THE WHOLE STORY

An Overview of All 66 Books of the Bible



From the garden to the city
one story, one Author, one Savior

ANDREW DOMINGUEZ

TRINFINITY
Enterprises

The Whole Story

An Overview of All 66 Books of the Bible

Andrew Dominguez

Trinfinity Enterprises

The Whole Story: An Overview of All 66 Books of the Bible

Copyright 2026 by Andrew Dominguez.

I own the copyright to everything in this book. I freely allow anyone to read, copy, print, quote, share, and teach from it, and to hand out or post copies, at no cost, as long as the text is not changed and this notice stays with it.

Publishing this book, meaning releasing it as an edition of your own in print or electronic form, whether sold or given away, requires my written permission first. Requests go to andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com.

The full text can be read, printed and downloaded free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Scripture quotations are taken from the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB), with familiar English forms of personal names, copyright 2026 Andrew Dominguez. The complete SLB is free to read at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb.

Independently published.

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.

About This Book

The Bible is one book made of sixty-six books, written over about fifteen hundred years by some forty writers, and it tells one story from beginning to end. This book walks you through all sixty-six of them, Genesis to Revelation, so you can see what each one says and how it fits that story.

Each chapter covers one book of the Bible. It opens with an At a Glance box (author, date, who it was written to, setting, chapters, key word and key verse), then gives the book's background and purpose, its main themes, an outline, key verses quoted from the Steadfast Literal Bible, how the book points to Jesus Christ, and how it fits the whole story. Where good Bible teachers disagree, both views are laid out fairly. Each chapter ends with a tip on how to read that kind of writing and five study questions for personal or group use.

The book opens with The Big Story, the Bible's storyline in one chapter, and each section of the Bible gets a short opener on how to read that kind of book. A chapter on the four hundred years between Malachi and Matthew bridges the two Testaments. At the back you will find a Bible timeline, a table of all sixty-six books, and a glossary of hard terms.

Contents

Introduction....1
The Big Story....5
A Note on the Canon....11
Part One: The Law....12
Genesis....13
Exodus....18
Leviticus....24
Numbers....29
Deuteronomy....34
Part Two: History....39
Joshua....40
Judges....45
Ruth....50
1 Samuel....54
2 Samuel....59
1 Kings....64
2 Kings....69
1 Chronicles....74
2 Chronicles....79
Ezra....84
Nehemiah....89
Esther....94
Part Three: Poetry and Wisdom....98
Job....99
Psalms....104
Proverbs....110
Ecclesiastes....116
Song of Songs....122
Part Four: The Major Prophets....127
Isaiah....128
Jeremiah....134
Lamentations....140
Ezekiel....144
Daniel....150
Part Five: The Minor Prophets....156
Hosea....158
Joel....163
Amos....168
Obadiah....173
Jonah....177
Micah....182
Nahum....187
Habakkuk....191
Zephaniah....195
Haggai....199
Zechariah....203
Malachi....208
Between the Testaments: The 400 Silent Years....213
Part Six: The Gospels....218
Matthew....220

Mark....225
Luke....230
John....235
Part Seven: Acts....240
Acts....241
Part Eight: Paul's Letters....247
Romans....248
1 Corinthians....253
2 Corinthians....258
Galatians....263
Ephesians....268
Philippians....273
Colossians....278
1 Thessalonians....283
2 Thessalonians....288
1 Timothy....293
2 Timothy....298
Titus....303
Philemon....308
Part Nine: The General Letters....312
Hebrews....313
James....318
1 Peter....323
2 Peter....328
1 John....333
2 John....338
3 John....342
Jude....346
Part Ten: Revelation....350
Revelation....351
Bible Timeline....356
The 66 Books at a Glance....358
Glossary....361
Conclusion....363
Bibliography....364

Introduction

Welcome, and thank you for picking up this book. My purpose in writing it is the same as it has been for every Bible study I have written: to bring you closer to our Creator and to give you a way to grow in your Christian walk.

Many people who love God have never read the whole Bible. They know a few favorite chapters, a few stories from childhood, and the verses they hear in church. When they try to read it through, they get lost somewhere in Leviticus or the prophets, because nobody ever showed them how the pieces fit together. That is the reason for this book. The Bible is not sixty-six separate books stacked on a shelf. It is one story, told by one Author, about one Savior. When you see the whole story, every part makes more sense.

Jesus Himself read the Bible this way. On the road to Emmaus after He rose from the dead, "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). Later that evening He told His disciples that everything "written concerning Me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44). If the whole Old Testament points to Jesus, and the New Testament tells us who He is and what He has done, then knowing the whole Bible is really about knowing Him.

I do not claim to be an authority on the Bible. I am simply someone like you who wants to grow closer to God and understand what He has given us in His Word. Before you read any part of this book, or any part of Scripture, I ask that you pray, asking God:

- For the Holy Spirit to be present, to help open your eyes and your heart (Psalm 119:18, 119:105)
- For discernment and knowledge (Psalm 119:66, James 1:5)

2 Timothy 2:15 (SLB)

"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker not needing to be ashamed, cutting straight the word of truth."

The Bible is God's Word to us (2 Timothy 3:16), given for training in righteousness. If we cannot understand what it says, we cannot apply it to our lives or help build God's kingdom.

So how do we go about understanding God's Word?

The first rule is context. You may have heard the saying "Context is King," but what does that mean? Every word, sentence, and passage helps explain the ones around it. Before we read any passage, we should ask a few simple questions: Who wrote it? Who was it written to? What came right before it? Knowing the answers gives us a clearer picture of what God is saying, both in general and to each of us personally.

Context matters a great deal when we read the whole Bible. Every book was written by real people, to real people, at a real point in history, and every book sits in a certain place in God's one story. A verse from the Law reads differently once you know it was given to Israel at Mount Sinai. A promise in the prophets reads differently once you know whether it was spoken before the exile

or after it. That is why every chapter of this book starts with the book's background before it gets to the book's message.

Exegesis, Eisegesis, and Hermeneutics

People typically interpret the Bible using one of two methods, Exegesis or Eisegesis. Both are explained below, along with a third word, Hermeneutics. Sometimes people use both methods to "make their case" for the interpretation they want. These definitions are based on www.merriam-webster.com, with my own notes added.

Exegesis means explaining a text, especially a passage of Scripture. Exegesis is reading and interpreting the full text of a passage, and drawing out what it is actually saying.

Eisegesis means reading your own ideas into a text. This happens when we try to find something in the text that really isn't there. It can lead to many errors, especially when we bring assumptions to a passage that aren't actually in it. This method can be used to justify a behavior, position, or belief that goes against what the text originally meant.

Hermeneutics is the study of the principles used to interpret a text, such as the Bible. "Hermeneutics" and "Exegesis" are sometimes used to mean the same thing. The difference is that Exegesis is the work of explaining a passage, while Hermeneutics is the set of principles that guides that work. In Biblical Hermeneutics, the Bible should be read literally unless the text itself gives us a different meaning.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (SLB)

"16 Every Scripture ***is*** God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training which ***is*** in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work."

This passage tells us plainly that the writers of Scripture were inspired by God. Every passage in the Bible came from God and was written down by man. These are not fairy tales or made-up stories. They are God's own breath, given to us so we can be equipped and ready to do good work.

Because every word was inspired and breathed by God, I believe we must let God's Word interpret itself. We must study the Bible using Exegesis, drawing out what the text says, guided by sound Biblical Hermeneutics.

We should study God's Word using the Golden Rule of Interpretation, as Dr. David L. Cooper stated it:

"When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise."

(http://www.biblicalresearch.info/page55.html)

I read the Bible as it is written. When a book of the Bible tells us who wrote it and when, I take it at its word. When it records history, I believe it happened. When it gives prophecy, I believe God

meant what He said and will do what He promised. Where Bible-believing teachers disagree on a point, I lay out the main views fairly and tell you where I stand when I have settled it for myself.

This book uses the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB) for every Scripture quotation.

How This Book Is Laid Out

The book opens with The Big Story, the Bible's whole storyline in one chapter. Read that first. It gives you the map, and every chapter after it fills in one part of the map.

After that, the sixty-six books are grouped the way most English Bibles order them, in ten parts: the Law, History, Poetry and Wisdom, the Major Prophets, the Minor Prophets, the Gospels, Acts, Paul's Letters, the General Letters, and Revelation. Each part opens with a short chapter on what that kind of writing is and how to read it. Between the Old and New Testaments there is a chapter on the four hundred years when no prophet spoke.

Every book of the Bible gets its own chapter, and every chapter follows the same pattern:

- At a Glance: the author, when it was written, who it was written to, the setting, the number of chapters, a key word and a key verse.
- Background and Purpose: who, when, where and why, and what the book was written to do.
- Main Themes and Outline: the big ideas, tied to chapter and verse, and the book's sections.
- Key Verses: a few verses printed in full, with a sentence on why each one matters.
- Christ in the Book: how the book points to Jesus Christ.
- How It Fits the Whole Story: where the book sits in the Bible's storyline.
- Where Good Teachers Disagree: only where there is a real debate.
- Read It This Way: a tip on reading that kind of writing, and a simple reading plan.
- Study Questions: five questions for personal or group use.

Where I have written a verse-by-verse study on a book, the chapter ends with a Go deeper note pointing you to it. Every one of those studies is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Using This Book

You can read this book straight through, or you can keep it beside your Bible and read the chapter on each book before you start reading that book. I recommend the second way. Read the chapter here, then read the Bible book itself, and then come back and work through the study questions. The overview is a guide. It is never a replacement for reading God's Word.

If you are using this book with a group, one book of the Bible per week works well for the longer books, and two or three of the short ones can share a week. A full pass through the Bible this way takes about a year.

If you have any questions or comments, please reach out to me at andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com. I would love to hear from you.

God bless you as you read the whole story.

The Big Story

The Bible is sixty-six books, written by about forty writers over some fifteen hundred years. Kings wrote parts of it, and so did shepherds, fishermen, a doctor, a tax collector and a tentmaker. You would expect a collection like that to be a jumble. It isn't. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible tells one story: a world made good, ruined by sin, and rescued by a Savior. Before we look at the books one at a time, I want to walk you through that story, so you can see where each book fits.

Creation

The story starts with God. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). The Bible never tries to prove that God exists. It simply begins with Him. Everything else exists because He spoke it into being.

In six days God made the light, the sky and seas, the land and plants, the sun, moon and stars, the birds, fish and animals, and finally man and woman. I believe those were ordinary days, as the text reads, though some good teachers take them as long ages or as a literary framework. Either way, the point is clear: God made it all, on purpose, and He made it good. "God saw all that He had made, and look, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31).

The crown of creation was the human race, made in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27). God "formed the man of dust from the ground, and He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7). He gave Adam and Eve a garden, a world to rule, and one another. Most of all, He gave them Himself. They walked with God, and nothing stood between them.

The Fall and the First Promise

God gave Adam one command. He could eat from every tree but one, "for in the day you eat from it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17). The serpent questioned God's word to Eve, then flatly denied it. Eve ate, and Adam ate with her (Genesis 3:1-6). Shame came in, and they hid from God. Pain, hard labor and death entered the world, and they were driven from the garden (Genesis 3:7-24). Paul sums it up: "through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin" (Romans 5:12). Every problem you see in the news, and every problem you see in the mirror, goes back to that day.

But before God sent them out, He made a promise. Speaking to the serpent, He said, "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). Many call this the first gospel. One day a descendant of the woman would crush the serpent's head, though He would be wounded doing it. The rest of the Bible is the story of God keeping that promise. And God clothed them with garments of skin (Genesis 3:21). An animal died to cover their shame, the first hint of a sacrifice.

The Flood and Babel

Sin spread fast. Cain killed his brother Abel (Genesis 4:8). By Noah's day, "every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the day" (Genesis 6:5). God judged the world with a flood. "And Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD" (Genesis 6:8). God saved Noah and his family in the ark, and afterward He made a covenant with Noah, setting His bow in the clouds as a sign that

He would never again destroy the earth by a flood (Genesis 9:8-17). A covenant is a binding promise God makes, often with a sign attached.

The flood did not change the human heart. At Babel, people set out to build a tower reaching the heavens. "Let us make for ourselves a name," they said (Genesis 11:4). God confused their language and scattered them (Genesis 11:5-9). By the end of Genesis 11, the nations are divided and far from God. What will He do now?

Abraham and the Covenant

His answer was surprising. He chose one man. About 2091 B.C., God called Abram out of Ur, in what is now Iraq, to go to a land He would show him (Genesis 12:1). Then He promised, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great" (Genesis 12:2). The people at Babel tried to make a name for themselves. God would make a name for Abraham, and the blessing would not stop with his family: "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

God promised Abraham a land, a nation of descendants, and blessing for the whole world. Abraham and Sarah were old and childless. But "he believed in the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). Paul points to that verse to show that people have always been made right with God by faith (Romans 4:3). God gave them a son, Isaac. The promise passed to Isaac, then to Jacob, whom God renamed Israel, and to Jacob's twelve sons, the fathers of the twelve tribes. Genesis ends with the family in Egypt, where Joseph, sold as a slave by his brothers, had risen to power and saved them from famine. Joseph told his brothers, "you planned evil against me; God planned it for good" (Genesis 50:20). That line could be written over the whole Bible.

Israel in Egypt and the Exodus

Over the next centuries Jacob's family grew into a great people, and a new Pharaoh made them slaves (Exodus 1:8-14). They cried out, and "God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (Exodus 2:24). He sent Moses to Pharaoh with a demand: let My people go. Pharaoh refused, and God struck Egypt with ten plagues. The last was the death of the firstborn, but each Israelite family killed a lamb and put its blood on the doorposts. "And I will see the blood, and I will pass over you" (Exodus 12:13). That was the first Passover. Many centuries later, John the Baptist would point to Jesus and say, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

God brought Israel through the Red Sea on dry ground. I believe this exodus happened about 1446 B.C., following 1 Kings 6:1, which places it 480 years before Solomon began the temple. Some scholars date it in the 1200s B.C. Either way, it is the great saving event of the Old Testament. Again and again God reminds Israel, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from a house of slaves" (Exodus 20:2).

The Law and the Tabernacle

At Mount Sinai, God made a covenant with the nation. If they kept it, they would be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). He gave them His Law, the Ten Commandments and

many other laws for worship, justice and daily life. The Law was not a ladder to climb up to God. He had already saved them before He gave it. It showed a redeemed people how to live, and it showed them how far short they fell. Paul calls it a "child-guardian to Christ" (Galatians 3:24).

God also had Moses build a tabernacle, a tent where He would dwell among His people. "And they shall make for Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell in their midst" (Exodus 25:8). When it was finished, "the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Exodus 40:34). Still there was a barrier. Only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, once a year, with blood (Leviticus 16). The sacrifices taught that sin brings death and that a substitute can die in the sinner's place. "It is the blood that makes atonement by the life" (Leviticus 17:11). Atonement means covering sin and bringing the sinner back to God. All of it was "a shadow of the coming good things" (Hebrews 10:1).

The Land

Israel should have marched straight into Canaan. Instead they believed a fearful report and refused to go in (Numbers 13-14). That generation wandered forty years in the wilderness. Then God raised up Joshua to lead their children across the Jordan. "Be strong and be bold," God told him, "for the LORD your God is with you in every place where you go" (Joshua 1:9). Israel took the land, and the writer could say, "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).

The Judges

But Israel did not stay faithful. A new generation grew up that did not know the LORD, and they served the gods of their neighbors (Judges 2:10-13). The book of Judges repeats a cycle: Israel sins, an enemy oppresses them, they cry out, God raises up a judge like Gideon, Deborah or Samson to deliver them, and then they slide back. It ends with a sad line: "In those days there was no king in Israel; each man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Even then God was working. Ruth, a Moabite widow from those same days, came to trust Israel's God, married Boaz of Bethlehem, and became the great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:17).

The Kings and the Divided Kingdom

Israel asked for a king like the other nations. God told Samuel, "they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from reigning over them" (1 Samuel 8:7). Saul, the first king, disobeyed God and was rejected. Then God chose David, a shepherd from Bethlehem, "a man according to His heart" (1 Samuel 13:14).

David reigned about 1000 B.C., made Jerusalem his capital, and received a promise that shapes the rest of the Bible. "And your house and your kingdom will be established forever before you; your throne will be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:16). From then on, God's people looked for a Son of David who would be the true King.

Solomon built the temple, and Israel reached its height. But Solomon turned to other gods in his old age (1 Kings 11:1-8). After his death, about 930 B.C., the kingdom split. The ten northern tribes became Israel. Judah and Benjamin in the south, with Jerusalem, became Judah, still ruled by David's line. Most of the kings who followed did evil in the sight of the LORD.

The Prophets

God sent prophets, men who spoke for Him, calling the people back to the covenant and telling what He was about to do. Elijah and Elisha confronted the kings of Israel. Amos and Hosea warned the north. Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah and others warned Judah. They warned of judgment, and they promised a coming King. He would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14) in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). He would be called "Mighty God, Father of Eternity, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). He would suffer: "He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5). And God would make "a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31), writing His law on their hearts.

Exile and Return

The people did not listen. In 722 B.C. Assyria destroyed Samaria and carried the northern tribes away (2 Kings 17:5-7). In 586 B.C. Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and took Judah into exile (2 Kings 25:8-21). No land, no temple, no king on David's throne. It looked like the end.

But God had said the exile would last seventy years (Jeremiah 29:10). In Babylon, Daniel saw visions of the kingdoms to come and of God's kingdom that "will never be destroyed" (Daniel 2:44). Then in 538 B.C. Cyrus king of Persia let the Jews go home to rebuild the house of the LORD (Ezra 1:1-4). Under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah, some returned and rebuilt the temple and the walls. Esther shows God protecting His people who stayed in Persia. Yet the return was not the full restoration the prophets promised. There was still no king, and the people still struggled with sin. Malachi, about 430 B.C., promised that the Lord would send His messenger, and then "suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come to His temple" (Malachi 3:1).

The Four Hundred Silent Years

Then heaven went quiet. For about four hundred years there was no new prophet. But God was not idle. Alexander the Great spread the Greek language across the eastern world, and the Old Testament was translated into Greek. Rome rose to power and built roads across its empire. Jews built synagogues wherever they lived. When the time came, the gospel would travel fast. "When the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son" (Galatians 4:4).

Christ

The silence broke with angels. One told the priest Zechariah that his son, John the Baptist, would prepare the way for the Lord (Luke 1:13-17). Gabriel told a virgin in Nazareth named Mary that her Son would be given "the throne of David His father" (Luke 1:32). Jesus was born in Bethlehem: "For there has been born to you today a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David" (Luke 2:11). The eternal Son of God had become a man. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

For about three years Jesus taught, healed, cast out demons and raised the dead. He lived the perfect life no one else ever lived. And He came to die. His own leaders rejected Him, and the Romans crucified Him at Passover time, about A.D. 30 to 33. On the cross He bore our sins. "He made the One who did not know sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Before He died, He cried, "It has been finished"

(John 19:30). The veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom (Mark 15:38). The way to God was open.

On the third day He rose from the dead and appeared to His followers many times over forty days (Acts 1:3; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8). The serpent had bruised His heel, but the seed of the woman had crushed the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15; Hebrews 2:14). Then Jesus ascended into heaven, and two angels said, "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same manner as you watched Him going into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

The Church

On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came on the disciples in Jerusalem, Peter preached, and about three thousand believed (Acts 2). The church was born. In the Bible a church is not a building. It is the people Christ has saved, His body on earth, Jews and Gentiles together (Ephesians 2:14-16). The gospel spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and toward the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), and the letters of the New Testament were written to teach these churches what God had done in Christ and how to live. The heart of the message is simple: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves; the gift is of God, not from works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). God's promise to Abraham is coming true, as people from every nation are blessed in Christ (Galatians 3:8, 16). That is the age we live in now, making disciples of all the nations (Matthew 28:19-20) and waiting for our Lord.

The Rapture of the Church

How does the story end? I believe the next event on God's calendar is the rapture of the church. Jesus promised, "I am coming again and will receive you to Myself, so that where I am, you also may be" (John 14:3). Paul explains: "the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are living, who remain, will be caught away together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). It will happen "in an instant, in the blink of an eye" (1 Corinthians 15:52). I believe it comes before the Tribulation, because "God did not appoint us for wrath" (1 Thessalonians 5:9), and Jesus promised to keep His church "from the hour of testing which is about to come upon the whole inhabited world" (Revelation 3:10).

The Seven-Year Tribulation

After the church is taken, the world will enter a time of trouble unlike any before it. Daniel was told of a ruler who would make a covenant "for one seven," a period of seven years, and break it in the middle (Daniel 9:27). Paul calls him "the man of sin" (2 Thessalonians 2:3), and Revelation calls him the beast (Revelation 13). God will pour out His judgments on a world that has rejected His Son (Revelation 6-18). Yet even then He will save a great multitude from every nation (Revelation 7:9-14). And He will turn again to Israel. A hardening has come on part of Israel "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:25-26). "The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29).

Christ's Visible Return

At the end of the Tribulation, Jesus will come back to the earth, and this time everyone will see Him. "Look, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, and those who pierced Him" (Revelation 1:7). John saw it: "I saw heaven opened, and look, a white horse, and the One sitting on it is called Faithful and True" (Revelation 19:11). The armies of heaven follow Him, the beast and the false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 19:19-20), and on His robe is written "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Revelation 19:16). The rejected King has come back to reign.

The Thousand-Year Kingdom

Then Satan will be bound for a thousand years, and Christ will reign on the earth. His people "will be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with Him a thousand years" (Revelation 20:6). This is the kingdom the prophets saw, when the Son of David sits on David's throne, the nations come to Jerusalem to learn God's ways, and the earth is full of the knowledge of the LORD (Isaiah 2:2-4; 11:1-10). Every promise God made to David and to Israel will be kept. At the end, Satan will be released for a short time, lead one last rebellion, and be thrown into the lake of fire forever (Revelation 20:7-10).

The Final Judgment

Then comes the great white throne. "And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life" (Revelation 20:12). Everyone who has not trusted Christ will be judged by what they have done, and no one can stand on his own record. "And if anyone was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15). That is why the gospel is so urgent. Jesus died so that no one has to face that day without a Savior.

The New Heavens and the New Earth

And then the story comes full circle. "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away" (Revelation 21:1). The holy city comes down from God, and a voice from the throne says, "Look, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will tabernacle with them" (Revelation 21:3). What Adam lost in the garden is restored, and more. "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death will not be any longer" (Revelation 21:4). The curse is gone, the tree of life is there again, and God's people "will see His face" (Revelation 22:2-4).

That is the whole story, and it is not just a story to read. It is a story to enter. The same Savior who rose from the dead offers you forgiveness and eternal life as a free gift, if you will turn from your sin and trust Him. "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). And the last prayer in the Bible is one every believer can pray: "Yes, come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20).

A Note on the Canon

This book walks through the 66 books of the Bible as Protestant Christians have it: 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. Before we start, it helps to say a word about what that list is and where it came from.

The word canon comes from a Greek word for a measuring rod or a ruler. A carpenter used a canon to check whether a line was straight. Over time, the word came to mean a standard, and then a list of books that meet the standard. When Christians speak of the canon of Scripture, they mean the books the church has recognized as God's inspired Word, the books that measure everything else we believe.

Notice the word recognized. The church did not make these books Scripture by voting on them. God gave them by His Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21), and over time His people recognized them as His Word. The Old Testament books were received by the Jewish people long before Jesus came, and Jesus spoke of the Scriptures as a whole, the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms (Luke 24:44). The 39 books in our Old Testament contain the same text as the Hebrew Bible, arranged and numbered a little differently. The 27 books of the New Testament were written by the apostles and those close to them, and they were widely received in the churches during the first centuries after Christ.

You should know that not every Christian Bible has the same list. Roman Catholic Bibles include several more books in the Old Testament, such as Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach and Baruch, along with additions to Esther and Daniel. Eastern Orthodox Bibles include these and a few others. Protestants usually call these books the Apocrypha, while Catholics call most of them deuterocanonical, meaning a second canon. Most of them were written in the centuries between Malachi and Matthew, and many were included in Greek copies of the Old Testament.

Protestants have not included these books in the canon, mainly because they were not part of the Hebrew Scriptures of the Jewish people, and they are not quoted as Scripture in the New Testament. Many of them are still worth reading. 1 Maccabees, for example, is an important source for the history between the Testaments, and I draw on it in that chapter of this book. But this book covers only the 66 books that all Christians accept as Scripture, and that Protestants hold to be the whole canon.

This is an area where sincere believers have landed in different places, and I want to be fair to them. If you would like to learn more, my book Which Bible, Which Books? covers the Apocrypha and how the canon came together. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Part One: The Law

The Bible opens with five books that belong together: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Jewish people call them the Torah, a Hebrew word that means instruction or teaching. Christians often call them the Pentateuch, from a Greek word meaning "five scrolls," or simply the Law. Jesus called them "the law of Moses" and said that Moses wrote about Him (Luke 24:44; John 5:46). I take Him at His word. Moses wrote these books during Israel's forty years in the wilderness, about 1445 to 1405 B.C., and a few later notes, such as the account of his own death, were added by another hand.

