he was born (Jeremiah 20:14).

As the Babylonian army surrounded Jerusalem, Jeremiah told King Zedekiah the truth: surrender to Babylon and live, or resist and the city will burn. The officials called him a traitor. They threw him into a cistern with no water, only mud, and Jeremiah sank down in it (Jeremiah 38:6). An Ethiopian palace official named Ebed-melech went to the king, got permission, and pulled Jeremiah out with ropes and old rags to pad his arms.

In the middle of the siege, God told Jeremiah to do something that made no sense. His cousin came to offer him a field at Anathoth, land that was at that moment under Babylonian control. Jeremiah bought it, signed the deed, and had it sealed in a clay jar so it would last a long time. Why? Because God said, "Houses and fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land" (Jeremiah 32:15). Jeremiah was betting his money on God's promise of a future.

In 586 B.C., the Babylonians broke through. They burned the temple, the palace, and the houses of Jerusalem, tore down the walls, and carried most of the people away to Babylon (Jeremiah 39; 52). Everything Jeremiah had warned about came true. The Babylonians treated Jeremiah kindly and let him stay in the land. But after the governor they appointed was murdered, the remaining Jews fled to Egypt in fear and forced Jeremiah to go with them (Jeremiah 43:1-7). That is the last we see of him.

What God Did

God knew him before he was born. God's plan for Jeremiah came before his first breath. That is true of every person, and it is one reason every human life is precious.

God put His words in Jeremiah's mouth. Jeremiah did not have to come up with his message. His job was to say what God said. That is still the calling of everyone who teaches God's Word.

God kept him alive. Jeremiah faced death threats again and again, and God protected him every time, often through unexpected people like Ebed-melech. God had promised at the start, "And they will fight against you, and they will not prevail against you, for I ***am*** with you" (Jeremiah 1:19).

God disciplined His people, but did not abandon them. Jeremiah prophesied that the exile would last seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11; 29:10), and then God would bring His people home. He wrote to the exiles in Babylon, "For I, I know the plans which I am planning concerning you," plans "of welfare and not for calamity, to give you a latter end and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11).

God promised a new covenant. This is the high point of Jeremiah's book. God promised that one day He would make a new covenant, not like the one Israel broke at Sinai. He would put His law within them and write it on their hearts. "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will not remember again" (Jeremiah 31:34). On the night before He died, Jesus took the cup and said, "This cup ***is*** the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20). Hebrews 8 quotes Jeremiah's promise in full and says it is fulfilled in Christ. I also believe Jeremiah's promise will yet be fulfilled for the nation of Israel itself, when, as Paul says, "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26-27).

What We Learn

1. **Faithfulness matters more than results.** By any human measure, Jeremiah's ministry failed. Almost no one listened. But he was faithful, and God's word through him was true. God does not ask us to be successful. He asks us to be faithful.
2. **You can be honest with God about your pain.** Jeremiah's prayers are raw. God did not reject him for them. Bring Him your real feelings.
3. **God's Word cannot be burned.** Jehoiakim cut up the scroll and threw it in the fire. God had it written again. Kings come and go. God's Word stands.
4. **Invest in God's promises.** Jeremiah bought a field in a war zone because God said there was a future. Live in a way that shows you believe what God has promised.
5. **Hope is possible in the ruins.** Lamentations is a book of grief over a burned city. Right in the middle of it, Jeremiah wrote that God's mercies are new every morning. When everything falls apart, God's faithfulness does not.

Study Questions

1. Read Jeremiah 1:4-10. What did God promise Jeremiah? How does that encourage you in what God has called you to do?
2. Read Jeremiah 2:13. What "broken cisterns" do people try to drink from today?
3. Read Jeremiah 20:7-9. Have you ever felt like Jeremiah? What kept him going?
4. Read Jeremiah 31:31-34. What is new about the new covenant? How does Jesus fulfill it?
5. Read Lamentations 3:19-26. How can you hold on to hope when life falls apart?

Chapter 24: Daniel: Faithful in Babylon

> *And when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and **he had** windows opened in his upper room toward Jerusalem; and three times in the day he was kneeling on his knees and praying and giving thanks before his God, just as he had been doing from before this.*
>
> Daniel 6:10 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Daniel means "God is my judge." The Babylonians renamed him Belteshazzar, a name honoring their god Bel (Daniel 1:7; 4:8).

When: Taken to Babylon as a youth in 605 B.C.; lived at least until 536 B.C., the third year of Cyrus king of Persia (Daniel 10:1).

Where: Jerusalem, then Babylon, serving under the kings of Babylon and then of Persia.

Where to read it: The book of Daniel; Ezekiel 14:14, 20; 28:3; Matthew 24:15; Hebrews 11:33.

Known for: Refusing the king's food, interpreting dreams, praying three times a day, the lions' den, and his prophecies of the end times.

Daniel was taken from his home as a teenager and carried hundreds of miles to the greatest city in the world. Babylon set out to make him a Babylonian. They gave him a new name, a new language, a new education, and a seat at the king's table. Daniel lived in Babylon for about seventy years, served under at least four kings and two empires, and rose to the highest offices in the land.

And he never stopped belonging to God. Daniel's life shows us how to live faithfully in a culture that does not share our faith. That makes him one of the most important people in the Bible for believers today.

What Happened

In 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon besieged Jerusalem and took some of the young men of Judah's royal and noble families back to Babylon. They were chosen for being handsome, intelligent, and well educated, and they were to be trained for three years in the language and literature of the Babylonians, and then serve the king (Daniel 1:3-5). Daniel and his friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were among them. Their new names were Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego.

The young men were assigned food and wine from the king's own table. "And Daniel set on his heart that he would not defile himself with the delicacies of the king and with the wine of his drinking" (Daniel 1:8). The food may have broken God's laws about clean and unclean food, or been offered to idols. Daniel did not stage a protest. He asked politely for a ten-day test: give us vegetables and water and see how we look. At the end of ten days they looked healthier than all the others. God gave the four young men knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom, and Daniel understanding of visions and dreams. When the king examined them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his kingdom (Daniel 1:20).

In Nebuchadnezzar's second year, the king had a dream that troubled him so much he could not sleep. He demanded that his wise men tell him not only what it meant but what the dream itself was. When they said no man on earth could do that, he ordered all the wise men of Babylon executed, including Daniel and his friends. Daniel asked for time, went home, and asked his friends to pray. That night God revealed the mystery to Daniel in a vision, and Daniel blessed the God of heaven. When he stood before the king, he made sure the credit went where it belonged: "there is a God in the heavens who reveals mysteries" (Daniel 2:28). The dream was of a great statue of gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay, and a stone cut out without hands that struck the statue, broke it to pieces, and became a great mountain that filled the whole earth. The statue showed four great kingdoms, beginning with Babylon. The stone is a kingdom God will set up that will never be destroyed (Daniel 2:44). The king fell on his face and made Daniel ruler over the whole province of Babylon.

Later, Daniel's three friends refused to bow down to a giant golden image the king set up, and were thrown into a blazing furnace. The king looked in and saw four men walking in the fire, unharmed, and the fourth looked "like a son of ***the*** gods" (Daniel 3:25). Daniel himself interpreted another dream for Nebuchadnezzar, warning him that he would be humbled until he acknowledged that the Most High rules. A year later, as the king boasted on his palace roof about the great Babylon he had built, he lost his mind and lived like an animal for seven periods of time, until his sanity returned and he praised the King of heaven (Daniel 4).

Decades later, when Daniel was an old man, King Belshazzar threw a drunken feast and used the gold cups taken from the temple in Jerusalem to toast his gods. Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote on the wall. No one could read it. The queen remembered Daniel. He read the writing: God has numbered your kingdom and finished it; you have been weighed in the balances and found lacking; your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians (Daniel 5:25-28). That very night Belshazzar was killed, and Darius the Mede took the kingdom.

Under the new Persian rulers, Daniel rose again, and Darius planned to set him over the whole kingdom. The other officials were jealous and looked for something to accuse him of, but they could find nothing, because he was faithful. So they decided they would have to attack him through his faith. They persuaded the king to sign a law that for thirty days, anyone who prayed to any god or man except the king would be thrown into the lions' den.

Daniel knew the law had been signed. He went home, opened his windows toward Jerusalem, and knelt and prayed three times a day, "just as he had been doing from before this" (Daniel 6:10). His enemies caught him and reported him. The king was heartsick and tried all day to find a way to save him, but a law of the Medes and Persians could not be changed. Daniel was thrown into the den, and a stone was laid over the mouth of it. The king could not sleep. At dawn he hurried to the den and called out in anguish. Daniel answered: "My God sent His angel and shut the mouth of the lions, and they have not harmed me" (Daniel 6:22). Not a scratch was found on him, "because he had trusted in his God" (Daniel 6:23).

In his later years, Daniel received visions of the future: four beasts, the Ancient of Days on His throne, "one like a son of man" coming with the clouds of heaven to receive an everlasting kingdom (Daniel 7:13-

14), and the seventy weeks of years leading to the coming of Messiah the Prince (Daniel 9:24-27). He read Jeremiah's prophecy that the exile would last seventy years, and when he saw the time was nearly up, he fasted and confessed the sins of his people as if they were his own (Daniel 9:1-19). The book ends with God's word to the old prophet: "And you, go to the end; and you will rest, and you will stand for your allotted portion at the end of the days" (Daniel 12:13).

What God Did

God gave favor and wisdom. Daniel 1:9 says God granted Daniel favor and compassion with the official in charge of him. Daniel's skill came from God, and Daniel said so every time.

God revealed secrets. No Babylonian magician could tell the king his dream. God could. He is the God who knows the end from the beginning.

God shut the lions' mouths. God did not keep Daniel out of the den. He kept him safe inside it. Sometimes God delivers us from the trial, and sometimes He delivers us through it.

God showed that He rules over kings. The great theme of the book is that "the Most High rules over the kingdom of mankind, and to whomever He wills He gives it" (Daniel 4:17). Babylon fell, Persia rose and fell, and God's kingdom stands forever.

God showed Daniel the future. Daniel's visions stretch from his own day to the end of history. Jesus called Himself the Son of Man from Daniel 7, and He pointed to Daniel when He spoke about the last days (Matthew 24:15). I believe Daniel's seventieth week (Daniel 9:27) is the seven-year tribulation that is still to come, and that the church will be taken up to be with the Lord before it begins (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; Revelation 3:10). I go into much more detail in my Daniel study.

What We Learn

1. **Decide ahead of time.** Daniel "set on his heart" what he would do before the food was ever served. Faithfulness under pressure starts with decisions made before the pressure comes.
2. **Be respectful and wise, not just right.** Daniel did not insult his captors. He made a polite request and offered a test. You can hold firm convictions and still be gracious.
3. **Do excellent work.** Daniel's enemies could find no fault in his job. A believer's work should be so honest and good that the only thing anyone can attack is his faith.
4. **Keep your habits of prayer.** When the law changed, Daniel did not change. He prayed as he always had. Strong habits of prayer carry us through days of crisis.
5. **Pray for your nation.** Daniel confessed his people's sins as "we have sinned" (Daniel 9:5). Pray for your country with humility, not just with complaints.
6. **God's kingdom wins.** The stone that became a mountain is God's kingdom, and one day it will fill the whole earth. Live like a citizen of that kingdom now.

Study Questions

1. Read Daniel 1:8-16. How did Daniel stand firm without being rude? What can you learn from his approach?

2. Where do you feel pressure to fit into a culture that does not honor God? What “Babylonian food” are you being offered?

3. Read Daniel 6:1-10. Why couldn’t Daniel’s enemies find anything against him except his faith?

4. Daniel prayed three times a day, “just as he had been doing from before this.” What habits of prayer would keep you steady in a crisis?

5. Read Daniel 2:44 and 7:13-14. What do these verses tell you about the future of God’s kingdom?

Chapter 25: Esther: For Such a Time as This

> *For if you indeed keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, and you and the house of your father will perish. And who knows whether for a time like this you have attained to royalty?*
>
> Esther 4:14 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Esther is probably a Persian name meaning "star." Her Hebrew name was Hadassah, "myrtle" (Esther 2:7).

When: About 483 to 473 B.C., in the reign of Xerxes I of Persia, called Ahasuerus in the Hebrew text.

Where: Susa (Shushan), one of the capitals of the Persian Empire, in what is now southwestern Iran.

Where to read it: The book of Esther.

Known for: Becoming queen of Persia, risking her life to go before the king, and saving the Jewish people from destruction.

The book of Esther is the only book in the Bible that never mentions God by name. There are no visions, no prophets, no miracles, and no prayers recorded. And yet nobody can read it without seeing God's hand on every page. It is a story full of "coincidences": a sleepless king, a timely report, a gallows built for the wrong man. By the end, it is clear that nothing in it was a coincidence at all.

At the center of it all is a young Jewish orphan who became the queen of the most powerful empire on earth, and who had to decide whether to risk her life for her people.

I have spent about 40 years at work. Every workplace is a place where people watch how a believer handles pressure. Like Esther, each of us is placed in a job and a neighborhood for a purpose and for a season (Esther 4:14).

What Happened

About a century after Babylon conquered Jerusalem, Persia had long since conquered Babylon, and many Jews still lived scattered across the Persian Empire. In the capital city of Susa lived a Jewish man named Mordecai, who had raised his young cousin Hadassah, known as Esther, after her parents died (Esther 2:7).

The king, Ahasuerus, held a huge banquet and, while drunk, ordered his queen, Vashti, to come and show off her beauty to his guests. She refused. Advised that her refusal would encourage every wife in the empire to disrespect her husband, the king removed her as queen. Later, he held a search for a new queen, and beautiful young women from all over the empire were brought to the palace. Esther was one of them. She won the favor of everyone who saw her, and the king loved her more than all the other women and made her queen (Esther 2:17). On Mordecai's instructions, she did not tell anyone that she was Jewish.

Around that time, Mordecai overheard two of the king's officials plotting to assassinate the king. He told Esther, she told the king, the plot was confirmed, and the two men were hanged. It was all written down in the king's chronicles (Esther 2:21-23). Then the matter was forgotten.

Then a man named Haman was promoted above all the king's officials, and everyone at the king's gate bowed down to him by royal command. Mordecai would not bow. When Haman learned Mordecai was a Jew, he was not satisfied to punish just one man. He decided to destroy every Jew in the empire. He cast lots, called pur, to pick the day, and the lot fell on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, almost a year away. Then he told the king there was a certain people scattered throughout his kingdom whose laws were different and who did not keep the king's laws, and offered to pay ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury if the king would let them be destroyed. The king handed Haman his signet ring and told him to do what he liked. Letters went out to every province, in every language: on that day, kill all the Jews, young and old, women and children, and take their possessions (Esther 3:8-13).

When Mordecai heard, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and cried loudly and bitterly in the middle of the city. Across the empire, the Jews mourned and fasted. Mordecai sent word to Esther, asking her to go to the king and plead for her people. Esther sent back a reminder: anyone who went to the king in the inner court without being called was put to death, unless the king held out his golden scepter. And the king had not called for her in thirty days.

Mordecai's answer is the heart of the book. Do not think that you will escape in the king's palace any more than the other Jews. If you keep silent now, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And then: "And who knows whether for a time like this you have attained to royalty?" (Esther 4:14).

Esther made her decision. She asked Mordecai to gather all the Jews of Susa to fast for her for three days, night and day, and she and her maids would fast too. "and so I will go in to the king, which ***is*** not according to the law; and as I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16).

On the third day, Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court. When the king saw her, she won his favor, and he held out the golden scepter. He asked what she wanted, up to half the kingdom. She invited him and Haman to a banquet. At the banquet she invited them to a second banquet the next day.

Haman went home thrilled, until he passed Mordecai at the gate, who still would not stand or tremble before him. His wife and friends suggested he build a gallows seventy-five feet high and ask the king in the morning to hang Mordecai on it. Haman loved the idea and had it built that night.

That same night, the king could not sleep (Esther 6:1). He ordered the book of the chronicles brought and read to him, and it happened to be read to him how Mordecai had saved his life. The king asked what honor Mordecai had received for it. Nothing had been done. Just then Haman walked into the outer court, coming to ask for Mordecai's death. Before he could speak, the king asked him, what should be done for the man the king delights to honor? Haman, sure the king meant him, suggested a royal robe, a royal horse, and a noble official leading him through the city square proclaiming his honor. The king said, excellent. Go do all that for Mordecai the Jew. Haman had to lead his enemy through the streets.

At the second banquet, Esther finally made her request: spare my life and the lives of my people, for we have been sold to be destroyed. The king demanded to know who would dare do such a thing. Esther pointed: "A man, an adversary and an enemy: this evil Haman!" (Esther 7:6). The king stormed out into the garden in a rage. When he came back, Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was, begging for his life. A servant mentioned the gallows Haman had built for Mordecai. The king said, "Hang him on it." And they hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai (Esther 7:9-10).

The king's first order could not be cancelled, since a Persian law could not be revoked. But the king gave Mordecai his signet ring, and Mordecai wrote a new decree allowing the Jews everywhere to gather and defend themselves on that day. When the day came, the Jews overcame their enemies. Mordecai was made second to the king. And the Jews celebrated a new feast, Purim, named after Haman's lots, as days of feasting and joy, which they still keep to this day (Esther 9:20-28).

What God Did

God worked behind the scenes. He is never named, but He is never absent. A beauty contest, an overheard plot, a sleepless night, and a book read at just the right page all came together to save His people. This is what Bible teachers call God's providence: His quiet, constant rule over ordinary events.

God put Esther in the right place. An orphan girl in exile became queen just before her people needed someone close to the throne. Mordecai sensed it: maybe this is why you are here.

God protected His promise. Haman's plan would have wiped out the Jewish people, and with them the line of the Messiah. God promised Abraham that He would curse those who cursed his family (Genesis 12:3). Haman learned what that meant.

God turned the tables. The book is full of reversals. Haman built a gallows and was hanged on it. Haman planned to be honored and had to honor Mordecai. A day appointed for destruction became a day of victory. "The LORD has made everything for its purpose, and also the wicked for a day of evil" (Proverbs 16:4).

What We Learn

1. **God is at work even when He seems silent.** If you cannot see God's hand in your life right now, read Esther. He may be arranging things you cannot yet see.
2. **You are where you are for a reason.** Your job, your neighborhood, your family, your friendships are not accidents. Ask God, "Why have You placed me here, for such a time as this?"
3. **Courage sometimes means risking everything.** "As I perish, I perish." Esther did not know how it would turn out. She did the right thing anyway.
4. **Prepare with prayer and fasting.** Prayer is not mentioned by name in the book, but the three-day fast is hard to explain any other way. Esther did not rush in. She prepared her heart and asked others to stand with her.
5. **Pride goes before a fall.** Haman had wealth, power, and the king's favor, and he was miserable because one man would not bow. Pride is never satisfied, and in the end it destroys.

Study Questions

1. God is never named in Esther. Where do you see His hand at work in the story?
2. Read Esther 4:12-16. What did Mordecai say to Esther, and why do you think it changed her mind?
3. Where has God placed you “for a time like this”? What might He want you to do there?
4. Read Esther 6:1-11. List the “coincidences” in that chapter. Have you seen God work like that in your life?
5. What does Haman’s story teach you about pride and bitterness?

Chapter 26: Nehemiah: Prayer and a Trowel

> *And I brought back word to them and said to them, "The God of the heavens, He will give us success; and we His servants will arise and build. And to you **there is** no portion, and **no** right, and **no** memorial in Jerusalem."*
>
> Nehemiah 2:20 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Nehemiah means "the LORD comforts."