Do not let the word "law" scare you off. These books are not a dry rule book. Most of Genesis and much of Exodus and Numbers is story: creation, the fall, the flood, the call of Abraham, slavery in Egypt, the Passover night, the crossing of the sea, and forty hard years in the desert. The laws come inside that story. God saved Israel first, and then He told them how to live as His people. That order matters. Grace comes before commands, in the Old Testament as much as in the New.

Here is the flow. Genesis tells how the world began, how sin broke it, and how God chose one family to bring blessing to every nation. Exodus tells how God rescued that family, now a nation, from Egypt and came to live among them in the tabernacle. Leviticus explains how sinful people can come near a holy God. Numbers shows what happens when they refuse to trust Him, and how patient He is with them anyway. Deuteronomy is Moses' farewell, preached to the next generation on the edge of the promised land.

Why should a Christian today read these books? Because the rest of the Bible stands on them. You cannot understand words like covenant, sacrifice, atonement, priest, Passover or promised land without them. The New Testament quotes and explains the Law on almost every page. Jesus answered Satan with Deuteronomy. Paul built his teaching on faith around Abraham. Hebrews explains the cross with the tabernacle and the Day of Atonement. If you skip the first five books, much of the New Testament will sound like it is speaking a language you never learned.

How should we read them? Read the stories as real history, because the rest of Scripture treats them that way. Read the laws by asking what they show us about God and about sin. Many of them were given to Israel as a nation, and believers in Christ are not under the Law of Moses as a covenant (Romans 6:14; Galatians 3:24-25). But every part of it still teaches us (Romans 15:4). The sacrifices point forward to the one sacrifice of Christ. The holiness laws show how seriously God takes sin. And the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are still standing, for Israel and, through Christ, for the whole world.

Genesis

At a Glance	
Author	Moses (Luke 24:44; John 5:46)
Date written	About 1445 to 1405 B.C., during the wilderness years
Written to	Israel, on the way from Egypt to Canaan
Setting and time covered	From creation to the death of Joseph, about 1805 B.C.
Chapters	50
Key word	Beginnings
Key verse	Genesis 12:3

Background

Genesis is the book of beginnings. The name comes from a Greek word that means origin. The Hebrew title is simply the book's first word, which means "in the beginning." Everything else in the Bible grows out of this book. If you want to know where the world came from, why people die, why there are so many nations and languages, and why God chose Israel, Genesis is where you start.

Genesis does not name its author, but Jewish and Christian teachers have long held that Moses wrote it along with the next four books. Jesus spoke of the Law as the writings of Moses (Luke 24:44; John 5:46-47), and I hold that Moses wrote it. He was not alive for any of the events in Genesis, so he would have used records and accounts handed down from earlier generations, guided by the Holy Spirit. A few small notes, such as old place names updated for later readers, may have been added by scribes after him. Many modern scholars believe the book was put together from several sources long after Moses. I don't find that convincing, because Jesus and the apostles treated the Law as Moses' work.

Think about the first readers. Israel had just walked out of Egypt after about four hundred years there, much of it as slaves. They had lived among a people with many gods: gods of the Nile, of the sun, of the fields. Now they were camped in the wilderness on the way to Canaan, a land full of other gods. Genesis told them the truth. There is one God. He made the sun, so the sun is not a god. He made the whole earth, so He has the right to give Canaan to whoever He chooses. And He had already promised that land to their father Abraham centuries before.

Moses marked the sections of the book with a repeated heading, "These are the generations of" (2:4). It shows up about ten times, at 2:4, 5:1, 6:9, 10:1, 11:10, 11:27, 25:12, 25:19, 36:1 and 37:2 (with a second heading for Esau's family at 36:9). Each one opens a new part of the story, and each one narrows the focus a little more, from the heavens and the earth down to one family.

The book falls into two big parts. Chapters 1-11 cover the whole human race: creation, the fall, the first murder, the flood and the tower of Babel. Those chapters cover a huge sweep of time, and Scripture does not give us a date for creation, so I won't try to set one. Chapters 12-50 slow down and follow one family over about 285 years: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. The call of Abraham came about 2091 B.C. The book ends with Joseph's death in Egypt about 1805 B.C.

Purpose

Why did God give Israel this book before He gave them the Law? Because rules make no sense until you know who is giving them and why. Genesis shows that God is the Creator of all things and that He made everything good. It shows that sin came into the world through man, not through God, and that death came with it. And it shows that right after the fall, God began His plan to save a people for Himself through a promised Seed (3:15).

Genesis also lays the foundation for God's covenant with Israel. A covenant is a binding agreement, a solemn promise that God makes and swears to keep. In Genesis God makes covenants with Noah and with Abraham, and He repeats the promise to Isaac and to Jacob. Every later book of the Bible leans on those promises. When Moses pleads for Israel in Exodus, he reminds God of Abraham. When Paul explains faith in Romans and Galatians, he goes back to Abraham. When God promises Israel a future in the prophets, He is keeping His word to Abraham.

Main Themes

God made everything good. Six times in chapter 1 God looks at what He has made and sees that it is good, and at the end of the sixth day He saw it was "very good" (1:31). The world was not born out of a war between gods or an accident of nature. It came from one wise and good Creator. Men and women are made "in His image" (1:27), which gives every human life worth, from the unborn child to the oldest grandmother.

Sin broke what God made. Adam and Eve were told not to eat from one tree, and they ate (2:17; 3:6). Sin brought shame, blame, pain and death. Chapters 4-11 show it spreading like a disease: Cain kills Abel, violence fills the earth, God sends the flood, and after the flood people unite at Babel to "make for ourselves a name" (11:4). Paul says that "through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin" (Romans 5:12).

God keeps coming after sinners. The first question God asks in the Bible is "Where are you?" (3:9). He goes looking for Adam. He clothes Adam and Eve with "garments of skin" (3:21). He protects Cain, saves Noah, and scatters Babel before its pride can grow worse. Grace shows up in every one of these early stories.

God chose Abraham to bless the world. In chapter 12 God calls Abram (later renamed Abraham) to leave his country. He promises him a land, a great nation, and that "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (12:3). God confirms this with a covenant in chapter 15 and calls it "an everlasting covenant" in chapter 17 (17:7). The promise of the land to Abraham's descendants is still on God's books. I believe He will keep it.

Faith is counted as righteousness. Abraham "believed in the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness" (15:6). He was declared right with God before he was circumcised and centuries before the Law was given. Paul uses this verse to show that salvation has always been by grace through faith (Romans 4:3, 9-10).

God rules over evil for good. Joseph's brothers sold him as a slave. Years later Joseph told them, "you planned evil against me; God planned it for good" (50:20). God does not cause sin, but He is never beaten by it. He can take the worst thing done to you and use it to save many.

Outline

- Chapters 1-2: Creation
- Chapters 3-5: The fall and its results
- Chapters 6-9: The flood
- Chapters 10-11: The nations and the tower of Babel
- Chapters 12-25: Abraham
- Chapters 25-26: Isaac
- Chapters 27-36: Jacob
- Chapters 37-50: Joseph

Key Verses

Genesis 1:1 *In **the** beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*

The first verse of the Bible answers the biggest question there is. Before anything else existed, God was there, and He made it all.

Genesis 3:15 *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.*

This is the first promise of the gospel. The woman's seed would be bruised on the heel, but He would crush the serpent's head.

Genesis 12:2-3 *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.*

God's call to Abram sets the course for the rest of the Bible. Through one man and one nation, God would bring blessing to the whole world.

Genesis 15:6 *And he believed in the LORD, and He counted it to him **as** righteousness.*

Abraham was made right with God by believing God's promise. That is still the only way anyone is made right with Him.

Genesis 50:20 *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.*

Joseph's words to his brothers sum up the whole story of God's providence, His quiet rule over all things.

Christ in Genesis

Jesus said that Moses "wrote concerning Me" (John 5:46), and Genesis is full of Him. The clearest place is 3:15. Right after the fall, God told the serpent that the woman's seed would crush his head, even though the serpent would bruise His heel. That is a picture of the cross. At Calvary Satan struck at Jesus, but Jesus rose from the dead and broke Satan's power (Hebrews 2:14). Notice it

says the seed of the woman, not of a man. Many Christians have long seen in that a hint of the virgin birth (Galatians 4:4).

The promise then narrows. It goes to Abraham, and Paul says the "seed" promised to Abraham is "one," and "who is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). It goes through Isaac, not Ishmael, and through Jacob, not Esau. Then Jacob says the ruler's staff will not leave Judah "until Shiloh comes" (49:10), a promise that points to the King from Judah's line.

There are also types in Genesis that the New Testament itself points out. A type is a real person or event in history that God used as a picture of something greater to come. Paul calls Adam "a type of the One to come" (Romans 5:14). Adam brought death to everyone in him, and Christ brings life to everyone in Him. Melchizedek, the king and priest who blessed Abraham (14:18), is explained in Hebrews 7 as a picture of Christ's priesthood. When Abraham offered Isaac on Mount Moriah, Hebrews says he "reasoned that God was able to raise even from the dead," and received Isaac back "in a figure" (Hebrews 11:19). Abraham told his son, "God will see to the lamb for Himself" (22:8). Two thousand years later, John the Baptist pointed at Jesus and said, "Look, the Lamb of God" (John 1:29).

Joseph is also a picture of Christ, though the New Testament does not call him a type in so many words. He was loved by his father, hated by his brothers, sold for silver, falsely accused, and then raised to the right hand of the king, where he saved the very brothers who had rejected him. When you read Joseph's story, it is hard not to think of Jesus.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Genesis sets up the problem the rest of the Bible solves. Sin entered, death followed, and people were cut off from God's presence when Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden. The Bible ends in Revelation 21-22 with that problem fixed. There is a new heaven and a new earth, God dwells with His people, the tree of life is back, and there is no more curse. What was lost in Genesis 3 is restored in Revelation 22.

In between, the story runs along the line of the promise. God promised Abraham a land, a people and a blessing. Exodus turns Abraham's family into a nation. Joshua brings them into the land. The kings give us David, and God promises that one of David's sons will reign forever. The prophets look ahead to a new covenant. Then Matthew opens his gospel with the words "Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1). Jesus is where all those promises meet.

Genesis also matters for the future. God's promises to Abraham's physical descendants did not end when the church began. Paul says the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable, and that a day is coming when "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26, 29). I believe God will keep every word He swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, including the land.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

The days of creation. I believe the days of Genesis 1 were ordinary days. Each one has a number and "evening and morning," and when God gave Israel the Sabbath, He pointed back to this week: "in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth" (Exodus 20:11). Other Bible-believing Christians see it differently. The day-age view reads each day as a long period of time. The

framework view reads the days as a literary pattern that shows God's order rather than a timeline. Those who hold these views still believe God created everything. I take the plain reading, and I don't claim Scripture gives us a date for creation.

The sons of God in chapter 6. Genesis 6:2 says "the sons of God saw the daughters of mankind" and married them. Who were these sons of God? Some teachers believe they were fallen angels who took human wives, pointing to Job 1:6, where the same phrase is used of angels, and to Jude 6-7 and 2 Peter 2:4. Others believe they were men from the godly line of Seth who married into the line of Cain, pointing to Jesus' words that angels do not marry (Matthew 22:30). A third view sees them as powerful rulers. Good teachers hold each of these, and the main point of the passage is clear either way: sin had spread so far that God brought the flood.

Read It This Way

Read Genesis as real history. Jesus spoke of Adam and Eve as the first couple (Matthew 19:4-5), of Abel as a real man (Matthew 23:35), and of Noah and the flood as real events (Matthew 24:37-39). If we treat these chapters as myth, we are reading them differently than Jesus did.

Read it as one story, not a box of separate lessons. Watch how the promise of 3:15 keeps going on, often through people who don't deserve it. Abraham lied about his wife twice. Jacob was a schemer. Judah sold his brother. God kept His promise anyway. That should give you hope. God's plan does not depend on how good His people are. It depends on Him.

Pay attention to the repeated words. "Blessing" and "seed" show up again and again. So do the words "covenant" and "the LORD was with" him. When the same word keeps coming up, Moses wants you to notice.

And read it slowly. The patriarch stories are full of real family trouble: favoritism, jealousy, deception, infertility, grief. You will probably see your own family in there somewhere. Ask what each story shows about God, not only what it shows about the people.

Study Questions

1. What does it mean that God created mankind "in His image," and how should that change the way we treat other people (1:27)?
2. When Adam and Eve sinned, God came looking for them and asked, "Where are you?" What does that tell you about God's heart toward sinners (3:8-9)?
3. Abraham was counted righteous because he believed God. How does Paul use that verse to explain how we are saved today (15:6; Romans 4:1-5)?
4. Jacob spent much of his life scheming to get what God had already promised him. Where are you tempted to work things out your own way instead of trusting God (27:1-29; 28:13-15)?
5. Joseph told his brothers that God meant their evil for good. Is there a hard part of your past that God might be using for good (50:20; Romans 8:28)?

Go deeper: My Genesis Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Exodus

At a Glance	
Author	Moses (Exodus 17:14; 24:4; Mark 12:26)
Date written	About 1445 to 1405 B.C., during the wilderness years
Written to	Israel, the nation God had just brought out of Egypt
Setting and time covered	Egypt, the wilderness and Mount Sinai; from the years of slavery to the tabernacle set up about a year after the exodus of about 1446 B.C.
Chapters	40
Key word	Redemption
Key verse	Exodus 12:13

Background

Exodus means "going out." It picks up where Genesis left off. At the end of Genesis, Jacob's family of about seventy people had moved to Egypt during a famine, and Joseph had cared for them. Exodus opens centuries later. The family has grown into a great people, and "a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph" (1:8). The Egyptians grew afraid of the Hebrews and made them slaves. Exodus 12:40 says Israel lived in Egypt for 430 years.

Moses wrote this book. The text says he wrote down the LORD's words (17:14; 24:4), and Jesus quoted from it as "the book of Moses" (Mark 12:26). Moses was the right man to write it. He was born a Hebrew slave, raised in Pharaoh's palace, spent forty years as a shepherd in Midian, and then led Israel out. He was there for nearly every event in the book.

When did the exodus happen? 1 Kings 6:1 says Solomon began building the temple in "the four hundred and eightieth year" after Israel came out of Egypt. Solomon's fourth year was about 966 B.C. Add 480 years and you get about 1446 B.C. I hold to that early date because it comes straight from the text. I'll say more about the other view below.

The book moves through three places. Chapters 1-12 take place in Egypt. Chapters 13-18 follow Israel through the sea and into the wilderness. Chapters 19-40 take place at Mount Sinai, where Israel camped for about a year. That last section is the longest, which tells you something. God did not only want to get Israel out of Egypt. He wanted to bring them to Himself.

Why ten plagues? Each one hit something Egypt trusted. The Nile turned to blood. The land was covered with frogs, gnats and flies. The livestock died, the crops were eaten, and darkness covered the land for three days, even though the Egyptians worshiped the sun. Then came the death of the firstborn. God said plainly what He was doing: "on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments" (12:12). Pharaoh claimed to be a god himself, and God showed that he was only a man. Israel had lived among those gods for centuries. They needed to see with their own eyes that the LORD is the only true God.

Purpose

Exodus shows how God keeps His promises. In Genesis 15:13-14 God told Abraham that his descendants would be slaves in a foreign land and that He would bring them out with great possessions. Exodus is that promise coming true. When the people groaned under slavery, "God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (2:24).

The book also shows who God is. Pharaoh asked, "Who is the LORD, that I should listen to His voice?" (5:2). The rest of the book is the answer. Over and over, God says He is acting so that Egypt and Israel will "know that I am the LORD" (7:5; 6:7). He is stronger than Pharaoh and all the gods of Egypt. He is holy, so the people cannot rush up the mountain. And He is gracious, so He forgives them after the golden calf.

And Exodus shows what God saved Israel for. He did not free them so they could do as they pleased. He freed them to be His own people, to worship Him, and to live with Him in their midst.

Main Themes

God hears and remembers. The book begins with silence from heaven for many years. Then God tells Moses, "I have certainly seen the affliction of My people" (3:7). If you feel forgotten today, Exodus is a good place to read. God's timing was not Israel's timing, but He had not forgotten one word He spoke to Abraham.

God makes Himself known by name. At the burning bush Moses asked God's name, and God answered, "I AM WHO I AM" (3:14). God's personal name, written LORD in capital letters in the SLB, comes from this. It means He is the One who simply is. He depends on nothing and no one, and He never changes.

Redemption by blood and by power. To redeem means to buy back or set free by paying a price. On the night of the Passover each family killed a lamb and put its blood on the doorposts. God said, "I will see the blood, and I will pass over you" (12:13). Then He opened the sea and brought them through on dry ground. Moses told the people to "see the salvation of the LORD" (14:13). Israel did not save themselves. God did.

A covenant and a law. At Sinai God offered Israel a covenant: if they would obey His voice, they would be His "treasured possession" and "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:5-6). Then He gave the Ten Commandments and the laws that follow. Notice the first words of the Ten Commandments: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt" (20:2). The Law came after the rescue. God did not tell them to obey so that He would save them. He told them He had saved them, and now they should live like it.

God dwelling with His people. Almost half the book is about the tabernacle, a large tent that served as a portable house of worship. God said, "they shall make for Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell in their midst" (25:8). At the end of the book the work is finished, and "the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (40:34). What Adam lost in the garden, God begins to give back.

Mercy after failure. While Moses was on the mountain, the people made a golden calf and said, "These are your gods, O Israel" (32:4). It was a terrible sin, only weeks after they had promised to obey. God judged it, but He did not throw Israel away. Moses prayed, and God showed him His

glory and proclaimed His name: "a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in steadfast love and faithfulness" (34:6).

Outline

- Chapter 1: Israel enslaved in Egypt
- Chapters 2-4: The birth and call of Moses
- Chapters 5-12: The plagues and the Passover
- Chapters 13-15: Out of Egypt and through the sea
- Chapters 15-18: The journey to Sinai
- Chapters 19-24: The covenant and the Law
- Chapters 25-31: The tabernacle planned
- Chapters 32-34: The golden calf and the covenant renewed
- Chapters 35-40: The tabernacle built

Key Verses

Exodus 3:14 *And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"*

God reveals His name to Moses. Jesus took this name on His own lips when He said, "before Abraham came into being, I am" (John 8:58).

Exodus 12:13 *And the blood shall be for you for a sign on the houses where you **are**; and I will see the blood, and I will pass over you, and **there** shall not be among you a plague for destruction when I strike in the land of Egypt.*

The blood of the lamb was the only thing between each family and death. It is the clearest picture of the cross in the Old Testament.

Exodus 19:5-6 *And now, if you will surely listen to My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be to Me a treasured possession out of all the peoples; for all the earth **belongs** to Me. And you, you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These **are** the words which you shall speak to the sons of Israel.*

God's purpose for Israel: a people set apart for Him to show the nations what He is like.

Exodus 20:2-3 *I **am** the LORD your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from a house of slaves. There shall not be for you other gods before My face.*

The Ten Commandments begin with grace, then call for loyalty to God alone.

Exodus 34:6-7 *And the LORD passed by before his face, and He proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and He will surely not leave* ***the guilty*** *unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on sons and on sons of sons, on the third and on the fourth* ***generation****."*

God's own description of Himself. The rest of the Old Testament quotes it again and again.

Christ in Exodus

The New Testament draws a straight line from Exodus to Jesus. Paul says, "our Passover was sacrificed for us: Christ" (1 Corinthians 5:7). Jesus died at Passover time. The Passover lamb had to be without defect, and none of its bones could be broken (12:5, 46). John points out that none of Jesus' bones were broken on the cross, and he ties it to that very command (John 19:36). John the Baptist called Him "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

The manna points to Jesus too. In John 6:31-35 Jesus reminded the crowd of the bread from heaven in the wilderness and then said that He is the true bread from heaven. Paul says the rock that gave Israel water "was the Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4).

The tabernacle is full of Christ. John writes that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), and the word for dwelt means to pitch a tent or tabernacle. God once lived among His people in a tent. Then He came to live among us in a body. Hebrews says the tabernacle was "a copy and shadow of the heavenly things" (Hebrews 8:5). The veil kept people out of the Most Holy Place. When Jesus died, "the veil of the temple was torn into two from top to bottom" (Matthew 27:51), and Hebrews tells us we can now enter "by the blood of Jesus" (Hebrews 10:19).

Moses himself is a picture. He was a deliverer whom his own people at first rejected (Acts 7:35). Hebrews compares the two plainly: Moses was faithful as a servant in God's house, "but Christ as a Son over His house" (Hebrews 3:5-6).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Exodus is the great salvation event of the Old Testament. Later books look back to it the way the New Testament looks back to the cross. The prophets remind Israel that God brought them out of Egypt. The Psalms sing about the sea. When the prophets describe a future rescue of Israel, they often describe it as a new exodus.

Exodus also explains Israel's calling. God called them "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:6). Peter uses the same words for believers in Christ: "a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9). That does not mean the church has replaced Israel. God's promises to Israel still stand (Romans 11:28-29). It means that believers from every nation now share in the blessing God promised through Abraham's family.

And Exodus sets up the rest of the Law. Leviticus tells the priests how to serve in the tabernacle that Exodus describes. Numbers picks up the journey from Sinai. Deuteronomy looks back on all of it. The covenant made at Sinai, often called the Mosaic covenant, governs Israel's life all the way to the coming of Christ, who brings the new covenant promised in Jeremiah 31:31-34.

What about the Law for a Christian today? Paul says believers "are not under law but under grace" (Romans 6:14), and that the Law served as "our child-guardian to Christ, so that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24). The Sinai covenant was made with Israel, and its sacrifices, festivals and food laws were fulfilled in Christ. But Paul also says "the law indeed is holy" (Romans 7:12). The Ten Commandments still show us what God is like and what sin is. Nine of them are repeated in the New Testament as part of the Christian life. The Law cannot save anyone, because none of us keeps it. What it can do is show us our need and send us to Jesus.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

The date of the exodus. I hold the early date, about 1446 B.C., because 1 Kings 6:1 counts 480 years from the exodus to Solomon's fourth year, and Judges 11:26 has Jephthah saying Israel had been in the land about 300 years in his day. Many scholars prefer a date in the 1200s B.C., in the time of Pharaoh Ramesses II. They point to the store city named Rameses in Exodus 1:11 and to some evidence from digs in Canaan. Those who hold that view usually read the 480 years as a round number for twelve generations. Both sides agree the exodus really happened. I take the number in 1 Kings as written.

Read It This Way

Read Exodus as history and as gospel. The plagues, the Passover and the sea really happened, and they also show us how God saves sinners. When you get to the laws in chapters 21-23, don't skip them. Ask what each one shows about God's care for the weak: the slave, the widow, the orphan, the stranger.

When you get to the tabernacle chapters, slow down instead of speeding up. They feel repetitive because Moses describes the plans in chapters 25-31 and then describes the building in chapters 35-40. That repetition is the point. The people did exactly what God said. Try reading those chapters with a simple drawing of the tabernacle next to you. Start at the gate and walk in toward the ark the way a priest would. You will see that there was only one way in.

Notice how often God says why He is acting. The words "know that I am the LORD" run through the plague chapters like a refrain (7:5, 17; 8:22; 10:2). Exodus is about rescue, but under the rescue is a bigger goal: that people would know the LORD. That is still His goal for your life.

And watch the people. They sing at the sea in chapter 15 and grumble about water three days later. They promise to obey in chapter 24 and dance around a calf in chapter 32. We are not so different. That's why the mercy of chapter 34 is such good news.

Study Questions

1. God waited a long time before He sent Moses. What does Exodus 2:23-25 teach about God's timing when we feel forgotten?
2. What does the name "I AM WHO I AM" tell you about God, and how does Jesus use it (3:14; John 8:58)?
3. Each family had to put the lamb's blood on the doorposts. What does that teach about how a person receives the salvation Christ provides (12:13; 1 Corinthians 5:7)?

4. Why do you think the Ten Commandments begin with what God had already done for Israel (20:2-3)?

5. Israel turned to a golden calf only weeks after promising to obey. What "calves" are you tempted to trust in place of God, and what does God's answer in 34:6-7 mean for you?

Leviticus

At a Glance	
Author	Moses (Leviticus 1:1; 27:34)
Date written	About 1445 B.C., at Mount Sinai
Written to	Israel, and especially the priests who served at the tabernacle
Setting and time covered	Mount Sinai, in the month after the tabernacle was set up
Chapters	27
Key word	Holy
Key verse	Leviticus 17:11

Background

Leviticus is the book most Bible reading plans die in. People sail through Genesis and Exodus, hit the offerings in chapter 1, and quit. I understand why. But if you skip Leviticus, you miss one of the main keys to understanding the cross. The book of Hebrews is almost a commentary on Leviticus, and you cannot really follow Hebrews without it.

The name comes from the tribe of Levi. God chose that tribe to serve at the tabernacle, and from it He chose Aaron and his sons to be the priests. A priest is someone who stands between God and people. He brings the people's offerings to God and brings God's blessing back to the people. Leviticus is in large part the priests' handbook, but it was written for the whole nation too, so every Israelite would know how to worship and how to live.

Moses wrote it. More than any other book of the Law, Leviticus is made up of God's own words. Over and over the text says, "And the LORD spoke to Moses." The book opens with God calling to Moses "from the tent of meeting" (1:1) and closes with the words "These are the commandments which the LORD commanded Moses for the sons of Israel on Mount Sinai" (27:34).

The setting is Mount Sinai. At the end of Exodus the tabernacle was finished and the glory of the LORD filled it. Leviticus covers about one month. Numbers 1:1 picks up in the second month of the second year after the exodus. So Leviticus is God's instruction for the first weeks of life with Him living in the middle of the camp.

Here is the problem the book answers. God is holy, and the people are not. At the end of Exodus even Moses could not enter the tent when the glory filled it (Exodus 40:35). How can sinful people live near a holy God and not be destroyed? Leviticus answers that question in two parts. Chapters 1-16 show the way to God through sacrifice and priesthood. Chapters 17-27 show the walk with God in holy living.

Purpose

Leviticus teaches Israel how to approach God and how to live as His people. It shows that sin is serious, that it brings death, and that God Himself provided a way for sin to be covered. The sacrifices were God's idea, not man's. He set the terms for how He would be approached.

The book also shaped Israel into a different kind of nation. God said, "I have separated you from the peoples to be Mine" (20:26). Their food, their clothing, their calendar and their families were all to be marked by the fact that they belonged to the LORD. Israel was to be a living picture to the nations of what a holy God is like.

Main Themes

Holiness. The word holy shows up more in Leviticus than in any other book of the Bible. Holy means set apart, different, belonging to God. God says, "You shall be holy, for holy am I, the LORD your God" (19:2). God's holiness is not only that He is morally pure. It is that He is completely other than us. That is why coming near Him carelessly is dangerous. When Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu offered "strange fire, which He had not commanded them," fire came out from the LORD and they died (10:1-2).

Sacrifice and atonement. Chapters 1-7 describe five main offerings: the burnt offering, the grain offering, the peace offering, the sin offering and the guilt offering. Some were about forgiveness, some about thanks and fellowship. In the animal offerings, the worshiper laid his hand on the animal's head, "and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him" (1:4). Atonement means covering sin and making peace between God and the sinner. The animal died in the worshiper's place. God explains why blood mattered: "the life of the flesh is in the blood," and "it is the blood that makes atonement by the life" (17:11).

The Day of Atonement. Chapter 16 is the center of the book. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest went behind the veil into the Most Holy Place, where the ark of the covenant stood. He sprinkled blood for his own sins and for the people's. Then he laid his hands on a live goat, confessed Israel's sins over it, and sent it away into the wilderness (16:21-22). One goat died. The other carried the sins away. God promised, "from all your sins before the LORD you shall be clean" (16:30).

Clean and unclean. Chapters 11-15 deal with food, skin disease, mold, childbirth and bodily discharges. To be unclean did not always mean a person had sinned. It meant they were not fit, for a time, to come into God's presence at the tabernacle. These laws taught Israel every day that God is holy and that a fallen world is full of things that separate us from Him. Jesus later declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19), but the lesson behind the food laws still stands.

Holy living in everyday life. Chapters 17-27 are often called the Holiness Code. Holiness reaches into marriage, business, farming, justice and how you treat the poor. Leave the edges of your field for the poor. Don't cheat with your scales. Don't curse the deaf or trip the blind. And in the middle of it comes a verse Jesus called the second great commandment: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18). The same chapter says to love the stranger the same way (19:34).

God's calendar. Chapter 23 lists "the appointed times" of the LORD: the weekly Sabbath and the yearly feasts of Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Weeks, Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and Booths. Chapter 25 adds the Sabbath year and the Year of Jubilee, when every fiftieth year land went back to its family and slaves went free: "proclaim liberty in the land to all its inhabitants" (25:10).

Outline

- Chapters 1-7: The offerings
- Chapters 8-10: The priests ordained, and the sin of Nadab and Abihu
- Chapters 11-15: Clean and unclean
- Chapter 16: The Day of Atonement
- Chapters 17-22: Holy living for the people and the priests
- Chapter 23: The feasts of the LORD
- Chapters 24-25: Sabbath years and the Year of Jubilee
- Chapter 26: Blessings and curses
- Chapter 27: Vows

Key Verses

Leviticus 11:44 *For I **am** the LORD your God; and you shall sanctify yourselves, and you shall be holy, for I **am** holy; and you shall not make your souls unclean with any swarming thing that moves on the earth.*

God's call to holiness rests on who He is. Peter quotes it for Christians today (1 Peter 1:16).

Leviticus 16:30 *For on this day he shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins before the LORD you shall be clean.*

The promise of the Day of Atonement: real cleansing from sin, provided by God.

Leviticus 17:11 *For the life of the flesh **is** in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it **is** the blood **that** makes atonement by the life.*

The key to the whole sacrificial system. Life for life, blood for atonement.

Leviticus 19:2 *Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for holy **am** I, the LORD your God.*

Holiness is not only for priests. It is for all of God's people.

Leviticus 19:18 *You shall not take vengeance, and you shall not keep **a grudge** against the sons of your people; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I **am** the LORD.*

The command Jesus named as second only to loving God (Matthew 22:39).

Christ in Leviticus

Hebrews is the best guide here. It tells us that the Law had "a shadow of the coming good things, not the very image of the things" (Hebrews 10:1). A shadow is real, but it is not the thing itself. The sacrifices were real, and God really did forgive the Israelite who offered them in faith. But Hebrews also says plainly, "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and of goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). They pointed forward to the sacrifice that could.

That sacrifice is Jesus. On the Day of Atonement the high priest went into the Most Holy Place "once in the year, not without blood" (Hebrews 9:7). Christ, our high priest, went into heaven itself, "nor through blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood," and He "entered once for all into the holy places, having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12). The high priest had to do it again every year. Jesus did it once. The high priest offered blood for his own sins first. Jesus had none.

The two goats of chapter 16 give a picture of what Christ did. One died, and its blood was brought before God. The other carried the people's sins far away. On the cross, Jesus did both. Paul says God "made the One who did not know sin to be sin on our behalf" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Even the place matters. The bodies of the sin offerings were burned outside the camp (16:27), and Hebrews notes that Jesus "suffered outside the gate" (Hebrews 13:12).

The feasts point to Him as well. Paul calls Christ "our Passover" (1 Corinthians 5:7) and calls His resurrection "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20). The Feast of Weeks is Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit came in Acts 2. Many teachers believe the fall feasts (Trumpets, Atonement and Booths) look ahead to events still to come: the gathering of God's people, Israel's national repentance, and Christ reigning on the earth. The New Testament does not spell that out feast by feast, so that reading is held more loosely than the spring feasts it plainly names.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Genesis ended with God's people outside the garden. Exodus ended with God dwelling in the middle of His people, but behind a curtain. Leviticus tells them how to come near, carefully, through the priest and the blood. The rest of the Old Testament keeps this pattern. The temple Solomon built followed the tabernacle plan. The prophets rebuked Israel when they kept the sacrifices without a changed heart.

The New Testament shows us the curtain torn. Because of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice, every believer can come near to God with confidence (Hebrews 10:19-22). We don't bring animals any more, because "we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). But God's call to holiness has not changed. Peter quotes Leviticus straight to Christians: "Be holy, because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16).

Leviticus also looks ahead for Israel. Chapter 26 warns that if Israel broke the covenant, God would scatter them among the nations. That happened in the exiles of 722 B.C. and 586 B.C., and again after A.D. 70. But the same chapter promises, "I will not reject them, and I will not abhor them, to make an end of them" (26:44). God remembers His covenant with Jacob, Isaac and Abraham (26:42). He is not done with Israel.

Read It This Way

Don't read Leviticus as a list of rules you are supposed to follow today. Christians are not under the Sinai covenant (Romans 6:14). Read it as a window into God's holiness and as a picture of what Christ did for you. When you read about the animal that died in the worshiper's place, think of the cross. When you read about the priest, think of Jesus, who is "always living to intercede for them" (Hebrews 7:25).

It helps to ask three simple questions of each section. What does this show about God? What does it show about sin? How does it point to Christ? You won't find a clear answer to the third question in every verse, and you don't need to force one. But you will be surprised how often it is there.

Some of the laws will seem strange to you, such as not mixing two kinds of fabric (19:19). Scripture doesn't always tell us the reason behind each one. Many of them seem meant to make Israel visibly different from the nations around them. What is clear is the big point: God wanted every part of His people's lives to show that they belonged to the LORD.

Finally, don't miss the kindness in Leviticus. A poor person who could not afford a lamb could bring two birds, and one who could not afford birds could bring flour (5:7, 11). God made sure no one was shut out of forgiveness because they were poor. Mary and Joseph used that very law when they brought two birds for Jesus at the temple (Luke 2:24).

Study Questions

1. What does it mean that God is holy, and why did coming near Him carelessly bring such serious results (10:1-3; 19:2)?
2. Why did the worshiper lay his hand on the head of the animal, and what does that picture about Christ's death for us (1:4; 2 Corinthians 5:21)?
3. Read Leviticus 16. How does the work of the high priest on the Day of Atonement help you understand what Jesus did (Hebrews 9:11-12)?
4. Jesus said the second great commandment is in Leviticus 19:18. What does loving your neighbor look like in the practical laws around it (19:9-18)?
5. Peter tells Christians to be holy because God is holy. Where in your daily life is God calling you to be different (1 Peter 1:14-16)?

Numbers

At a Glance	
Author	Moses (Numbers 33:2)
Date written	About 1405 B.C., on the plains of Moab
Written to	Israel, the new generation about to enter Canaan
Setting and time covered	From Mount Sinai to the plains of Moab, almost 39 years (about 1445 to 1405 B.C.)
Chapters	36
Key word	Wandering
Key verse	Numbers 14:18

Background

Numbers gets its name from the two times Moses counted the people, once at the start of the book (chapter 1) and once near the end (chapter 26). The Hebrew title is better. It means "in the wilderness," and that is where the whole book takes place. If Exodus is the story of how God got Israel out of Egypt, Numbers is the story of how hard it was to get Egypt out of Israel.

Moses wrote it. Numbers 33:2 says he wrote down the stages of their journey "at the mouth of the LORD," that is, at God's command. He wrote near the end of his life, on the plains of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho, about 1405 B.C.

The book picks up a month after Leviticus. It opens "on day one of the second month, in the second year of their going out from the land of Egypt" (1:1). Israel had been camped at Mount Sinai for almost a year. They had the Law, the priesthood and the tabernacle. God's presence went with them in a cloud by day and fire by night. When the cloud lifted, they moved. When it settled, they stayed (9:15-23). The trip from Sinai to the edge of Canaan should have taken a matter of weeks. Deuteronomy 1:2 says it was an eleven-day journey.

Instead it took almost forty years. At Kadesh, on the southern border of Canaan, Moses sent twelve spies into the land. They all agreed it was a good land. But ten of them said the people there were too strong. Only Joshua and Caleb said, "We shall surely go up, and we shall take possession of it, for we shall surely prevail over it" (13:30). The people believed the ten. They wept all night and talked about going back to Egypt (14:1-4).

God's sentence was simple and severe. The generation that refused to trust Him would die in the wilderness. Their children, the ones they said would become plunder, would go in instead. Forty days of spying became forty years of wandering: "a day for the year" (14:34). The first census counted 603,550 fighting men (1:46). The second census, almost forty years later, counted 601,730 (26:51), and except for Joshua and Caleb, not one of them was a man from the first count (26:64-65).

Purpose

Numbers was written to the second generation, the children who were about to enter the land. Moses wanted them to learn from their parents' failure. Unbelief had kept a whole generation out of the promise. It could do the same to them.

Paul says these events were written for us too: "these things became examples for us" (1 Corinthians 10:6). Hebrews 3-4 uses Kadesh as a warning to anyone who hears God's promise and hardens their heart. Numbers is a book about the cost of not trusting God. It is also a book about how patient God is with people who keep failing Him.

Main Themes

The danger of unbelief. The great sin of Numbers is not idolatry or violence. It is refusing to believe God. The LORD asked Moses, "how long will they not believe in Me, with all the signs which I have done in their midst?" (14:11). They had seen the plagues and the sea. They ate manna every morning. And they still did not trust Him to keep His word about Canaan. Hebrews sums it up: "they were not able to enter in because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:19).

Grumbling. Over and over the people complain: about the food (11:4-6), about Moses' leadership (12; 16), about the land (14), about water (20:2-5). Grumbling may sound like a small sin, but in Numbers it is the outside of an unbelieving heart. It says God is not good and not able. Paul warns Christians not to grumble as they did (1 Corinthians 10:10).

God's patience and discipline. God disciplines His people in Numbers, sometimes with fire, plague or serpents. But He never stops feeding, leading or protecting them. Moses prays and quotes God's own words back to Him: "The LORD is slow to anger and great in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression" (14:18). God forgives, and He also lets the consequences of their choice stand. Both are true.

Faithful people in a faithless generation. Caleb stands out. God said of him, "because another spirit has been with him and he has fully followed after Me, I will bring him into the land" (14:24). Even Moses failed. When he struck the rock in anger instead of speaking to it, God told him he would not bring the people into the land "Because you did not believe in Me, to treat Me as holy" (20:12). Leaders are not exempt.

God's blessing cannot be undone. In chapters 22-24, Balak, king of Moab, hires a prophet named Balaam to curse Israel. Every time Balaam opens his mouth, a blessing comes out. He says, "God is not a man, that He should lie" (23:19), and, "He has blessed, and I will not turn it back" (23:20). Israel was grumbling down in the camp, unaware that God was defending them on the mountain above. When Balaam later found another way to hurt them, by leading them into sin with the women of Moab, it came from inside the camp (25:1-3; 31:16).

Sin will be found out. Near the end, Moses warns the tribes who wanted to settle east of the Jordan to keep their word and help the others fight. If they don't, "know your sin, that it will find you" (32:23). That is true for every one of us.

Outline

- Chapters 1-10: Getting ready at Sinai
- Chapters 10-12: From Sinai to Kadesh
- Chapters 13-14: Unbelief at Kadesh
- Chapters 15-20: The wilderness years
- Chapters 21-25: On to Moab, and Balaam
- Chapters 26-36: The new generation prepared

Key Verses

Numbers 6:24-26 *"May the LORD bless you, and may He keep you; may the LORD make His face shine toward you, and may He be gracious to you; may the LORD lift up His face toward you, and may He set peace for you."'*

The priestly blessing. God wanted His name and His peace placed on His people (6:27).

Numbers 14:18 *'The LORD **is** slow to anger and great in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will surely not clear **the guilty**, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the sons, on the third and on the fourth **generation**.'*

Moses' prayer at Kadesh. God forgives, and God still takes sin seriously.

Numbers 21:8-9 *And the LORD said to Moses, "Make for yourself a fiery **serpent**, and set it on a standard; and it shall be **that** everyone who is bitten and sees it shall live." And Moses made a serpent of bronze, and he set it on the standard; and it happened, if the serpent had bitten a man, and he looked to the serpent of bronze, and he lived.*

Healing came by looking at what God had provided. Jesus said it pictured Him.

Numbers 23:19 *God **is** not a man, that He should lie, and a son of mankind, that He should relent. Has He said, and will He not do **it**? And has He spoken, and will He not establish it?*

God always keeps His word. What He promised Abraham, He will do.

Numbers 32:23 *And if you do not do so, look, you have sinned against the LORD; and know your sin, that it will find you.*

Hidden sin does not stay hidden.

Christ in Numbers

The clearest link is one Jesus made Himself. In chapter 21 the people complained again, and God sent poisonous serpents among them. Many died. When they confessed their sin, God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. Anyone who was bitten and looked at it would live (21:8-9). Jesus told Nicodemus, "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up" (John 3:14). The bitten Israelite could do nothing to heal himself. He could only look and trust God's promise. That is how we are saved from sin: by looking in faith to Christ lifted up on the cross (John 3:15).

Paul says the water from the rock pictured Christ: "they were drinking from a spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was the Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4). Jesus also said that He is the true bread from heaven, the fulfillment of the manna (John 6:32-35), which fed Israel through all their years in the wilderness.

Balaam's last messages include this line: "A star will march forth from Jacob, and a scepter will arise from Israel" (24:17). Balaam said he saw it "not now" and "not near." The New Testament does not quote this verse directly, but many Jewish and Christian readers have long understood it of the Messiah, the coming King from Israel. Jesus calls Himself "the bright and morning star" (Revelation 22:16). I would treat this as a likely prophecy rather than one the New Testament spells out.

Aaron's priesthood is also confirmed in Numbers. When rebels challenged it, God made Aaron's staff bud, blossom and bear almonds overnight (17:8). A dead stick came to life to show whom God had chosen. That is not called a type in the New Testament, but it is hard to miss the picture of God confirming His chosen Priest by life from the dead.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Numbers bridges Sinai and the promised land. It explains why the people who stood with Moses in Deuteronomy were not the same people who came out of Egypt. It sets up Joshua, the man who would lead the new generation across the Jordan (27:18-23).

The rest of the Bible keeps coming back to Kadesh. Psalm 95 warns, "do not harden your heart" as Israel did in the wilderness. Hebrews 3-4 quotes that psalm and applies it to us. God offers rest, and the only way to miss it is unbelief.

Balaam shows up in the New Testament too, as a warning. Peter, Jude and Revelation all point to him as a picture of false teachers who will do anything for money and lead God's people into sin (2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14). And the promise that God has blessed Israel and will not take it back still stands. Paul says, "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29). God's choice of Israel did not end when the church began.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

The large numbers. Numbers 1:46 counts more than 600,000 fighting men, which would mean a total of perhaps two million people. Some teachers think the Hebrew word for "thousand" can also mean a clan or a military unit, which would make the numbers much smaller. Others take the numbers as written and point out that God fed and watered the whole crowd by miracle anyway. Either way, the God who split the sea was able to care for His people in the wilderness.

Read It This Way

Read Numbers as a mirror. It is easy to shake your head at Israel. They saw so much and still complained. But ask yourself how often you have done the same. God has kept every promise to you, and you still worry about tomorrow's manna. Numbers is not only their story. It is ours.

Don't rush past the priestly blessing in chapter 6 either. In the middle of a book full of failure, God told Aaron exactly how to bless the people: "May the LORD bless you, and may He keep you"

(6:24). Then God said, "they shall put My name on the sons of Israel, and I, I will bless them" (6:27). The blessing was not Aaron's wish. It was God's promise. Before Israel ever took a step from Sinai, God wanted them to know He was for them. Many churches still close their services with these words, and they are a good place to start when you don't know how to pray for your family.

Don't get stuck on the lists. The census chapters, the camp layout in chapter 2, and the offerings of the tribal leaders in chapter 7 all repeat a lot. They show that every tribe and every family counted with God and had a place around His tabernacle. Read them quickly, but don't skip them.

Watch the contrast between the two generations. The book starts with a count of the old generation and ends with a count of the new one. In between, the old one dies out. The question for the new generation is simple: Will you trust God where your parents did not? The question is still the same for us.

And notice how gracious God is in the middle of judgment. Even while the people wandered, God gave laws for life in the land they would enter (chapter 15), the cities of refuge (chapter 35), and the inheritance of the daughters of Zelophehad (chapters 27 and 36). God was still planning their future while they were in the desert. He does the same for His children today.

Study Questions

1. Ten spies and two spies saw the same land. What made the difference in how they reported it (13:25-33; 14:6-9)?
2. Why is grumbling so serious in Numbers, and what does it reveal about our view of God (14:1-4, 11; 1 Corinthians 10:10)?
3. Moses was kept out of the land for one act of disobedience. What does that teach about leadership and about treating God as holy (20:7-12)?
4. Balaam could only bless Israel. What does that tell you about God's protection of His people, even when they do not see it (23:19-20)?
5. Jesus compared Himself to the bronze serpent. What does it mean for you to "look" to Him in faith (21:8-9; John 3:14-15)?

Deuteronomy

At a Glance	
Author	Moses (Deuteronomy 31:9, 24); the account of his death likely added by Joshua
Date written	About 1405 B.C., in the last month of Moses' life
Written to	The new generation of Israel, about to cross the Jordan
Setting and time covered	The plains of Moab, east of the Jordan; about one to two months at the end of the fortieth year after the exodus
Chapters	34
Key word	Remember
Key verse	Deuteronomy 6:4-5

Background

Deuteronomy means "second law." The name comes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It does not mean God gave a different law. It means the Law given a second time, preached again to a new generation. The Hebrew title is taken from the book's first words, "These are the words."

Picture the scene. It is "the fortieth year, in the eleventh month, on the first of the month" (1:3). Israel is camped on the plains of Moab, east of the Jordan River, looking across at Jericho. The generation that came out of Egypt is gone, buried in the wilderness. Their children are now the adults. Most of them were young or not yet born when God gave the Law at Sinai. Moses is 120 years old, and God has told him he will not enter the land. So before he dies, he gathers the people and preaches.

Deuteronomy is mostly a series of sermons. Moses reminds the people what God has done, explains the Law again, and pleads with them to love and obey the LORD in the land. Then he writes it down: "Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests" (31:9). He teaches them a song (chapter 32), blesses the tribes (chapter 33), climbs Mount Nebo to see the land, and dies (chapter 34). The final chapter tells of Moses' death and burial, and the SLB introduction says it was likely added by Joshua or another leader of that time. That does not make Moses any less the author of the book, any more than an obituary added to a man's journal makes him not its writer.

Many scholars have noticed that Deuteronomy follows the pattern of treaties between kings and their subject nations in the ancient Near East: a history of the relationship, the terms of the agreement, blessings and curses, witnesses, and directions for reading it in public. That fits well with a book written in Moses' day. God was laying out His covenant with Israel in a form they would have recognized.

Some modern scholars date Deuteronomy much later, tying it to the scroll found in the temple in King Josiah's day around 622 B.C. (2 Kings 22). The book itself says it was spoken and written by Moses, and Jesus quoted it as God's Word given through Moses (Mark 10:3-5). I take it at its word.

Purpose

Deuteronomy gets a new generation ready to live in the land. Their parents had failed through unbelief. Moses does not want the children to repeat it. He tells them to remember what God has done, to love Him with all their heart, and to obey Him because they love Him.

The book also gets them ready for a danger their parents never faced: plenty. In the wilderness the problem was hunger and thirst. In Canaan the problem would be full barns and comfortable houses. Moses warns, "take heed to yourself, lest you forget the LORD" (6:12). It is often easier to trust God when you have nothing than when you have everything.

Moses also looks ahead to how Israel would live once they were settled. God would choose one place "to put His name there" (12:5), where the people would bring their sacrifices, instead of worshiping on every hill the way the Canaanites did. That place turned out to be Jerusalem. Moses also expected that Israel would one day ask for a king. He did not forbid it, but he set limits. The king was not to pile up horses, wives or gold, and he was to write out his own copy of the Law and "read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God" (17:19). Keep that chapter in mind when you read about Solomon. He broke nearly every one of those limits.

Main Themes

Remember. The word remember and the warning not to forget run all through Deuteronomy. Remember you were slaves in Egypt. Remember the forty years. Remember the golden calf. "Only take heed to yourself, and guard your soul very carefully, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen" (4:9). Forgetting is not only a memory problem. It is a heart problem.

Love the LORD. The center of the book is 6:4-5, called the Shema, from the Hebrew word for "hear." "Hear, Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Jewish people still pray these words every day. Jesus called it the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37-38). God wants more than outward obedience. He wants our love.

God's choosing love. Why did God choose Israel? Not because they were big or impressive. Moses says, "you were the fewest of all the peoples" (7:7). God chose them "because of the LORD's love for you, and because He kept the oath which He swore to your fathers" (7:8). Grace is the reason, not merit. That should humble any of us who belong to God.

Teach your children. God's words were to be on the parents' hearts first, and then, "you shall repeat them to your sons" (6:7). Faith was to be taught at the table, on the road, at bedtime and in the morning. Deuteronomy puts the job of passing on the faith squarely on the home.

Blessing and curse. Chapters 27-28 set out the blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience. The curses are long and hard to read. They include defeat, famine, siege and being scattered among the nations. Moses ends by laying it out plainly: "life and death I have set before you, the blessing and the curse; and you shall choose life" (30:19).

Return and restoration. Even before Israel entered the land, God told them they would fail and be scattered. But He also promised that when they turned back to Him, "the LORD your God will turn back your captivity and have compassion on you," and gather them from all the peoples

(30:3). He promised to "circumcise your heart" so that they would love Him (30:6). God's plan for Israel did not end with the curse.

Outline

- Chapters 1-4: First message: what God has done
- Chapters 5-26: Second message: the Law explained
- Chapters 27-28: Blessings and curses
- Chapters 29-30: Third message: the covenant renewed
- Chapters 31-34: Moses' last days, his song and blessing, and his death

Key Verses

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 *Hear, Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD **is** one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*

The heart of Israel's faith and the command Jesus called the greatest.

Deuteronomy 8:3 *And He humbled you, and caused you to hunger, and caused you to eat the manna, which you had not known, and your fathers had not known, in order to make you know that man does not live on bread alone, but on everything that goes out of the mouth of the LORD man lives.*

God let Israel hunger so they would learn to live on His word. Jesus quoted this verse when Satan tempted Him (Matthew 4:4).

Deuteronomy 10:12-13 *And now, Israel, what is the LORD your God asking from you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I am commanding you today, for your good?*

What God asks of His people, summed up in plain words, and all of it "for your good."

Deuteronomy 18:15 *A prophet from your midst, from your brothers, like me, the LORD your God will raise up for you; to him you shall listen,*

The promise of a Prophet like Moses. Peter and Stephen both say Jesus is that Prophet (Acts 3:22; 7:37).