When: He came to Jerusalem in 445 B.C., the twentieth year of Artaxerxes I of Persia (Nehemiah 2:1), and returned again after 433 B.C. (Nehemiah 13:6).

Where: Susa in Persia, where he served as the king's cupbearer, and then Jerusalem, where he served as governor.

Where to read it: The book of Nehemiah; Ezra 2:2 may refer to a different man of the same name.

Known for: Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem in fifty-two days, his quick prayers, and leading the people back to God's law.

Nehemiah was not a priest or a prophet. He was a layman with a government job, a man who knew how to manage people, plan a project, handle opposition, and keep going until the job was done. As a project manager by trade, I have always had a soft spot for him. But what makes Nehemiah stand out is not his skill. It is that every part of his work was soaked in prayer. He picked up the trowel with one hand and held on to God with the other.

What Happened

By Nehemiah's day, the Jews had been back in their land for almost a century. The temple had been rebuilt under Zerubbabel, and Ezra the scribe had brought another group back and taught the law. But Jerusalem was still in sad shape. Its walls lay broken and its gates burned. A city without walls was open to every raider and was a disgrace in the eyes of its neighbors.

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia, a trusted position that meant he tasted the king's wine and stood close to him every day. One day his brother Hanani and some men came from Judah, and Nehemiah asked them about the Jews who had survived and about Jerusalem. They told him the people were in great trouble and shame, and the wall was broken down (Nehemiah 1:3). "And it was, when I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned ***for*** days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of the heavens" (Nehemiah 1:4).

His prayer in chapter 1 is a model. He praised God as great and awesome, keeping His covenant and steadfast love. He confessed the sins of Israel, including his own and his father's house. He reminded God of His promise to bring His people back if they returned to Him. And he asked for one specific thing: favor "before this man," the king.

Four months later, the king noticed Nehemiah's sad face and asked what was wrong. That was dangerous. A servant was not supposed to look sad before the king. Nehemiah was very afraid, but he told him the truth: the city of his fathers lay in ruins. The king asked, "For what are you requesting?" And here is one of my favorite verses in the Bible: "And I prayed to the God of the heavens. And I said to the king" (Nehemiah 2:4-5). Between the king's question and his own answer, Nehemiah sent up a silent prayer. Then he asked boldly: send me to rebuild it. And he had a plan ready, with a timeline and a request for letters to the governors and for timber from the king's forest. The king granted everything, "according to the good hand of my God on me" (Nehemiah 2:8).

In Jerusalem, Nehemiah did not announce his plans right away. He went out at night with a few men and inspected the walls himself. Then he gathered the leaders and told them what God had done and what the king had said. They answered, "Let us arise and build" (Nehemiah 2:18).

Chapter 3 is a long list of names that most of us skim. But it is beautiful. Priests, goldsmiths, perfume makers, rulers, and ordinary families each took a section of the wall, many of them right in front of their own houses. One man, Shallum, worked with his daughters (Nehemiah 3:12). Everybody had a part.

The opposition came fast. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, the leaders of the surrounding peoples, mocked them first. Tobiah said that if even a fox climbed on their wall, it would break down (Nehemiah 4:3). Nehemiah prayed and kept building, for "***there*** was a heart in the people to work" (Nehemiah 4:6). Then the enemies plotted to attack. Nehemiah prayed and set a guard day and night. He armed the people by families and told them, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the great and awesome Lord, and fight for your brothers" (Nehemiah 4:14). From then on, half the men worked while the other half stood guard, and the builders worked with a weapon at their side. A trumpeter stayed with Nehemiah, and wherever the trumpet sounded, everyone would rally. "Our God will fight for us" (Nehemiah 4:20).

Then came trouble from inside. Some wealthy Jews were charging their poorer brothers interest and taking their fields and even their children as slaves during a famine. Nehemiah was very angry. He called a great assembly, rebuked the nobles, and made them give everything back. He himself, as governor, refused to take the food allowance he was entitled to for twelve years, "because of the fear of God" and because the burden on the people was already heavy (Nehemiah 5:15, 18).

The enemies tried one more time, with tricks. Four times they invited Nehemiah to a meeting in the plain of Ono, planning to harm him. His answer every time: "I am doing a great work, and I am not able to come down" (Nehemiah 6:3). They spread rumors that he planned to make himself king. They hired a false prophet to frighten him into hiding in the temple. Nehemiah saw through all of it, prayed, and kept working.

"And the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth ***day*** of Elul, in fifty-two days" (Nehemiah 6:15). When the surrounding nations heard, they lost their confidence, "and they knew that this work had been done from our God" (Nehemiah 6:16).

But Nehemiah knew a wall was not enough. The people gathered in the square, and Ezra read the law of God to them from early morning until midday while the Levites explained it. The people wept as they heard it, and Nehemiah told them, "do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your stronghold"

(Nehemiah 8:10). They confessed their sins, renewed the covenant, and dedicated the wall with two great choirs marching around it, and the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away (Nehemiah 12:43).

Some years later, Nehemiah returned from a trip to Persia and found the people slipping again: neglecting the temple, working on the Sabbath, marrying people who worshiped other gods. He did not let it slide. He cleaned house, restored the Levites, shut the gates on the Sabbath, and confronted the offenders. His book ends with a simple prayer: "Remember me, my God, for good" (Nehemiah 13:31).

What God Did

God answered specific prayer. Nehemiah asked for favor with the king, and God gave it. Nehemiah gave God the credit: it was God's good hand upon him.

God moved a pagan king. "Streams of water ***is*** the heart of a king in the hand of the LORD; to all that He desires He turns it" (Proverbs 21:1). Artaxerxes had once stopped the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Ezra 4:21). Now he paid for it.

God protected the work. Every plot against the builders failed. God frustrated their plans (Nehemiah 4:15).

God finished what He started. Fifty-two days. Even the enemies had to admit that God did it.

God rebuilt His people, not just their walls. The greatest work in the book is not the wall but the revival at the Water Gate, when the people heard God's Word and returned to Him.

What We Learn

1. **Let your heart be broken by what breaks God's heart.** Nehemiah's work began with tears. Before you try to fix something, take it to God.
2. **Pray and plan.** Nehemiah prayed for four months and still had a plan ready when the king asked. Prayer and planning are not opposites. Faith does its homework.
3. **Arrow prayers work.** Nehemiah prayed in the split second between the king's question and his answer. You can pray anywhere, anytime, without anyone knowing.
4. **Everybody gets a section of the wall.** God's work is never a one-man show. Find your section and build.
5. **Watch and pray.** The builders worked with one hand and held a weapon with the other. Expect opposition when you do God's work, and do not let it stop you.
6. **Do not come down from a great work.** Distractions, rumors, and pointless meetings can pull us away from what God has called us to do. Learn to say, "I am doing a great work."
7. **Leaders must have clean hands.** Nehemiah refused what he could have taken. Integrity gave him the authority to confront others.

Study Questions

1. Read Nehemiah 1:4-11. What can you learn from Nehemiah's prayer?
2. Read Nehemiah 2:1-8. How did Nehemiah combine prayer, courage, and planning?

3. What “section of the wall” has God given you in your church, family, or community?

4. Read Nehemiah 4:7-23. How did Nehemiah respond to threats? How do you respond when your work for God is opposed?

5. Read Nehemiah 6:1-4. What distractions are pulling you away from what God has called you to do?

Part Four: In the Days of Jesus

Chapter 27: Mary: The Servant of the Lord

> *Then Mary said, "Look, the slave of **the** Lord; may it happen to me according to your declaration." And the angel departed from her.*
>
> Luke 1:38 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Mary is the Greek form of the Hebrew Miriam, the name of Moses' sister. Its meaning is uncertain.

When: Born about 20 to 15 B.C.; Jesus was born about 6 to 4 B.C. She was still living after the resurrection (Acts 1:14).

Where: Nazareth in Galilee; Bethlehem; Egypt for a time; Jerusalem at the cross and at Pentecost.

Where to read it: Matthew 1-2; 12:46-50; Luke 1-2; 8:19-21; John 2:1-12; 19:25-27; Acts 1:14; Galatians 4:4.

Known for: Being chosen to be the mother of Jesus, her humble faith, her song of praise, and standing at the foot of the cross.

Mary has been honored, sung about, and painted more than almost any woman in history. Some traditions have lifted her far beyond what the Bible says, and others have almost forgotten her. The Bible itself gives us a picture that is both simpler and more beautiful: a young woman from a small town who heard an impossible message from God and said yes.

What Happened

Mary lived in Nazareth, a small village in the hills of Galilee that nobody thought much of (John 1:46). She was engaged to a carpenter named Joseph, a descendant of King David. In that culture, engagement was a binding commitment that could only be broken by divorce, though the couple did not yet live together. She was probably quite young, as most brides were then.

God sent the angel Gabriel to her with a greeting that frightened her: "Greetings, you who have been favored! The Lord ***is*** with you" (Luke 1:28). Gabriel told her not to be afraid, because she had found favor with God. She would conceive and give birth to a son and name Him Jesus. "He will be great and will be called Son of ***the*** Most High; and ***the*** Lord God will give Him the throne of David His father" (Luke 1:32).

Mary's question was practical: "How will this be, since I do not know a man?" (Luke 1:34). Gabriel explained that the Holy Spirit would come upon her, and the power of the Most High would overshadow her, so the holy Child would be called the Son of God. He told her that her relative Elizabeth, old and childless, was already six months pregnant, "For with God no declaration will be impossible" (Luke 1:37).

Then Mary gave the answer that opens this chapter. She called herself the Lord's servant and accepted His word. Think of what it would cost her. She would be pregnant before her wedding in a small village where everyone knew everyone's business. Joseph might divorce her. People might whisper about her for the rest of her life. She said yes anyway.

Mary hurried to the hill country of Judah to visit Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard her greeting, the baby in Elizabeth's womb, the future John the Baptist, leaped for joy, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, called Mary blessed among women and "the mother of my Lord" (Luke 1:43). Mary answered with a song of praise that the church has sung for centuries, often called the Magnificat:

> *And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior, because He has looked upon the lowliness of His slave; for look, from now on all the generations will call me blessed."* (Luke 1:46-48)

Joseph, when he found out she was pregnant, planned to divorce her quietly, because he was a righteous man and did not want to shame her. But an angel came to him in a dream and told him the child was from the Holy Spirit, and he took Mary as his wife (Matthew 1:18-25).

Near the time of the birth, the Roman emperor Augustus ordered a census, and Joseph took Mary to Bethlehem, his ancestral town. There was no room for them in the lodging place, so when Jesus was born, Mary wrapped Him in cloths and laid Him in a manger (Luke 2:7). Shepherds came that night, telling what the angels had said. "But Mary was treasuring up all these declarations, pondering ***them*** in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

Forty days later, at the temple, an old man named Simeon took the baby in his arms and praised God. Then he told Mary something hard: "and a sword will go through your own soul also" (Luke 2:35). Later, wise men came from the east with gifts, and when King Herod tried to kill the child, Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Egypt until Herod died, and then they settled in Nazareth (Matthew 2).

When Jesus was twelve, the family went to Jerusalem for the Passover. On the way home, Mary and Joseph realized He was missing and searched for three days before finding Him in the temple, listening to the teachers and asking them questions. Mary said, "Child, why did You do thus to us?" He answered, "Did you not know that I must be in the ***things*** of My Father?" They did not understand, but again "His mother was keeping all these declarations in her heart" (Luke 2:48-51).

At a wedding in Cana, years later, the wine ran out. Mary told Jesus, and then told the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it" (John 2:5). Those are the last words of Mary recorded in the Bible, and they are good advice for anyone. Jesus turned the water into wine.

Mary did not stay a virgin all her life. Matthew says Joseph "was not knowing her until she had brought forth her firstborn son" (Matthew 1:25), and after Jesus was born, she and Joseph had other children together: four sons, James, Joses, Jude, and Simon, and at least two daughters (Mark 6:3). Mary's path was not always easy. At one point she and Jesus' brothers came to take Him home, perhaps worried about Him (Mark 3:21, 31). Jesus answered that whoever does the will of God is His brother and sister and mother (Mark 3:35). Mary's place in God's family, like ours, rested on faith, not just family ties.

Then came the sword Simeon had promised. Mary stood near the cross and watched her Son die. Even in His agony, Jesus thought of her. He looked at her and at John, the disciple He loved, and said, "Woman, look, your son!" and to John, "Look, your mother!" From that hour John took her into his own home (John 19:25-27).

The last time we see Mary in the Bible, she is in the upper room in Jerusalem after the resurrection and ascension, praying with the apostles, the other women, and Jesus' brothers (Acts 1:14). The brothers who once doubted Him now believed. And Mary, who had carried Him, now worshiped Him as her risen Lord.

What God Did

God chose the humble. God did not choose a queen in a palace. He chose a young woman in a forgotten village. Mary herself said God "has looked upon the lowliness of His slave" (Luke 1:48).

God did the impossible. The virgin birth was foretold in Isaiah 7:14 and fulfilled in Mary. The eternal Son of God took on human flesh in her womb. Paul says, "God sent forth His Son, born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4). That is the wonder of Christmas: God became a man without ceasing to be God.

God kept His promise to David. Gabriel's message tied Jesus to the covenant God made with David a thousand years earlier. Mary's Son is the King who will reign forever.

God prepared her heart. Mary's song is full of the Old Testament, especially Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2. She knew the Scriptures, and when the moment came, God's Word poured out of her.

God brought her to faith in her Son. Mary called God "my Savior" in her song. She needed a Savior, like everyone else. She found Him in the Child she bore.

What We Learn

1. **Say yes to God before you know how it will work out.** Mary did not have every answer. She had God's word, and that was enough.
2. **Ponder what God is doing.** Twice Luke tells us Mary treasured these things in her heart. Take time to think over what God has done and is doing in your life.
3. **Obedience can be costly.** Saying yes to God put Mary's reputation and her marriage at risk, and later brought her to the foot of the cross. Following God is worth it, but it is not always easy.
4. **Do whatever He tells you.** Mary's last recorded words point away from herself to Jesus. That is the best way to honor her.
5. **Honor Mary the way the Bible does.** The Bible calls her blessed and holds her up as a model of faith and humility. It never asks us to pray to her or worship her. She would want all the glory to go to her Son.

Study Questions

1. Read Luke 1:26-38. What did Mary risk by saying yes to God? What helped her say it?
2. Read Luke 1:46-55. What does Mary's song tell you about God? What does it tell you about Mary?
3. Luke says Mary was "treasuring up all these declarations" in her heart. How can you make time to ponder what God is doing?
4. Read John 2:1-11. What does Mary's instruction to the servants mean for your own life?
5. How does the Bible's picture of Mary compare with the way you have heard her described?

Chapter 28: John the Baptist: He Must Increase

*He must increase, but I **must** decrease.*

John 3:30 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: John is the Greek form of the Hebrew Johanan, "the LORD is gracious." He is called the Baptist, or the Baptizer, because of the baptism he preached.

When: Born about six months before Jesus (Luke 1:36); began preaching about A.D. 26 to 29, "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" (Luke 3:1); executed about A.D. 28 to 30.

Where: Born in the hill country of Judah; preached in the wilderness of Judea and baptized in the Jordan River; imprisoned and executed by Herod Antipas, at the fortress of Machaerus east of the Dead Sea according to Josephus.

Where to read it: Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6; Matthew 3; 11:1-19; 14:1-12; Mark 1:1-11; 6:14-29; Luke 1; 3:1-22; 7:18-35; John 1:6-42; 3:22-36.

Known for: Preparing the way for Jesus, baptizing Him in the Jordan, calling Him the Lamb of God, and dying for speaking the truth to a king.

For four hundred years after the prophet Malachi, there was no new word from God in Israel. Then a wild man in camel's hair appeared in the desert near the Jordan, eating locusts and wild honey and shouting that the kingdom of heaven was near. Crowds poured out from Jerusalem and all Judea to hear him. Jesus said that among those born of women there had arisen none greater than John the Baptist (Matthew 11:11).

And yet the thing John is most remembered for is pointing away from himself. His whole life was an arrow aimed at Someone else.

When I was a boy in Victorville, Pastor Jimmy Carter took time with a neighbor kid who mowed his lawn, and he pointed me to Jesus. When I later led Bible studies and served as a lay pastor, his example reminded me that ministry is never about building a following. Like John the Baptist, our job is to step back so people see Christ (John 3:30).

What Happened

John's parents were Zechariah, a priest, and Elizabeth, who was also from a priestly family. "Now they were both righteous before God," but they had no children, and they were both old (Luke 1:6-7). While Zechariah was burning incense in the temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him his wife would have a son, to be named John. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb and would go before the Lord "in ***the*** spirit and power of Elijah," to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and make ready a people prepared for the Lord (Luke 1:17). Zechariah doubted, and he was struck mute until the baby was born. When his neighbors wanted to name the baby after his father,

Zechariah wrote on a tablet, “John is his name,” and immediately he could speak again. He praised God and prophesied that his son would be called “a prophet of ***the*** Most High” (Luke 1:63-76).

John grew up and lived in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly (Luke 1:80). When he began to preach, he looked and lived like Elijah, in a garment of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist (Matthew 3:4; compare 2 Kings 1:8). His message was simple and sharp: “Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near” (Matthew 3:2). He called people to be baptized in the Jordan as a sign of turning from their sins.

He did not soften his words for anyone. To the religious leaders who came out to see him, he said, “Brood of vipers” and warned them not to think that being Abraham’s descendants would save them (Matthew 3:7-9). When ordinary people asked what they should do, he gave practical answers: whoever has two coats should share with someone who has none. Tax collectors, do not collect more than you are owed. Soldiers, do not extort money, and be content with your wages (Luke 3:10-14).

People began to wonder whether John might be the Messiah. He told them no. One was coming after him who was mightier than he, whose sandals he was not worthy to untie. “I indeed baptize you with water,” he said, but “He Himself will baptize you with ***the*** Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16).

One day Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptized. John tried to stop Him: I need to be baptized by You, and You come to me? Jesus said it was fitting for them to do this to fulfill all righteousness. When Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens opened, the Spirit of God came down on Him like a dove, and a voice from heaven said, “This is My Son, the beloved, in whom I was well pleased” (Matthew 3:13-17).

The next day, John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). He told the crowd that he had seen the Spirit come down on Jesus and stay on Him, and he testified that “this is the Son of God” (John 1:34). The day after that, John was standing with two of his own disciples when Jesus walked by, and John said again, “Look, the Lamb of God!” The two disciples left John and followed Jesus. One of them was Andrew, who went and got his brother Simon Peter (John 1:35-42). John did not try to keep them.

Later, some of John’s disciples complained that everyone was now going to Jesus instead. John answered that he was only the friend of the bridegroom, and his joy was complete just hearing the bridegroom’s voice. Then he said the words that open this chapter: He must increase, but I must decrease.

John’s preaching eventually reached the palace. Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee, had married Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. John told Herod plainly, “It is not lawful for you to have her” (Matthew 14:4). Herod threw John into prison. Herodias wanted him dead, but Herod was afraid of John, “knowing him ***to be*** a righteous and holy man,” and he kept him safe and heard him gladly (Mark 6:20).

In prison, John began to wonder. Jesus was not doing what John expected. Where was the winnowing fork and the fire? So John sent two of his disciples to ask, “Are You the One who is coming, or are we to look for another?” (Matthew 11:3). Jesus did not scold him. He told the messengers to report what they saw: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. Then, after the messengers left, Jesus praised John to the crowd as more than a prophet (Matthew 11:4-11).