Deuteronomy 30:19-20 *I call the heavens and the earth to witness against you today: life and death I have set before you, the blessing and the curse; and you shall choose life, so that you may live, you and your seed, to love the LORD your God, to listen to His voice, and to cling to Him; for He **is** your life and the length of your days, to dwell on the ground which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them.*

The choice set before every generation. God is not only the source of life. Moses says, "He is your life."

Christ in Deuteronomy

The clearest prophecy is 18:15. Moses said, "A prophet from your midst, from your brothers, like me, the LORD your God will raise up for you; to him you shall listen." God added, "I will put My words in his mouth" (18:18). Israel waited a long time for this Prophet. The book itself closes by saying no prophet had yet arisen "like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face" (34:10). Peter tells the crowd in Jerusalem that Jesus is the One Moses promised (Acts 3:22-26). Moses brought God's word to Israel. Jesus is God's Word (John 1:1).

Deuteronomy was also Jesus' Bible in the wilderness. When Satan tempted Him for forty days, Jesus answered all three temptations with verses from Deuteronomy (Matthew 4:1-11; Deuteronomy 8:3; 6:16; 6:13). Israel failed its forty years of testing in the wilderness. Jesus passed His forty days without sin. He succeeded where Israel, and where we, have failed.

There is one more link, and it is a hard one. Deuteronomy 21:23 says that a man hanged on a tree is "a curse of God." Paul explains that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13). All the curses of chapter 28 fall on those who break God's law, which is all of us. On the cross Jesus took that curse on Himself.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Deuteronomy closes the books of Moses, and it shapes everything after them. Joshua opens with God telling Joshua to keep "this book of the law" on his lips day and night (Joshua 1:8). The history books from Joshua to Kings judge Israel by the standard of Deuteronomy: Did they love the LORD alone? Did they tear down the idols? Did they worship where God chose? When the kings failed, the curses of chapter 28 came true, first for the northern kingdom in 722 B.C. and then for Judah in 586 B.C.

The prophets lean on it too. They call Israel back to the covenant of Deuteronomy and remind them of its blessings and curses. And they pick up its promise of a changed heart. What Moses promised in 30:6, Jeremiah calls the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34) and Ezekiel describes as a new heart and a new spirit (Ezekiel 36:26).

The New Testament quotes Deuteronomy often. Jesus calls its Shema the greatest command. Paul uses its words about the nearness of God's word to explain faith in Christ (Romans 10:6-8). And its promise that God will one day gather Israel from the nations still stands. I believe God will keep that promise to the nation of Israel, just as Paul says, "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29).

Deuteronomy ends with one of the saddest and most hopeful scenes in Scripture. God took Moses up Mount Nebo and showed him the whole land. "This is the land which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob," He said (34:4). Moses saw it, but he did not go in. Yet the story does not end there. Centuries later Moses stood on a mountain in that very land, talking with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:3). God kept His promise to Moses after all, in a better way than Moses could have imagined.

Read It This Way

Read Deuteronomy as a sermon from a dying pastor. Moses is not reading a legal code in a flat voice. He is pleading with people he loves. You can hear it in lines like "choose life, so that you may live, you and your seed" (30:19). Try reading a chapter out loud. It was meant to be heard.

When you come to the laws in chapters 12-26, look for the heart behind them. Many deal with the poor, the widow, the orphan and the foreigner. Others guard Israel from the idol worship of Canaan. Some apply only to Israel's life as a nation in the land. But the reason behind each one is the same: love the LORD and love your neighbor.

Also notice how honest God is. Moses tells the people ahead of time that they will fail (31:16-21). God does not hide the future from them, and He does not drop them because of it. He builds the promise of restoration right into the covenant. If God can be that patient with Israel, He can be patient with you.

Finally, take Moses' warning about plenty to heart. Most of us reading this book have more food, more comfort and more choices than Israel ever had in the wilderness. The danger is the same one Moses named: forgetting the God who gave it. Moses gives a simple answer. When you eat and are satisfied, bless the LORD for the good land He has given you (8:10).

Study Questions

1. Why do you think Moses tells the people to "remember" so often? What has God done in your life that you are in danger of forgetting (4:9; 8:2, 11)?
2. What does it mean to love the LORD with all your heart, soul and might, and why did Jesus call this the greatest command (6:4-5; Matthew 22:37-38)?
3. According to 6:6-9, how was faith passed on in an Israelite home? What would that look like in your home?
4. Why did God choose Israel, and what does that teach about why God saves anyone (7:6-8; Ephesians 2:8-9)?
5. Jesus answered every temptation with Scripture from Deuteronomy. Which verses would you hold onto when you are tempted (8:3; Matthew 4:1-11)?

Part Two: History

The next twelve books, Joshua through Esther, tell the story of Israel in its land. They cover about a thousand years, from the crossing of the Jordan around 1405 B.C. to the days of Nehemiah around 430 B.C. In the Hebrew Bible, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are called the Former Prophets. That is a good name for them. They are history, but they are history told from God's point of view, by men who wanted Israel to see why things happened the way they did.

Here is the story in brief. Joshua leads Israel into Canaan and divides the land among the tribes. Judges shows the nation sliding again and again into idolatry, with God raising up deliverers to rescue them. Ruth, set in those same dark days, shows God quietly preparing the family of David. First and Second Samuel tell how Israel got a king, first Saul and then David, and how God promised David a house and a throne that would last forever. First and Second Kings follow Solomon, the split of the kingdom into Israel in the north and Judah in the south, and the long decline that ended with the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. and the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. First and Second Chronicles retell the story of David's line for the Jews who came home from exile. Ezra and Nehemiah tell how they rebuilt the temple and the walls of Jerusalem after Cyrus let them return in 538 B.C. Esther, set in Persia, shows God protecting the Jews who stayed behind.

How should we read these books? First, as real history. These are not legends. They name kings, cities and battles, and many of them can be checked against the records of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Persia. Second, as a measuring stick. Again and again the writers judge each generation by the covenant God gave through Moses, especially in Deuteronomy. When Israel loved the LORD and obeyed Him, they were blessed. When they turned to other gods, they suffered, just as Moses warned. Third, as one long story that leads somewhere. God promised David that one of his sons would reign forever (2 Samuel 7:16). By the end of Kings, David's line has lost its throne. But the promise has not died, and the New Testament opens by naming Jesus as the Son of David.

You will meet some of the most famous people in the Bible here: Rahab, Gideon, Samson, Ruth, Samuel, David, Elijah, Hezekiah, Nehemiah and Esther. Don't read their stories only as moral lessons. Many of them failed badly, and Scripture tells us so plainly. The real hero of these books is God, who keeps His promises to a people who keep breaking theirs. That is good news for us. Paul says these things were written "for our instruction" (Romans 15:4), so that through them we would have hope.

Joshua

At a Glance	
Author	Joshua (Joshua 24:26), with the account of his death added by others, likely Eleazar and Phinehas
Date written	About 1405 to 1385 B.C., in Joshua's lifetime, with closing notes soon after
Written to	Israel, the generation that entered the land, and their children
Setting and time covered	Canaan, from the crossing of the Jordan about 1405 B.C. to Joshua's death about twenty-five years later
Chapters	24
Key word	Possession
Key verse	Joshua 21:45

Background

For forty years Israel had lived in tents in the wilderness. Now Moses was dead, buried by God Himself in Moab. The people stood on the east bank of the Jordan River, at flood stage, looking across at the walled city of Jericho. And God spoke to a new leader: "Moses My servant has died. And now, arise, pass over this Jordan" (1:2).

That leader was Joshua. He had been Moses' assistant since the exodus. He led Israel's army against Amalek (Exodus 17:9-14), went partway up Mount Sinai with Moses, and was one of only two spies who trusted God at Kadesh (Numbers 14:6-9). His name means that the LORD saves. It is the Hebrew form of the name Jesus.

Joshua wrote much of the book himself. Joshua 24:26 says "Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God." The account of his death and burial at the end (24:29-33) was added by others, probably Eleazar the priest and his son Phinehas. Little notes like "to this day" (for example 4:9; 6:25) show the book was written while people who had seen these things were still alive. Rahab, the text says, was still living in Israel when it was written (6:25).

The book covers about twenty-five years. If the exodus was about 1446 B.C., as I believe, then the crossing of the Jordan was about 1405 B.C. Joshua was about eighty at the start and died at 110 (24:29).

The land itself was a patchwork of city-states, each with its own king. Joshua 12 lists thirty-one kings he defeated. These peoples, often called Canaanites or Amorites, worshiped gods like Baal and practiced things God called detestable, including child sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12:31). God had waited centuries before judging them. He told Abraham that his descendants would come back to the land in the fourth generation, "for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete" (Genesis 15:16). By Joshua's day it was.

Before a single battle, God did two things that tell you what the book is about. After the crossing, He had twelve men take twelve stones from the riverbed and stack them at Gilgal, so that when children asked, "What are these stones to you?" their parents would tell them how God cut off the

waters of the Jordan (4:6-7). Then He had the men of the new generation circumcised, the sign of His covenant with Abraham that had been neglected in the wilderness. God said, "This day I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from on you" (5:9). They kept the Passover, and the next day the manna stopped (5:12). Israel was home. Before they fought for the land, they had to remember who they were and whose they were.

Purpose

Joshua shows that God keeps His word. He promised Abraham a land, and here Israel receives it. The book ends with this summary: "Not a word fell of every good word which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel; everything came to pass" (21:45). Joshua says it again in his farewell (23:14).

The book also shows how God's people receive what He has promised. They receive it by faith and obedience. Jericho fell not because Israel was strong but because they did exactly what God said. Ai defeated them because one man disobeyed. The lesson is not that God's promise depends on us. It is that God's people enjoy His promise when they walk with Him.

Main Themes

Courage that comes from God's word. God's first words to Joshua are a charge to be strong and courageous, repeated three times (1:6, 7, 9). The source of that courage is not Joshua's skill. It is God's presence and God's word. "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, and you shall meditate on it by day and night" (1:8). To meditate means to think it over and speak it to yourself again and again.

God fights for His people. The Jordan stopped flowing when the priests carrying the ark stepped into it, and "all Israel was passing over on dry ground" (3:17). At Jericho the people marched, the priests blew the trumpets, the people shouted, "and the wall fell in its place" (6:20). At Gibeon God threw down hailstones and lengthened the day (10:11-14). The battles were real, and Israel fought them, but the victory came from the LORD.

Sin in the camp. Right after Jericho, Israel lost at the little town of Ai. The reason was hidden. Achan had taken silver, gold and a fine robe from Jericho, things God had set apart for Himself (7:1, 21). One man's secret sin brought defeat on the whole nation. It is a sobering chapter. God cares about holiness among His people, and private sin is never only private.

Grace to outsiders. Rahab was a Canaanite, a prostitute, living in a doomed city. But she had heard what God did at the sea, and she confessed, "the LORD your God, He is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath" (2:11). She hid the spies and tied a scarlet cord in her window, and she and her family were saved. The Gibeonites were saved too, though by a trick (chapter 9). God's judgment on Canaan was never about race. Anyone who turned to the LORD could find mercy.

An inheritance for every tribe. Chapters 13-21 can feel like a land survey, and in a way they are. But each boundary line was a promise kept. Every tribe got its portion, the Levites got their towns, and six cities of refuge were set up for those who killed someone by accident. Caleb, now eighty-five, asked for the hill country where the giants lived and took it (14:6-15).

Choose whom you will serve. At the end of his life Joshua gathered the people at Shechem. He recounted what God had done and then gave them a choice: "choose for yourselves today whom you will serve." He told them where he stood: "And I and my house, we will serve the LORD" (24:15). God's past faithfulness calls for a present decision.

Outline

- Chapters 1-5: Entering the land
- Chapters 6-12: Taking the land
- Chapters 13-21: Dividing the land
- Chapters 22-24: Holding the land, and Joshua's farewell

Key Verses

Joshua 1:8-9 *This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, and you shall meditate on it by day and night, so that you may take care to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your ways successful, and then you will prosper. 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.*

God's charge to every leader and every believer: keep His word close and trust His presence.

Joshua 21:45 *Not a word fell of every good word which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel; everything came **to pass**.*

The summary of the whole book. God did not fail on one promise.

Joshua 23:14 *And look, I **am** going today in the way of all the earth, and you know with all your heart and with all your soul that not one word has fallen of all the good words which the LORD your God spoke concerning you; all have come **to pass** for you; not one word of it has fallen.*

Joshua's testimony at the end of a long life. He had seen it all come true.

Joshua 24:15 *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.*

A choice every generation and every household has to make.

Christ in Joshua

Start with the name. Joshua and Jesus are the same name, one in Hebrew and one in Greek. Joshua led God's people into the land Moses could not enter. Hebrews makes a point of this: Joshua gave Israel a rest in the land, but not the final rest, because "if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have been speaking about another day after these things" (Hebrews 4:8). Joshua brought Israel into Canaan. Jesus brings His people into the true rest of God.

Before the battle of Jericho, Joshua met a man with a drawn sword who said, "I am the commander of the army of the LORD." Joshua fell on his face and worshiped, and the commander told him, "Take off your sandal from on your foot, for the place on which you are standing, it is holy" (5:14-15). Those are almost the same words God spoke to Moses at the burning bush. An angel would refuse worship (Revelation 22:8-9). This commander accepted it. Many teachers understand this as an appearance of the Son of God before He was born in Bethlehem. Scripture does not name Him, so it is best held with some care.

Rahab gives us one more link. The scarlet cord in her window is often seen as a picture of the blood of Christ, much like the blood on the doorposts at Passover. The New Testament does not make that link directly, so I treat it as a picture, not a prophecy. What the New Testament does say is better still. Rahab is praised for her faith (Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25), and she is named in the family line of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). A Canaanite woman with a bad past became an ancestor of the Messiah.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Joshua is where the promise of the land first comes true. God promised it to Abraham in Genesis 12, 15 and 17. Exodus brought the people out of Egypt. Numbers showed a generation miss it through unbelief. Deuteronomy prepared the next generation. Now they finally walk in.

But the book also leaves work undone. God told Joshua, "very much of the land remains to take possession of it" (13:1). Judges opens with tribe after tribe failing to drive out the Canaanites, and that failure haunts Israel for centuries. Joshua's warning in chapters 23-24 comes true in the very next book.

Some ask whether Joshua was the final fulfillment of God's land promise. I don't believe so. The prophets, writing long after Joshua, still look ahead to a day when God will plant Israel in their land, never to be uprooted (Amos 9:15). Paul says God's gifts and calling for Israel are irrevocable (Romans 11:29). I believe Israel will one day possess the land in full under the reign of Christ.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

The long day at Gibeon. Joshua 10:13 says "the sun was still, and the moon stood," and the sun "did not hurry to go down about a whole day." Some teachers take this as a miracle in which God stopped or slowed the earth's rotation. Others think God gave extended light in some other way, or that the sun's heat was held back so the battle could go on. All agree God did something remarkable that day. The text calls it unique: there was no day like it before or after (10:14). I take it as a real miracle, and I don't claim to know exactly how God did it.

Read It This Way

Read Joshua as history and as a book of faith. The battles happened. So did the miracles. But the main question is not military. It is spiritual. Will God's people trust Him and obey Him?

Many readers today struggle with the conquest. How could God command Israel to destroy whole cities? It is a fair question. Scripture gives several answers. The Canaanites' sin was great and God had waited four hundred years (Genesis 15:16). God is the judge of all the earth, and judgment is

His right. Israel was not given a blank check: when they sinned, God judged them too, as Achan found out and as the exile would later show. And mercy was open to any Canaanite who turned to God, as Rahab and the Gibeonites show. This was a unique moment in history, not a pattern for Christians today. Jesus never calls His people to take land by the sword.

When you come to the boundary lists, slow down long enough to see the point. God's promises are specific. He told each family where they would live. He is not a God of vague hopes. He keeps His word down to the last village.

And let Joshua's charge speak to you. God's people still face battles, though not with swords. What Joshua needed, we need: God's word on our lips and in our hearts, and the confidence that He goes with us.

Study Questions

1. God told Joshua three times to be strong and courageous. Where did that courage come from, and how can you draw on the same source (1:6-9)?
2. Rahab was saved by faith. What did she know about God, and how did she act on it (2:8-14; Hebrews 11:31)?
3. Why was Achan's sin so serious, and what does it teach about hidden sin among God's people (7:1-26)?
4. Caleb asked for the hardest territory at age eighty-five. What does his faith teach you about growing older in the Lord (14:6-15)?
5. Joshua called the people to choose whom they would serve. What would it mean for your household to make that choice today (24:14-15)?

Judges

At a Glance	
Author	Not named; Jewish tradition names Samuel
Date written	About 1050 to 1000 B.C., early in the time of the kings
Written to	Israel, in the early days of the monarchy
Setting and time covered	Canaan, about 350 years from the death of Joshua to the days of Samuel
Chapters	21
Key word	Cycle
Key verse	Judges 21:25

Background

Judges is one of the darkest books in the Bible. It is also one of the most honest. It does not dress up God's people. It shows them at their worst, and it shows God rescuing them anyway, again and again.

The book picks up after Joshua's death. The tribes had their land, but they had not finished the job. Chapter 1 reads like a list of half-obedience: this tribe "did not dispossess" these people, that tribe let them stay and made them work (1:27-33). The Canaanites stayed, and so did their gods. Then came the turning point: "another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD, and also the work which He had done for Israel" (2:10). It only took one generation.

What was a judge? The word does not mainly mean a courtroom judge, though Deborah did settle cases (4:4-5). It means a leader God raised up to rescue His people and lead them. Most of the judges were military deliverers. Scripture calls Othniel "a savior for the sons of Israel" (3:9). Twelve judges are named in the book: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon and Samson. Most led only part of the nation, and some of their times probably overlapped, which is why the years of the judges, added end to end, come to more than the time available.

The book does not name its author. Jewish tradition says Samuel wrote it, and that fits. The repeated line "In those days there was no king in Israel" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25) tells us it was written after Israel had a king. Another note says the Jebusites still lived in Jerusalem "until this day" (1:21), which means it was written before David took the city about 1003 B.C. That puts it around the time of Saul or the early years of David.

Purpose

Judges explains what went wrong after Joshua. Israel had God's law, God's land and God's presence. So why were they constantly being crushed by Moabites, Canaanites, Midianites, Ammonites and Philistines? The answer is simple. They forsook the LORD and served other gods (2:11-13). Everything Moses warned about in Deuteronomy came true.

The book also makes the case that Israel needed a king. Not just any king, as Saul would show, but a righteous king who would lead the people in God's ways. The last five chapters show a nation without that kind of leader. Without the LORD as their true King, everyone made up their own rules.

Look at how the book handles the question of who should rule. After Gideon's great victory, the men of Israel asked him to become their king. He gave the right answer: "I will not rule over you, and my son shall not rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you" (8:23). But in the next breath he asked for their gold and made the ephod, and he named a son Abimelech, a name that means my father is king. Gideon said the right words and lived a different way. His son then tried to take the throne by murder (chapter 9). Judges is not against kings as such. It is against people ruling themselves without God.

Deborah's story shows the opposite. She was a prophetess, someone God spoke through, and Israel came to her for judgment. When she called Barak to lead the army against the Canaanite general Sisera, Barak would not go unless she went too. She went, but she told him the honor would go to a woman (4:9). It did. Jael, a woman of the tents, killed Sisera. Deborah and Barak then sang one of the oldest songs in the Bible (chapter 5), giving the glory to the LORD. The book is not shy about showing that God used faithful women when men held back.

Main Themes

The downward cycle. Chapter 2:11-19 lays out a pattern that repeats through the whole book. Israel sins. God hands them over to an enemy. They cry out. God raises up a judge who saves them. The land has rest while the judge lives. Then the judge dies, and they go back to their sin, "they turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked" (2:17). It is not a circle so much as a downward spiral. Each time it gets worse.

God's compassion. Why does God keep rescuing people who keep failing? Because "the LORD was moved to compassion by their groaning" (2:18). Later, when they put away their idols, the text says "His soul became impatient over the trouble of Israel" (10:16). God is not cold toward His people's pain, even when it is pain they brought on themselves.

God uses weak people. Ehud was left-handed. Deborah was a woman in a world run by men. Gideon was hiding in a winepress when the angel of the LORD called him "O mighty man of valor" (6:12). Then God cut Gideon's army from 32,000 to 300, "lest Israel glorify itself against Me" by boasting that its own hand had saved it (7:2). God chooses the weak so no one can doubt where the victory came from.

Flawed heroes. The judges get worse as the book goes on. Gideon made a gold ephod that the people worshiped, and it "became a snare to Gideon and to his household" (8:27). His son Abimelech murdered seventy brothers to make himself king. Jephthah made a rash vow. Samson, set apart from birth as a Nazirite, broke nearly every part of his vow and chased foreign women until he was blinded and chained. And yet Hebrews 11:32 names Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah among the people of faith. God worked through them in spite of their flaws, not because of them.

Everyone doing what is right in his own eyes. The book ends with two terrible stories: a man who sets up his own shrine with a hired priest (chapters 17-18) and a crime in Gibeah so horrible that it leads to a civil war that almost wipes out the tribe of Benjamin (chapters 19-21). The final verse explains it all: "each man did what was right in his own eyes" (21:25). When people throw off God's authority, they do not become free. They become cruel.

Outline

- Chapters 1-2: Israel's failure to finish the conquest, and the pattern of the book
- Chapters 3-16: The judges, from Othniel to Samson
- Chapters 17-21: Moral and spiritual collapse

Key Verses

Judges 2:16-17 *And the LORD raised up judges, and they saved them from the hand of their plunderers. And also to their judges they did not listen, for they prostituted themselves after other gods, and they bowed down to them; they turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked, listening to the commandments of the LORD; they did not do so.*

The heart of the cycle. God raised up deliverers, and the people still turned away.

Judges 2:10 *And also all that generation were gathered to their fathers; and another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD, and also the work which He had done for Israel.*

It takes only one generation to forget the LORD. Every parent and church should take this verse seriously.

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

God saw a mighty man of valor in a frightened farmer. He sees what He will make of us, not only what we are.

Judges 21:25 *In those days **there was** no king in Israel; each man did what **was** right in his own eyes.*

The last line of the book and the diagnosis of the whole period.

Christ in Judges

Judges has no direct prophecy of Christ, and I won't force one. The link is a theme. Every judge was a temporary deliverer. Each saved Israel for a while, then died, and the people went right back to their sin. Some of them were deeply flawed men. Judges leaves you longing for a deliverer who would not fail, who would not die and leave the job undone, and who could change the people's hearts and not just their circumstances.

That is Jesus. Hebrews 7:25 says He is "always living to intercede" for those who come to God through Him. He does not save for forty years and then pass away. He saves completely and forever.

Samson's last act also gives a faint picture. Blind, mocked and bound, he prayed, pushed the pillars, and in his death he defeated more of Israel's enemies than in his life (16:28-30). The New Testament does not call Samson a type of Christ, and his life was very different from the sinless life of Jesus. But it is hard to miss the shadow of a deliverer who wins the greatest victory by his death.

The angel of the LORD who appears to Gideon (6:11-24) and to Samson's parents (13:3-23) is also worth noticing. He speaks as God, receives an offering, and tells Manoah his name is "wonderful" (13:18). Many teachers believe this was an appearance of the Son of God before His birth. Scripture does not say so in plain words, so it is best held as a possibility.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Judges is the bridge between Joshua and the kings. Joshua ended with the people promising to serve the LORD. Judges shows how fast that promise broke. By the end of Judges, the stage is set for Samuel, the last judge, and for the request for a king in 1 Samuel 8.

The book's refrain, "no king in Israel," points straight to David. The very next book, Ruth, is set "in the days of the judging of the judges" and ends with David's name (Ruth 1:1; 4:22). In the middle of the chaos, God was quietly preparing the king.

The ugly ending matters later too. The crime that started the civil war happened in Gibeah of Benjamin (19:12-30). Israel's first king, Saul, came from the tribe of Benjamin, and his home was Gibeah (1 Samuel 10:26). The reader who remembers Judges 19 is not hopeful when Israel's first king comes from that town. Centuries later, Hosea could still point to "the days of Gibeah" as a byword for deep corruption (Hosea 9:9).

Judges also warns the church. Paul says Israel's history was written as an example for us (1 Corinthians 10:11). Every generation has to know the LORD for itself. Faith is not inherited automatically. If we do not teach our children what God has done, the next generation can grow up not knowing Him.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Jephthah's vow. Before battle Jephthah vowed that whatever came out of his house to meet him, he would offer to the LORD as a burnt offering. His only daughter came out (11:30-35). Did he really sacrifice her? Many teachers believe he did, and that Scripture records it as a tragic example of a man who knew God's name but not God's ways, since the Law forbade human sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12:31). Others believe he dedicated her to lifelong service at the tabernacle, pointing out that she mourned that she would never marry (11:37-39), not that she would die. Good teachers hold both. Either way, the lesson is the same: a rash vow is a dangerous thing.

Read It This Way

Read Judges slowly and honestly. Some of its stories are violent and disturbing, and you should not read them to young children without care. But don't skip them. God put them in the Bible for a reason. They show what sin does to a people when it is left alone.

Don't assume that everything a judge did was right. The writer often reports without commenting, and expects the reader to measure what happened against the Law. Gideon's ephod, Jephthah's vow and Samson's women are recorded, not approved. Ask how each act lines up with what God said in Deuteronomy.

Watch for the turning points: Israel crying out, God raising up a judge, the land having rest. And notice who is really acting. The judges come and go. The LORD is the One who keeps raising up saviors.

Then ask the hard question about your own life. Where are you doing what is right in your own eyes? Where have you made peace with the Canaanites, the sins God told you to drive out? Judges shows that the things we tolerate today become the things that rule us tomorrow.

Study Questions

1. How could a whole generation grow up not knowing the LORD so soon after Joshua? What does this teach about passing on our faith (2:7-12)?
2. Trace the cycle in 2:11-19. Where do you see that same pattern in the lives of believers today?
3. Why did God cut Gideon's army down to 300 men, and what does that teach about where our strength comes from (7:2-7)?
4. Samson had great gifts but little self-control. What warnings does his life give us (14:1-3; 16:1-21)?
5. What does "each man did what was right in his own eyes" look like in our world, and why is it so dangerous (17:6; 21:25)?

Ruth

At a Glance	
Author	Not named; Jewish tradition names Samuel
Date written	After David became known (Ruth 4:22), likely early in the time of the kings
Written to	Israel, in the days of David's family
Setting and time covered	Moab and Bethlehem in the days of the judges, about 1100 B.C.; about ten to twelve years
Chapters	4
Key word	Redeemer
Key verse	Ruth 4:14

Background

After the violence of Judges, Ruth feels like stepping out of a storm into a quiet kitchen. It is set in the same dark period, "in the days of the judging of the judges" (1:1), but there are no battles here. There is a famine, a funeral, a long walk home, a barley harvest, and a wedding. And through all of it, God is working.

The story starts badly. A man from Bethlehem named Elimelech takes his wife Naomi and their two sons to Moab to escape a famine. Moab was Israel's old enemy, a land of other gods. There the sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Then Elimelech dies, and both sons die too. Ten years later Naomi is left with nothing but two foreign daughters-in-law.

When Naomi hears that the LORD has given His people bread again, she heads home. Orpah turns back. Ruth refuses to leave. In Bethlehem Naomi tells the town, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has made it very bitter for me" (1:20). Naomi means pleasant. Mara means bitter.

The book does not name its author. Jewish tradition says Samuel wrote it. The family line at the end stops with David (4:17, 22), so it was written after David became known, but it does not mention Solomon. That suggests it was written during or soon after David's time. The story itself took place about 1100 B.C., three generations before David.

Purpose

Ruth shows God's quiet care in ordinary life. There are no plagues or parted seas. There is a widow gleaning grain and a farmer who notices her. Yet by the end, God has turned Naomi's emptiness into fullness and has prepared the family of Israel's greatest king.

The book also shows that God's grace was never only for Israel. Ruth was a Moabite. The Law kept Moabites out of the assembly of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:3). But Ruth came to trust Israel's God, and God brought her in. Boaz blessed her as one who had come to take refuge under the LORD's wings (2:12). A foreign woman became the great-grandmother of David and an ancestor of Jesus.

Main Themes

Loyal love. Ruth's words to Naomi are some of the most famous in the Bible: "where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God my God" (1:16). The Hebrew word often translated steadfast love (hesed) runs through the book. It means loyal, covenant love that keeps going when it costs you. Ruth shows it to Naomi. Boaz shows it to Ruth. And above them both, the LORD shows it to all of them (2:20).

God's hidden hand. The text says Ruth went out to glean, and "her chance happened upon the portion of the field of Boaz" (2:3). To Ruth it was chance. The reader knows better. God is not named as acting in most of the story, but He is behind every step: the harvest, the field, the timing, the relative who could redeem.

The kinsman-redeemer. Under the Law, if an Israelite became poor and sold his land, a close relative could buy it back (Leviticus 25:25). That relative was called the redeemer, sometimes called the kinsman-redeemer. Another law let a man's brother marry his widow to carry on his name (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Boaz was "one of our redeemers," Naomi said (2:20). At the threshing floor Ruth asked him, "spread your wing over your maidservant, for you are a redeemer" (3:9). Boaz was willing, but there was a closer relative. In chapter 4 that man stepped aside, and Boaz bought the land and married Ruth in front of the town elders.

From empty to full. Naomi said, "I went full, and empty the LORD has brought me back" (1:21). By the end, the women of Bethlehem bless God, "who has not caused a redeemer to cease for you today" (4:14), and Naomi holds her grandson Obed on her lap. "A son has been born to Naomi," they say (4:17). The bitter woman of chapter 1 is full again.

Outline

- Chapter 1: Ruth goes with Naomi
- Chapter 2: Ruth meets Boaz
- Chapter 3: Ruth asks Boaz to redeem
- Chapter 4: Boaz redeems Ruth, and the line of David

Key Verses

Ruth 1:16 *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's decision. She chose Naomi's people and Naomi's God.

Ruth 2:12 *May the LORD repay your work, and may your wages be complete from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.*

Ruth had come to take refuge under the wings of the God of Israel. That is a picture of what faith is.

Ruth 4:14 *And the women said to Naomi, Blessed **be** the LORD, who has not caused a redeemer to cease for you today; and may his name be proclaimed in Israel.*

God provided a redeemer. The praise goes to the LORD, not to Boaz.

Ruth 4:17 *And the neighbor women called him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." And they called his name Obed. He **was** the father of Jesse, the father of David.*

The last surprise of the book. This baby would be the grandfather of King David.

Christ in Ruth

The book ends with a family line: Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, "and Jesse fathered David" (4:22). Matthew picks that line up and carries it forward to Jesus: "Boaz fathered Obed by Ruth" (Matthew 1:5). Ruth is one of only a few women named in Jesus' family tree, along with Tamar, Rahab, the wife of Uriah, and Mary. God put a Moabite widow in the line of the Messiah.

Boaz as kinsman-redeemer gives us a picture of Christ. The New Testament does not call Boaz a type by name, so I treat this as a picture. But it fits what the New Testament says about Jesus very closely. A redeemer had to be a close relative, and Jesus became our relative by taking on flesh and blood (Hebrews 2:14-17). A redeemer had to be able to pay the price, and Jesus paid it with His own blood (1 Peter 1:18-19). A redeemer had to be willing, and the closer relative in Ruth 4 was not. Jesus was willing. He gave Himself (Galatians 2:20). And the redeemer took the bride as his own, as Christ takes His church (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Ruth's own story is a picture of the gospel too. She was an outsider with no claim on Israel's blessings. She came empty and trusting, took refuge under God's wings, and found a redeemer who gave her a name, a home and a future. That is what God does for every Gentile who comes to Him through Christ (Ephesians 2:12-13).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Ruth sits between Judges and 1 Samuel for a reason. Judges ended with "no king in Israel." Ruth ends with the name David. While the nation was falling apart, God was quietly preparing the king through one faithful family in Bethlehem, the town where David would be born and, a thousand years later, the Son of David.

Ruth also fits God's promise to Abraham that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). Even in the Old Testament, a Moabite could be grafted into God's people by faith. Ruth is an early sign of what God would do on a much larger scale through the gospel.

In the Jewish calendar, Ruth is read at the Feast of Weeks, the harvest festival Christians know as Pentecost. The story takes place during the barley and wheat harvests (1:22; 2:23). It is fitting that on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, God began gathering a harvest of people from many nations.

Read It This Way

Read Ruth in one sitting. It takes about fifteen minutes, and it reads like a short story because it is one. Watch the characters. Naomi is honest about her bitterness, and God does not reject her for it. Ruth works hard and takes risks. Boaz is generous beyond what the Law required. He told his workers to let her glean among the sheaves and even to pull out stalks for her on purpose (2:15-16).

Some readers wonder about the night scene at the threshing floor in chapter 3. Ruth lay down at Boaz's feet and asked him to "spread your wing" over her. In that culture this was a request for marriage and protection, not a seduction. Boaz praised her as "a woman of worth" (3:11), and he handled it with honor, sending her home before anyone could misjudge it. He then went straight to the town gate the next morning to settle it the right way.

And look for God in the ordinary. You may never see a sea part. But God is at work in the job you have, the people you meet, and the losses you grieve. Ruth reminds us that He has not forgotten us, even when we feel empty.

Study Questions

1. Ruth chose to stay with Naomi and follow her God. What did that choice cost her, and what does it teach about real faith (1:16-17)?
2. Naomi was honest about her bitterness. How does God treat her, and what does that teach about bringing our grief to Him (1:20-21; 4:14-17)?
3. Ruth "happened" to come to Boaz's field. Where have you seen God's hand in what looked like chance in your life (2:3)?
4. What did a kinsman-redeemer have to do, and how does Jesus fulfill that role for us (3:9; 4:9-10; Hebrews 2:14-17)?
5. Boaz went beyond what the Law required to care for Ruth. Who in your life could you show that kind of kindness to this week (2:8-16)?

1 Samuel

At a Glance	
Author	Not named; Samuel likely wrote the early part, with Nathan and Gad adding later records (1 Chronicles 29:29)
Date written	After the division of the kingdom (about 930 B.C.), using records from the time of the events
Written to	Israel, to explain how God gave them a king
Setting and time covered	Israel from the birth of Samuel to the death of Saul, about 1105 to 1010 B.C.
Chapters	31
Key word	Heart
Key verse	1 Samuel 16:7

Background

First Samuel is where Israel stops being a loose group of tribes and becomes a kingdom. It opens at the end of the time of the judges, with no king and a corrupt priesthood. It closes with Israel's first king dead on a battlefield and a young shepherd from Bethlehem waiting in the wings.

The book follows three men. Samuel was the last of the judges and one of the first great prophets. A prophet is someone God speaks through, who carries God's word to the people. Saul was the first king, tall and impressive, who started well and ended in ruin. David was the youngest son of Jesse, a shepherd God chose to replace Saul. The overlap between these lives is where the drama of the book happens.

First and Second Samuel were one book in the Hebrew Bible. They were split into two when the Old Testament was translated into Greek, because the Greek text took more room on a scroll. The book does not name its author. Samuel himself likely wrote the early part. He dies in chapter 25, so others finished it. First Chronicles 29:29 mentions the records of "Samuel the seer," "Nathan the prophet" and "Gad the seer," and those records were likely used. A note that Ziklag "has belonged to the kings of Judah until this day" (27:6) suggests the final form came after the kingdom split into Israel and Judah, about 930 B.C. The events themselves run from about 1105 B.C. to Saul's death about 1010 B.C. Paul says Saul reigned forty years (Acts 13:21).

Israel's great enemy in this book is the Philistines. They lived along the southern coast, had iron weapons, and pressed hard into Israel's hill country. When Israel brought the ark of the covenant into battle like a good-luck charm, the Philistines captured it (chapter 4). Eli's daughter-in-law named her newborn son Ichabod, saying, "Glory has gone into exile from Israel" (4:21). That is where the book starts: a nation that had lost its way and lost the symbol of God's presence.

Purpose

First Samuel explains how Israel got a king and why God rejected the first one. When the elders asked Samuel for a king "like all the nations" (8:5), God told Samuel, "they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from reigning over them" (8:7). God had planned for Israel to have a

king (Genesis 49:10; Deuteronomy 17:14-20). The problem was the reason they wanted one. They wanted a king to make them like everyone else and to fight their battles so they would not have to trust God.

The end of Saul's story is hard to read. On Mount Gilboa the Philistines killed Jonathan and two of Saul's other sons, and Saul, badly wounded, fell on his own sword (31:1-6). The writer of Chronicles later sums up why: Saul died for his unfaithfulness, because he did not keep the word of the LORD and because he consulted a medium (1 Chronicles 10:13-14). First Samuel lets us watch a man God had chosen and gifted throw it all away, one small compromise at a time.

The book also shows the kind of leader God wants. Saul looked the part. David did not. God's choice of David is summed up in one verse: "man sees according to the eyes, and the LORD sees according to the heart" (16:7).

Samuel himself is one of the quiet heroes of the Old Testament. He called Israel to put away their foreign gods, and when they did, God routed the Philistines. Samuel set up a stone and named it Ebenezer, saying, "Until now the LORD has helped us" (7:12). He judged Israel all his life and never took a bribe (12:3-5). Even when the people asked for a king and pushed him aside, he did not walk away in hurt. He told them, "far be it from me to sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you" (12:23). That is a pastor's heart. Most of us, when people reject our counsel, stop praying for them. Samuel kept going.

Main Themes

God raises up and brings down. The book opens with Hannah, a woman who could not have children and who was mocked for it. She prayed, God gave her Samuel, and she gave him back to the LORD's service. Her song in chapter 2 sets the theme of the whole book: "He brings low, also He exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust" (2:7-8). Eli's house falls and Samuel rises. Saul falls and David rises. Mary's song in Luke 1 echoes Hannah's: God "has brought down rulers from thrones and has exalted the lowly" (Luke 1:52).

Listening to God. When God called the boy Samuel in the night, he finally answered, "Speak, for Your servant is listening" (3:10). Samuel spent his life listening. Saul spent his reign half-listening. He offered a sacrifice he had no right to offer (chapter 13). He spared what God told him to destroy and then said he kept it for a sacrifice (chapter 15). Samuel's answer is one of the key lines of the Old Testament: "to listen is better than sacrifice" (15:22).

God looks at the heart. When Samuel went to Jesse's house to anoint the next king, he was impressed by the oldest son, Eliab. God said no. He chose David, the youngest, who was out with the sheep. Paul quotes God's testimony about David: "a man according to My heart, who will do all My wishes" (Acts 13:22). David was not sinless, as 2 Samuel will show. But his heart was turned toward God.

Faith against giants. Goliath was over nine feet tall, and the whole army of Israel was afraid of him. David, a teenager carrying cheese to his brothers, could not believe anyone would let this man insult God's people. He told Goliath, "I am coming to you in the name of the LORD of armies" (17:45), and added, "the battle belongs to the LORD" (17:47). Faith does not measure the giant. It measures God.

Waiting for God's timing. David was anointed king in chapter 16 and did not take the throne until 2 Samuel 2. For years Saul hunted him like an animal. Twice David could have killed Saul, and twice he refused, saying he would not stretch out his hand against "the anointed of the LORD" (24:6; 26:9-11). David trusted God to give him the throne in God's way and time. When his own men talked of stoning him at Ziklag, "David strengthened himself in the LORD his God" (30:6).

Faithful friendship. Jonathan, Saul's son and heir, should have been David's rival. Instead "the soul of Jonathan was bound with the soul of David" (18:1). Jonathan gave up his claim to the throne and protected David from his own father. It is one of the finest friendships in the Bible.

Outline

- Chapters 1-7: Samuel, from his birth to his years as judge
- Chapters 8-15: Saul becomes king and is rejected
- Chapters 16-31: David and Saul

Key Verses

1 Samuel 2:2 *There is none holy like the LORD, for there is none besides You, and there is no rock like our God.*

Hannah's praise. God is holy and there is no one like Him.

1 Samuel 15:22 *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.*

God wants obedience more than religious performance.

1 Samuel 16:7 *And the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance and at the height of his stature, for I have rejected him; for **it is** not what man sees, for man sees according to the eyes, and the LORD sees according to the heart."*

The verse that explains why David was chosen, and how God still looks at people.

1 Samuel 17:45 *And David said to the Philistine, You are coming to me with sword and with spear and with javelin, and I am coming to you in the name of the LORD of armies, the God of the battle lines of Israel, whom you have defied.*

David's answer to Goliath. Courage rests on the name of the LORD.

Christ in 1 Samuel

The word "anointed" is the key. In Hebrew it is messiah, and in Greek it is christ. Hannah's song ends by saying God "will give strength to His king and exalt the horn of His anointed" (2:10). This is the first time in the Bible a king of Israel is called God's anointed, and Hannah sang it before Israel even had a king. Saul was anointed, and David was anointed. But both pointed ahead to the Anointed One, Jesus the Messiah.

David himself is the clearest picture. He was born in Bethlehem, a shepherd, the youngest and least likely son, chosen by God and anointed with the Spirit (16:13). He was rejected and hunted by the ruling king before he took the throne. Jesus was born in Bethlehem too, called Himself the good shepherd (John 10:11), and was rejected by the leaders of His people before His kingdom comes. The New Testament calls Jesus the Son of David again and again (Matthew 1:1; 21:9; Romans 1:3), and it applies David's promise to Him. David's victory over Goliath also gives a picture of one man fighting alone on behalf of a whole people. The New Testament does not call that battle a type of the cross, so I hold it as an illustration, not a prophecy.

How It Fits the Whole Story

First Samuel turns the page from the judges to the kings. The chaos of Judges, where "there was no king in Israel," is answered here, first with a bad king and then with the promise of a good one. Ruth ended with David's name. First Samuel shows how God brought David from the sheepfold to the edge of the throne.

The book also sets up the covenant God will make with David in 2 Samuel 7. Everything that follows in the Bible about the Messiah as the Son of David grows from the choice God makes in 1 Samuel 16. When the angel told Mary that God would give her son "the throne of David His father" (Luke 1:32), he was pointing back to this book.

And Saul is a warning that runs through the rest of Scripture. A person can start well, be gifted and anointed, and still be ruined by pride and partial obedience. Saul was more worried about how he looked before the people than about obeying God (15:30). Many leaders since have followed his path.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

The medium at En-dor. Near the end of his life, Saul was desperate. God would not answer him, so he went to a medium, something the Law forbade (Leviticus 19:31). The text says "the woman saw Samuel" (28:12), and Samuel spoke to Saul and told him he would die the next day (28:15-19). Was it really Samuel? Some teachers believe God allowed the real Samuel to appear, which is why the woman herself seemed shocked. Others believe it was a deceiving spirit pretending to be Samuel, since Scripture condemns contact with the dead. The text simply calls him Samuel, and his message came true. What is clear is that Saul's turn to a medium was the final step in a life of disobedience (1 Chronicles 10:13).

Read It This Way

Read 1 Samuel as a story of contrasts. Hannah and Peninnah. Samuel and Eli's sons. Saul and David. David and Goliath. In each pair, ask what makes the difference. Almost always, it comes down to the heart toward God.

Don't read David and Goliath only as a story about facing your fears. It is that, but first it is about God's honor. David was angry that Goliath had defied "the battle lines of the living God" (17:26). The point is not that you can beat any giant. The point is that God fights for His name and His people.

Watch Saul closely. His sins can look small at first: a sacrifice offered a little early, some sheep kept back. But he kept making excuses and blaming others. Ask yourself whether you have any of Saul's habits: obeying partly, explaining it away, caring more about people's opinion than God's.

And take comfort from David's waiting years. Many of the psalms come from this time, such as Psalm 57 and Psalm 142, written when he hid in a cave. If God has made you a promise and you are still waiting in the cave, you are in good company.

Study Questions

1. Hannah brought her deep pain to the LORD in prayer. What can you learn from how she prayed and how she kept her vow (1:9-28)?
2. Why was Israel's request for a king a rejection of God, even though God had planned for Israel to have a king (8:4-9; Deuteronomy 17:14-15)?
3. Saul obeyed God partly and called it obedience. Where are you tempted to do the same (15:13-23)?
4. What did God see in David that Samuel at first missed, and what does God look for in you (16:6-13)?
5. David refused to take the throne by killing Saul. What does his patience teach about waiting for God's timing (24:1-12)?

2 Samuel

At a Glance	
Author	Not named; likely compiled from the records of Nathan and Gad (1 Chronicles 29:29)
Date written	After the death of David, using records from his reign
Written to	Israel, to show God's covenant with David and its cost and promise
Setting and time covered	Hebron and Jerusalem, the forty-year reign of David, about 1010 to 970 B.C.
Chapters	24
Key word	Covenant
Key verse	2 Samuel 7:16

Background

Second Samuel is the story of David as king. First Samuel ended with Saul and Jonathan dead on Mount Gilboa. This book opens with David hearing the news and weeping, singing a lament that includes the line "How the mighty have fallen!" (1:19). He did not celebrate the death of the man who had hunted him for years. That tells you something about David's heart from the first chapter.

In the Hebrew Bible, First and Second Samuel were one book. The second half follows David's forty-year reign. "David was thirty years old when he became king; he reigned forty years" (5:4). For seven and a half years he ruled only Judah from Hebron, while Saul's son Ish-bosheth ruled the northern tribes. Then all the tribes came to David and made him king over the whole nation. He captured the Jebusite fortress of Jerusalem, "the stronghold of Zion; it is the city of David" (5:7), and made it his capital. That was about 1003 B.C. Jerusalem has been the center of the Bible's story ever since.

The book does not name its author. First Chronicles 29:29 says the acts of David were written in the records of Samuel, Nathan and Gad. Samuel was dead before David became king, so most of this book likely came from Nathan and Gad, two prophets who served at David's court. Whoever put it together had close access to the king's family, because the book tells the private story of David's household in painful detail.

Second Samuel turns on a hinge in chapter 11. Chapters 1-10 show David rising and blessed: the kingdom united, Jerusalem taken, the ark brought home, enemies defeated, and God's great covenant given. Chapters 11-24 show what happened after David sinned with Bathsheba: family breakdown, rape, murder, rebellion and civil war.

Purpose

Second Samuel shows God establishing David's kingdom and making a covenant that would shape all of history. It also shows, honestly, that even the man after God's own heart was a sinner who needed mercy. Scripture does not polish its heroes. David's story is here to show God's faithfulness, not David's perfection.

Look at how David answered God's promise. He went in and sat before the LORD and said, "Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that You have brought me this far?" (7:18). He had wanted to do something great for God. Instead God told him what He would do for David. That is the right order in every believer's life. We do not build God a house. He builds us one, and our part is to receive it with humble thanks.

The book also gave later Israel a standard. Every king after David was measured against him. Did he follow the LORD as his father David did? And when Israel's kings failed, God's people kept looking back to the promise of this book, waiting for the Son of David who would reign forever.

Main Themes

God's covenant with David. Chapter 7 is one of the most important chapters in the Old Testament. David wanted to build a house, a temple, for God. God said no. Instead, God would build David a house, a family line. He promised, "I will raise up your seed after you," and "I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (7:12-13). Then the promise widens: "your house and your kingdom will be established forever before you; your throne will be established forever" (7:16). This is called the Davidic covenant. It was not based on David's goodness. God simply promised.

Worship with all your strength. When David brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, he "was dancing with all his strength before the LORD" (6:14). The first attempt went wrong because they carried the ark on a cart instead of on the shoulders of the Levites as the Law said, and Uzzah died when he touched it (6:6-7). God is to be worshiped joyfully, but on His terms.

Kindness for the sake of another. David looked for anyone left from Saul's house so he could show kindness for Jonathan's sake. He found Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, who was lame in both feet. David told him, "you will eat bread at my table continually" (9:7). The grandson of David's enemy became like one of the king's sons. It is a beautiful picture of grace.

Sin and its consequences. "At the return of the year, at the time of the going out of the kings," "David was staying in Jerusalem" (11:1). He was not where he should have been. He saw Bathsheba, took her, and when she was pregnant, he arranged the death of her husband Uriah, one of his own loyal soldiers. The chapter ends quietly: "the thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of the LORD" (11:27).

Real repentance and real forgiveness. God sent the prophet Nathan, who told David a story about a rich man who stole a poor man's only lamb. David was furious, and Nathan said, "You are the man!" (12:7). David did not make excuses. He said, "I have sinned against the LORD," and Nathan answered, "The LORD also has taken away your sin; you shall not die" (12:13). Psalm 51 comes from this moment. But Nathan also said "the sword shall not depart from your house" (12:10). God forgave the guilt. He did not erase the consequences.

A broken family. The rest of the book shows that sword at work. David's son Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar. David was angry but did nothing. Her brother Absalom murdered Amnon two years later, fled, came back, and then led a revolt that drove David out of Jerusalem. When Absalom died in battle, David wept, "My son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! Would that I had

died, I myself, in your place!" (18:33). Passive fathering and unpunished sin tore David's family apart.

Outline

- Chapters 1-4: David king over Judah at Hebron
- Chapters 5-10: David king over all Israel, and God's covenant
- Chapters 11-12: David's sin with Bathsheba and against Uriah
- Chapters 13-20: Trouble in David's house, and Absalom's rebellion
- Chapters 21-24: Later events, David's song and last words

Key Verses

2 Samuel 7:12-13 *When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, and I will raise up your seed after you, who will come out from your inward parts, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.*

God promises David a son whose throne will last forever. It begins with Solomon and ends with Christ.

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

The heart of the Davidic covenant. A house, a kingdom and a throne, forever.

2 Samuel 12:13 *And David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." And Nathan said to David, The LORD also has taken away your sin; you shall not die.*

Confession and forgiveness in one verse. There is hope for any sinner who comes to God honestly.

2 Samuel 22:2-3 *And he said, The LORD **is** my crag and my stronghold, and a rescuer for me; the God of my rock, I take refuge in Him; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my high refuge and my place of escape; my savior, from violence You save me.*

David's song of praise near the end of his life. God had been his rock through everything.

Christ in 2 Samuel

The covenant of chapter 7 leads straight to Jesus. The angel Gabriel told Mary that God would give her son "the throne of David His father," and "of His kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:32-33). Peter said on the day of Pentecost that David knew "God had sworn to him with an oath" that one of his descendants would sit on his throne, and that David spoke of the resurrection of the Christ (Acts 2:30-31). Hebrews quotes 2 Samuel 7:14, "I will be to Him a Father, and He will be to Me a Son," and applies it to Jesus (Hebrews 1:5).