At Herod's birthday banquet, Herodias's daughter danced and pleased Herod so much that he promised her anything she asked. Prompted by her mother, she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod was sorry, but because of his oath and his guests, he gave the order. John was beheaded in the prison. His disciples came and buried his body, and went and told Jesus (Matthew 14:6-12).

What God Did

God fulfilled His promises. Isaiah 40:3 foretold a voice in the wilderness preparing the way of the LORD, and Matthew 3:3 says John was "***The*** voice of ***one*** crying out in the wilderness," and Malachi promised that God would send Elijah before the great day of the LORD. Jesus said that John was the one Malachi meant, for those willing to accept it (Matthew 11:14).

God gave John a clear job. John knew exactly who he was and who he was not. He was not the Christ. He was the voice. He did his job and did not try to do anyone else's.

God revealed His Son to John. At the Jordan, the Father spoke and the Spirit came down. John saw the Trinity on display: the Son in the water, the Spirit like a dove, and the Father's voice from heaven.

God answered John's doubts with evidence. Jesus did not shame John for asking. He pointed to the fulfillment of prophecy in His works (Isaiah 35:5-6; 61:1). God is patient with honest questions.

God honored him. John died in a dungeon, apparently defeated. But Jesus called him the greatest born of women. Faithfulness that ends in what looks like failure is not failure in God's eyes.

What We Learn

1. **Point people to Jesus.** John's finger was always pointing away from himself. The best thing any of us can do is say, "Look, the Lamb of God."
2. **Joy comes from His glory, not ours.** John was glad, not jealous, when the crowds left him for Jesus. When we live for His increase, we are free from the need to be important.
3. **Repentance is practical.** John's advice was about coats, food, taxes, and wages. Real repentance shows up in how we treat people and handle money.
4. **Speak the truth, even to the powerful.** John lost his head for telling a king the truth about his marriage. Faithfulness may cost us, but truth is worth it.
5. **Bring your doubts to Jesus.** Even the greatest prophet wondered in prison. Do what John did: take your questions straight to Jesus, and look at what He has done.

Study Questions

1. Read John 1:19-27. How did John describe himself? Why do you think he was so careful to say who he was not?
2. Read Luke 3:10-14. If you asked John, "What then shall we do?", what practical answer might he give you?
3. Read John 3:26-30. What does "He must increase, but I must decrease" look like in your daily life?
4. Read Matthew 11:2-6. Why do you think John doubted? How did Jesus answer him?

5. Who in your life could you point to Jesus this week?

Chapter 29: Peter: The Rock Who Cracked and Was Restored

> *He says to him the third time, "Simon **son** of Jonah, do you love Me dearly?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me dearly?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You dearly." Jesus says to him, "Feed My sheep."*
>
> John 21:17 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: His given name was Simon (Simeon in Hebrew). Jesus named him Cephas, Aramaic for "rock," which in Greek is Petros, Peter (John 1:42).

When: Called about A.D. 27 to 29; led the church in Jerusalem after A.D. 30; according to early church writers, died in Rome under Nero, about A.D. 64 to 68.

Where: From Bethsaida, later living in Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, where he worked as a fisherman with his brother Andrew. Later in Jerusalem, Samaria, Joppa, Caesarea, Antioch, and Rome.

Where to read it: The four Gospels; Acts 1-12; 15; Galatians 1:18; 2:7-14; 1 and 2 Peter.

Known for: Walking on water, confessing Jesus as the Christ, denying Him three times, being restored by the sea, and preaching at Pentecost.

If you have ever opened your mouth and then wished you could take the words back, you will like Peter. He was bold, impulsive, loud, and loyal. He was usually the first to speak and sometimes the last to understand. He walked on water and then sank. He made the greatest confession of faith in the Gospels and a few minutes later was called Satan. He swore he would die for Jesus and then denied Him three times to a servant girl.

And Jesus made him a leader of His church. Peter's story is a story about what Jesus can do with a man who keeps coming back.

What Happened

Simon and his brother Andrew were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. Andrew met Jesus first, through John the Baptist, and ran to tell his brother, "We have found the Messiah" (John 1:41). When Jesus saw Simon, He gave him a new name: Cephas, Peter, the rock. It was a promise about who Simon would become, not a description of who he was yet.

Some time later, Jesus borrowed Peter's boat to teach the crowds on the shore. Afterward, He told Peter to push out into deep water and let down the nets. Peter had fished all night and caught nothing, but he did it anyway, and the nets filled so full they began to break. Peter fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, Lord." Jesus answered, "Do not fear; from now on you will be catching men" (Luke 5:1-11). Peter left everything and followed Him.

Peter was with Jesus for about three years. He saw Jesus heal his own mother-in-law of a fever (Mark 1:29-31). He was one of the three, with James and John, who saw Jesus raise Jairus's daughter and saw Him transfigured on the mountain. One stormy night, he saw Jesus walking toward the boat on the water and called out, "Lord, if ***it*** is You, command me to come to You on the waters." Jesus said, "Come." Peter got out and walked on the water. Then he saw the strong wind, became afraid, and began to sink, crying, "Lord, save me!" Jesus caught him and said, "***You*** of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:28-31). Peter is the only man besides Jesus who ever walked on water. He is also the only one who sank.

Near Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked His disciples who people said He was. Then He asked, "But you, who do you say Me to be?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:15-16). Jesus told him that flesh and blood had not revealed this to him, but His Father in heaven. Then Jesus told the disciples He would suffer, be killed, and rise on the third day. Peter took Him aside and rebuked Him: this shall never happen to You! Jesus turned and said, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me" (Matthew 16:22-23). In the space of a few verses, Peter went from speaking for God to speaking for the enemy.

At the Last Supper, Peter refused at first to let Jesus wash his feet, and then asked Him to wash his hands and head too (John 13:6-9). When Jesus warned that all of them would fall away that night, Peter insisted that even if everyone else did, he never would. Jesus told him that before the rooster crowed, he would deny Him three times. Peter said, "Even if it is necessary for me to die with You, I will by no means deny You" (Matthew 26:35). In Gethsemane, Peter fell asleep while Jesus prayed in agony. When the soldiers came, he drew a sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, Malchus, and Jesus told him to put it away and healed the man (John 18:10-11; Luke 22:51).

Peter followed at a distance into the courtyard of the high priest's house and warmed himself at a fire. A servant girl looked at him and said he had been with Jesus. Peter denied it. Another said it, and he denied it again. An hour later, others said his Galilean accent gave him away, and he began to curse and to swear, "I do not know the man!" (Matthew 26:74). Immediately the rooster crowed. "And having turned, the Lord looked at Peter" (Luke 22:61). Peter remembered what Jesus had said, went out, and wept bitterly.

On Easter morning, when the women reported that the tomb was empty, Peter ran to the tomb (Luke 24:12). The angel had given the women a special message: "go, tell His disciples and Peter" (Mark 16:7). The risen Lord appeared to Peter personally (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5).

Then came the morning by the sea. Peter had gone back to fishing, and once again had caught nothing all night. A man on the shore told them to cast the net on the right side of the boat, and the net filled. John said, "It is the Lord!" and Peter threw himself into the water and swam to shore. Jesus had a charcoal fire burning, with fish and bread. After breakfast, beside a charcoal fire like the one where Peter had denied Him, Jesus asked him three times, "Simon son of Jonah, do you love Me?" Three times Peter said yes, and the third time he was grieved. Three times Jesus told him to feed His sheep. One denial for each question, and one commission for each answer (John 21:1-17). Then Jesus told him how he would die, and said, "Follow Me" (John 21:19).

Fifty days after the resurrection, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon the believers, and the man who had been afraid of a servant girl stood up in front of thousands in Jerusalem and preached that God had made Jesus, whom they crucified, both Lord and Christ. About three thousand people were baptized that day (Acts 2:14-41). Soon after, Peter and John healed a man lame from birth at the temple gate. When the same council that condemned Jesus ordered them to stop speaking in His name, Peter answered, "It is necessary to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Peter was the one God used to open the door of the gospel to the Gentiles, when he preached to the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household (Acts 10).

Peter wrote two letters that are in our New Testament. Early Christian writers report that he died in Rome under the emperor Nero, and an old tradition says he was crucified. Jesus had told him by the sea that he would stretch out his hands and be led where he did not want to go, signifying "by what death he would glorify God" (John 21:18-19).

What God Did

God saw a rock in a reed. Jesus renamed Simon before he had done anything to deserve it. God calls us by what His grace will make us.

God revealed the truth to him. Peter's confession did not come from his own cleverness. The Father revealed it. Faith is a gift.

God prayed for him before he fell. Jesus told Peter, "But I begged for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32). Jesus knew Peter would fall, and He had already prayed him back.

God sought him out after he failed. "And Peter." The angel's message singled him out. Jesus appeared to him personally and restored him publicly. Jesus does not just forgive the fallen. He goes and finds them.

God filled him with the Spirit. The difference between Peter in the courtyard and Peter at Pentecost is the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit lives in every believer today.

What We Learn

1. **Keep your eyes on Jesus.** Peter walked on water as long as he looked at Jesus. He sank when he looked at the waves. Where are your eyes today?
2. **Overconfidence is dangerous.** "I will by no means deny You," Peter said. Paul warns, "Therefore let the one who thinks he stands watch, lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).
3. **Failure is not final.** Peter's worst night was not the end of his story. If you have denied the Lord in word or deed, go back to Him. He is waiting by the fire.
4. **Love for Jesus shows up in caring for His people.** Jesus did not ask Peter to prove his love with another bold promise. He told him to feed His sheep.
5. **God's power works best through humbled people.** Peter's later letters are full of humility: "Therefore be humbled under the mighty hand of God" (1 Peter 5:6). He had learned it the hard way.

Study Questions

1. Read Luke 5:1-11. Why do you think Peter's first reaction to the great catch was to say he was a sinful man?
2. Read Matthew 14:22-33. What causes you to look at the wind and start to sink?
3. Read Luke 22:31-34 and 54-62. How did Peter go from bold promises to bitter tears in one night?
4. Read John 21:15-19. Why do you think Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved Him?
5. What difference did the Holy Spirit make in Peter's life (Acts 2:14-41; 4:8-13)? What difference is He making in yours?

Chapter 30: John: From Son of Thunder to Apostle of Love

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son **as** a propitiation for our sins.*
>
> 1 John 4:10 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: John is the Greek form of Johanan, "the LORD is gracious." Jesus nicknamed John and his brother James "Boanerges," "Sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17).

When: Called about A.D. 27 to 29. Early church writers say he lived into the reign of Trajan, which began in A.D. 98, making him the last of the apostles to die.

Where: Galilee, where he fished with his father Zebedee and his brother James; Jerusalem; later, according to early church writers, Ephesus; and the island of Patmos, where he received the Revelation (Revelation 1:9).

Where to read it: The four Gospels; Acts 3-4; 8:14-25; Galatians 2:9; the Gospel of John; 1, 2, and 3 John; Revelation.

Known for: Being the disciple whom Jesus loved, leaning on Jesus at the Last Supper, standing at the cross, and writing about God's love.

Two young fishermen were mending their nets with their father in a boat on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus called them. They left the boat, their father, and the hired men, and followed Him (Mark 1:19-20). One was James. The other was his younger brother John.

John was one of Jesus' three closest friends, along with Peter and James. He wrote five books of the New Testament, more than anyone except Paul. And the man Jesus once nicknamed a "Son of Thunder" became known in the end as the apostle of love. His life shows how Jesus can soften a hard heart over many years, and how love for Jesus grows into love for others.

What Happened

John and James had tempers. When a Samaritan village refused to welcome Jesus, the brothers asked, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, as Elijah also did?" Jesus turned and rebuked them (Luke 9:54-55). Another time John saw a man casting out demons in Jesus' name and told him to stop, "because he does not follow with us" (Luke 9:49). Jesus told him not to stop the man: the one who is not against you is for you.

They were ambitious too. With their mother, they came to Jesus and asked to sit at His right and left hand in His kingdom. Jesus asked if they could drink the cup He was about to drink. They said they could. Jesus told them they would, but the seats were not His to give. When the other ten heard, they were angry, and Jesus called them all together and taught them that whoever wants to be great must be a servant, "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life ***as*** a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:20-28).

But John was also close to Jesus' heart. He was there when Jesus raised Jairus's daughter, when Jesus shone with glory on the mountain, and when He prayed in Gethsemane. At the Last Supper, John was reclining next to Jesus, leaning back against Him. When Jesus said one of them would betray Him, Peter signaled to John to ask who it was (John 13:23-25). In his own Gospel, John never names himself. He calls himself "the disciple whom Jesus was loving" (John 21:20), which most English Bibles render as the disciple whom Jesus loved. He did not mean that Jesus loved him more than the others. He meant that the most important fact about his life was that Jesus loved him.

When the soldiers arrested Jesus, all the disciples fled. But John followed Him into the high priest's courtyard, and it was John who got Peter in (John 18:15-16). And when Jesus hung on the cross, John was there, standing near the cross with Jesus' mother and the other women. Jesus entrusted His mother to him, and John took her into his own home (John 19:25-27). He watched the soldier pierce Jesus' side, and saw blood and water come out. He wrote, "And the ***one*** who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true" (John 19:35).

On Easter morning, when Mary Magdalene ran to say the tomb was empty, Peter and John ran together to see. John outran Peter and got there first, but stopped at the entrance. Peter went straight in. Then John went in too, "and he saw and believed" (John 20:3-8). A few days later, by the Sea of Galilee, John was the first to recognize the risen Jesus on the shore: "It is the Lord!" (John 21:7).

In the early chapters of Acts, John and Peter are almost always together. They healed the lame man at the temple gate, were arrested together, and told the council that they could not stop speaking about what they had seen and heard (Acts 4:20). When the gospel reached Samaria, the apostles sent Peter and John. The man who once wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village went there to pray for Samaritan believers to receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-17). Paul later called John one of the pillars of the church in Jerusalem (Galatians 2:9).

His brother James was the first of the twelve apostles to be killed for his faith, put to death with the sword by Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:2). John lived the longest. According to early Christian writers like Irenaeus, he spent his later years in Ephesus. He wrote his Gospel "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). He wrote three letters, full of the word love. And near the end of his life, he was exiled to the island of Patmos "because of the word of God and because of the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:9), where the risen Lord appeared to him in glory and gave him the book of Revelation.

What God Did

God called him and changed him. John did not start out loving and gentle. He wanted to burn down a village. Jesus spent years with him, rebuking, teaching, and loving him, until love became the mark of his life.

God drew him close. John leaned on Jesus at the table. Jesus welcomes that kind of closeness from every believer. "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8).

God made him a witness. John saw the glory on the mountain, the agony in the garden, the blood and water at the cross, and the empty tomb. He wrote, "That which was from ***the*** beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we looked upon and our hands handled" (1 John 1:1). His testimony is eyewitness testimony.

God gave him a long life of faithfulness. James died young. John lived to be an old man. God gives different lives to different servants, and both are precious to Him.

God showed him the end of the story. On Patmos, John saw Jesus as the glorified Lord, the coming judgments, the return of Christ, His thousand-year reign, and the new heaven and new earth. I believe the church is taken up before the judgments of Revelation 6-19, as Revelation 3:10 promises, and my Revelation study walks through it chapter by chapter.

What We Learn

1. **Jesus can change your temperament.** If you have a temper, a sharp tongue, or a competitive streak, Jesus is not finished with you. He turned a Son of Thunder into an apostle of love.
2. **Build your identity on His love.** John called himself the disciple whom Jesus loved. That is a good way for any believer to think of himself.
3. **Stay near the cross.** When the others ran, John stood there. Faithfulness means staying close to Jesus when it is costly.
4. **Love proves we know God.** "The one who does not love has not known God, because God is love" (1 John 4:8). John learned that love is not a feeling but a way of life, laid down for others as Jesus laid His life down for us (1 John 3:16).
5. **Greatness is service.** The brothers wanted thrones. Jesus gave them towels. Real greatness in God's kingdom looks like serving.

Study Questions

1. Read Luke 9:49-56. What do these stories show about John as a young man? How had he changed by the time he wrote 1 John?
2. Read Mark 10:35-45. What did Jesus teach James and John about greatness?
3. Why do you think John called himself the disciple whom Jesus loved? How would it change your life to see yourself that way?
4. Read John 19:25-27. Why do you think John stayed at the cross when the others fled?
5. Read 1 John 4:7-12. What does real love look like, according to John?

Chapter 31: Mary Magdalene: First Witness of the Risen Lord

> *Jesus says to her, "Mary!" She, having turned, says to Him, "Rabbouni!" which is to say, "Teacher!"*
>
> John 20:16 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Mary, from the Hebrew Miriam. Magdalene means she came from Magdala, a fishing town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.

When: Followed Jesus during His ministry in Galilee, about A.D. 28 to 30, and was at the cross and the empty tomb.

Where: Magdala in Galilee; traveled with Jesus through Galilee; Jerusalem at the crucifixion and resurrection.

Where to read it: Luke 8:1-3; Matthew 27:55-61; 28:1-10; Mark 15:40-16:11; Luke 23:49-24:12; John 19:25; 20:1-18.

Known for: Being set free from seven demons, supporting Jesus' ministry, standing at the cross, and being the first to see the risen Jesus.

Few people in the Bible have been more misunderstood than Mary Magdalene. For centuries, many people in the West have pictured her as a reformed prostitute. The Bible never says that. That idea goes back to a sermon by Pope Gregory the Great in A.D. 591, which blended her with the unnamed sinful woman of Luke 7 and with Mary of Bethany. In modern times, novels and films have made up even wilder stories about her.

The real Mary Magdalene, the one in the Gospels, is more wonderful than any of the legends. She was a woman Jesus set free, who gave her money and her life to follow Him, who stayed at the cross when the men ran, and to whom the risen Lord chose to show Himself first.

What Happened

Luke introduces Mary when he describes Jesus traveling from town to town in Galilee, preaching the good news of the kingdom. With Him were the twelve, "and certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, the one called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out" (Luke 8:2). Luke names two others, Joanna, the wife of a steward of Herod, and Susanna, and says there were many more, "who were ministering to Him from their possessions" (Luke 8:3).

That is almost all we know about Mary's past. Seven demons is a picture of complete bondage. Whatever her life had been like, it had been dominated by darkness, and Jesus had set her free. From then on, she followed Him. And she did not just follow. She gave. Mary was apparently a woman with some means, and she used them to support Jesus and His disciples.

She followed Him all the way to Jerusalem and to the cross. When the disciples fled, the women stayed. Matthew says many women were there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee,

ministering to Him, “among whom was Mary the Magdalene” (Matthew 27:55-56). John says she stood near the cross with Jesus’ mother (John 19:25). She watched Him die. She watched Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus take His body down, and she sat opposite the tomb and saw where He was laid (Matthew 27:61; Mark 15:47).

On the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary went to the tomb. With other women, she had brought spices to anoint His body (Mark 16:1). When she saw the stone had been rolled away, she ran to Peter and John and told them, “They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him” (John 20:2). Peter and John ran to the tomb, saw the linen cloths lying there, and went back home.

Mary did not go home. She stood outside the tomb weeping. When she stooped to look in, she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the feet. They asked her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him” (John 20:13).

She turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know it was Jesus. He asked her the same question, and added, “Whom are you seeking?” Thinking He was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if You have carried Him off, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away” (John 20:15).

Then Jesus said one word: “Mary!”

She knew that voice. She turned and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabbouni!” which means Teacher (John 20:16). Jesus said to her, “Do not touch Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and ***to*** My God and your God’” (John 20:17). So Mary went to the disciples with the greatest news ever told, “announcing to the disciples that she had seen the Lord” (John 20:18).