Notice what that means. Solomon was the first son of David to fulfill the promise. He built the temple. But Solomon died, and his kingdom split. The promise of a throne "forever" could only be kept by a Son of David who would never die. Jesus rose from the dead and will never die again. His throne really is forever.

I believe that promise will be seen on earth. Jesus will return visibly and reign from David's throne in His thousand-year kingdom (Revelation 19:11-16; 20:1-6), and then forever in the new heavens and new earth. God's covenant with David has not been canceled or turned into something only spiritual. It will be kept in the way God gave it.

David's own life also shows us Christ by contrast. David was the anointed king, but he sinned terribly and failed his family. He wished he could have died in Absalom's place, but he could not save his son. Jesus is the King who never sinned, and He did die in our place.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Second Samuel is the high point of Israel's kingdom. The land promised to Abraham was more fully under Israel's control in David's day than at any time before. But the book also shows the seeds of the kingdom's fall. The trouble in David's family carried into Solomon's reign, and after Solomon the kingdom split in two.

The Davidic covenant is one of the great covenants of the Bible, along with the covenant with Abraham and the new covenant. The prophets keep coming back to it. Isaiah speaks of a child who will sit "on the throne of David" (Isaiah 9:7). Jeremiah speaks of a righteous Branch from David (Jeremiah 23:5). Ezekiel speaks of "My servant David" shepherding God's people (Ezekiel 34:23). The New Testament opens with "Jesus Christ, son of David" (Matthew 1:1) and closes with Jesus calling Himself "the root and the offspring of David" (Revelation 22:16).

Second Samuel also gives us the background to many psalms. Psalm 51 comes from David's sin with Bathsheba. Psalm 3 is titled as written when he fled from Absalom. Chapter 22 is almost the same as Psalm 18. Reading 2 Samuel with the Psalms open next to you brings both to life.

Notice too how the book ends. It does not close with a great battle or a coronation. It closes with a plague stopped, a sinful king confessing, and an altar built on a threshing floor (chapter 24). The last picture is of sacrifice and mercy, on the very spot where the temple would stand.

Read It This Way

Read 2 Samuel as the story of a real man, with all his greatness and all his failure. Don't skip chapters 11-20 because they are uncomfortable. They are some of the most honest chapters in the Bible about how sin works and what it costs.

Watch how David's sin starts. He stayed home when he should have been with his army. He kept looking when he should have turned away. He sent for her when he should have stopped. Then he covered it up with a lie and a murder. Sin rarely starts big. It grows when we feed it.

Then watch how David's repentance works. He did not argue with Nathan. He owned it. Read Psalm 51 along with chapter 12 to see what was going on in his heart: "Create for me a pure heart, God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10). If you have fallen badly, David's story tells you that God forgives those who come back honestly.

Keep an eye on Joab, David's nephew and the commander of his army. He was loyal, brave and ruthless. He murdered Abner and later Amasa, both in cold blood, and he killed Absalom against David's direct order (3:27; 18:14; 20:10). David knew Joab was a problem but never dealt with him.

On his deathbed David told Solomon to settle it (1 Kings 2:5-6). Joab is a reminder that a leader who will not confront the sin of the people closest to him will pay for it later.

And notice David's humility at the end. When he went to buy a place to build an altar, the owner offered it for free. David refused: "I will not offer up to the LORD my God burnt offerings without cost" (24:24). That place became the site of the temple (2 Chronicles 3:1). Real worship costs us something.

Study Questions

1. David mourned Saul instead of celebrating his death. What does that show about his heart, and how should we respond when an enemy falls (1:11-27)?
2. Read 2 Samuel 7:8-16. What did God promise David, and how is that promise fulfilled in Jesus (Luke 1:32-33)?
3. David showed kindness to Mephibosheth for Jonathan's sake. How is that a picture of how God treats us for Christ's sake (9:1-13)?
4. Trace the steps of David's sin in chapter 11. Where could he have stopped, and what does that teach you about temptation?
5. God forgave David, but the consequences remained. How do you hold both of those truths together in your own life (12:7-14)?

1 Kings

At a Glance	
Author	Not named; Jewish tradition names Jeremiah, who used older royal records
Date written	About 560 to 540 B.C., after the fall of Jerusalem
Written to	The Jews in exile, to explain why the kingdom fell
Setting and time covered	Israel and Judah, from Solomon's rise about 970 B.C. to the death of Ahab and the reign of Ahaziah about 853 B.C.
Chapters	22
Key word	Divided
Key verse	1 Kings 18:21

Background

First Kings opens with a dying king and a fight over the throne. David is old and cold in bed. His son Adonijah declares himself king. Nathan the prophet and Bathsheba remind David of his promise, and David has Solomon anointed instead. By the end of chapter 2, Solomon is firmly on the throne. By the end of the book, Solomon's kingdom has split in two, and the northern half is ruled by Ahab, the worst king Israel had yet known.

First and Second Kings were one book in the Hebrew Bible. They cover about four hundred years, from Solomon to the exile in Babylon. The writer is not named. Jewish tradition says Jeremiah wrote it. Whoever he was, he worked after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., because 2 Kings ends with an event in about 560 B.C. He used older sources and tells us so. He mentions "the book of the matters of Solomon" (11:41) and the records of the kings of Israel and of Judah again and again (14:19, 29). So the book rests on court records written at the time.

Why does that matter? Because the first readers were in exile. They had lost their land, their king and their temple. They were asking why. First and Second Kings answer that question. It was not because the gods of Babylon were stronger than the LORD. It was because Israel and Judah broke the covenant, just as Moses had warned in Deuteronomy.

The book has three main parts. Chapters 1-11 tell of Solomon's reign: his wisdom, his wealth, the temple he built, and the wives who turned his heart. Chapters 12-16 tell how the kingdom split after his death, about 930 B.C. Ten tribes in the north kept the name Israel, with Jeroboam as king. The south, mainly Judah and Benjamin, kept David's line in Jerusalem and took the name Judah. Chapters 17-22 slow down to focus on the prophet Elijah and his fight against Ahab, Jezebel and the worship of Baal.

Purpose

First Kings judges each king by one standard: did he walk before the LORD as David did? Even David's record is summed up honestly: he did right "except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite" (15:5). Kings who followed the LORD are praised. Kings who led the people into idolatry are condemned, no matter how successful they were in the world's eyes. Omri, for example, was one

of the most powerful kings of the north and built the city of Samaria, but the book gives him only a few verses and says he did more evil than all before him (16:23-28).

The book also shows that God keeps speaking to His people even when their leaders turn away. When the kings failed, God sent prophets. Elijah, Ahijah, Micaiah and others brought God's word to kings who often did not want to hear it.

How did the split actually happen? When Solomon died, the people came to his son Rehoboam and asked him to lighten the heavy labor and taxes his father had laid on them. The older advisers told him, "If today you will be a servant to this people, and serve them," they would serve him for life (12:7). Rehoboam listened to his young friends instead and answered harshly. The ten northern tribes walked away. The writer adds that this was "a turn of events from the LORD," to fulfill what the prophet Ahijah had said (12:15). Rehoboam's pride and God's judgment worked together. Human choices are real, and God still rules over them.

Main Themes

Wisdom is a gift from God. When God offered Solomon anything he wanted, Solomon asked for "a listening heart to judge Your people, to discern between good and evil" (3:9). God was pleased and gave him wisdom, along with riches and honor he had not asked for. "God gave Solomon wisdom and very great understanding" (4:29). Solomon's wisdom became famous, and the queen of Sheba traveled a long way to hear it (chapter 10).

God's presence in His house. Solomon built the temple in seven years. It followed the pattern of the tabernacle but was larger and permanent. When the ark was brought in, "the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD" (8:11), just as it had filled the tabernacle in Moses' day. Solomon's prayer of dedication in chapter 8 is one of the great prayers of the Bible. He knew no building could hold God: "the heavens and the heavens of the heavens cannot contain You; how much less this house which I have built!" (8:27).

A divided heart leads to a divided kingdom. Deuteronomy 17 warned kings not to multiply wives, horses or gold. Solomon did all three. He had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (11:3), many of them foreign princesses who brought their gods with them. "His wives turned aside his heart after other gods" (11:4). God told him, "I will surely tear the kingdom away from you" (11:11). The wisest man in the world could not keep his own heart.

The sin of Jeroboam. After the split, Jeroboam was afraid his people would go back to Judah if they worshiped in Jerusalem. So he made two golden calves, put them in Bethel and Dan, and said, "Look, your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!" (12:28). Those are almost the same words Israel used for the golden calf at Sinai. Every northern king after him is judged for walking in "the sins of Jeroboam." His shortcut became a trap for two centuries.

The LORD alone is God. Ahab married Jezebel, a princess from Sidon, and together they made Baal worship the official religion of Israel. Baal was the Canaanite god of storms and rain. So God sent Elijah to announce a drought: no dew or rain "except according to my word" (17:1). After three and a half years, Elijah called the prophets of Baal to Mount Carmel and asked the people, "How long will you be limping on the two crutches? If the LORD is the God, walk after Him"

(18:21). Baal's prophets cried out all day and nothing happened. Elijah prayed once, and fire fell. The people fell on their faces and cried, "The LORD, He is the God!" (18:39).

God meets His tired servants. Right after Carmel, Jezebel threatened Elijah and he ran for his life. He sat under a tree and asked to die. God did not scold him. He fed him and let him sleep, then met him at Mount Horeb. The LORD was not in the wind, the earthquake or the fire, but in "a sound of a thin silence" (19:12). God told Elijah he was not alone: seven thousand in Israel had not bowed to Baal (19:18). Then God gave him a new job and a helper, Elisha.

Injustice does not escape God. Ahab wanted his neighbor Naboth's vineyard. Naboth would not sell the land God had given his family. So Jezebel arranged false witnesses, and Naboth was stoned to death. Ahab went to take the vineyard and found Elijah waiting for him. "Have you found me, O my enemy?" Ahab asked. Elijah answered, "I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do the evil in the eyes of the LORD" (21:20). Power does not put anyone beyond God's reach.

Outline

- Chapters 1-11: Solomon's reign
- Chapters 12-16: The kingdom divides, and the early kings of Israel and Judah
- Chapters 17-22: Elijah and Ahab

Key Verses

1 Kings 3:9 *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?*

Solomon's request. The best leaders know they need God's wisdom.

1 Kings 8:27 *For will God really dwell on the earth? Look, the heavens and the heavens of the heavens cannot contain You; how much less this house which I have built!*

God is too great for any building. Yet He chose to put His name among His people.

1 Kings 9:4-5 *And you, if you walk before Me just as David your father walked, in integrity of heart and in uprightness, to do according to all that I have commanded you,* ***and if*** *you keep My statutes and My judgments, then I will establish the throne of your kingdom over Israel forever, just as I spoke concerning David your father, saying, 'A man shall not be cut off for you from on the throne of Israel.'*

God's terms for Solomon's line. The throne was secure by promise, but each king's blessing depended on walking with God.

1 Kings 18:21 *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.*

Elijah's challenge to a people trying to worship two gods at once.

1 Kings 18:39 *And all the people saw, and they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD, He **is** the God! The LORD, He **is** the God!"*

The answer that every person must come to.

Christ in 1 Kings

Jesus Himself made the link to Solomon. When the religious leaders asked Him for a sign, He reminded them that the queen of the south came "from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and look, something greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:42). Solomon's wisdom, wealth and peace were a small picture of the reign of Christ. But Solomon fell. Jesus is the Son of David who never turns aside. Paul says that in Him "all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge are hidden" (Colossians 2:3).

The temple also points to Jesus. God's glory filled Solomon's temple, but Jesus said of His own body, "Destroy this sanctuary, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). He is the true place where God meets man.

Elijah's story points forward too. Malachi said God would send Elijah before the great day of the LORD (Malachi 4:5). Jesus said John the Baptist came in that role (Matthew 11:14; 17:11-13), and Elijah himself appeared with Moses at the transfiguration, talking with Jesus (Matthew 17:3). Elijah's ministry of calling a divided people back to the LORD prepared for the One who would bring them back for good.

How It Fits the Whole Story

First Kings shows the kingdom of 2 Samuel at its height and then in its first great fall. The temple is built, the promise to David seems to be coming true, and then everything begins to unravel. The rest of Kings follows that unraveling to the end.

The split of the kingdom shapes the rest of the Old Testament. When you read the prophets, you need to know which kingdom they spoke to. Amos and Hosea preached mostly to the north. Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah preached mostly to Judah. The north never had a single good king. Judah had some, and that is part of why it lasted longer.

God's promise to David did not fail in all this. When God tore the kingdom from Solomon, He left one tribe to David's line "for the sake of David My servant" (11:13). David's lamp kept burning in Jerusalem, through good kings and bad, until the line came to Jesus.

Read It This Way

First Kings can be hard to follow once the kingdom splits, because the writer goes back and forth between the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah. It helps to keep two columns on a piece of paper, one for each kingdom, and write down each king as you meet him with a note on whether he did right or evil. You'll see the pattern quickly.

Pay attention to the prophets. They are often the most important people in the story, even though the book is named for kings. When a prophet speaks, what he says comes true. That is the writer's point: God's word governs history.

Learn from Solomon's decline. He did not fall in a day. He started by loving the LORD (3:3). Then came the alliances, the horses, the wives and the high places, one compromise after another. By his old age his heart was not wholly the LORD's. If it could happen to the wisest man who ever lived, it can happen to any of us.

And take courage from Elijah. James says "Elijah was a man of like nature to us," and yet his prayers made a difference (James 5:17). He was bold on Carmel and depressed under the tree. God used him in both places. You do not have to be a spiritual giant for God to work through you.

Study Questions

1. Solomon asked God for wisdom instead of riches or long life. What would you ask for, and why does God value a "listening heart" (3:5-14; James 1:5)?
2. Read Solomon's prayer in 8:22-53. What does it teach about prayer, repentance and God's willingness to forgive?
3. How did Solomon's heart drift from God, and what warning does that give us (11:1-11; Deuteronomy 17:16-17)?
4. Elijah asked the people how long they would go limping on two crutches, trying to lean on the LORD and Baal at the same time. Where are you tempted to keep one foot in each camp (18:21)?
5. After his great victory, Elijah fell into despair. How did God care for him, and what does that teach about caring for tired believers (19:1-18)?

2 Kings

At a Glance	
Author	Not named; Jewish tradition names Jeremiah
Date written	During the exile, after about 560 B.C. (2 Kings 25:27)
Written to	The Jews in exile in Babylon
Setting and time covered	Israel and Judah, from Ahaziah of Israel about 853 B.C. to the release of Jehoiachin in Babylon about 560 B.C.
Chapters	25
Key word	Exile
Key verse	2 Kings 17:13-14

Background

Second Kings is the story of two kingdoms going down. It picks up right where 1 Kings ends, with the northern kingdom of Israel ruled by Ahab's family and the southern kingdom of Judah ruled by David's descendants. By the last chapter, both kingdoms are gone. The north has been carried off by Assyria. The south has been carried off by Babylon, Jerusalem has been burned, and the temple Solomon built lies in ruins.

First and Second Kings were one book in Hebrew, so the author is the same. He is not named, and Jewish tradition says it was Jeremiah. The book's last event is the release of King Jehoiachin from prison in Babylon "in the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin" (25:27), which was about 560 B.C. So the book was finished during the exile, for people who had lost everything and wanted to know why.

Second Kings covers almost three hundred years. That is a lot of ground, and the writer moves fast. He goes back and forth between Israel and Judah, giving each king a short summary and judging him by one question: did he do right in the eyes of the LORD, or evil? In the north, the answer is always evil. In Judah, the answer is mixed. A few kings stand out as good, especially Hezekiah and Josiah.

This is also a time we know from outside history. Assyria, in what is now northern Iraq, was the great power through most of the book. Its kings are named in the text, and their own records mention Israelite and Judean kings. Assyria took Samaria, the northern capital, in 722 B.C. Sennacherib of Assyria invaded Judah in 701 B.C. and besieged Jerusalem in Hezekiah's day. Then Babylon rose up and replaced Assyria. Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem, carried King Jehoiachin to Babylon in 597 B.C., and finally burned the city and the temple in 586 B.C.

Two stories in the middle of the book show how complicated the history is. Jehu was anointed king of Israel to wipe out Ahab's family and the worship of Baal, and he did it with terrible zeal. God commended him for it and promised his sons the throne to the fourth generation (10:30). But the next verse says "Jehu did not take care to walk in the law of the LORD, the God of Israel, with all his heart," and he kept Jeroboam's golden calves (10:31). He was a tool of God's judgment who never fully gave his own heart to God. In Judah, the wicked queen Athaliah murdered the royal

family to take the throne for herself. But a baby prince, Joash, was hidden in the temple by his aunt for six years (11:1-3). If Athaliah had found him, David's line would have ended. God kept one child alive, and with him the promise.

Purpose

Second Kings explains the exile. God did not lose. His people broke the covenant. The writer stops the story in chapter 17, right after the fall of Samaria, to explain it plainly: "it was so, because the sons of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God" (17:7). He goes on to say that God had warned them by "all the prophets and every seer," saying "Turn back from your evil ways," but "they did not listen" (17:13-14). The same thing happened to Judah later.

But the book is not only bad news. It shows God's patience, sending prophet after prophet for centuries. It shows that a king who trusted the LORD, like Hezekiah, could see God's deliverance even against the greatest army on earth. And it ends with a small but real sign of hope.

Main Themes

The ministry of Elisha. The book opens with Elijah taken up "in the whirlwind to the heavens" by a chariot of fire (2:11). Before he went, Elisha asked for "a double portion of your spirit" (2:9). Chapters 2-8 are full of Elisha's miracles: a widow's oil that kept flowing, a dead boy raised to life, poison taken out of a pot of stew, and bread multiplied to feed a hundred men. Many of these miracles were acts of mercy for ordinary people in a time of national apostasy.

Grace beyond Israel. Naaman was the commander of the army of Syria, Israel's enemy, and he had a skin disease. A captured Israelite servant girl told him about the prophet in Samaria. Elisha told him to wash seven times in the Jordan. He was offended, but his servants talked him into it, and "his flesh returned like the flesh of a young lad, and he was clean" (5:14). Jesus pointed to Naaman to show that God's grace has always reached outsiders (Luke 4:27).

Unseen help. When an army surrounded Elisha's town, his servant panicked. Elisha said, "Do not be afraid, for more are those who are with us than those who are with them." Then he prayed that his servant's eyes would be opened, "and look, the mountain was full of horses and chariotry of fire all around Elisha" (6:16-17). God's people are never as alone as they feel.

Judgment on persistent sin. The northern kingdom had nineteen kings and not one of them followed the LORD. In the end "the king of Assyria captured Samaria and carried Israel into exile to Assyria" (17:6). Assyria then moved other peoples into the land, and they mixed the worship of the LORD with their own gods. That mixed population became the Samaritans of the New Testament (17:24-41).

Trusting God in a crisis. "In the LORD, the God of Israel, he trusted," the writer says of Hezekiah, and the text says there was none like him among the kings of Judah (18:5). When Sennacherib's army surrounded Jerusalem and his messenger mocked the LORD, Hezekiah took the letter into the temple, spread it out before God and prayed, "save us, please, from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You, O LORD, are God, You alone" (19:19). That night the angel of the LORD struck the Assyrian camp, and Sennacherib went home (19:35-36).

The Word rediscovered. Hezekiah's son Manasseh was the worst king Judah ever had. He rebuilt the altars to Baal and "shed very much innocent blood" (21:16). Later, his grandson Josiah began repairing the temple, and the high priest found the book of the Law. When Josiah heard it read, he tore his clothes and said "great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not listened to the words of this book" (22:13). He led the greatest reform in Judah's history. No king before him turned to the LORD "with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might" (23:25). But it was too late to turn back the judgment Manasseh's sins had brought (23:26; 24:3).

The end of Judah. The last kings of Judah would not listen either. Nebuchadnezzar carried off Jehoiachin with the officials and craftsmen and "ten thousand exiles" (24:14), and set up Zedekiah as a puppet king. When Zedekiah rebelled, Babylon besieged Jerusalem until famine took the city. Zedekiah's sons were killed in front of him, and then he was blinded and taken in chains to Babylon (25:7). The Babylonians "burned the house of the LORD and the house of the king and all the houses of Jerusalem" (25:9). The glory that filled Solomon's temple in 1 Kings 8 is gone by the end of 2 Kings 25.

Outline

- Chapters 1-8: Elisha's ministry
- Chapters 9-17: Israel and Judah to the fall of Samaria
- Chapters 18-25: Judah to the fall of Jerusalem

Key Verses

2 Kings 17:13-14 *And the LORD warned Israel and Judah by the hand of all the prophets **and** every seer, saying, "Turn back from your evil ways, and keep My commandments, My statutes, according to all the law that I commanded your fathers and that I sent to you by the hand of My servants the prophets." And they did not listen, and they hardened their neck like the neck of their fathers, who did not believe in the LORD their God.*

The reason for the exile in two verses. God warned, and the people would not listen.

2 Kings 18:5 *In the LORD, the God of Israel, he trusted; and after him there was none like him among all the kings of Judah, and **among** those who were before him.*

Hezekiah's trust in God set him apart from almost every other king.

2 Kings 19:19 *And now, O LORD our God, save us, please, from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You, O LORD, **are** God, You alone.*

A prayer for God's glory in the middle of a crisis.

2 Kings 22:13 *"Go, inquire of the LORD for me and for the people and for all Judah concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great **is** the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not listened to the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us."*

What happens when God's people hear His word after neglecting it for a long time.

Christ in 2 Kings

The link to Christ in 2 Kings is mostly a matter of theme and of David's line being kept alive. Still, there are clear connections.

Jesus Himself pointed to Elisha's ministry. In Nazareth He reminded His hometown that "many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian" (Luke 4:27). Many of Elisha's miracles look ahead to Jesus' own: raising the dead, cleansing a leper, feeding a crowd with a little bread with food left over (4:42-44). These are not called types in the New Testament, but Jesus' words invite the comparison.

The ending of the book matters most. David's line seemed finished. The last king of Judah, Zedekiah, was blinded and taken away, and his sons were killed (25:7). But the book closes with Jehoiachin, an earlier king of David's line, released from prison in Babylon. The new king of Babylon gave him a seat of honor, "and he ate bread continually before him all the days of his life" (25:29). It is a quiet ending, but it means David's line was still alive. Matthew lists Jehoiachin, under the name Jechoniah, in the family line of Jesus (Matthew 1:11-12). God's promise to David had not failed, even in exile.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Second Kings is the end of the road that began in Deuteronomy. Moses had warned that if Israel turned to other gods, they would be scattered among the nations (Deuteronomy 28:64). That is exactly what happened. The covenant curses were not empty threats.

Many of the prophets lived during the events of this book. Jonah, Amos and Hosea spoke to the north before its fall. Isaiah and Micah ministered in Judah in the days of Hezekiah. Isaiah 36-39 tells many of the same events as 2 Kings 18-20. Zephaniah and Jeremiah preached in the days of Josiah and after. Habakkuk wrestled with the coming of Babylon. When you read the prophets, 2 Kings gives you the background.

The story does not end in Babylon. Daniel and Ezekiel were already in exile. Ezra and Nehemiah tell how God brought His people back after seventy years, just as Jeremiah had said (Jeremiah 25:11; 29:10). And the prophets promised a greater return still to come. I believe God will yet gather Israel to their land and turn their hearts to Him, as Paul says, "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26).

Read It This Way

Read 2 Kings with a timeline next to you. A simple chart of the kings of Israel and Judah side by side will help more than anything else. Many study Bibles include one. The names can get confusing, because both kingdoms had kings named Jehoram and Ahaziah at about the same time, and some kings have two names.

Look past the kings to the prophets. Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Isaiah and Huldah all appear here. The kings come and go, but the word of the LORD comes true every time.

Pay attention to the summary verses for each king. They are short, but they tell you what God thought of his reign. Ask why the writer praised or condemned each one. Almost always it comes down to worship. Did he remove the idols and high places, or did he keep them?

And take the warning personally. The exile did not happen in one generation. It came after centuries of warnings that were ignored. Sin that is tolerated in one generation tends to grow in the next. Josiah's reform was real, but it could not undo the damage of Manasseh's long reign. What we pass on to our children matters.

Study Questions

1. Elisha's servant could not see the army of God around him. When have you felt surrounded and alone, and what does this passage say to you (6:15-17)?
2. Naaman almost missed his healing because of pride. Why was it hard for him to do something so simple, and how is that like coming to Christ (5:9-14)?
3. Read the writer's explanation for the fall of Israel in 17:7-18. Which of those sins do you see in our own culture today?
4. What can you learn from how Hezekiah handled Sennacherib's threatening letter (19:14-19)?
5. Josiah's reform began when God's word was found and read. What place does Scripture have in your life right now, and what would change if you took it as seriously as he did (22:8-13)?

1 Chronicles

At a Glance	
Author	Not named; Jewish tradition names Ezra
Date written	About 450 to 430 B.C., after the return from exile
Written to	The Jews who had come back from Babylon to Judah
Setting and time covered	Family lines from Adam to the return, then the reign of David, about 1010 to 970 B.C.
Chapters	29
Key word	Worship
Key verse	1 Chronicles 17:11-14

Background

Many people open 1 Chronicles, see nine chapters of names, and close it again. I understand. But Chronicles is not just a rerun of Samuel and Kings with a list of names stuck on the front. It is the same history told again from a different angle, for a different group of people, with a different question in mind.