What God Did

God set her completely free. Seven demons is a picture of total bondage. Jesus broke all of it. There is no darkness so deep that He cannot reach it.

God turned a freed captive into a faithful giver. Mary’s response to grace was generosity and service. Love for Jesus always shows up in what we do with what we have.

God kept her at the cross. The courage to stand at the cross did not come from Mary’s own strength. It came from love for the One who had set her free. “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

God chose her as the first witness. In that culture, a woman’s testimony was often not accepted in court. Even the apostles at first thought the women’s report sounded like nonsense (Luke 24:11). Yet Jesus chose to appear first to Mary. That detail is one of the reasons historians take the Gospel accounts seriously. If someone were making up the story, he would never have chosen a woman, and especially not one known for having had seven demons, as the first witness.

God called her by name. Mary did not recognize Jesus by His appearance. She recognized Him when He said her name. “He calls his own sheep by name,” Jesus had said, and “the sheep follow him, because they know his voice” (John 10:3-4).

What We Learn

1. **Your past is not who you are.** Mary’s story begins with seven demons and ends with the words, I have seen the Lord. Jesus defines you, not your past.
2. **Gratitude gives.** Mary supported Jesus from her own means. When we understand what He has done for us, we hold our money and our time with open hands.
3. **Stay when others leave.** The women stayed at the cross and came back to the tomb. Faithful love keeps showing up, even when hope seems gone.
4. **Jesus meets us in our tears.** Mary was weeping when Jesus came to her. He did not scold her for crying. He asked her why, and then He showed her that the reason for her tears was gone.
5. **Go and tell.** Mary’s first act after seeing the risen Jesus was to go tell others. The good news of the resurrection is not meant to be kept to ourselves.
6. **Stick to what the Bible says.** Mary has been buried under centuries of legend. When you hear something about a person in the Bible, check it against the Bible itself.

Study Questions

1. Read Luke 8:1-3. What does this passage tell you about Mary Magdalene? What does it not say?
2. Why do you think Mary and the other women stayed at the cross when most of the disciples ran?
3. Read John 20:11-18. Why do you think Mary did not recognize Jesus at first? What made her recognize Him?
4. Why does it matter that the first witness of the resurrection was a woman?
5. Who could you tell this week what Mary told the disciples, that she had seen the Lord? What has He done in your life that others need to hear?

Chapter 32: Martha and Mary: The Friends at Bethany

> *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The **one** believing in Me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone living and believing in Me will certainly never die. Do you believe this?"*
>
> John 11:25-26 (SLB)

At a Glance

Names: Martha is Aramaic for "lady" or "mistress of the house." Mary, from the Hebrew Miriam. Their brother was Lazarus, a short form of Eleazar, "God has helped."

When: During the last months of Jesus' ministry, about A.D. 29 to 30.

Where: Bethany, a village on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, about two miles from Jerusalem (John 11:18).

Where to read it: Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-12:11; compare Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:3-9.

Known for: Welcoming Jesus into their home, Mary sitting at His feet, the raising of Lazarus, and Mary anointing Jesus before His death.

Jesus had no home of His own during His ministry. He said Himself that foxes have holes and birds have nests, "but the Son of Man does not have ***a place*** where He may lay His head" (Luke 9:58). But there was one house where He seems to have been especially welcome. In the little village of Bethany, just over the hill from Jerusalem, lived two sisters and their brother. John says simply, "Now Jesus was loving Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (John 11:5).

Their stories show us two very different personalities, both loved by Jesus, both learning to trust Him. And they show us Jesus as a friend who weeps with us and then does what only God can do.

What Happened

The first time we meet the sisters, Jesus has come to their village, and Martha has welcomed Him into her home (Luke 10:38). That probably meant Jesus and His disciples, so there were a lot of people to feed. Martha threw herself into the work. Her sister Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened to His teaching. Sitting at a teacher's feet was the place of a disciple.

Martha became more and more frustrated. Finally she came to Jesus and said, "Lord, does it not concern You that my sister has left me alone to serve? Tell her therefore that she help me" (Luke 10:40). You can hear the irritation. Jesus answered her gently, saying her name twice: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; but there is need of one ***thing***; and Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42). He did not say Martha's work was bad. He said she was anxious, and that Mary had chosen what mattered most.

Some time later, Lazarus became seriously ill. The sisters sent a message to Jesus: "Lord, look, ***he*** whom You love dearly is sick" (John 11:3). Then comes one of the most puzzling sentences in the Gospels. Jesus

loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. “Therefore,” when He heard Lazarus was sick, He stayed where He was two more days (John 11:5-6). His delay was not in spite of His love. It was part of it. He had told the disciples, “This sickness is not to death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (John 11:4).

By the time Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. Many people had come from Jerusalem to comfort the sisters. When Martha heard Jesus was coming, she went out to meet Him, while Mary stayed home. Martha said, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” Then she added, “But even now I know that whatever You may ask God, God will give You” (John 11:21-22).

Jesus told her that her brother would rise again. Martha said she knew he would rise in the resurrection on the last day. Then Jesus said the words that open this chapter: “I am the resurrection and the life.” And He asked her, “Do you believe this?” Martha’s answer is one of the great confessions of faith in the Gospels: “Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, the ***One*** coming into the world” (John 11:27). The busy sister in the kitchen had been listening after all.

Then Martha went and called Mary. Mary came quickly, fell at Jesus’ feet, and said the same words her sister had said: “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:32). But she did not say anything more. She just wept. When Jesus saw her weeping, and the people with her weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. He asked where they had laid him. And then comes the shortest verse in most English Bibles: “Jesus wept” (John 11:35). The people said, “Look how He was loving him dearly!”

At the tomb, a cave with a stone across the entrance, Jesus told them to take away the stone. Practical Martha objected: “Lord, already he stinks, for he is four days ***dead***” (John 11:39). Jesus answered, “Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” They took away the stone. Jesus prayed aloud, thanking the Father for hearing Him. Then He cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” And the man who had died came out, bound hand and foot with linen strips and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said, “Unbind him and allow ***him*** to go” (John 11:43-44).

Many who saw it believed in Him. But some went and told the Pharisees, and from that day on the leaders plotted to kill Jesus (John 11:53). They even planned to kill Lazarus, because on account of him many were believing in Jesus (John 12:10-11).

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came back to Bethany, and they gave a dinner for Him. “And Martha was serving” (John 12:2). Of course she was. But this time there is no complaint. Lazarus was reclining at the table with Jesus. And Mary took a pound of very costly perfume, pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. “and the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil” (John 12:3).

Judas Iscariot objected that the perfume should have been sold for three hundred denarii, about a year’s wages for a laborer, and the money given to the poor. John tells us Judas did not care about the poor. He was a thief, and he used to steal from the money box (John 12:4-6). Jesus defended Mary. She had kept this for the day of His burial. Mark records Jesus saying that wherever the gospel is preached in the

whole world, what she had done would be told in memory of her (Mark 14:9). Mary seems to have understood what the disciples still did not: Jesus was about to die.

What God Did

God loved this family. John tells us plainly that Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. He loves His people as individuals, by name.

God's delays have purpose. Jesus waited two days on purpose. The sisters' pain was real, but the delay led to a greater miracle and greater faith. God's timing is often not ours, but it is never careless.

God weeps with us. Jesus knew He was about to raise Lazarus, and He wept anyway. He was not indifferent to their grief. "For we do not have a high priest who is not able to sympathize with our weaknesses" (Hebrews 4:15).

God has power over death. With one command, Jesus called a man out of a four-day-old grave. It was a preview of His own resurrection a few weeks later, and of the day when "all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth" (John 5:28-29).

God received Mary's gift. What looked like waste to others was worship to Jesus. He receives what we give Him out of love.

What We Learn

1. **Do not let service crowd out sitting with Jesus.** Serving is good. Martha was not wrong to cook. But "there is need of one ***thing***." Make time every day to sit at His feet in His Word and in prayer.
2. **Bring your frustration honestly to Jesus.** Martha said exactly what she felt. Jesus answered her with gentleness and truth. You can do the same.
3. **Different personalities can both love Jesus.** Martha went out to meet Him and talked theology. Mary fell at His feet and cried. Jesus met each sister where she was.
4. **Hold on to Him in the waiting.** If God seems late, remember Bethany. He has not forgotten you, and He is not finished.
5. **Worship can be costly.** Mary poured out something worth a year's wages. True worship is not about what we can spare. It is about what He is worth.

Study Questions

1. Read Luke 10:38-42. Are you more like Martha or Mary? What would it look like for you to choose "the good portion" this week?
2. Read John 11:1-6. Why do you think Jesus waited two days? How does this help you when God seems slow to answer?
3. Read John 11:17-27. What did Martha believe about Jesus? How do you answer His question, "Do you believe this?"
4. Read John 11:32-36. What does it mean to you that Jesus wept?
5. Read John 12:1-8. What is something costly you could offer to Jesus out of love?

Chapter 33: Thomas: From Doubt to Worship

> *And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus says to him, "Because you have seen Me, Thomas, you have believed. Blessed **are** those who have not seen and have believed."*
>
> John 20:28-29 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Thomas is Aramaic for "twin." John also gives his Greek name, Didymus, which means the same thing (John 11:16).

When: One of the twelve apostles, about A.D. 28 to 30. Ancient Christian tradition says he later carried the gospel east, as far as India.

Where: Probably from Galilee, like most of the twelve.

Where to read it: Matthew 10:3; John 11:16; 14:5-6; 20:24-29; 21:2; Acts 1:13.

Known for: Doubting the resurrection until he saw Jesus, and then making the greatest confession in the Gospels: "My Lord and my God!"

Poor Thomas. He gets one bad week, and two thousand years later people still call him "Doubting Thomas." Nobody calls Peter "Denying Peter," or James and John "Fire-from-Heaven Brothers." But Thomas is stuck with it.

When you actually read what the Bible says about him, Thomas comes across as a loyal, honest, practical man who said out loud what others were probably thinking. And when he finally saw the risen Jesus, he went further than any of the others had yet gone in confessing who Jesus is.

My family attended the Catholic church when I was young, but faith became personal for me only later. In my own drifting seasons, I had to bring my doubts and failures to Jesus instead of pretending they were not there. Like Thomas, honest questions brought to Christ lead to deeper worship (John 20:27-28).

What Happened

Thomas is named in all four lists of the twelve apostles, but only John tells us anything he said, and John records him speaking three times before he saw the risen Lord.

The first time, Jesus had just told the disciples He was going back to Judea, because Lazarus had died. The disciples were alarmed. The last time Jesus was there, the leaders had tried to stone Him. It was Thomas who spoke up: "Let us also go, so that we may die with Him" (John 11:16). That is not doubt. That is courage, maybe with a little gloom mixed in. Thomas expected the worst, and he was ready to go anyway.

The second time was at the Last Supper. Jesus told His disciples He was going to prepare a place for them, and "where I am going you know, and the way you know." Thomas did not pretend to understand. "Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how are we able to know the way?" (John 14:4-5). Because

Thomas asked an honest question, Jesus gave one of the most important answers in the Bible: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6).

Then came the crucifixion. On the evening of resurrection Sunday, the disciples were gathered behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish leaders, and Jesus came and stood among them. He showed them His hands and His side, and they rejoiced (John 20:19-20). But Thomas was not there. We are not told why.

When the others told him, "We have seen the Lord," Thomas would not believe it. He said, "Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will certainly not believe" (John 20:25). He had seen Jesus die. He had probably seen the spear go into His side. He was not going to believe something that big on someone else's word.

For a whole week, Thomas lived with that. Then, eight days later, the disciples were inside again, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were locked. Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace to you." Then He turned to Thomas and offered him exactly what he had asked for:

> *Then He says to Thomas, "Bring your finger here, and see My hands; and bring your hand, and put **it** into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing."* (John 20:27)

We are not told that Thomas ever did touch the wounds. He did not need to. He answered with the words that open this chapter: "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus said to him that he had believed because he had seen, and then He spoke words meant for everyone who would come after: blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. John adds that this is exactly why he wrote his Gospel, "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31).

The last time we see Thomas in the Gospels, he is fishing with Peter and the others on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus appears on the shore (John 21:2). And he is in the upper room with the other apostles, praying, before Pentecost (Acts 1:13). Early Christian tradition, recorded by later writers, says Thomas preached the gospel in Parthia and then in India, where he died as a martyr. The Christians of Kerala in southern India still call themselves Saint Thomas Christians. The Bible itself does not tell us where he went, so I hold those traditions loosely.

What God Did

God welcomed his questions. Thomas's honest question at the Last Supper drew out "I am the way and the truth and the life." God is not threatened by our questions. Some of His greatest answers came because someone asked.

God came back for one man. Jesus appeared to the disciples a second time with Thomas present. He could have left Thomas to catch up on his own. Instead, He came back and met him personally. The Good Shepherd goes after the one sheep (Luke 15:4).

God knew what Thomas had said. Jesus repeated Thomas's own words back to him: your finger, My hands, your hand, My side. Jesus had heard Thomas's doubt even though He was not visibly in the room.

God gave evidence. Christianity is not a leap in the dark. Jesus offered Thomas real, physical proof. His resurrection body still bore the marks of the cross. Paul said more than five hundred people saw Him at one time, most of whom were still alive when he wrote (1 Corinthians 15:6).

God drew out a full confession. "My Lord and my God" is one of the clearest statements in the New Testament that Jesus is God. Jesus did not correct Thomas. He accepted his worship.

What We Learn

1. **Doubt is not the opposite of faith.** Unbelief that refuses to look is a problem. But honest doubt that brings its questions to Jesus can lead to deeper faith. Thomas went from the strongest doubt to the strongest confession.
2. **Stay with the church.** Thomas missed the first appearance because he was not with the other disciples. When he came back, he met Jesus. Do not isolate yourself when you are struggling. "not forsaking the assembling together of ourselves" (Hebrews 10:25).
3. **Our faith rests on evidence.** We have not seen Jesus with our eyes as Thomas did. But we have the testimony of eyewitnesses who saw Him alive and were willing to die for it. That is why the Gospels were written.
4. **You are blessed if you believe without seeing.** Jesus spoke those words about us. Peter wrote the same thing: "whom, not having seen ***Him***, you love" (1 Peter 1:8).
5. **Make it personal.** Thomas did not say, "the Lord and God." He said, "My Lord and my God." Is Jesus yours?

Study Questions

1. Read John 11:16 and 14:5. What do these verses tell you about Thomas before the resurrection?
2. Why do you think Thomas refused to believe the other disciples? Have you ever struggled to believe something about God?
3. Read John 20:26-29. How did Jesus treat Thomas's doubt? What does that tell you about how He treats yours?
4. What evidence for the resurrection is most convincing to you?
5. Can you say to Jesus, "My Lord and my God"? What would that mean in your daily life?

Chapter 34: Judas Iscariot: Close to Jesus, Far From Him

> *The Son of Man indeed goes, just as it has been written concerning Him; but woe to that man through whom the Son of Man is handed over! It would have been good for him if that man had not been born.*
>
> Matthew 26:24 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Judas is the Greek form of Judah, "praise." Iscariot probably means "man of Kerioth," a town in southern Judah, which would make him the only one of the twelve not from Galilee. Other meanings have been suggested.

When: One of the twelve apostles, about A.D. 28 to 30. He died the same week Jesus was crucified.

Where: Traveled with Jesus through Galilee and Judea; betrayed Him in the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives; died in Jerusalem.

Where to read it: Matthew 10:4; 26:14-16, 20-25, 47-50; 27:3-10; Mark 14:10-11, 43-46; Luke 22:3-6, 47-48; John 6:70-71; 12:4-6; 13:2, 21-30; 17:12; 18:2-5; Acts 1:16-20, 25.

Known for: Betraying Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, with a kiss.

This is the hardest chapter in the book to write. Every other person here is someone we can learn from by example. Judas is someone we learn from by warning. He is proof that a person can be very close to Jesus, hear every sermon, see every miracle, eat at His table, and still be lost.

I include him because the Bible gives him so much space, and because his story asks us a question we must not dodge: is my faith real, or am I just near the things of God?

What Happened

Jesus chose Judas to be one of the twelve. He spent the whole night in prayer before choosing them (Luke 6:12-16). Judas went out with the others to preach, heal, and cast out demons (Matthew 10:1-8). As far as the other disciples could tell, he was one of them. He was even trusted with the group's money bag (John 13:29).

But John, looking back, tells us what nobody saw at the time. Early in Jesus' ministry, after many followers turned away, Jesus asked the twelve if they wanted to leave too. Peter answered, "Lord, to whom will we go? You have words of eternal life." Jesus answered, "Did I not choose you, the twelve? And of you one is a devil." John explains, "Now He was speaking of Judas Iscariot, ***son*** of Simon" (John 6:67-71). Jesus knew from the beginning.

When Mary of Bethany poured out her costly perfume on Jesus' feet, Judas objected that it should have been sold and the money given to the poor. John tells us why: "not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money bag, and was carrying off what was being put into ***it***" (John 12:6).

A few days later, Judas went to the chief priests and asked, “What are you willing to give me, and I will hand Him over to you?” They set for him thirty silver coins (Matthew 26:15). That was the price of a slave in the law of Moses (Exodus 21:32), and it fulfilled what the prophet Zechariah had written about thirty pieces of silver thrown to the potter (Zechariah 11:12-13; Matthew 27:9-10). From then on, Judas looked for a good opportunity to betray Him.

At the Last Supper, Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, including the feet of Judas. Then He became troubled in spirit and said, “one of you will betray Me” (John 13:21). The disciples looked at each other, at a loss. One by one they asked, “Surely it is not I, Lord?” Judas asked too: “Surely it is not I, Rabbi?” Jesus answered him, “You have said ***it***” (Matthew 26:22-25). Jesus dipped a piece of bread and gave it to Judas, a gesture of friendship and honor. “And after the morsel, then Satan entered into that ***one***.” Jesus said to him, “What you are doing, do more quickly.” The others thought Judas was going to buy something for the feast or give to the poor. “Therefore having received the morsel, that ***one*** went out immediately. And it was night” (John 13:21-30).

Later that night, Judas led a crowd with swords and clubs from the chief priests to the garden of Gethsemane, where he knew Jesus often went with His disciples (John 18:2). He had given them a signal: the one I kiss is the man. He walked up to Jesus, said, “Greetings, Rabbi,” and kissed Him. Jesus said to him, “Friend, ***do that*** for which you are here” (Matthew 26:49-50). Luke records another question: “Judas, are you delivering up the Son of Man with a kiss?” (Luke 22:48).

When Judas saw that Jesus had been condemned, he was seized with remorse. He brought the thirty pieces of silver back to the chief priests and elders and said, “I sinned, having handed over innocent blood.” They answered coldly, “What ***is that*** to us? You will see ***to it***” (Matthew 27:4). He threw the silver into the temple and went away and hanged himself (Matthew 27:3-5). The priests would not put the money back in the treasury, because it was blood money, so they used it to buy a potter’s field as a burial place for strangers. Luke adds in Acts that Judas fell headlong in that field and his body burst open (Acts 1:18-19). The two accounts are usually understood together: he hanged himself, and his body later fell.

What God Did

God gave Judas every opportunity. Judas heard the Sermon on the Mount, saw the dead raised, and had his feet washed by the Son of God. He was warned more than once. Jesus even called him “Friend” in the garden. No one ever had more light.

God knew all along. Jesus was never surprised by Judas. He knew from the beginning who would betray Him (John 6:64). Nothing that happened that night was outside God’s plan.

God fulfilled Scripture. Psalm 41:9 speaks of a close friend who ate bread with him and lifted up his heel against him. Jesus quoted it at the supper (John 13:18). Zechariah foretold the thirty pieces of silver.

God held Judas responsible. God’s plan did not make Judas a puppet. Jesus said, “The Son of Man indeed goes, just as it has been written concerning Him; but woe to that man through whom the Son of Man is handed over!” (Matthew 26:24). God’s sovereignty and human responsibility stand side by side.

Peter said the same thing about the crucifixion at Pentecost: it happened by God's predetermined plan, and yet those who did it were guilty (Acts 2:23).

God turned the worst betrayal into the greatest salvation. Judas meant to hand Jesus over for money. God handed Him over for us. "He who indeed did not spare His own Son, but handed Him over for us all" (Romans 8:32).

What We Learn

1. **Being close to Jesus is not the same as belonging to Him.** Judas was in the room for every lesson. He was never changed by them. Going to church, reading the Bible, and serving are good, but they do not save. Only faith in Christ does.
2. **Small sins grow.** Judas did not start with betrayal. He started by stealing small amounts from the money box. The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10).
3. **Remorse is not repentance.** Judas was sorry. He even said, "I sinned." But he took his guilt to the priests and then to a rope. Peter also failed terribly that night, but he took his guilt back to Jesus. Paul explains the difference: "For the grief according to God produces repentance to salvation without regret, but the grief of the world produces death" (2 Corinthians 7:10).
4. **It is never too late while there is breath.** Judas could have gone to the foot of the cross. Jesus prayed for those who crucified Him. If Judas had come, would He have turned him away? Whatever you have done, do not do what Judas did. Go to Jesus.
5. **Examine yourself.** When Jesus said one of them would betray Him, the disciples did not point at each other. They each asked, "Surely it is not I?" Paul says, "Test yourselves ***to see*** whether you are in the faith" (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Study Questions

1. Judas spent three years with Jesus. Why do you think he was never changed?
2. Read John 12:1-8. What does this passage reveal about Judas's heart?
3. Read Matthew 26:47-50. How do you think Jesus felt when He called Judas "Friend"?
4. Compare Judas (Matthew 27:3-5) and Peter (Luke 22:61-62; John 21:15-19). Both failed Jesus that night. What made the difference?
5. Read 2 Corinthians 13:5. How can you know your faith is real?

Chapter 35: Nicodemus: The Teacher Who Came by Night

> *For God so loved the world, that He gave His Son, the only begotten, so that everyone who believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*
>
> John 3:16 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Nicodemus is a Greek name meaning "victory of the people."

When: During Jesus' ministry and at His burial, about A.D. 27 to 30.

Where: Jerusalem.

Where to read it: John 3:1-21; 7:45-52; 19:38-42.

Known for: Visiting Jesus at night, hearing that he must be born from above, and helping bury Jesus' body.

John 3:16 is probably the best-known verse in the Bible. Millions of people can quote it. Far fewer know who first heard it. Jesus spoke those words in a private conversation, late at night, to a leading religious teacher who had come with questions. His name was Nicodemus.

Nicodemus appears only three times in the Bible, all in John's Gospel. But those three short scenes trace a beautiful journey, from a cautious visit in the dark to a courageous act in broad daylight.

What Happened

John introduces him carefully: "Now there was a man of the Pharisees, Nicodemus ***was*** his name, a ruler of the Jews" (John 3:1). The Pharisees were the strictest keepers of the law in Israel. A ruler of the Jews probably means he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the high council of seventy-one members. Jesus calls him "the teacher of Israel" (John 3:10). This was a man at the top of Israel's religious world.

He came to Jesus by night. John does not say why. Perhaps he was afraid of what his fellow Pharisees would think. Perhaps he wanted a quiet conversation without the crowds. Either way, he came, and he opened respectfully: "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God ***as a teacher; for no one is able*** to do these signs that You do unless God is with him" (John 3:2).

Jesus went straight to the point: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless someone is born from above, he is not able to see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). The Greek word translated from above can also mean "again," which is why many English Bibles say "born again." Nicodemus took it as a second physical birth and was confused. How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter his mother's womb a second time?

Jesus explained that He was talking about a spiritual birth. "unless someone is born of water and ***the*** Spirit, he is not able to enter into the kingdom of God. That which has been born of the flesh is flesh, and that which has been born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:5-6). Like the wind, which you cannot see but whose effects you can hear, the Spirit gives new life to whomever He wills.

Nicodemus asked, “How are these things able to come about?” (John 3:9). Jesus gently rebuked him: You are the teacher of Israel, and you do not understand these things? Then Jesus pointed him to a story Nicodemus knew well. In the wilderness, when poisonous snakes were biting the people of Israel, God told Moses to make a bronze snake and lift it up on a pole. Anyone who was bitten and looked at it lived (Numbers 21:4-9). “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:14-15). Then came the verse that opens this chapter: For God so loved the world.

We do not know how Nicodemus responded that night. John simply moves on.

The second time we see Nicodemus, about two years later, the chief priests and Pharisees had sent officers to arrest Jesus. The officers came back empty-handed, saying, “Never did a man speak like this, as this man ***speaks***” (John 7:46). The Pharisees were furious. They sneered that none of the rulers or Pharisees had believed in Him. Nicodemus spoke up: “Our law does not judge the man unless it first hears from him and knows what he does, does it?” (John 7:51). It was a small, careful defense of fair process. But his colleagues turned on him: “You are not also from Galilee, are you?” (John 7:52). Nicodemus was starting to stand out.

The third time is at the cross. Jesus had died. Most of His disciples had fled. Joseph of Arimathea, another member of the council who had been a secret disciple “because of the fear of the Jews,” went to Pilate and asked for the body. “And Nicodemus also came, the ***one*** who at the first had come to Jesus by night, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, approximately 75 pounds” (John 19:39). That is an enormous amount, the kind of burial spices used for a king. Together, Joseph and Nicodemus took down the body of Jesus, wrapped it in linen cloths with the spices, as was the Jewish custom, and laid it in a new tomb in a garden near the place of crucifixion (John 19:40-42).

Think about what that cost. Touching a dead body would make them ceremonially unclean for the Passover. Asking for the body of a man just executed as a criminal, at the request of their own council, would mark them publicly as His followers. The man who came by night now came in the open, when it was most dangerous to do so.

What God Did

God welcomed a seeker. Jesus did not turn Nicodemus away for coming at night. He gave him time, attention, and the clearest explanation of the gospel in the Gospels. God meets people who are honestly searching.

God told a religious man he needed new life. Nicodemus was moral, educated, and respected. Jesus told him that was not enough. Everyone, no matter how good, must be born from above. Salvation is not reform. It is a new birth from God.

God pointed him to the cross. The bronze snake was a picture of Jesus lifted up on the cross. The people did not heal themselves. They looked and lived. Salvation comes by looking to Christ in faith.

God gave His Son out of love. John 3:16 tells us why. Not because the world was lovable, but because God is love. He gave His only Son so that whoever believes would not perish but have eternal life.

God grew Nicodemus's faith. From night visit, to a quiet defense, to a public act of devotion. God's work in a person is sometimes slow, but it is real.

What We Learn

1. **You can bring your questions to Jesus.** Nicodemus came with questions and left with answers. If you are wondering about Jesus, go to Him. Read the Gospel of John.
2. **Religion is not enough.** If the teacher of Israel needed to be born from above, so do we. Being raised in church, being a good person, or knowing the Bible does not replace new birth.
3. **Look and live.** The Israelites in the wilderness did not have to understand everything about the bronze snake. They just had to look. Look to Jesus, lifted up for you.
4. **Courage often grows over time.** Nicodemus did not become bold overnight. But he did become bold. If your faith feels timid now, keep walking. God can make you braver.
5. **It is never too late to honor Jesus.** Nicodemus and Joseph stepped forward when the others had run. Their act of love at the tomb is remembered forever.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think Nicodemus came to Jesus at night? Have you ever been afraid of what people would think of your interest in Jesus?
2. Read John 3:1-8. What does it mean to be "born from above," or born again? Why did Nicodemus need it?
3. Read Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-15. How does the bronze snake help you understand the cross?
4. Read John 3:16-18 slowly. What does it tell you about God, about the world, and about how a person is saved?
5. Read John 19:38-42. What do you think changed in Nicodemus between John 3 and John 19?

Chapter 36: Zacchaeus: The Day Salvation Came to His House

for the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which has been lost.

Luke 19:10 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Zacchaeus is the Greek form of the Hebrew Zakkai, "pure" or "innocent." Given his job, the name may have been a sore joke in Jericho.

When: About A.D. 30, a few days before Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem.

Where: Jericho, a wealthy oasis city on the main road from the Jordan Valley up to Jerusalem.

Where to read it: Luke 19:1-10.

Known for: Climbing a sycamore tree to see Jesus, welcoming Him into his home, and giving away half his wealth.

Children love the song about the wee little man who climbed up in a sycamore tree. Adults sometimes forget how scandalous his story really was. Zacchaeus was not just short. He was hated. He was a chief tax collector, which meant he was rich, crooked, and working for Rome. When Jesus picked his house out of all the houses in Jericho, the whole crowd grumbled.

His story is only ten verses long, but it ends with one of the clearest statements in the Bible of why Jesus came.

What Happened

Jesus was passing through Jericho on His last journey to Jerusalem. A large crowd was traveling with Him. Many of them were pilgrims heading to Jerusalem for the Passover, and the city was buzzing because Jesus had just healed a blind beggar named Bartimaeus on the road outside town (Luke 18:35-43; Mark 10:46-52).

"And look, ***there was*** a man called by name Zacchaeus; and he was a chief tax collector, and this ***one*** was rich" (Luke 19:2). Rome collected taxes through local contractors. A chief tax collector bid for the right to collect taxes in a region, hired other collectors under him, and kept whatever he could squeeze out above what he owed Rome. Jericho was on a major trade route, so there was a lot to squeeze. Jews who did this work were seen as traitors and thieves, and they were often lumped together with prostitutes and sinners.

Zacchaeus wanted to see who Jesus was, but he could not see over the crowd, "because he was small in stature" (Luke 19:3). Nobody was going to make room for him. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree along the route. A sycamore-fig in that region had low, wide branches that were easy to climb. But it was still undignified. Rich men in that culture did not run, and they certainly did not climb trees.

When Jesus came to that place, He stopped, looked up, and called him by name: "Zacchaeus, having hurried, come down; for today I must stay in your house" (Luke 19:5). Notice that Jesus said He must. This was not a whim. It was part of His mission.

"And having hurried, he came down and received Him, rejoicing" (Luke 19:6). The crowd did not rejoice. "And having seen ***it***, all were grumbling, saying, 'He has gone in to lodge with a sinful man'" (Luke 19:7). Of all the respectable homes in Jericho, Jesus chose the home of the most notorious sinner in town.

We are not told what Jesus and Zacchaeus talked about that day. We are only told the result. Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, the half of my possessions I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore fourfold" (Luke 19:8). The law of Moses required a person who had cheated someone to repay what he had taken plus one fifth (Leviticus 6:1-5; Numbers 5:6-7). Fourfold was the penalty for a stolen sheep that had been killed or sold (Exodus 22:1). Zacchaeus was treating his own fraud as seriously as the law treated outright theft. Nobody asked him to. Grace did it.

Jesus answered, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham" (Luke 19:9). Then He spoke the words that open this chapter, words that sum up His whole mission: the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

What God Did

God was already drawing him. Zacchaeus thought he was seeking Jesus. But Jesus was seeking him. He knew his name before Zacchaeus said a word. "No one is able to come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44).

God chose the outcast. Jesus could have stayed with anyone in Jericho. He chose the man everyone else despised. He was often called "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34), and He did not mind.

God gave grace first. Jesus did not tell Zacchaeus to clean up his life and then He would come over. He came over first. The change in Zacchaeus came after Jesus welcomed him, not before.

God changed his heart, and his wallet followed. The man who lived to get money suddenly wanted to give it away. When salvation comes into a life, it shows up where we live, including our bank accounts.

God restored him to the family. Jesus called him "a son of Abraham." The people of Jericho had written him off. Jesus brought him home.

What We Learn

1. **Do whatever it takes to see Jesus.** Zacchaeus ran and climbed and did not care how silly he looked. What is keeping you from getting close to Jesus? Pride? What people will think?
2. **Jesus knows your name.** He stopped under the tree and called Zacchaeus by name. You are not lost in the crowd to Him.
3. **Real repentance makes things right.** Zacchaeus did not just feel sorry. He paid people back, generously. If you have wronged someone, salvation will lead you to make it right where you can.

4. **Do not grumble at grace.** The crowd was upset that Jesus went to a sinner's house. Be careful that you never resent God's kindness to someone you think does not deserve it. None of us do.
5. **Jesus came for the lost.** That includes the person you least expect, and it includes you. If you know you are lost, you are exactly the person He came to find.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus so badly?
2. Read Luke 19:5. What does it mean to you that Jesus called Zacchaeus by name and said He "must" stay at his house?
3. Read Luke 19:7. Why did the crowd grumble? Are there people you would be uncomfortable seeing Jesus welcome?
4. Read Luke 19:8. What did Zacchaeus's promise show about the change in his heart? Is there anything you need to make right with someone?
5. Read Luke 19:10. How does this verse describe Jesus' mission? How have you seen it true in your own life?

Part Five: The Early Church

Chapter 37: Stephen: Full of Faith and Power

> *And they were stoning Stephen as he was calling upon **the Lord** and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And having knelt down, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And having said this, he fell asleep.*
>
> Acts 7:59-60 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Stephen is the Greek Stephanos, "crown," the kind of wreath given to a winner.

When: About A.D. 31 to 35, in the first years of the church.

Where: Jerusalem.

Where to read it: Acts 6-7; 8:1-2; 11:19; 22:20.

Known for: Being one of the seven chosen to serve the church's widows, his fearless sermon before the council, and being the first Christian martyr.

Stephen's whole story takes up less than two chapters in the book of Acts. He is not an apostle. He does not write any part of the New Testament. He was chosen to help make sure widows got their fair share of food. And yet he is one of the giants of the early church. He was the first follower of Jesus to die for his faith, and his death set off a chain of events that carried the gospel out of Jerusalem and into the world. Among those watching him die was a young man named Saul.

What Happened

The church in Jerusalem was growing fast. It included two groups of Jewish believers: those who spoke Aramaic and had grown up in the land of Israel, and those who spoke Greek and had grown up elsewhere in the Roman world, called Hellenists. The Hellenists complained that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1).

The apostles did not want to leave the ministry of the Word of God to wait on tables. So they told the believers to choose seven men "being well attested, full of ***the*** Holy Spirit and wisdom" to oversee this work (Acts 6:3). All seven men they chose have Greek names, which may mean the church picked men from the very group that felt overlooked. The first on the list is "Stephen, a man full of faith and of ***the*** Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5). The apostles prayed and laid their hands on them, and the word of God kept spreading.

Stephen did not just serve tables. "And Stephen, full of faith and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8). Some men from a synagogue of freed slaves and of Jews from North Africa and Asia began to argue with him. "And they were not able to withstand the wisdom and the Spirit by which he was speaking" (Acts 6:10). So, like the enemies of Jesus, they got men to lie about him. They said he spoke against Moses and God, against the temple and the law. They stirred up the people, seized him, and brought him before the council. All who sat in the council, staring at him, "saw his face as ***the*** face of an angel" (Acts 6:15).

The high priest asked, “Are these things then so?” Stephen’s answer, in Acts 7, is the longest sermon in the book of Acts. He walked the council through the history of Israel: Abraham, Joseph, Moses, the tabernacle, David, and Solomon’s temple. His point was double. First, God was never limited to one building or one land. He appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia, was with Joseph in Egypt, and spoke to Moses in the desert. “But the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands” (Acts 7:48). Second, Israel had always rejected the men God sent to save them. Joseph’s brothers sold him. The people rejected Moses. And their fathers killed the prophets.

Then Stephen brought it home:

> *You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and in ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers **did**, you also **do**. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold concerning the coming of the Righteous One, of whom you have now become betrayers and murderers* (Acts 7:51-52)

The council was furious. “they were furious in their hearts, and were gnashing their teeth at him” (Acts 7:54). But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at ***the*** right ***hand*** of God” (Acts 7:56).

That was too much for them. They cried out with a loud voice, covered their ears, and rushed at him all together. They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. The witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. As the stones fell, Stephen prayed the two prayers that open this chapter. He asked the Lord Jesus to receive his spirit. Then he fell to his knees and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Having said this, he fell asleep (Acts 7:59-60).

“And Saul was consenting to his killing” (Acts 8:1). That same day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all the believers except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and mourned loudly for him (Acts 8:2). And “those who had been scattered went about preaching the word ***as*** the gospel” (Acts 8:4). Some went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, where for the first time large numbers of Gentiles believed (Acts 11:19-21).

What God Did

God filled an ordinary servant. Stephen was chosen to handle food distribution. God filled him with faith, power, wisdom, and the Holy Spirit. There is no small job in God’s kingdom when He fills the person doing it.

God gave him words. Jesus had promised His disciples that when they were brought before councils, the Spirit would give them what to say (Luke 12:11-12). Stephen’s opponents could not answer him.

God opened heaven to him. At the moment of his death, Stephen saw Jesus standing at God’s right hand. Elsewhere the Bible says Jesus sat down at the right hand of God (Hebrews 1:3). Many Bible teachers believe Jesus stood to welcome His first martyr home.

God made him like Jesus. Jesus prayed, "Father, into Your hands I will commit My spirit," and "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34, 46). Stephen prayed almost the same two prayers. God had shaped him into the image of His Son, all the way to the end.

God used his death to spread the gospel. The persecution that began with Stephen scattered the church, and wherever they went, they preached. Tertullian, a Christian writer in North Africa, made the same point around A.D. 197 in his Apology: the more Christians are cut down, the more of them there are, because the blood of Christians is seed.

God planted a seed in Saul. Saul held the coats. Later, as Paul, he remembered that day with shame: "And when the blood of Stephen Your witness was being poured out, I myself also was standing by and consenting to his killing" (Acts 22:20). An old saying often credited to Augustine goes, "If Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul." We cannot know that for certain, but we know God answered the prayer of a dying man in a way no one at the stoning could have imagined.

What We Learn

1. **Serve faithfully wherever you are placed.** Stephen did not consider serving widows beneath him. God's greatest servants are often found doing practical, humble work.
2. **Know the Scriptures.** Stephen's sermon shows a man who knew his Bible deeply. When you are called on to give a reason for your hope, God often brings to mind what you have already put in your heart.
3. **Forgive even your enemies.** Stephen's last breath was a prayer for the men killing him. That is only possible by the Spirit of Jesus living in us.
4. **Death is not the end for a believer.** Luke says Stephen "fell asleep." For those in Christ, death is like sleep, from which we will wake in resurrection. Stephen saw where he was going before he got there.
5. **God wastes nothing.** Stephen's ministry looked short, and his death looked like a defeat. God used it to scatter the gospel and to start working on the heart of the man who would become the greatest missionary in history.

Study Questions

1. Read Acts 6:1-7. What kind of men did the church look for to serve the widows? Why does character matter for practical service?
2. Read Acts 6:8-15. How was Stephen's experience like Jesus' trial?
3. Read Acts 7:54-60. What did Stephen see, and what did he say? What does this tell you about him?
4. Is there someone you need to forgive the way Stephen forgave his enemies?
5. Read Acts 8:1-4 and 11:19-21. How did God use Stephen's death for good?