Think about who first read it. The Jews had been carried off to Babylon in 586 B.C. In 538 B.C. the Persian king Cyrus let them go home, and some of them did. By the time Chronicles was written, about 450 to 430 B.C., they had rebuilt the temple, but life was hard. They had no king. They were a small, poor province in the Persian Empire. The great days of David and Solomon were long gone. They had a question: Are we still God's people, and are His promises still good?

Chronicles answers yes. The book does not name its author, and Jewish tradition says Ezra wrote it. That fits well. Ezra was a priest and a scribe, and Chronicles cares a great deal about priests, Levites, the temple and the Law. The last verses of 2 Chronicles are the same as the first verses of Ezra, which suggests a close link between the two books. First and Second Chronicles were one book in the Hebrew Bible, and in the Hebrew order it is the last book of the Old Testament.

The writer used many sources and names them: the records of Samuel, Nathan and Gad (29:29), "the book of the kings of Israel and Judah" (9:1), and others. He clearly also knew the books of Samuel and Kings, since much of his material follows them closely. But he leaves things out and adds things in. In 1 Chronicles he skips Saul's reign except for his death, skips David's years as a fugitive, skips the sin with Bathsheba and the rebellion of Absalom, and spends almost a third of the book on David's preparations for the temple.

Purpose

Why would the writer leave out David's worst sins? Not to hide them. Everyone reading already knew Samuel and Kings. Chronicles assumes you know the story. The writer chose what would help his readers most. They did not need another lesson on how the kingdom fell. They had lived through that. They needed to know who they were, where they came from, and what still mattered.

So 1 Chronicles focuses on two things that the returning Jews still had: their place in God's family, and the worship of God in His temple. The family lines tie them all the way back to Adam and to Abraham. The chapters on David show that the heart of Israel's life was never the palace. It was the house of God.

Main Themes

You belong to God's people. The book opens with "Adam, Seth, Enosh" (1:1) and moves through Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and then through each of the twelve tribes, with special attention to Judah, the tribe of David, and Levi, the tribe of the priests. Chapter 9 brings it up to those who came back after the exile. To people who felt cut off and forgotten, these names said: You are part of a story that goes back to the beginning. God has not lost track of you.

Prayer in the middle of the names. In the middle of the lists, the writer stops to tell about a man named Jabez. He "called to the God of Israel," asking for blessing and protection, "And God brought what he had asked" (4:10). God hears ordinary people whose names would otherwise be lost in a list. The point of the verse is that God answers prayer, not that we can use a formula to get what we want.

God's covenant with David. Chapter 17 repeats the great promise of 2 Samuel 7. God told David, "I will raise up your seed after you," and "I will set him in My house and in My kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever" (17:11, 14). For a people with no king, this was a promise to hold on to. God had not forgotten David's line.

Worship at the center. David brought the ark to Jerusalem, this time the right way. He said, "No one is to carry the ark of God except the Levites" (15:2). He appointed singers and musicians and gave them a psalm of thanks: "Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His steadfast love is forever" (16:34). Chapters 23-26 organize the priests, Levites, singers and gatekeepers into groups for temple service. Those groups were still in use in Jesus' day. Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, served in "the division of Abijah" (Luke 1:5; 1 Chronicles 24:10).

Preparing for the next generation. God told David he could not build the temple, because "you have shed much blood on the earth before Me" (22:8). David did not sulk. He gathered materials, drew up plans, organized the workers, and charged Solomon to finish the job. He told his son, "know the God of your father and serve Him with a whole heart and with a willing soul" (28:9). Sometimes our job is to prepare for a work that someone else will finish.

Everything comes from God. When the people gave generously for the temple, David prayed one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible: "To You, O LORD, is the greatness and the might and the splendor" (29:11). He added, "everything is from You, and from Your hand we have given to You" (29:14). We never give God anything that was not His first.

The right people at the right time. Chapter 12 lists the warriors who came to David, first while he was hiding from Saul and then at Hebron to make him king over all Israel. Among them were the men of Issachar, "knowing understanding of the times, to know what Israel should do" (12:32). God gathered a whole nation around His chosen king, tribe by tribe. The book wants its readers to see that the kingdom was not one man's project. It was God's work among His people.

Outline

- Chapters 1-9: Family lines from Adam to the return from exile
- Chapters 10-12: Saul's death and David made king
- Chapters 13-17: The ark brought to Jerusalem, and God's covenant with David
- Chapters 18-21: David's wars, and the census
- Chapters 22-29: David prepares for the temple and hands the kingdom to Solomon

Key Verses

1 Chronicles 16:34 *Give thanks to the LORD, for **He is** good; for His steadfast love **is** forever.*

The song of thanks at the coming of the ark. It is repeated throughout the Old Testament.

1 Chronicles 17:11-14 *And it shall be, when your days are fulfilled to go with your fathers, that I will raise up your seed after you, who shall be from your sons; and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build Me a house, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to Me a son; and My steadfast love I will not remove from him, as I removed **it** from him who was before you. And I will set him in My house and in My kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever.*

God's covenant with David retold for a people waiting for their king.

1 Chronicles 28:9 *And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve Him with a whole heart and with a willing soul, for the LORD searches all hearts and understands every inclination of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will be found by you; and if you forsake Him, He will reject you forever.*

David's charge to Solomon. God searches every heart.

1 Chronicles 29:11 *To You, O LORD, **is** the greatness and the might and the splendor and the preeminence and the majesty, for all **that is** in the heavens and on the earth; to You, O LORD, **is** the kingdom, and the One lifting Himself up over all as head.*

David's great prayer of praise. All greatness and every kingdom belong to God.

Christ in 1 Chronicles

The family lines are not dead lists. They track the line of promise from Adam to Abraham to Judah to David, and then beyond David through the kings and into the exile (chapter 3). Matthew and Luke both trace Jesus' family line through these same names (Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38). Chronicles keeps the record that shows Jesus really is the Son of David and the Son of Abraham.

The covenant of chapter 17 points to Christ just as 2 Samuel 7 does. Notice one small change. In 2 Samuel 7:16 God says David's house and kingdom will be established. Here God says, "I will set him in My house and in My kingdom forever" (17:14). The kingdom is God's, and the Son of David reigns over it on God's behalf. That fits Jesus perfectly. He is David's Son, and He rules the kingdom of God. Hebrews 1:5 applies the words "I will be to Him a Father, and He will be to Me a Son" to Jesus (compare 17:13).

The site of the temple also matters. David bought the threshing floor of Ornan, built an altar, and God answered with fire from heaven (21:26). Second Chronicles 3:1 says this was Mount Moriah, the same place where Abraham offered Isaac. On that mountain God provided a ram in Isaac's place, stopped a plague with a sacrifice in David's day, and later received the temple sacrifices. Not far away, outside the city walls, Jesus died as the final sacrifice (Hebrews 13:12).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Chronicles retells the story from Adam to the return from exile, so in a way it sums up the whole Old Testament. In the Hebrew Bible it comes last. Jesus may have had that order in mind when He spoke of the blood of the righteous from Abel to Zechariah (Matthew 23:35). Abel is killed in Genesis, and Zechariah son of Jehoiada is killed in 2 Chronicles 24:20-22, the first and last murders in the Hebrew order of books.

First Chronicles also prepares for 2 Chronicles. David gets the plans and materials ready. Solomon builds. The rest of the story follows the kings of Judah, judged by how they treated the house and worship of God.

For us, Chronicles is a reminder that God's promises do not depend on how big or strong His people look. The returned exiles were small and weak. But they were still God's people, the temple worship was restored, and the promise to David still stood. God was going to keep it. Four centuries later, the Son of David was born in Bethlehem.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Who moved David to take the census? Second Samuel 24:1 says the LORD's anger burned against Israel, "and He incited David against them," while 1 Chronicles 21:1 says "Satan stood up against Israel, and he incited David to count Israel." How do these fit together? Most conservative teachers believe both are true. Satan tempted David, and God allowed it as a judgment on Israel, much like the story of Job, where Satan acts but only within God's permission. Some put more weight on God's active judgment, others on His permission. All agree David was responsible for his own sin, as he himself confessed (21:8).

Read It This Way

Don't skip the genealogies, but don't get stuck in them either. Read them quickly, and stop where the writer stops. When a short story pops up in the middle of a list, like Jabez in 4:9-10 or the eastern tribes who "cried out to God in the battle" (5:20), that is the writer saying, pay attention here.

Look closely at the psalm David gave the singers in chapter 16. Large parts of it appear again in Psalms 105, 96 and 106. Israel's worship was built on songs that told the story of what God had done, from Abraham to the present. That is still a good test for our worship today. Does it remember what God has actually done?

Read Chronicles alongside Samuel. When you notice something left out or added, ask why. You'll usually find the writer is drawing attention to worship, the temple, the Levites, or the faithfulness of God to David's line.

And let the book encourage you if you feel small. The first readers of Chronicles did not have much: no king, no army, a rebuilt temple that older people said was not as good as the first. But they had God's promises and God's worship. So do we. The writer wanted them, and us, to see that faithful worship of God is never wasted. A small church in a hard place, singing the same old psalms of thanks, is part of the same story as David and his choirs.

Study Questions

1. Why might long family lists have mattered so much to Jews who had just returned from exile? What does it mean to you that God knows your name (1:1; 9:1-3)?
2. What did Jabez ask God for, and what does his short story teach about prayer (4:9-10)?
3. David's first attempt to bring the ark ended in death. What did he learn, and what does that teach about worshiping God His way (13:9-14; 15:2, 13-15)?
4. David prepared for a temple he would never build. What could you do now that will help the next generation serve God (22:5-16; 28:9-10)?
5. David said, "everything is from You." How should that truth change the way you give (29:10-17)?

2 Chronicles

At a Glance	
Author	Not named; Jewish tradition names Ezra
Date written	About 450 to 430 B.C., after the return from exile
Written to	The Jews who had come back from Babylon to Judah
Setting and time covered	Jerusalem and Judah, from Solomon's reign about 970 B.C. to the decree of Cyrus in 538 B.C.
Chapters	36
Key word	Seek
Key verse	2 Chronicles 7:14

Background

Second Chronicles picks up where 1 Chronicles leaves off. David has died, and Solomon is king. The book follows Solomon's reign, the building of the temple, and then the kings of Judah, one after another, for almost four hundred years. It ends with Jerusalem in ruins and a surprise: a Persian king telling the Jews they can go home.

It is the second half of one book, so the author is the same as 1 Chronicles. Jewish tradition names Ezra. It was written about 450 to 430 B.C. for the Jews who had returned from exile. They had rebuilt the temple, though it was smaller and plainer than Solomon's. They needed to know what God expected of them now and whether He would still bless them.

If you have read 1 and 2 Kings, you will notice right away that 2 Chronicles is different. It follows only the kings of Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel only comes up when it touches Judah's story. Why? Because Judah had David's line and the temple in Jerusalem, and those were the two things the returning exiles needed to hold on to. The writer also adds many things Kings leaves out, especially about the reforms of good kings like Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah, and the prayers they prayed.

Chronicles also tells some stories Kings does not. Kings tells us Manasseh was the worst king of Judah. Chronicles adds that he was taken captive to Babylon, and there "he humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers," and God brought him back (33:12-13). That one story sums up the message of the whole book. Even the worst sinner can be restored if he humbles himself before God.

You can see the pattern almost as soon as the kingdom splits. In the fifth year of Solomon's son Rehoboam, "Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem, for they had acted unfaithfully against the LORD" (12:2). Shishak's own records in Egypt boast of this campaign, about 925 B.C. The prophet Shemaiah told the king why it was happening, and Rehoboam and his officials "humbled themselves," confessing, "The LORD is righteous" (12:6). So God did not destroy them. He let them be servants of Egypt for a while so they would learn the difference between serving Him and serving the kings of the earth (12:7-8). That little story is the whole book in miniature: unfaithfulness, warning, humility, mercy.

Purpose

Second Chronicles teaches that God responds to His people's hearts. When they seek Him, He is found. When they forsake Him, He lets them face the results. The prophet Azariah told King Asa, "the LORD is with you while you are with Him; and if you seek Him, He will be found by you; and if you forsake Him, He will forsake you" (15:2). The writer shows this again and again, king after king.

The book also explains the exile in a fresh way. It was not just punishment. "The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent to them by the hand of His messengers, rising early and sending, for He had compassion on His people" (36:15). But they mocked the prophets "until there was no healing" (36:16). Even then, God had a plan. The land rested for seventy years, as Jeremiah had said (36:21), and then God moved the heart of Cyrus.

Main Themes

The temple and God's presence. Chapters 1-9 are mostly about Solomon's temple. When it was dedicated, the singers and trumpeters praised God with one voice, "For He is good," and the house was filled with a cloud, "for the glory of the LORD filled the house of God" (5:13-14). After Solomon's prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifice (7:1). For the returned exiles, who were worshiping in a much humbler temple, this was a reminder of what God's presence meant.

Humble yourselves and pray. After the dedication, God appeared to Solomon at night and gave him a promise: if "My people, over whom My name is called, humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their evil ways," then God would hear, forgive their sin and heal their land (7:14). The promise was given to Israel about their land and their temple. But the pattern it shows is true for God's people in every age: humility, prayer, seeking God and turning from sin come before healing.

God looks for a whole heart. The seer Hanani told King Asa, "the LORD, His eyes are roving in all the earth to show Himself strong with those whose heart is complete toward Him" (16:9). Asa had started well, but late in life he trusted the king of Syria instead of God, and when his feet became diseased, he sought doctors and not the LORD (16:7-12). Starting well is not enough. God wants the whole heart to the end.

The battle is the LORD's. When a huge army came against Jehoshaphat, he gathered Judah to fast and pray. His prayer ended, "we do not know what we should do; but our eyes are on You" (20:12). God answered through a Levite: "the battle is not yours, but God's" (20:15). Jehoshaphat sent singers out ahead of the army, praising God, and the enemy armies turned on each other. Praise went into battle before the soldiers did.

Pride before a fall. King Uzziah was a strong and successful king. But "when he was strong, his heart was lifted up until he acted corruptly" (26:16). He went into the temple to burn incense, a job only the priests could do, and God struck him with a skin disease for the rest of his life. Success can be more dangerous to the soul than trouble.

Revival and returning. Chronicles gives far more room to revival than Kings does. Hezekiah opened and cleaned the temple, restored the Passover, and invited even the people of the north to

come, telling them "gracious and compassionate is the LORD your God, and He will not turn aside His face from you if you return to Him" (30:9). Josiah found the book of the Law and made a covenant "to walk after the LORD and to keep His commandments" (34:31). Each revival began with a return to God's word and God's worship.

Faith that leans on others. King Joash was saved as a baby and raised by the priest Jehoiada. "Joash did what was right in the eyes of the LORD all the days of Jehoiada the priest" (24:2). But when Jehoiada died, the officials came and flattered the king, "then the king listened to them" (24:17). Judah went back to idols. When Jehoiada's son Zechariah warned them, Joash had him stoned in the temple court (24:20-22). Joash's faith had been borrowed. When the man he leaned on was gone, there was nothing underneath. Each of us needs a faith of our own.

Outline

- Chapters 1-9: Solomon and the temple
- Chapters 10-36: The kings of Judah, from the split of the kingdom to the exile and the decree of Cyrus

Key Verses

2 Chronicles 7:14 *and My people, over whom My name is called, humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their evil ways, then I Myself will hear from the heavens, and I will forgive their sin, and I will heal their land.*

God's promise to His people when they humble themselves, pray and turn from sin.

2 Chronicles 16:9 *For the LORD, His eyes are roving in all the earth to show Himself strong with **those** whose heart **is** complete toward Him. You have acted foolishly in this, for from now on there are wars with you.*

God is looking for people whose hearts are fully His.

2 Chronicles 20:15 *And he said, Pay attention, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat! Thus says the LORD to you: 'You, do not be afraid, and do not be dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle **is** not yours, but God's.*

When the battle is too big for us, it was never ours to begin with.

2 Chronicles 36:22-23 *And in the first year of Cyrus the king of Persia, to complete the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus the king of Persia, and he made a proclamation pass through all his kingdom, and also in writing, saying, "Thus says Cyrus the king of Persia: 'All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD, the God of the heavens, has given to me, and He has charged me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which **is** in Judah. Who **is** among you of all His people? The LORD his God **be** with him, and let him go up.'"*

The last words of the Hebrew Bible. God moved a pagan king to send His people home.

Christ in 2 Chronicles

The book's link to Christ is mainly a theme, not a direct prophecy. Its center is the temple, the place where God put His name and His presence among His people. Jesus is the fulfillment of what the temple pictured. John says the Word "dwelt among us" (John 1:14), and Jesus spoke of His own body as a sanctuary He would raise up in three days (John 2:19-21). He told the woman at the well that a time was coming when true worshipers would worship the Father "in spirit and truth," not tied to one mountain or building (John 4:21-24).

The line of David also runs through every chapter. Second Chronicles shows how close that line came to being wiped out. When Athaliah killed the royal family, only the baby Joash survived, hidden in the temple (22:10-12). God kept the line alive for the sake of His promise. That line led to Jesus, the Son of David (Matthew 1:6-16).

And the ending of the book points forward. In the Hebrew Bible, Chronicles is the last book, so the Old Testament ends with Cyrus saying, "Who is among you of all His people? The LORD his God be with him, and let him go up" (36:23). It ends with an invitation and a waiting. The people would go up and rebuild, but the true King had not yet come. When He did come, He came to that rebuilt temple, just as the prophets said (Haggai 2:9; Malachi 3:1).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Second Chronicles covers the same years as 1 and 2 Kings, but with a different purpose. Kings explains why the exile happened. Chronicles shows God's faithfulness through it and the way back for those who seek Him. Read them together, and you get the full picture: God's judgment is real, and His mercy is greater.

The book also connects to Ezra. The last two verses of 2 Chronicles are repeated almost word for word as the first verses of Ezra (Ezra 1:1-3). The story carries straight on into the return. Cyrus's decree in 538 B.C. was the turning point that made Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi possible.

Chronicles also reminds us that Scripture keeps its word down to the year. Jeremiah had said the exile would last seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11; 29:10), and Chronicles notes that it did (36:21). Daniel read the same prophecy in Babylon and began to pray for his people (Daniel 9:2). God's timing is exact.

Read It This Way

Read 2 Chronicles as a series of short case studies. Each king's story is a lesson. Ask what each king did when he faced a crisis. Did he seek God or rely on his own strength? How did it turn out? You will find the same pattern again and again, but it is not boring once you see how practical it is.

Be careful with 2 Chronicles 7:14. It is often quoted as a promise for modern nations. The promise was given to Israel, God's covenant people in their land. Christians can learn from the pattern of humility, prayer and repentance, and God does hear His people when they pray. But I would not read the verse as a guaranteed formula for any country today. Read it in its setting first.

Notice the role of music and singing. From the temple dedication to Jehoshaphat's army to Hezekiah's Passover, worship is full of song. The Levites who sang were as important to the writer as the priests who offered sacrifices. That should encourage everyone who leads worship.

And take hope from Manasseh. If God could restore a king who had filled Jerusalem with innocent blood and set up idols in the temple, He can restore anyone who humbles himself before Him. Nobody is too far gone for God's mercy. Manasseh's story is also a warning, though. His own repentance was real, but the idolatry he taught Judah outlived him, and his grandson Josiah's reform could not undo it. God forgives the sinner who returns, and the damage we do to others can still last for generations.

Study Questions

1. What does 2 Chronicles 7:14 ask of God's people, and how can we apply the pattern of that verse today while reading it in its setting?
2. Asa started well but ended poorly. What warning does his life give us about finishing well (14:2-6; 16:7-12)?
3. Jehoshaphat prayed, "we do not know what we should do; but our eyes are on You." When have you needed to pray that kind of prayer (20:1-22)?
4. Uzziah's pride grew with his success. Where might success be making you less dependent on God (26:15-21)?
5. Manasseh was the worst king of Judah, yet God restored him. What does his story teach about God's mercy toward people who seem beyond hope (33:1-16)?

Ezra

At a Glance	
Author	Ezra, a priest and scribe (Ezra 7:1-10)
Date written	About 450 B.C., soon after the events of chapters 7-10
Written to	The Jews who had returned from exile to Judah
Setting and time covered	Babylon and Jerusalem, from the decree of Cyrus in 538 B.C. to about 457 B.C.
Chapters	10
Key word	Restoration
Key verse	Ezra 7:10

Background

Second Chronicles ended with Jerusalem burned and a Persian king telling the Jews they could go home. Ezra begins with those same words. "In year one of Cyrus king of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD from the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus" (1:1). Cyrus had conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. The next year he issued a decree allowing the Jews to return and rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem.

That decree was no accident. Jeremiah had said the exile would last seventy years (Jeremiah 29:10). Isaiah, about a century and a half before Cyrus's decree and long before he was born, named him as God's shepherd who would say of Jerusalem, "Let her be rebuilt" (Isaiah 44:28). God keeps His word, and He can move the heart of the most powerful king on earth to do it.

Ezra and Nehemiah were one book in the Hebrew Bible. Ezra himself was a priest descended from Aaron (7:1-5) and "a scribe skilled in the law of Moses" (7:6). A scribe in this sense was more than a copyist. He was a student and teacher of God's Law. Ezra wrote much of chapters 7-10 in the first person. He also used official records, lists and letters, and parts of the book (4:8-6:18 and 7:12-26) are written in Aramaic, the official language of the Persian Empire, rather than Hebrew. That fits a man copying royal documents word for word.

The book covers about eighty years, but there is a big gap in the middle. Chapters 1-6 tell of the first return under Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, and Jeshua the high priest, starting in 538 B.C. About 42,360 people went back (2:64), plus servants. They rebuilt the altar, laid the foundation of the temple, and then faced years of opposition. The temple was finally finished in the sixth year of Darius (6:15), about 515 B.C. Then the story jumps almost sixty years. The events of the book of Esther happen during that gap. Chapters 7-10 tell of Ezra's own return, about 458 or 457 B.C., in the reign of Artaxerxes.

Purpose

Ezra shows God keeping His promise to bring His people home. It also shows what had to be restored once they got there. Rebuilding walls and buildings was the easy part. Rebuilding a people's worship and obedience was harder.

The first half of the book is about restoring the temple, the place of worship. The second half is about restoring the people through God's Word. Both matter. A beautiful building means little if the people inside it do not know or obey God.

Ezra also answers a question the returned exiles must have asked: Was it worth it? They came back to rubble, poor harvests and hostile neighbors. Some of them must have wondered whether they should have stayed in Babylon. Ezra shows them that God was with them in the small, hard work of rebuilding. Ezra called it "a little reviving in our servitude" (9:8). It was little, but it was from God.

Main Themes

God rules over kings. Again and again Ezra says God moved the hearts of rulers. He stirred up Cyrus (1:1). He "turned the heart of the king" toward His people so that Darius helped finish the temple (6:22). He gave Ezra favor with Artaxerxes, "according to the hand of the LORD his God on him" (7:6). God's people were a small, weak group in a huge empire. But the empire's kings were in God's hand.

Worship comes first. When the first returnees reached Jerusalem, before they built houses or walls, they rebuilt the altar and offered sacrifices (3:1-6). When the temple foundation was laid, they sang "For He is good, for His steadfast love is forever toward Israel" (3:11). But the older people, who remembered Solomon's temple, wept out loud, while the younger ones shouted for joy. The text says "the people were not distinguishing the sound of the shout of gladness from the sound of the weeping of the people" (3:13). Both reactions were real. Some saw what was lost. Others saw what God was doing.

Opposition and discouragement. The people living in the land offered to help build the temple, but they worshiped other gods too, and Zerubbabel refused. So they turned against the project. They "were weakening the hands of the people of Judah and terrifying them in building" (4:4), hired advisers against them, and wrote letters to the Persian kings. The work stopped for about sixteen years. Then God sent "Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo" (5:1) to stir the people back to work. Read Haggai and Zechariah 1-8 alongside Ezra 5-6 to hear what those prophets said.

A heart set on God's Word. The key verse of the book describes Ezra: "Ezra had set his heart to seek the law of the LORD and to do it, and to teach statute and judgment in Israel" (7:10). Notice the order. He studied it first. Then he lived it. Only then did he teach it. That is still the right order for anyone who teaches the Bible.

Trusting God for protection. When Ezra prepared to travel to Jerusalem with gold and silver for the temple, he was embarrassed to ask the king for soldiers, because he had told the king, "The hand of our God is on all who seek Him for good" (8:22). So he proclaimed a fast, and the people prayed. They made the dangerous four-month trip safely (7:9; 8:31).

Grief over sin. Soon after Ezra arrived, he learned that many of the returned Jews, including priests and leaders, had married women from the surrounding peoples who worshiped other gods. This was the very sin that had led Solomon and the nation into idolatry. Ezra tore his clothes and prayed, "O my God, I am ashamed and disgraced to lift up, O my God, my face to You" (9:6).

The people were moved, and a man named Shecaniah said, "We have acted unfaithfully against our God," and then added, "now there is hope for Israel concerning this" (10:2). They agreed to put away those marriages.