Chapter 38: Barnabas: The Son of Encouragement

> *who, having come and having seen the grace of God, rejoiced, and was exhorting all with purpose of heart to remain with the Lord. For he was a good man, and full of **the** Holy Spirit and of faith. And a large crowd was added to the Lord.*
>
> Acts 11:23-24 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: His given name was Joses, a form of Joseph. The apostles called him Barnabas, which Luke explains means "Son of Encouragement" (Acts 4:36).

When: About A.D. 30 to the 50s. Paul mentions him as still working around A.D. 55 (1 Corinthians 9:6).

Where: A Levite from the island of Cyprus; lived in Jerusalem; led the church in Antioch of Syria; traveled with Paul through Cyprus and southern Galatia (modern Turkey).

Where to read it: Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-27; 11:22-30; 12:25-15:39; 1 Corinthians 9:6; Galatians 2:1, 9, 13; Colossians 4:10.

Known for: Giving his field to the church, vouching for Saul, leading the church at Antioch, Paul's first missionary journey, and giving John Mark a second chance.

Every church needs a Barnabas. He is the person who notices the new believer nobody trusts and walks over to sit with him. He is the one who sees the good in people and calls it out. He gives generously and does not need the credit. And when someone fails, he is the first to offer another chance.

Barnabas was never the star of the story. But again and again in the book of Acts, he is the man standing behind someone else, helping them become who God made them to be.

What Happened

We first meet Barnabas in the early days of the church in Jerusalem, when the believers were sharing everything they had, so that no one among them was in need. Luke gives him as an example. "And Joses, who was surnamed Barnabas by the apostles (which is, being translated, Son of Encouragement), a Levite, a Cypriot by birth, having a field, sold ***it*** and brought the money and laid ***it*** at the feet of the apostles" (Acts 4:36-37). Right after that, Luke tells the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who sold land and lied about the price (Acts 5:1-11). The contrast is sharp. Barnabas gave generously and honestly. They gave to look good.

Some years later, Saul of Tarsus, the man who had hunted down Christians, came back to Jerusalem claiming he was now a follower of Jesus. Nobody believed him. "and all were afraid of him, not believing that he is a disciple" (Acts 9:26). Who could blame them? This could be a trick to get inside and arrest them.

"But Barnabas, having taken hold of him, brought ***him*** to the apostles" (Acts 9:27). He told them how Saul had seen the Lord on the road, how the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus Saul had preached

boldly in the name of Jesus. Because Barnabas vouched for him, the apostles accepted Saul. If not for Barnabas, the church might never have welcomed the man who wrote much of the New Testament.

When news came to Jerusalem that large numbers of Gentiles were believing in Antioch of Syria, the third-largest city in the Roman Empire, the church sent Barnabas to see what was going on. That was a wise choice. He could have arrived suspicious of these new non-Jewish believers. Instead, "having come and having seen the grace of God," he "rejoiced" (Acts 11:23), and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their heart. Luke adds that he was "a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith," and many people were added to the Lord (Acts 11:24).

The work in Antioch grew so fast that Barnabas needed help. He knew just the man. He went to Tarsus, found Saul, and brought him back. For a whole year they taught large numbers of people in Antioch. "And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch" (Acts 11:26). When a prophet named Agabus predicted a great famine, the church sent famine relief to the believers in Judea by the hands of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:29-30).

One day, while the leaders at Antioch were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart now for Me both Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2). After fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off. This was the first great missionary journey. They took with them Barnabas's young cousin, John Mark (Colossians 4:10). They crossed to Cyprus, Barnabas's home island, and preached across it. Then they sailed to the mainland. There John Mark left them and went home to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). We are not told why.

Barnabas and Saul, who began to be called Paul, pressed on into the region of Galatia. In Lystra, after Paul healed a man lame from birth, the crowds decided the two were gods. They called Barnabas Zeus, perhaps because he was the more dignified of the two, and Paul Hermes, because he did the talking. The priest of Zeus brought bulls to sacrifice to them. Barnabas and Paul tore their clothes and rushed into the crowd, shouting that they were only men (Acts 14:8-18). Not long after, Paul was stoned and left for dead in the same city, and the two of them went on, strengthening the souls of the disciples and telling them that "through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

Back in Antioch, a crisis arose. Some men from Judea taught that Gentile believers had to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to be saved. Paul and Barnabas argued strongly against it and went to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders. At that council, Barnabas and Paul told of all the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them (Acts 15:12), and the church agreed that Gentiles are saved by grace, not by becoming Jews.

Later, Paul suggested they go back and visit the churches they had planted. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark again. Paul refused, because Mark had deserted them on the first trip. "So ***there*** came about a sharp disagreement, so that they were separated from one another" (Acts 15:39). Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus. Paul took Silas and went another way. That is the last time Barnabas appears in Acts.

But the story of Mark does not end there. Years later, Paul wrote from prison to Timothy, "Take Mark and bring ***him*** with you, for he is useful to me for ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11). Mark became Peter's companion (1 Peter 5:13), and early church writers say the Gospel of Mark comes from his work with

Peter. The young man Paul gave up on became one of the four Gospel writers, in large part because Barnabas did not give up on him.

What God Did

God renamed him for his gift. The apostles saw what God was doing in Joses and gave him a name to match. God gives each believer gifts, and encouragement is one of them (Romans 12:8).

God used him to open doors. Barnabas opened the door of the church to Saul, and later opened the door of ministry to him in Antioch. God often uses one person to unlock another person's calling.

God gave him eyes to see grace. In Antioch, Barnabas saw the grace of God at work in people very different from him, and rejoiced. That was the work of the Spirit in him.

God sent him out. The Spirit called Barnabas and Saul by name. The church's first deliberate missionary journey started with him.

God used even a disagreement. Paul and Barnabas's sharp argument was painful. But two missionary teams went out instead of one, and Mark was restored. God works through even our conflicts.

What We Learn

1. **Be an encourager.** Look for the good God is doing in people and say it out loud. A few words of encouragement can change the direction of someone's life.
2. **Take a risk on people.** Barnabas took Saul by the arm when everyone else kept their distance. Who in your church needs someone to vouch for them and walk with them?
3. **Give generously and honestly.** Barnabas gave a field and did not make a show of it. Give because you love God, not to be seen.
4. **Rejoice when God works outside your circle.** Barnabas was glad, not threatened, by Gentile believers. Celebrate God's grace wherever you see it.
5. **Give second chances.** Mark failed, and Barnabas stood by him. Many of us are walking with God today because someone did not give up on us.
6. **Godly people can disagree.** Paul and Barnabas both loved God and still parted ways. When it happens, do not let it turn into bitterness. Years later, Paul spoke warmly of both Barnabas and Mark (1 Corinthians 9:6; Colossians 4:10).

Study Questions

1. Read Acts 4:36-5:11. What is the difference between Barnabas's gift and that of Ananias and Sapphira?
2. Read Acts 9:26-28. Why do you think Barnabas was willing to vouch for Saul? Is there someone you could stand beside like that?
3. Read Acts 11:22-26. What did Barnabas see in Antioch, and how did he respond?
4. Read Acts 15:36-41 and 2 Timothy 4:11. What do you learn from the story of John Mark?
5. Who has been a Barnabas to you? Who could you encourage this week?

Chapter 39: Paul: The Persecutor Who Became an Apostle

> *But whatever things were gain to me, these I have considered loss because of Christ. But indeed, rather, I also consider all things to be loss because of the surpassing* ***worth*** *of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, because of whom I was made to suffer the loss of all things, and I consider* ***them*** *to be rubbish, so that I may gain Christ*
>
> Philippians 3:7-8 (SLB)

At a Glance

Name: Saul, a Hebrew name meaning "asked for," like Israel's first king, who was also from the tribe of Benjamin. Paul, a Roman name meaning "small" or "little." He likely had both names from birth and began using Paul as he took the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 13:9).

When: Born about A.D. 5 to 10; converted about A.D. 33 to 35; his missionary journeys ran from about A.D. 46 to 57; imprisoned in Caesarea and Rome about A.D. 57 to 62. Early church writers say he was beheaded in Rome under Nero, about A.D. 64 to 67.

Where: Born in Tarsus in Cilicia (southern Turkey); trained in Jerusalem; preached across Syria, Cyprus, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece; imprisoned in Caesarea and Rome.

Where to read it: Acts 7:58-8:3; 9; 11:25-30; 13-28; his thirteen letters, Romans to Philemon; 2 Peter 3:15-16.

Known for: Persecuting the church, meeting the risen Jesus on the Damascus road, carrying the gospel to the Gentiles, and writing thirteen books of the New Testament.

Other than Jesus Himself, no one has shaped Christianity more than Paul. He planted churches across the Roman world. He wrote thirteen letters that make up nearly half the books of the New Testament. His letter to the Romans set Martin Luther's heart on fire and helped spark the Reformation. And he did all of it after spending the first part of his adult life trying to destroy the church.

Paul never got over that. He called himself "the least of the apostles," not fit to be called an apostle, "because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Corinthians 15:9). But he also never got over the grace that saved him. "But by ***the*** grace of God I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10).

For years I took pride in being a successful man who could handle his job, his family and his problems on his own. When my drinking caught up with me in May 2020, that self-reliance collapsed in a single day. Like Paul in Philippians 3:7-8, I had to let go of my pride to depend on Christ.

What Happened

Saul was born a Jew in Tarsus, a major city in what is now southern Turkey, and he was born a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28). He was "of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; according to ***the*** law, a Pharisee" (Philippians 3:5). He was educated in Jerusalem "at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3), one of the

most respected rabbis of the day. By his own account, he was advancing in Judaism beyond many of his age, "being more abundantly a zealot for my ancestral traditions" (Galatians 1:14).

That zeal turned violent. Saul stood by and approved when Stephen was stoned. Then he "was ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he was delivering ***them*** to prison" (Acts 8:3). Not satisfied with Jerusalem, he asked the high priest for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any followers of "the Way," men or women, he could bring them back bound to Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-2).

As he approached Damascus, around noon, a light from heaven brighter than the sun flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" He asked, "Who are You, Lord?" The answer turned his world upside down: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4-5). Jesus told him to go into the city, and he would be told what to do. Saul got up, but when he opened his eyes, he could not see. His companions led him by the hand into Damascus, and for three days he did not eat or drink.

The Lord spoke in a vision to a disciple in Damascus named Ananias and told him to go to Saul and lay hands on him. Ananias protested: I have heard how much evil this man has done to Your saints. The Lord said, "Go, for this ***man*** is a vessel of choice to Me, to carry My name before Gentiles and kings and ***the*** sons of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Ananias went, laid his hands on him, and called him "Saul, brother." Something like scales fell from his eyes, and he could see. He was baptized, and immediately he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God (Acts 9:17-20). The hunter had become the hunted. The Jews of Damascus plotted to kill him, and his new friends let him down over the city wall in a basket at night (Acts 9:23-25).

After some years, including time in Arabia (Galatians 1:17) and back home in Tarsus, Barnabas brought him to Antioch, and from there the church sent them out on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3). Over the next decade or so, Paul made three great journeys through Cyprus, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece, starting churches in cities like Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus. His pattern was to go first to the synagogue and preach Jesus as the Messiah from the Old Testament, and then to the Gentiles.

It cost him dearly. In 2 Corinthians 11, he gives a list that is hard to read. Five times he received thirty-nine lashes from the synagogue authorities. Three times he was beaten with rods. Once he was stoned. Three times he was shipwrecked, and he spent a night and a day adrift at sea. He was in danger from rivers, robbers, his own countrymen, Gentiles, and false brothers. He went without sleep, food, and warm clothing. And on top of all that, there was "the pressure on me daily, the care for all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:24-28). He also lived with what he called "a thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7). Three times he asked the Lord to take it away. The Lord answered, "My grace is sufficient for you, for ***My*** power is perfected in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

Yet the joy in his letters is unmistakable. In Philippi he and Silas were beaten and thrown into the inner prison with their feet in stocks, and at midnight they were praying and singing hymns to God (Acts 16:25). An earthquake shook the prison open, and the jailer asked, "Sirs, what must I do that I may be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:30-31).

Paul's last journey to Jerusalem ended with his arrest in the temple, after a mob accused him of bringing Gentiles inside. The Roman commander rescued him. He spent two years in custody in Caesarea, testified before the governors Felix and Festus and before King Agrippa, and finally, as a Roman citizen, appealed to Caesar. On the way to Rome, his ship was wrecked in a storm off Malta, and all 276 people on board came safely to land, just as God had promised him (Acts 27). In Rome he lived two years under house arrest, "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, unhindered" (Acts 28:31). That is where Luke's account ends.

His last letter, 2 Timothy, was written from a Roman prison as he faced death. It closes with his own summary of his life:

> *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on **there** is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me in that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing.* (2 Timothy 4:7-8)

What God Did

God saved the worst sinner he knew. Paul called himself the foremost of sinners, and said God saved him for a reason: "that in me, the foremost, Jesus Christ might display all His patience as a pattern for those who were going to believe on Him for eternal life" (1 Timothy 1:16). If God could save Saul, He can save anyone.

God revealed His Son to him. Paul did not get his gospel from people. He said it came "through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:12). On the Damascus road, he saw the risen Lord. That is why he could list himself among the witnesses of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:8).

God sent him to the Gentiles. Most people reading this book are not Jewish. If you are a Gentile who knows Jesus, you can trace your spiritual family tree back through Paul's missionary journeys.

God gave him the gospel of grace. Paul's letters lay out more clearly than anywhere else in Scripture that we are saved by grace through faith, not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9). They also teach the hope of the church: that the Lord Himself will come down from heaven, the dead in Christ will rise first, and we who are alive will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). That is the Rapture, which I believe comes before the tribulation, "because God did not appoint us for wrath" (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

God's strength in Paul's weakness. The thorn was never removed. God gave grace instead. Paul learned to say, "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

What We Learn

1. **No one is beyond saving.** Think of the person you would least expect to become a Christian. Pray for him. Saul was that person once.
2. **Grace is the reason, not our goodness.** Paul had the best religious résumé in Israel, and he counted it all as loss compared to knowing Christ. Our righteousness cannot save us. His can.

3. **Following Jesus may cost a lot.** Paul's list of sufferings is a sober reminder that the Christian life is not a promise of comfort. But Paul said these light and momentary troubles are producing for us an eternal weight of glory (2 Corinthians 4:17).
4. **Contentment can be learned.** Paul wrote from prison, "I have learned to be content in whatever ***circumstances*** I am" (Philippians 4:11). He learned it. So can we.
5. **Finish the race.** Paul did not just start well. He finished. Keep the faith all the way to the end, and look forward to the crown the Lord has waiting for all who love His appearing.

Study Questions

1. Read Acts 9:1-19. What changed Saul? What role did Ananias play?
2. Read Philippians 3:4-11. What did Paul once trust in? What did he count as loss? What might you be tempted to trust in instead of Christ?
3. Read 2 Corinthians 11:23-30 and 12:7-10. How did Paul handle suffering and weakness?
4. Read 1 Timothy 1:12-17. Why did God save Paul? What does that mean for you?
5. Read 2 Timothy 4:6-8. If your life ended today, could you say what Paul said? What would help you finish well?

Chapter 40: Priscilla and Aquila: A Home Open for the Gospel

> *Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who laid down their own neck for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles*
>
> Romans 16:3-4 (SLB)

At a Glance

Names: Aquila is Latin for "eagle." Priscilla is a pet form of Prisca, a Roman name meaning "ancient" or "venerable." In 2 Timothy 4:19 Paul calls her Prisca.

When: About A.D. 49 to the 60s. They left Rome after the emperor Claudius ordered Jews out of the city, about A.D. 49 (Acts 18:2).

Where: Aquila was from Pontus on the Black Sea. They lived in Rome, then Corinth, then Ephesus, then Rome again, and later probably Ephesus once more (2 Timothy 4:19).

Where to read it: Acts 18; Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19.

Known for: Working as tentmakers with Paul, teaching Apollos, and hosting churches in their home.

The New Testament never mentions Priscilla without Aquila, or Aquila without Priscilla. Six times they appear, always together. They worked together, traveled together, taught together, risked their lives together, and opened their home to the church together. In a book of mostly individual stories, they remind us that God also does great things through a husband and wife who serve Him side by side.

They were not apostles or preachers in the usual sense. They were small business owners who made tents. And wherever they went, a church seemed to grow up around their kitchen table.

What Happened

Aquila was a Jew from Pontus, a region on the southern shore of the Black Sea. He and Priscilla had been living in Rome until the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from the city. The Roman historian Suetonius, writing about A.D. 121 in his Life of Claudius (25.4), says Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because they were constantly causing disturbances "at the instigation of Chrestus." Many historians think that is a garbled reference to arguments in the Jewish community over Christ. If so, Priscilla and Aquila may already have been believers when they left Rome. Acts does not say.

They moved to Corinth, a busy port city in Greece. There Paul met them, around A.D. 50. "and because he was of the same trade, he was staying with them and was working; for they were tentmakers by trade" (Acts 18:3). The word may also mean leatherworkers. Paul stayed with them about a year and a half, working with his hands during the week and reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath (Acts 18:4, 11). For a while they were his hosts, his business partners, and his friends.

When Paul left Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila went with him to Ephesus, the leading city of the Roman province of Asia, and stayed there while Paul traveled on (Acts 18:18-21). In Ephesus they heard a man named Apollos speaking in the synagogue. Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria in Egypt, "an eloquent man," "mighty in the Scriptures" (Acts 18:24). He was fervent in spirit and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, but he knew only the baptism of John. Something was missing.

Here is how Priscilla and Aquila handled it. They did not correct him in front of the congregation. They did not criticize him to others. "And having heard him, Aquila and Priscilla took him aside and expounded to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:26). Apollos received their teaching. When he wanted to go on to Greece, the believers wrote a letter of recommendation for him, and in Corinth he "greatly helped those who had believed through the grace. For he was powerfully refuting the Jews publicly, showing through the Scriptures Jesus to be the Christ" (Acts 18:27-28). Apollos became so well known that some in Corinth said, "I of Apollos" (1 Corinthians 1:12). His ministry grew out of a quiet conversation in a tentmakers' home.

While they lived in Ephesus, a church met in their house. When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus, he sent greetings from "Aquila and Priscilla," "with the church at their house" (1 Corinthians 16:19).

Some time later, after Claudius died, they moved back to Rome, and again a church met in their home. When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, the first people he greeted in his long list were these two, in the words that open this chapter. He called them "my fellow workers in Christ Jesus," and said they "laid down their own neck for my life" (Romans 16:3-4). We do not know exactly when. It may have been during the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41), or some other danger the Bible does not record. But Paul never forgot it. And he added that not only he but "all the churches of the Gentiles" gave thanks for them.

The last mention of them is near the end of Paul's life. Writing from prison in Rome to Timothy in Ephesus, Paul said, "Greet Prisca and Aquila" (2 Timothy 4:19). After all those years and all those moves, they were still serving the Lord together.

What God Did

God used a government order to move His people. Claudius thought he was solving a problem in Rome. God was sending Priscilla and Aquila to Corinth to meet Paul. God uses even the decisions of rulers to place His people where He wants them.

God used their work. Their tentmaking business gave Paul a job, a home, and a way to support himself so he would not be a burden to the new believers (1 Thessalonians 2:9). Ordinary work can be holy work.

God used their home. Every place they lived, their house became a church. For about the first two hundred years, Christians had no church buildings. The church met in homes like theirs.

God used their teaching. Through their quiet instruction, God turned a gifted but incomplete teacher into a powerful servant of the church.

God used their marriage. Their partnership in life became a partnership in the gospel. Priscilla's name comes first in four of the six times they are mentioned, which may mean she was especially gifted or prominent in their ministry. Either way, they served as one.

What We Learn

1. **Your job can be a ministry.** Priscilla and Aquila were tentmakers, not professional ministers. They served God through their trade, their skills, and their income.
2. **Open your home.** Some of the most important ministry in the church happens around a kitchen table. Hospitality is a command (Romans 12:13), and it is a gift you can give.
3. **Correct gently and privately.** When they heard Apollos, they took him aside. Correction given privately and kindly helps people grow. Public correction often just embarrasses them.
4. **Serve together.** If you are married, ask God how the two of you can serve Him as a team. If you are not, think about who you can partner with in God's work.
5. **Be willing to move.** They lived in at least three major cities. Wherever God sent them, they set up shop and opened the door. Ask God to use you wherever you are.
6. **Faithful people are remembered.** Paul said all the churches of the Gentiles gave thanks for them. Quiet faithfulness over many years may not make headlines, but God sees it, and so do His people.

Study Questions

1. Read Acts 18:1-4. How did Priscilla and Aquila's work help Paul's ministry? How could your work serve God's purposes?
2. Read Acts 18:24-28. What can you learn from how they handled Apollos?
3. Read Romans 16:3-5 and 1 Corinthians 16:19. What does it mean to have "the church at their house"? How could you use your home for God?
4. If you are married, how could you and your spouse serve God together? If not, who could you partner with?
5. Who are the faithful, quiet servants in your church who deserve a word of thanks this week?

The One They All Point To

> *And having begun from Moses and from all the prophets, He was explaining to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.*
>
> Luke 24:27 (SLB)

On the afternoon of the first Easter, two of Jesus' followers were walking from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles away. They were sad and confused. Their Master had been crucified, and now some women were saying His tomb was empty. A stranger joined them on the road and asked what they were talking about. It was Jesus, but they did not recognize Him.

After listening to them, He said something that could serve as the summary of this whole book. Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures. Later that evening, He told the disciples, "all the things which are written concerning Me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44).

Think back over the forty lives in this book. Every one of them, in one way or another, points to Him.

Shadows of the Savior

Adam was the first man, and through his sin death came into the world. Jesus is "the last Adam" (1 Corinthians 15:45), and through His obedience life came.

Noah's ark carried a family safely through judgment. Jesus carries all who are in Him safely through the judgment our sins deserve.

Abraham offered his son on Mount Moriah, and God saw to a ram in his place. God did not spare His own Son.

Joseph was rejected by his brothers, sold for silver, and raised to a throne from which he saved them. So was Jesus, except that He did it through a cross.

Moses led God's people out of slavery by the blood of a lamb. Jesus is our Passover Lamb, and He leads us out of slavery to sin.

Joshua led Israel into the Promised Land. Jesus, whose name is the same, leads us into the true rest of God.

Rahab and Ruth were foreigners brought into God's family, and they became ancestors of Jesus. He came for all nations.

Boaz was the kinsman who paid the price to redeem. Jesus became our kinsman and paid for us with His own blood.

David was the shepherd king to whom God promised an everlasting throne. Jesus is the Son of David who will sit on that throne forever.

Solomon was the wise king who built God's house. "***Something*** greater than Solomon ***is*** here."

Elijah and Elisha raised the dead and fed the hungry. Jesus did both, and then rose from the dead Himself.

Jonah was three days and nights in the fish. Jesus was three days in the tomb and came out alive.

Jeremiah promised a new covenant. Jesus poured out His blood to make it.

Daniel saw one like a Son of Man receive an everlasting kingdom. Jesus called Himself the Son of Man.

Esther and Nehemiah risked everything to save and rebuild God's people. Jesus gave everything.

And in the Gospels and Acts, the shadows give way to the Person. Mary held Him. John the Baptist pointed to Him. Peter denied Him and was restored by Him. John leaned on Him. Mary Magdalene saw Him alive. Martha confessed Him. Thomas worshiped Him. Judas betrayed Him. Nicodemus buried Him. Zacchaeus was found by Him. Stephen saw Him standing at God's right hand. Barnabas, Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila spent their lives telling the world about Him.

Not Heroes, but Sinners Saved by Grace

If you have read this whole book, you have noticed that the people in it are not perfect. Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samson, David, Solomon, Elijah, Jonah, Peter, and Thomas all failed in serious ways. Some of them failed badly.

That is the point. The Bible is not a collection of stories about good people who made it to heaven by being good. It is the story of a good God who saves people who are not good. "For all sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that ***is*** in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23-24).

The one perfect person in the Bible is Jesus. He lived the life none of us could live. He died the death we deserved. And He rose again, as the One who conquered sin and death for everyone who trusts in Him.

Your Story

Every person in this book had to answer the same question that Jesus asked Peter: "But you, who do you say Me to be?" (Matthew 16:15). Some, like Peter, answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Some, like Judas, were close enough to touch Him and still turned away. Some, like Nicodemus and Thomas, needed time and honest questions, and in the end they believed.

You have to answer that question too. Nobody can answer it for you.

The good news is simple. God loves you, even though you have sinned against Him, as all of us have. Jesus, God's Son, died on the cross to pay for your sins, and rose again on the third day. If you turn from your sin and trust in Him, God forgives you completely and gives you eternal life, not because you have earned it, but as a free gift.

> *that if you confess with your mouth Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God raised Him out of **the** dead, you will be saved; for with **the** heart it is believed for righteousness, and with **the** mouth it is confessed for salvation.* (Romans 10:9-10)

If you have never done that, you can do it right now. There are no magic words. God is looking at your heart. But if it helps, you can pray something like this:

> *Lord Jesus, I know that I have sinned against You, and I cannot save myself. I believe that You are the Son of God, that You died on the cross for my sins, and that You rose from the dead. I turn from my sin and put my trust in You alone. Please forgive me, come into my life, and make me Yours. Help me follow You for the rest of my life. Thank You for loving me. In Your name I pray, amen.*

If you prayed that and meant it, tell someone. Find a church that teaches the Bible and believes it. Start reading the Gospel of John. And remember that you are now part of the same family as every believer in this book. Hebrews 12:1 calls them "so great a cloud of witnesses." They ran their race. Now it is your turn.

The Story Is Not Over

One more thing. The Bible's story does not end with Paul in prison in Rome. Jesus promised, "I am coming again and will receive you to Myself, so that where I am, you also may be" (John 14:3). I believe the next great event in God's plan is the Rapture, when Jesus will come for His church and the dead in Christ will rise first, before the time of tribulation on the earth (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; Revelation 3:10). After that tribulation, He will return in glory with His saints to reign on the earth (Revelation 19:11-20:6).

On that day, you will meet the people in this book. You will see Abraham, who left everything to follow God's call. You will see Ruth, Hannah, Esther, Daniel, Mary Magdalene, and Paul. And you will see the One they all pointed to, face to face.

> *Come, Lord Jesus.*

Appendix A: Timeline of the People in This Book

Dates before about 900 B.C. are approximate and follow the Bible's own numbers, as explained in Before You Begin. Where the Bible gives no way to date a person, the table says so.

Person	Approximate dates	Chapter
Adam and Eve	The beginning; no dates can be counted	1
Noah	Before the flood; no dates can be counted	2
Abraham	About 2166 to 1991 B.C.	3
Sarah	About 2156 to 2029 B.C.	4
Jacob	About 2006 to 1859 B.C.	5
Joseph	About 1915 to 1805 B.C.	6
Job	Unknown, probably the time of the patriarchs	7
Moses	About 1526 to 1406 B.C. (the Exodus about 1446 B.C.)	8
Joshua	About 1500 to 1390 B.C.	9
Rahab	About 1406 B.C., the fall of Jericho	10
Deborah	The time of the judges, probably the 1200s B.C.	11
Gideon	The time of the judges, probably the 1100s B.C.	12
Samson	About 1100 to 1050 B.C.	13
Ruth	The time of the judges, probably the 1100s B.C.	14
Hannah	About 1110 B.C.	15
Samuel	About 1105 to 1015 B.C.	16
Saul	Reigned about 1050 to 1010 B.C.	17
David	Reigned about 1010 to 970 B.C.	18
Solomon	Reigned about 970 to 930 B.C.	19
Elijah	About 875 to 850 B.C.	20
Elisha	About 850 to 795 B.C.	21
Jonah	About 785 to 750 B.C.	22
Jeremiah	Called 627 B.C.; Jerusalem fell 586 B.C.	23
Daniel	Taken to Babylon 605 B.C.; still living 536 B.C.	24
Esther	About 483 to 473 B.C.	25
Nehemiah	Came to Jerusalem 445 B.C.	26
Mary, mother of Jesus	Jesus born about 6 to 4 B.C.	27
John the Baptist	Preached about A.D. 26 to 29; died about A.D. 28 to 30	28
Peter	Called about A.D. 27 to 29; died about A.D. 64 to 68	29
John the apostle	Called about A.D. 27 to 29; died about A.D. 98 or later	30
Mary Magdalene	About A.D. 28 to 30	31
Martha and Mary of Bethany	About A.D. 29 to 30	32
Thomas	About A.D. 28 to 30 and after	33

Person	Approximate dates	Chapter
Judas Iscariot	About A.D. 28 to 30	34
Nicodemus	About A.D. 27 to 30	35
Zacchaeus	About A.D. 30	36
Stephen	About A.D. 31 to 35	37
Barnabas	About A.D. 30 to the 50s	38
Paul	Converted about A.D. 33 to 35; died about A.D. 64 to 67	39
Priscilla and Aquila	About A.D. 49 to the 60s	40

Appendix B: A Forty-Day Reading Plan

Each day, read the passage in your own Bible first, then the chapter in this book. If you are using this book with a group, read one or two people a week and use the study questions when you meet.

Day	Person	Read	Done
1	Adam and Eve	Genesis 1:26-3:24	
2	Noah	Genesis 6:5-9:17	
3	Abraham	Genesis 12:1-9; 15:1-6; 22:1-19	
4	Sarah	Genesis 16:1-6; 18:1-15; 21:1-7	
5	Jacob	Genesis 27:1-29; 28:10-22; 32:22-32	
6	Joseph	Genesis 37; 39; 45:1-15; 50:15-21	
7	Job	Job 1-2; 38:1-11; 42:1-17	
8	Moses	Exodus 3:1-4:17; 12:1-13; 14:10-31	
9	Joshua	Joshua 1:1-9; 3:14-17; 6:1-20; 24:14-15	
10	Rahab	Joshua 2; 6:22-25	
11	Deborah	Judges 4-5	
12	Gideon	Judges 6:11-24; 7:1-22	
13	Samson	Judges 13:1-5; 16:4-31	
14	Ruth	Ruth 1-4	
15	Hannah	1 Samuel 1:1-2:10	
16	Samuel	1 Samuel 3; 7:3-12; 16:1-13	
17	Saul	1 Samuel 13:5-14; 15:1-35	
18	David	1 Samuel 17; 2 Samuel 11:1-12:13; Psalm 51	

Day	Person	Read	Done
19	Solomon	1 Kings 3:3-28; 8:22-30; 11:1-13	
20	Elijah	1 Kings 18:17-46; 19:1-18	
21	Elisha	2 Kings 2:1-15; 5:1-19; 6:8-23	
22	Jonah	Jonah 1-4	
23	Jeremiah	Jeremiah 1:4-10; 31:31-34; Lamentations 3:19-26	
24	Daniel	Daniel 1; 6	
25	Esther	Esther 4-7	
26	Nehemiah	Nehemiah 1-2; 4; 6:1-16	
27	Mary	Luke 1:26-56; 2:1-20	
28	John the Baptist	Luke 3:1-22; John 1:19-36; 3:22-30	
29	Peter	Matthew 16:13-23; Luke 22:54-62; John 21:1-19	
30	John	Mark 10:35-45; John 13:21-26; 19:25-27; 1 John 4:7-21	
31	Mary Magdalene	Luke 8:1-3; John 20:1-18	
32	Martha and Mary	Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-44; 12:1-8	
33	Thomas	John 11:16; 14:1-7; 20:19-31	
34	Judas Iscariot	John 12:1-8; 13:21-30; Matthew 26:47-50; 27:3-5	
35	Nicodemus	John 3:1-21; 7:45-52; 19:38-42	
36	Zacchaeus	Luke 19:1-10	
37	Stephen	Acts 6:1-8:4	
38	Barnabas	Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-28; 11:19-30; 15:36-41	
39	Paul	Acts 9:1-31; Philippians 3:4-14; 2 Timothy 4:6-8	

Day	Person	Read	Done
40	Priscilla and Aquila	Acts 18:1-28; Romans 16:3-5	

Appendix C: Words to Know

- **Apostle.** One sent with a message. Used most of all for the twelve men Jesus chose, and for Paul.
- **Ark of the covenant.** The gold-covered chest that held the stone tablets of the law and stood in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle and later the temple.
- **Covenant.** A binding agreement. God made covenants with Noah, Abraham, Israel at Sinai, and David, and Jesus made the new covenant in His blood.
- **Exile.** The time when the people of Judah were carried off to Babylon, beginning in 605 B.C., until they began to return about 538 B.C.
- **Gentile.** Anyone who is not Jewish.
- **Hesed.** A Hebrew word for steadfast, loyal love that keeps its promises. It runs through the book of Ruth.
- **Judge.** A leader God raised up to rescue Israel before the time of the kings, such as Deborah, Gideon, and Samson.
- **Messiah.** The Hebrew word for "anointed one." In Greek it is Christ. The promised King from David's family, Jesus.
- **Nazirite.** A person set apart to God by a vow not to drink wine, not to cut the hair, and not to touch a dead body (Numbers 6). Samson was one from birth.
- **Patriarchs.** The fathers of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- **Pharisee.** A member of a strict Jewish group in Jesus' day, devoted to keeping the law and the traditions of the elders. Nicodemus and Paul were Pharisees.
- **Providence.** God's quiet, constant care and control over everything that happens, even ordinary events. The book of Esther is the great example.
- **Rapture.** The moment when Jesus will come for His church, raise believers who have died, and catch up living believers to meet Him in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). This book holds that it comes before the tribulation.
- **Redeemer.** A close relative who could buy back land or a person for the family. Boaz was Ruth's redeemer. Jesus is ours.
- **Repentance.** Turning from sin to God, a change of mind that shows up in a change of life.
- **Sanhedrin.** The ruling council of the Jews in Jerusalem in New Testament times.
- **Tabernacle.** The tent where God was worshiped from the time of Moses until Solomon built the temple.
- **Tribulation.** The seven-year time of judgment on the earth before Jesus returns to reign, often linked with Daniel's seventieth week (Daniel 9:27).

About This Book

People of the Bible: Forty Lives That Point to God walks through forty men and women of Scripture, from Adam and Eve to Priscilla and Aquila. Each chapter gives a short summary at a glance, retells the story in plain words, shows what God did in that person's life, draws out lessons for today, and ends with study questions for personal reading or small groups.

The people in this book are not plaster saints. They doubted, ran, lied, and fell. Their stories are told honestly, because the real hero of every chapter is the faithful God who met them, and every life in the book points ahead to Jesus Christ.

The book includes a timeline of everyone in it, a forty-day reading plan, a short list of words to know, and an index of every Bible verse cited. Scripture quotations are from the Steadfast Literal Bible.

Scripture Index

Genesis 1:26 (5); 1:26-5:5 (5); 1:26-3:24 (142); 1:27 (5, 7); 2:7 (5); 2:15 (5); 2:17 (5); 2:18 (5); 2:23 (6); 2:25 (6); 3:1 (6); 3:1-6 (7); 3:4 (6); 3:6 (6); 3:9 (6); 3:12 (7); 3:15 (7); 3:20 (5); 3:21 (7); 3:22 (7); 5:5 (6); 5:24 (9); 5:28-9:29 (9); 5:29 (9); 5:32 (10); 6:5 (9); 6:5-9:17 (142); 6:6 (9); 6:8 (9, 11); 6:8-9 (9); 6:9 (9); 6:11 (9); 6:14-16 (9); 6:22 (10); 7:2-3 (9); 7:11 (10); 7:16 (10, 11); 7:23 (10); 8:1 (10); 8:4 (9); 8:20 (10); 9:6 (6); 9:8-17 (10); 9:10 (11); 9:20-27 (10); 11:26-25:11 (12); 11:29-23:20 (16); 11:30 (16); 12:1-3 (12); 12:1-4 (14); 12:1-9 (142); 12:3 (85); 12:4 (12); 12:7 (12); 12:10-20 (12, 16); 14:18 (13); 15:1-6 (142); 15:6 (12, 13, 14); 15:17 (14); 16:1-2 (16); 16:1-6 (18, 142); 17:5 (12); 17:15-16 (16); 17:17 (13); 17:19-21 (17); 18:1-15 (142); 18:12 (13, 17, 18); 18:14 (16, 17, 18); 18:15 (17); 20:1-18 (16); 21:1 (17); 21:1-7 (142); 21:6 (17); 22:1-14 (14); 22:1-19 (142); 22:2 (13); 22:7 (13); 22:8 (13); 22:14 (13); 23:1 (17); 25:9 (13); 25:19-50:14 (19); 25:23 (19); 25:26 (19); 25:27-28 (19); 25:27-34 (21); 25:29-34 (19); 27:1-29 (142); 27:36 (19); 28:10-22 (142); 28:15 (20); 28:16 (20); 30:24 (22); 32:22-32 (21, 142); 32:24 (20); 32:26 (20); 32:28 (19); 32:30 (20); 33:4 (20); 35:16-19 (20); 37:4 (22); 37:5-11 (22); 37:19 (22); 37:31-33 (21); 39:7-12 (24); 39:9 (22); 39:21 (23); 40:23-41:1 (23); 41:16 (23); 44:18-34 (23); 45:5 (23); 48:11 (21); 49:10 (24); 50:15-21 (24); 50:20 (22, 23)

Exodus 2:1-10 (29); 2:10 (29); 2:11-15 (29); 3:1-4:17 (142); 3:6 (19); 3:11-4:13 (31); 3:14 (30); 4:11 (30); 4:13 (30); 12:1-13 (31, 142); 12:13 (30); 14:10-31 (142); 14:13 (30); 17:8-16 (32); 17:8-13 (32); 21:32 (115); 22:1 (121); 24:13 (32); 32:30-32 (31); 32:32 (30); 33:11 (31, 32, 34); 34:6 (30)

Leviticus 6:1-5 (121); 19:9-10 (48)

Numbers 5:6-7 (121); 13:16 (32); 14:8-9 (32); 20:10 (30); 21:4-9 (118, 119)

Deuteronomy 17:14-20 (65); 17:16-17 (64); 18:15 (31); 23:3 (48); 31:1-8 (32); 34:6 (30); 34:10 (29)

Joshua 1:1-9 (34, 142); 1:5 (33); 1:8 (34); 1:9 (32, 34); 2:1 (35); 2:5 (35); 2:8-11 (37); 2:11 (35, 36); 2:21 (36); 3:14-17 (33, 142); 5:14 (33); 6:1-20 (142); 6:22-23 (36); 6:25 (36); 9:14 (33, 34); 10:12-14 (33); 21:45 (34); 23:3 (34); 24:2 (12); 24:14-15 (34, 142); 24:15 (33); 24:31 (33)

Judges 2:16-19 (40); 4:3 (38); 4:4-5 (38); 4:6-9 (40); 4:8 (38); 4:9 (38); 4:14 (39, 40); 4:15 (39); 4:17-21 (39); 5:1-5 (40); 5:7 (39); 5:20 (39); 5:21 (39); 5:31 (38, 39); 6:5 (41); 6:11-16 (43); 6:11-24 (142); 6:12 (41); 6:14 (41); 6:16 (41); 6:25-32 (41); 6:32 (41); 6:36-40 (42); 7:1-22 (142); 7:2 (42, 43); 7:7 (42); 7:14 (42); 7:20 (42); 8:22-27 (43); 8:23 (42); 8:27 (42); 13:1-5 (142); 13:2-5 (46); 13:5 (44); 13:24 (44); 14:3 (44, 46); 14:4 (45); 15:18-19 (45); 16:4-31 (142); 16:16 (45); 16:20 (45); 16:20-22 (46); 16:22 (45); 16:28 (44); 16:28-30 (46); 16:30 (45); 21:25 (38)

Ruth 1:1 (47); 1:16 (47); 1:16-17 (47, 49); 1:20 (47); 2:1-12 (49); 2:3 (48); 2:4 (48); 2:12 (48); 2:20 (48); 3:9 (48); 4:1-10 (48); 4:17-22 (48)

1 Samuel 1:1-8 (53); 1:1-2:21 (51); 1:1-2:10 (142); 1:6 (51); 1:8 (51); 1:9-18 (53); 1:10 (51); 1:15 (51); 1:17 (51); 1:18 (52); 1:19 (52); 1:20 (52, 54); 1:27-28 (51); 2:1-10 (52, 53); 2:7 (52); 2:10 (52); 2:12-17 (52); 2:12-22 (54); 2:21 (52); 3:1 (54); 3:1-10 (56); 3:7 (54); 3:10 (54); 3:18 (54); 3:19 (55); 7:12 (55); 8:3 (55); 8:4-9 (56); 8:5 (55); 8:7 (55); 9:2 (57); 9:21 (57, 59); 10:9-10 (58); 10:22 (57); 11:13 (57); 12:3-5 (55); 12:11 (41); 12:23 (55, 56); 13:5-14 (142); 13:8-14 (59); 13:14 (58); 15:1-35 (142); 15:12 (58); 15:13-23 (59); 15:14 (58); 15:22 (57); 15:23 (58); 15:24 (58); 15:24-30 (62); 15:30 (58); 16:7 (55, 56); 16:12-13 (55); 16:13 (60); 16:14 (58); 17:26 (60); 17:32-47 (62); 17:45 (60); 17:47 (61); 18:1-3 (60); 18:7 (58); 18:9 (58); 22:18 (58); 24:6 (60); 25:1 (55); 31:4 (58)

2 Samuel 1:19 (61); 5:4-5 (60); 6:14 (61); 7:16 (61); 11:1-12:13 (142); 11:27 (61); 12:7 (61); 12:13 (61, 62); 12:24-25 (63); 18:33 (61)

1 Kings 3:3-28 (143); 3:5 (63); 3:5-14 (65); 3:9 (63); 3:12-13 (63); 3:28 (64); 4:21 (63); 4:25 (64); 4:29 (64); 6:1 (2, 29); 8:10-11 (64); 8:22-30 (143); 8:27 (64); 8:27-30 (65); 9:6-9 (65); 10:1-9 (64); 11:1-8 (65); 11:1-13 (143); 11:3 (64); 11:4 (64); 11:9 (64); 16:33 (66); 17:1 (66); 17:8-24 (66); 18:17-18 (67); 18:17-46 (143); 18:21 (66, 68); 18:24 (67); 18:29 (67); 18:36-39 (68); 18:38 (67); 18:39 (67); 18:41-46 (67); 19:1-8 (68); 19:1-18 (143); 19:4 (67); 19:12 (67); 19:16-21 (70); 19:18 (67); 19:19-21 (72); 19:21 (70)

2 Kings 1:8 (95); 2:1-15 (143); 2:2 (70); 2:9 (70); 2:11 (68); 2:12 (70); 2:14 (70); 2:19-22 (70); 4:1-7 (71, 72); 4:8-37 (71); 4:38-44 (71); 5:1 (71); 5:1-19 (143); 5:9-14 (72); 5:14 (71); 5:20-27 (71); 6:1-7 (71); 6:8-23 (143); 6:15 (71); 6:15-17 (72); 6:16-17 (70); 6:17 (71); 6:18-23 (71); 13:20-21 (71); 14:25 (73)

1 Chronicles 10:13 (58); 29:28 (61)

2 Chronicles 3:1 (64); 35:25 (76); 36:12 (76); 36:21-22 (76)

Ezra 2:2 (87); 4:21 (89)

Nehemiah 1:3 (87); 1:4 (87); 1:4-11 (89); 2:1 (87); 2:1-8 (89); 2:4-5 (88); 2:8 (88); 2:18 (88); 2:20 (87); 3:12 (88); 4:3 (88); 4:6 (88); 4:7-23 (90); 4:14 (88); 4:15 (89); 4:20 (88); 5:15 (88); 5:18 (88); 6:1-4 (90); 6:3 (88); 6:15 (88); 6:16 (88); 8:10 (89); 12:43 (89); 13:6 (87); 13:31 (89)

Esther 2:7 (83); 2:17 (83); 2:21-23 (83); 3:8-13 (84); 4:12-16 (85); 4:14 (83, 84); 4:16 (84); 6:1 (84); 6:1-11 (86); 7:6 (84); 7:9-10 (85); 9:20-28 (85)

Job 1:1 (25); 1:11 (25); 1:20-22 (27); 1:21 (26); 2:10 (26); 2:13 (26); 9:33 (27); 19:25 (27); 19:25-26 (25, 26); 19:25-27 (27); 38:1-11 (27); 38:4 (26); 42:5 (26); 42:16 (25)

Psalms 41:9 (115); 51:1-12 (62); 51:10 (60); 62:8 (52); 83:9-11 (41); 99:6 (54); 103:14 (42); 105:16-22 (22); 139:7-10 (75)

Proverbs 3:1 (65); 16:4 (85); 21:1 (89); 29:25 (59)

Ecclesiastes 12:13 (65)

Isaiah 7:14 (94); 9:4 (41); 35:5-6 (97); 40:3 (95, 97); 51:2 (16); 61:1 (97)

Jeremiah 1:2 (76); 1:4-10 (78, 143); 1:5 (76); 1:6 (76); 1:9 (76); 1:19 (77); 2:13 (76, 78); 7:1-15 (77); 12:6 (77); 15:1 (54); 16:1-4 (77); 20:2 (77); 20:7-9 (78); 20:9 (77); 20:14 (77); 25:11 (78); 26:8-11 (77); 29:10 (78); 29:11 (78); 31:31-34 (78, 143); 31:34 (78); 32:15 (77); 36:22-23 (77); 38:6 (77); 43:1-7 (77)

Lamentations 3:19-26 (78, 143); 3:22-23 (76)

Ezekiel 14:14 (25, 79); 14:20 (25, 79); 28:3 (79)

Daniel 1:3-5 (79); 1:7 (79); 1:8 (79); 1:8-16 (81); 1:9 (81); 1:20 (79); 2:28 (80); 2:44 (80, 82); 3:25 (80); 4:8 (79); 4:17 (81); 5:25-28 (80); 6:1-10 (82); 6:10 (79, 80); 6:22 (80); 6:23 (80); 7:13 (80); 9:1-19 (81); 9:5 (81); 9:24-27 (81); 9:27 (81, 145); 10:1 (79); 12:13 (81)

Hosea 12:2-4 (19); 12:4 (21)

Jonah 1:1-3 (75); 1:2 (73); 1:3 (73); 1:4-16 (75); 1:9 (73); 1:16 (74); 1:17 (74); 2:9 (74); 3:1 (75); 3:4 (74); 3:5-10 (75); 3:9 (74); 3:10 (74); 4:1 (74); 4:2 (73, 75); 4:3 (74); 4:4 (74); 4:11 (74)

Zechariah 11:12-13 (115)

Malachi 3:1 (95); 4:5 (68); 4:5-6 (66, 95)

Matthew 1:1 (61); 1:1-6 (37); 1:3-6 (49); 1:5 (35, 47); 1:5-6 (36); 1:18-25 (93); 1:25 (93); 3:2 (96); 3:3 (97); 3:4 (95); 3:7-9 (96); 3:13-17 (96); 6:29 (63); 10:1-8 (114); 10:3 (111); 10:4 (114); 11:2-6 (97); 11:3 (96); 11:4-11 (96); 11:11 (95); 11:14 (97); 12:39-41 (73); 12:39-40 (75); 12:42 (63, 64, 65); 14:4 (96); 14:6-12 (96); 14:22-33 (101); 14:28-31 (99); 16:4 (73); 16:13-23 (143); 16:14 (76); 16:15 (138); 16:15-16 (99); 16:22-23 (99); 17:1-13 (66); 17:3 (68); 20:20-28 (102); 24:15 (79, 81); 24:36-42 (11); 24:37-39 (9); 24:38 (11); 26:6-13 (108); 26:14-16 (114); 26:15 (115); 26:20-25 (114); 26:22-25 (115); 26:24 (114, 115); 26:35 (99); 26:47-50 (114, 116, 143); 26:49-50 (115); 26:74 (99); 27:3-5 (115, 116, 143); 27:3-10 (114); 27:4 (115); 27:9-10 (115); 27:55-61 (105); 27:55-56 (106); 27:61 (106); 28:1-10 (105)

Mark 1:1-11 (95); 1:19-20 (102); 1:29-31 (99); 3:17 (102); 3:21 (93); 3:31 (93); 3:35 (93); 6:3 (93); 6:14-29 (95); 6:20 (96); 10:35-45 (104, 143); 10:46-52 (120); 14:3-9 (108); 14:9 (110); 14:10-11 (114); 14:43-46 (114); 15:40-16:11 (105); 15:47 (106); 16:1 (106); 16:7 (99)

Luke 1:6-7 (95); 1:17 (66, 68, 95); 1:26-38 (94); 1:26-56 (143); 1:28 (92); 1:32 (61, 92); 1:34 (92); 1:36 (95); 1:37 (92); 1:38 (92); 1:43 (93); 1:46-55 (52, 53, 94); 1:46-48 (93); 1:48 (94); 1:63-76 (95); 1:80 (95); 2:1-20 (143); 2:7 (93); 2:19 (93); 2:35 (93); 2:48-51 (93); 3:1 (95); 3:1-22 (143); 3:10-14 (96, 97); 3:16 (96); 4:27 (70, 72); 5:1-11 (98, 101); 6:12-16 (114); 7:34 (121); 8:1-3 (105, 107, 143); 8:2 (105); 8:3 (105); 9:30-31 (31); 9:49 (102); 9:49-56 (104); 9:54-55 (102); 9:58 (108); 9:62 (72); 10:38 (108); 10:38-42 (108, 110, 143); 10:40 (108); 10:41-42 (108); 11:29-32 (73); 12:11-12 (125); 15:4 (112); 18:35-43 (120); 19:1-10 (120, 143); 19:2 (120); 19:3 (120); 19:5 (121, 122); 19:6 (121); 19:7 (121, 122); 19:8 (121, 122); 19:9 (121); 19:10 (120, 122); 22:3-6 (114); 22:20 (78); 22:31-34 (101); 22:32 (100); 22:47-48 (114); 22:48 (115); 22:51 (99); 22:54-62 (143); 22:61 (99); 22:61-62 (116); 23:34 (126); 23:46 (126); 23:49-24:12 (105); 24:11 (106); 24:12 (99); 24:27 (137); 24:34 (99); 24:44 (137)

John 1:6-42 (95); 1:19-27 (97); 1:19-36 (143); 1:29 (14, 96); 1:34 (96); 1:35-42 (96); 1:41 (98); 1:42 (98); 1:46 (92); 2:1-12 (92); 2:1-11 (94); 2:5 (93); 3:1 (117); 3:1-8 (119); 3:1-21 (117, 143); 3:2 (117); 3:3 (117); 3:5-6 (117); 3:9 (118); 3:10 (117); 3:14-15 (118, 119); 3:16 (117, 118); 3:16-18 (119); 3:22-36 (95); 3:22-30 (143); 3:26-30 (97); 3:30 (95); 5:28-29 (110); 6:44 (121); 6:64 (115); 6:67-71 (114); 6:70-71 (114); 7:45-52 (117, 143); 7:46 (118); 7:51 (118); 7:52 (118); 8:58 (31); 9:1-3 (27); 10:3-4 (107); 11:1-6 (110); 11:1-44 (143); 11:1-12:11 (108); 11:3 (108); 11:4 (109); 11:5 (108); 11:5-6 (109); 11:16 (111, 113, 143); 11:17-27 (110); 11:18 (108); 11:21-22 (109); 11:25-26 (108); 11:27 (109); 11:32 (109); 11:32-36 (110); 11:35 (109); 11:39 (109); 11:43-44 (109); 11:53 (109); 12:1-8 (110, 116, 143); 12:2 (109); 12:3 (109); 12:4-6 (109, 114); 12:6 (114); 12:10-11 (109); 13:2 (114); 13:6-9 (99); 13:18 (115); 13:21 (115); 13:21-30 (114, 115, 143); 13:21-26 (143); 13:23-25 (103); 13:29 (114); 14:1-7 (143); 14:3 (139); 14:4-5 (111); 14:5-6 (111); 14:6 (111); 17:12 (114); 18:2 (115); 18:2-5 (114); 18:10-11 (99); 18:15-16 (103); 19:25 (105, 106); 19:25-27 (92, 93, 103, 104, 143); 19:35 (103); 19:38-42 (117, 119, 143); 19:39 (118); 19:40-42 (118); 20:1-18 (105, 143); 20:2 (106); 20:3-8 (103); 20:11-18 (107); 20:13 (106); 20:15 (106); 20:16 (105, 106); 20:17 (106); 20:18 (106); 20:19-20 (112); 20:19-31 (143); 20:24-29 (111); 20:25 (112); 20:26-29 (113); 20:27 (112); 20:28-29 (111); 20:31 (103, 112); 21:1-17 (99); 21:1-19 (143); 21:2 (111, 112); 21:7 (103); 21:15-19 (101, 116); 21:17 (98); 21:18-19 (100); 21:19 (99); 21:20 (103)

Acts 1:13 (111, 112); 1:14 (92, 94); 1:16-20 (114); 1:18-19 (115); 1:25 (114); 2:14-41 (100, 101); 2:23 (116); 3:22-26 (31); 3:24 (54); 4:8-13 (101); 4:20 (103); 4:36 (127); 4:36-37 (127, 143); 4:36-5:11 (129); 5:1-11 (127); 5:29 (100); 6:1 (124); 6:1-7 (126); 6:1-8:4 (143); 6:3 (124); 6:5 (124); 6:8 (124); 6:8-15 (126); 6:10 (124); 6:15 (124); 7:9-16 (22); 7:17-44 (29); 7:22 (29); 7:48 (125); 7:51-52 (125); 7:54 (125); 7:54-60 (126); 7:56 (125); 7:58-8:3 (130); 7:59-60 (124, 125); 8:1 (125); 8:1-4 (126); 8:2 (125); 8:3 (131); 8:4 (125); 8:14-17 (103); 9:1-2 (131); 9:1-19 (133); 9:1-31 (143); 9:4-5 (131); 9:15 (131); 9:17-20 (131); 9:23-25 (131); 9:26 (127); 9:26-27 (127); 9:26-28 (129, 143); 9:27 (127); 11:19-21 (125); 11:19-30 (143); 11:22-30 (127); 11:22-26 (129); 11:23 (128); 11:23-24 (127); 11:24 (128); 11:26 (128); 11:29-30 (128); 12:2 (103); 12:25-15:39 (127); 13:1-3 (131); 13:2 (128); 13:9 (130); 13:13 (128); 13:20 (54); 13:21 (57); 13:22 (60); 13:36 (60); 14:8-18 (128); 14:22 (128); 15:12 (128); 15:36-41 (129, 143); 15:39 (128); 16:25 (131); 16:30-31 (131); 17:11 (3); 18:1-4 (136); 18:1-28 (144); 18:2 (134); 18:3 (134); 18:4 (134); 18:11 (134); 18:18-21 (135); 18:24 (135); 18:24-28 (136); 18:26 (135); 18:27-28 (135); 19:23-41 (135); 22:3 (130); 22:20 (126); 22:28 (130); 28:31 (132)

Romans 3:23-24 (138); 4:1-5 (14); 4:19 (16, 17); 4:23-24 (14); 5:12-21 (5); 5:17-19 (8); 8:28 (23); 8:32 (116); 9:9 (16); 9:10-13 (19); 9:11-12 (20); 10:9-10 (139); 10:17 (36); 11:26-27 (78); 11:29 (14); 12:8 (129); 12:13 (136); 15:4 (1); 16:3-4 (134, 135); 16:3-5 (134, 136, 144)

1 Corinthians 1:12 (135); 5:7 (31); 6:18 (24); 9:6 (127, 129); 10:11 (1); 10:12 (100); 15:5 (99); 15:6 (112); 15:8 (132); 15:9 (130); 15:10 (130); 15:21-22 (5); 15:22 (7); 15:45 (7, 137); 15:45-49 (5); 16:19 (134, 135, 136)

2 Corinthians 4:7 (43); 4:17 (132); 7:10 (116); 11:23-30 (133); 11:24-28 (131); 12:7 (131); 12:7-9 (131); 12:10 (132); 13:5 (116)

Galatians 1:12 (132); 1:14 (130); 1:17 (131); 1:18 (98); 2:1 (127); 2:7-14 (98); 2:9 (102, 103, 127); 2:13 (127); 3:6-9 (12); 3:8 (14); 3:16 (15); 4:4 (7, 92, 94); 6:7 (21)

Ephesians 2:8-9 (132)

Philippians 3:4-11 (133); 3:4-14 (143); 3:5 (130); 3:7-8 (130); 4:11 (133)

Colossians 2:3 (65); 4:10 (127, 128, 129)

1 Thessalonians 2:9 (135); 4:16-17 (11, 81, 132, 139, 145); 5:9 (11, 132)

1 Timothy 1:12-17 (133); 1:16 (132); 2:13-14 (5); 6:10 (116)

2 Timothy 4:6-8 (133, 143); 4:7-8 (132); 4:11 (128, 129); 4:19 (134, 135)

Hebrews 1:3 (125); 2:14 (7); 3:1-6 (29); 3:5-6 (31); 4:8 (32); 4:8-10 (34); 4:15 (110); 10:25 (113); 11:7 (9, 11); 11:8 (12); 11:8-19 (12); 11:11 (16, 18); 11:11-12 (18); 11:19 (14); 11:21 (19); 11:22 (22); 11:23-29 (29); 11:30 (32); 11:31 (35, 36); 11:32 (38, 39, 41, 44, 54); 11:33 (79); 11:34 (45); 12:1 (2, 139); 12:2 (2)

James 1:5 (64); 2:21-23 (12, 14); 2:23 (14); 2:25 (35, 36); 3:9 (6); 4:8 (103); 5:11 (25, 27); 5:16-18 (69); 5:17 (66); 5:17-18 (66, 68)

1 Peter 1:8 (113); 1:18-19 (49); 3:5-6 (16); 3:20 (9); 3:20-21 (10); 5:6 (100); 5:13 (128)

2 Peter 2:5 (9, 10); 3:5-7 (10); 3:15-16 (130)

1 John 1:1 (104); 3:16 (104); 4:7-12 (104); 4:7-21 (143); 4:8 (104); 4:10 (102); 4:19 (106)

Revelation 1:9 (102, 103); 3:10 (11, 81, 104, 139); 12:9 (6); 19:11-20:6 (139); 22:2 (7)