Outline

- Chapters 1-2: The decree of Cyrus and the first return
- Chapters 3-6: The altar and the temple rebuilt despite opposition
- Chapters 7-8: Ezra's return to Jerusalem
- Chapters 9-10: Ezra's prayer and the people's repentance

Key Verses

Ezra 1:1 *And in year one of Cyrus king of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD from the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, and he caused a proclamation to pass through all his kingdom, and also in writing, saying,*

God moved the heart of a pagan king to keep the promise He made through Jeremiah.

Ezra 3:11 *And they sang responsively with praising and with giving thanks to the LORD: "For **He is** good, for His steadfast love **is** forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted a great shout, praising the LORD because the house of the LORD was founded.*

The people's song when the temple foundation was laid. It is the same song sung at Solomon's temple.

Ezra 7:10 *For Ezra had set his heart to seek the law of the LORD and to do **it**, and to teach statute and judgment in Israel.*

A pattern for every believer, and especially every Bible teacher: study, do, teach.

Ezra 9:8 *And now, for a little moment favor has come from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a tent peg in His holy place, that our God may light up our eyes and give us a little reviving in our servitude.*

Ezra saw the return as "a little reviving" from God. Small beginnings are still God's grace.

Christ in Ezra

The link here is a theme. God protected His people and rebuilt the temple so that the promised Messiah would come to that very house. Haggai, who prophesied during the rebuilding, said, "Great will be the glory of this house, the latter more than the former" (Haggai 2:9). The old men wept because the new temple looked so plain. But it was this second temple, later expanded by Herod, that Jesus walked into. Malachi said, "suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come to His temple" (Malachi 3:1). The glory of the latter house was greater because the Lord Himself came to it.

Zerubbabel also matters. He was a descendant of David through Jehoiachin (1 Chronicles 3:17-19), and Matthew lists him in the family line of Jesus (Matthew 1:12). The king of Judah had been taken away, but David's line was still leading God's people home.

Ezra himself gives us a picture of what Jesus does in a fuller way. Ezra grieved over his people's sin, confessed it as if it were his own (9:6-7), and stood between the people and God. Jesus, who had no sin of His own, took our sin on Himself and intercedes for us (Hebrews 7:25). I would call that a picture, not a type the New Testament names.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Ezra is the first of three books, along with Nehemiah and Esther, that tell of God's people after the exile. The prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi also belong to this period. Together they make up the last chapter of the Old Testament story.

The book shows that the exile did not end God's plan for Israel. He brought them back to the land, just as He said He would. But it was not yet the full restoration the prophets described. They were still under Persian rule, there was no king on David's throne, and the glory cloud did not fill the second temple as it had filled Solomon's. The people were home, but they were still waiting.

That waiting is important. The prophets promised a day when God would gather Israel from every nation, give them a new heart, and set His King over them (Ezekiel 36:24-28; 37:21-25). The return under Cyrus was a down payment on that promise. I believe the full fulfillment is still to come, when Christ returns and reigns.

Read It This Way

Read Ezra as a book about starting over. God's people had failed badly and paid for it. Now they had a second chance. Many of us know what that feels like. Ezra shows that starting over with God begins with worship and continues with His Word.

Notice how often the book mentions lists and letters. They can feel tedious, but they show that real people, family by family, made the choice to leave Babylon and go back. Many Jews stayed in Babylon, where life was comfortable. Those who went home took a risk to be where God was rebuilding.

One thing can confuse a first-time reader. In chapter 4 the writer jumps ahead in time. Verses 1-5 and 24 are about the temple in the days of Cyrus and Darius. But verses 6-23 describe later letters against the Jews in the reigns of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) and Artaxerxes, which were about rebuilding the city walls, not the temple. Ezra gathered the opposition into one place to show how long and stubborn it was. Then in verse 24 he returns to the story of the temple. If you keep that in mind, the chapter makes sense.

Pay attention to the opposition in chapter 4. It came in many forms: an offer to help that would have compromised them, discouragement, fear, legal action, and political pressure. God's work often faces the same things today. The answer in Ezra was not cleverness. It was God's word through the prophets and people willing to get back to work.

Read chapters 9-10 carefully. The answer to mixed marriages was painful, and Scripture does not say every detail was a pattern for later times. The New Testament tells a believer married to an unbeliever not to leave if the spouse is willing to stay (1 Corinthians 7:12-14). The point in Ezra was to protect a small, fragile community from sliding back into the idolatry that had destroyed it before. The lesson for us is that God takes faithfulness seriously, and we must not drift into the sins that once ruined us.

Study Questions

1. God moved the heart of Cyrus to fulfill His word. What does that teach you about God's control over leaders and nations today (1:1; Proverbs 21:1)?
2. At the temple foundation, some wept and some shouted for joy. Why do you think they reacted so differently, and which would you have done (3:10-13)?
3. The work on the temple stopped for years because of opposition. What has discouraged you from doing what God has called you to do, and what got the people moving again (4:4-5, 24; 5:1-2)?
4. Ezra studied God's Law, lived it, and then taught it. Which of those three steps is hardest for you (7:10)?
5. Ezra confessed the people's sin as his own. What does his prayer teach about how we should respond to sin among God's people (9:5-15)?

Nehemiah

At a Glance	
Author	Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:1), much of it in his own first-person record
Date written	About 430 B.C., after his second term as governor
Written to	The Jews in Jerusalem and Judah after the return
Setting and time covered	Susa and Jerusalem, about 445 to 430 B.C.
Chapters	13
Key word	Rebuild
Key verse	Nehemiah 8:10

Background

Nehemiah is one of the most practical books in the Bible. It is a leader's journal. Nehemiah tells us, mostly in his own words, how he heard bad news, prayed, made a plan, got permission, faced opposition, organized workers, solved problems, and finished the job. Then it shows him going on to the harder work of rebuilding a people.

The book opens in Susa, one of the capitals of the Persian Empire. Nehemiah was "cupbearer to the king" (1:11). That was a position of great trust. The cupbearer tasted the king's wine to make sure it was not poisoned, and he often became a close adviser. The king was Artaxerxes I, the same king who had sent Ezra to Jerusalem about thirteen years earlier.

In the month of Kislev, in "the twentieth year" (1:1), Nehemiah's brother came from Judah with a report. The people who had returned were "in great evil and in reproach," and the wall of Jerusalem was broken down and its gates burned with fire (1:3). In the ancient world a city without walls was defenseless and a disgrace. Almost a hundred years after the first return, Jerusalem was still a ruin.

Ezra and Nehemiah were one book in the Hebrew Bible, and the two men worked side by side for a time (8:9). Nehemiah wrote much of the book in the first person (1:1-7:5; 12:31-13:31). Other parts include lists of names and the record of the covenant renewal. Nehemiah served as governor for twelve years, from the twentieth to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes (5:14), about 445 to 433 B.C. He went back to the king and later returned to Jerusalem for a second term (13:6-7). The book was likely finished soon after, around 430 B.C.

Purpose

Nehemiah shows how God uses one faithful person to bring change. Nehemiah was not a priest or a prophet. He was a government official with a job in a palace. But he cared about God's people and God's city, and he put his position to work for God.

The book also shows that rebuilding has two parts. Chapters 1-7 are about rebuilding the wall. Chapters 8-13 are about rebuilding the people around God's Word. The walls went up in less than

two months. The people took much longer, and by the end of the book, some of them were already slipping back.

The last chapter is honest in a way that may surprise you. After his first term, Nehemiah went back to the king. When he returned, he found that Eliashib the priest had cleared out a storeroom in the temple courts for Tobiah, one of the very men who had fought the wall. Nehemiah writes, "it was very displeasing to me, and I threw all the utensils of the house of Tobiah outside" (13:8). He also found that the Levites had not been paid and "had fled, each man to his field" (13:10), that merchants were selling in Jerusalem on the Sabbath, and that some men had married women who worshiped other gods, so that their children could not even speak the language of Judah (13:23-24). The covenant the people signed in chapter 10 had been broken, point by point, within a few years. The book does not end with a parade. It ends with a tired leader still fighting for holiness.

Main Themes

Prayer and action together. When Nehemiah heard the news, "I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of the heavens" (1:4). His prayer in chapter 1 confesses Israel's sin and holds God to His promise in Deuteronomy to gather His people if they return. Four months later, when the king asked him what he wanted, Nehemiah says, "I prayed to the God of the heavens" (2:4), a quick prayer in the moment, and then answered the king. Nehemiah prayed, and he planned. He did both.

Good leadership. Nehemiah inspected the walls at night before telling anyone his plan (2:12-16). Then he called the people together, told them how God's hand had been on him, and they said, "Let us arise and build" (2:18). He gave each family a section of wall, usually near their own homes (chapter 3). When the poor were being crushed by debt to their richer neighbors, he confronted the nobles and made them stop (chapter 5). And he refused the governor's food allowance, because the people were already burdened (5:14-18).

Facing opposition. Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem did everything they could to stop the work. First they mocked (2:19; 4:1-3). Then they threatened to attack. Nehemiah's answer was simple and wise: "we prayed to our God, and we stationed a guard against them by day and night" (4:9). The builders worked "with one of his hands doing the work, and one holding the weapon" (4:17). Nehemiah told the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the great and awesome Lord" (4:14).

Not coming down. When threats failed, the enemies tried tricks. They asked Nehemiah four times to meet them in the valley, planning to harm him. He answered, "I am doing a great work, and I am not able to come down" (6:3). They spread false rumors and even hired a prophet to scare him into hiding in the temple. He refused. "The wall was completed on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days" (6:15). Even the enemies "knew that this work had been done from our God" (6:16).

The joy of hearing God's Word. Once the wall was done, the people gathered in the square, and Ezra read the Law from early morning until midday. The Levites "read in the book, in the law of God, making it clear and giving the sense, and they understood the reading" (8:8). The people

wept when they heard it, because they saw how far they had fallen. But Nehemiah and Ezra told them to celebrate instead: "do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your stronghold" (8:10).

Confession and covenant. Chapter 9 is a long prayer of confession that retells Israel's whole history, from creation to the exile. Over and over it says the people sinned and God was faithful: "You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger" (9:17). Then the leaders signed a written covenant to obey the Law, keep the Sabbath, support the temple, and not marry those who worshiped other gods (chapter 10).

A city that needed people. A wall is not much use around an empty city. Chapter 11 says the leaders lived in Jerusalem, and the rest of the people cast lots so that one family in ten would move there (11:1). Others volunteered, and the people blessed them for it (11:2). Living in Jerusalem meant leaving farms and family land for a city that was still poor and exposed. It took sacrifice to fill God's city.

Outline

- Chapters 1-7: Rebuilding the walls
- Chapters 8-10: Renewing the people through God's Word
- Chapters 11-13: Settling Jerusalem and Nehemiah's later reforms

Key Verses

Nehemiah 1:11 *Please, Lord, let Your ear be attentive, please, to the prayer of Your servant and to the prayer of Your servants who delight to fear Your name; and give success, please, to Your servant today, and give him compassion before this man. And I was cupbearer to the king.*

Nehemiah's prayer before he spoke to the king. Real leadership begins on its knees.

Nehemiah 4:14 *And I saw, and I arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the great and awesome Lord, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your houses."*

Courage rooted in remembering who God is.

Nehemiah 6:15-16 *And the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth **day** of Elul, in fifty-two days. And it was, when all our enemies heard, **that** all the nations which **were** around us were afraid, and they fell greatly in their own eyes; and they knew that this work had been done from our God.*

The wall finished in fifty-two days, and even the enemies saw God's hand in it.

Nehemiah 8:10 *And he said to them, "Go, eat fat things and drink sweet things, and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared, for this day **is** holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your stronghold."*

God's joy is His people's strength, even when His Word convicts them.

Christ in Nehemiah

Nehemiah does not contain a direct prophecy of Christ, and the New Testament does not name him as a type. The link is a theme. Nehemiah left a place of comfort and honor in the king's palace to come to a broken city, share its burdens, and rebuild what was ruined. He did not take what he was owed. He gave himself to serve. In that, he is a small picture of the One who left heaven's glory to come and restore His people (Philippians 2:5-8).

There is also a link through the calendar of prophecy. Daniel 9:25 speaks of a period of "seven sevens and sixty-two sevens" from "the going forth of the word to restore and to build Jerusalem" until "an anointed one, a prince." The two starting points most often proposed are both from Artaxerxes: his decree to Ezra in his seventh year, about 457 B.C. (Ezra 7:11-26), and his permission to Nehemiah in his twentieth year, about 445 or 444 B.C. (2:1-8). Faithful teachers hold both, and either way the sixty-nine sevens reach the time of Christ's first coming. I'll leave the details to the chapter on Daniel, but it is worth knowing that many see Nehemiah's permission slip as a fixed point on God's prophetic clock.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Nehemiah is the last historical book of the Old Testament in time. Malachi, the last of the prophets, likely preached around the same years, and he rebukes many of the same sins Nehemiah faced in chapter 13: careless priests, withheld tithes, and marriages to those who served other gods. After Nehemiah and Malachi, the Old Testament falls silent for about four hundred years until John the Baptist.

The book shows that the return from exile was real but incomplete. The temple was standing, the walls were up, and the Law was being read. But the people still struggled to obey. Nehemiah's last chapter is a list of things that went wrong while he was away. He ends with a simple prayer: "Remember me, my God, for good" (13:31). The people needed more than walls and reforms. They needed new hearts, which only the new covenant could bring (Jeremiah 31:33).

The rebuilt Jerusalem of Nehemiah's day is the city Jesus would one day walk into. And the Bible ends with another city, the New Jerusalem, with walls and gates that are never shut (Revelation 21:10-25). God's work of rebuilding does not end until everything is made new.

Read It This Way

Read Nehemiah as a model for doing God's work in a real world. He faced the same things leaders face today: discouragement, criticism, fear, money problems, quarrels inside the group, and people who start strong and then quit. Watch how he handles each one. He prays, he plans, he speaks plainly, and he keeps going.

Notice how often Nehemiah prays short prayers in the middle of the action (2:4; 4:4-5; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). He does not wait for a quiet hour. He talks to God right there on the wall. That is a good habit for any of us.

Don't skip chapter 3, the list of who built what. Priests worked next to goldsmiths and perfume makers. One man's daughters worked with him (3:12). The nobles of Tekoa "did not bring their

neck into the service of their lords" (3:5). Every name mattered to God, and the list honors ordinary people who did their part.

And be encouraged by chapter 8. The people did not just hear the Law read. They had it explained, they understood it, and they responded. That is still what God's Word is meant to do. If the Bible has ever seemed dry to you, ask God to help you understand it, and look for someone who can explain it plainly. Understanding leads to conviction, and conviction leads to joy.

Study Questions

1. Nehemiah wept, fasted and prayed for days when he heard about Jerusalem. What breaks your heart about the condition of God's people today, and what are you doing about it (1:3-11)?
2. Nehemiah prayed a quick prayer before answering the king. How can you build the habit of praying in the moment (2:4-5)?
3. When the enemies threatened, Nehemiah prayed and posted a guard. How do prayer and wise action work together in your life (4:7-14)?
4. Nehemiah said, "I am doing a great work, and I am not able to come down." What distractions are trying to pull you away from what God has given you to do (6:1-4)?
5. The people wept when they heard the Law, but they were told that the joy of the LORD was their strength. How can God's Word convict us and give us joy at the same time (8:8-12)?

Esther

At a Glance	
Author	Not named; a Jew who knew the Persian court well
Date written	Sometime after the events, likely in the 400s B.C.
Written to	The Jewish people, to explain the feast of Purim
Setting and time covered	Susa, capital of Persia, about 483 to 473 B.C., in the reign of Xerxes (Ahasuerus)
Chapters	10
Key word	Providence
Key verse	Esther 4:14

Background

Esther and the Song of Songs are the two books of the Bible that never plainly mention God by name. There is no prayer recorded in it, no temple, no prophet, no miracle. And yet God's hand is on every page. That is the point of the book. Even when God seems silent, He is working.

The story takes place in Susa, one of the capitals of the Persian Empire, during the reign of King Ahasuerus. He is better known in history by his Greek name, Xerxes I, who ruled from 486 to 465 B.C. His empire stretched "from India and as far as Cush" (1:1), from the edge of India to the upper Nile. The events happen between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7, after the first group of Jews had gone back to rebuild the temple and before Ezra led his group home. Many Jews had chosen to stay in Persia, where life was settled. Esther is about them.

The author is not named. He knew the Persian court very well: its customs, its officials, its laws that could not be changed, and its royal records. He was a Jew writing for Jews, and one of his main goals was to explain the origin of Purim, a feast the Jewish people still keep every year.

The plot is simple and dramatic. King Ahasuerus deposed his queen, Vashti, when she refused to appear at his banquet. After a search through the empire, he chose a young Jewish woman named Esther, raised by her older cousin Mordecai. Esther kept her Jewish identity a secret. Then Haman, the king's top official, was enraged that Mordecai would not bow to him (3:2). He decided to destroy not only Mordecai but "all the Jews who were in all the kingdom of Ahasuerus" (3:6). He cast lots, called pur, to pick the day, and he talked the king into signing a decree.

Purpose

Esther shows that God protects His people even when they are scattered and even when He is not named. The Jews of Persia had no prophet, no temple nearby, and no king of their own. But God had not forgotten them. Every "coincidence" in the book lines up to save them.

The book also explains why the Jews celebrate Purim. Mordecai wrote to the Jews throughout the empire to keep these days every year, "as the days on which the Jews had rest from their enemies" (9:22). The name comes from the lots Haman cast: "they called these days Purim, after the name of the Pur" (9:26).

Main Themes

God's hidden hand. Look at the timing. Esther became queen just before Haman's plot. Mordecai had earlier saved the king's life by reporting an assassination plot, but he was never rewarded (2:21-23). Then, on the very night before Haman came to ask permission to hang Mordecai, "the sleep of the king fled," and he had the royal records read to him (6:1). He heard about Mordecai and decided to honor him, and Haman was the one forced to lead the parade. No miracle, no voice from heaven. Just a sleepless king. God does not always part seas. Sometimes He keeps a king awake.

For such a time as this. When Mordecai told Esther about the decree, she was afraid. Anyone who went to the king without being called could be put to death. Mordecai answered, "if you indeed keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place." Then he asked, "who knows whether for a time like this you have attained to royalty?" (4:14). Mordecai believed God would save His people one way or another. The question was whether Esther would be part of it.

Courage that risks everything. Esther asked all the Jews in Susa to fast for her for three days, and she and her maids fasted too. Then she said, "I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and as I perish, I perish" (4:16). Fasting in the Bible goes with prayer, so even though the word prayer is not used, it is clear what they were doing.

The tables turned. Haman built a gallows to hang Mordecai. In the end, "they hanged Haman on the tree which he had prepared for Mordecai" (7:10). The day Haman had chosen to destroy the Jews became the day "it was turned about, so that the Jews themselves domineered over those who hated them" (9:1). Sorrow turned to joy and mourning to a good day (9:22). Proverbs 26:27 says that whoever digs a pit will fall into it. Esther shows it happening.

Outline

- Chapters 1-2: Esther becomes queen
- Chapters 3-5: Haman's plot and Esther's courage
- Chapters 6-10: The tables turned, and the feast of Purim

Key Verses

Esther 4:14 *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?*

Mordecai's challenge to Esther. God places His people where they are for a reason.

Esther 4:16 *"Go, gather all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me, and do not eat and do not drink three days, night and day. Also I and my young women will fast likewise; and so I will go in to the king, which* ***is*** *not according to the law; and as I perish, I perish."*

Esther's decision to risk her life for her people.

Esther 6:1 *On that night the sleep of the king fled, and he said to bring the book of the records, the matters of the days; and they were read before the king.*

The turning point of the book. One sleepless night changed everything.

Esther 9:22 *as the days on which the Jews had rest from their enemies, and the month which was turned for them from sorrow into joy and from mourning into a good day; to make them days of feasting and joy and of sending portions each to his neighbor and gifts to the needy.*

Sorrow turned to joy. The feast of Purim remembers God's deliverance.

Christ in Esther

Esther has no direct prophecy of Christ, and the New Testament never quotes it. The link is God's protection of His people and of the line through which the Messiah would come. If Haman's plan had worked, the Jews across the whole Persian Empire, including those back in Judah, would have been wiped out. There would have been no Bethlehem, no Son of David. Esther is part of the long story of God keeping His promise to Abraham and David against every attempt to destroy it.

There is also an old enemy in the background. Haman is called "the Agagite" (3:1), which most likely ties him to Agag, king of the Amalekites, whom Saul failed to destroy (1 Samuel 15:8-9). Mordecai was from the tribe of Benjamin and descended from a man named Kish (2:5), the same name as Saul's father. Centuries later, a Benjamite finished the fight Saul left undone.

Esther herself gives a picture, not a type, of one who risks her life to stand between her people and death. She went to the king saying, "as I perish, I perish." Jesus did more. He did not only risk death for His people. He died for them and rose again, and now He stands before the Father for us (Romans 8:34).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Esther fills in a gap in Ezra. Between the rebuilding of the temple in Ezra 6 and Ezra's return in Ezra 7, God was protecting the Jews who were still scattered. The book reminds us that God's people are not only those in the land. He cares for them wherever they are.

Esther also shows a pattern that runs through all of history. Pharaoh tried to destroy Israel. Haman tried. Others have tried since, again and again. None has succeeded. God promised Abraham that He would curse those who curse his descendants (Genesis 12:3), and He promised through Jeremiah that He would never make a full end of Israel (Jeremiah 30:11). I believe God still has a future for the nation of Israel (Romans 11:25-29), and Esther is one more proof that He keeps His people.

Read It This Way

Read Esther in one sitting. It is a story, and it builds like one, with the turning point right in the middle at 6:1. Watch for the reversals: who bows and who is honored, who builds the gallows and who hangs on it, which day was meant for death and became a day of joy.

Don't be bothered that God's name is not in the book. That silence teaches us something. Most of us will never see a miracle like the Red Sea. We live in the world of Esther, where God works through ordinary events, timing, and people willing to do the right thing. When you look back on your life, you may find His fingerprints in the same way.

Some parts of the book are hard. Esther hid her faith for a long time, and the Jews' defense in chapter 9 involved a lot of bloodshed. Scripture records these things without always commenting on them. But the main message is clear: God protects His people, and He calls us to have the courage to speak up when it matters.

Study Questions

1. God is never named in Esther. Where do you see His hand at work in the story (2:21-23; 4:14; 6:1-3)?
2. What did Mordecai mean when he said, "who knows whether for a time like this you have attained to royalty?" Where might God have placed you "for a time like this" (4:12-14)?
3. Esther fasted and asked others to fast before she went to the king. What does that teach about facing a fearful decision (4:15-17)?
4. Haman was destroyed by the very thing he planned for Mordecai. What does that teach about pride and revenge (5:9-14; 7:9-10; Proverbs 16:18)?
5. When God seems silent in your life, how does the book of Esther encourage you to keep trusting Him (4:14; 6:1-3)?

Part Three: Poetry and Wisdom

The first seventeen books of the Old Testament tell a story. They take us from creation to the return from exile, from Adam to Nehemiah. Now the story pauses. The next five books, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs, do not move the history forward. Instead they take us inside the hearts of God's people and show us how they lived, prayed, suffered, loved and thought about life in God's world.

These books are often called the books of poetry and wisdom. Almost all of them are written in Hebrew poetry. Hebrew poetry does not depend on rhyme or a steady beat the way English poetry often does. Its main feature is parallel lines. The writer says something, and then says it again in other words, or builds on it, or sets its opposite beside it. "A lamp to my foot is Your word, and a light to my pathway" (Psalm 119:105). Once you see that pattern, you start to read these books the way they were meant to be read. The second line often explains the first.

They are also books of wisdom. In the Bible, wisdom is not mainly about being clever. It is skill in living life the way God designed it. And it has one starting point: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7). Each of these books looks at life from a different angle, but every one of them comes back to God.

Here is how they fit together. Job wrestles with suffering. A righteous man loses everything, and his friends tell him it must be his fault. God finally answers him, not with an explanation, but with Himself. Psalms is Israel's prayer book and song book, 150 prayers and songs that cover every feeling a believer can have, from deep despair to shouting praise. Proverbs is wisdom for everyday life, short sayings on work, money, words, friendship and family. Ecclesiastes looks honestly at life under the sun and finds that nothing in this world can satisfy the heart apart from God. Song of Songs is a love song that celebrates married love as God's good gift.

Notice the range. These books deal with pain, worship, ordinary choices, the search for meaning, and romance. God cares about all of it. There is no part of our lives that falls outside His concern, and no feeling we are not allowed to bring to Him. That alone makes these books precious.

How should we read them? Slowly. These are not books to rush. A psalm can be read in two minutes and prayed for a lifetime. A proverb is meant to be chewed on. Job and Ecclesiastes make sense only when you read them all the way to the end, because the answer comes last. Pay attention to who is speaking. In Job, much of what the friends say is wrong, and God says so (Job 42:7). In Ecclesiastes, the Preacher often describes life as it looks without God, so that we will look up. And remember that a proverb tells how life usually works, not a promise that it always will.

Most of all, read these books as a believer who wants to know God better. Jesus said the Psalms speak of Him (Luke 24:44). Paul calls Christ the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24). Job longed for a mediator, and God sent one. The longing in these books for wisdom, for justice, for meaning and for love finds its answer in Jesus Christ.

Job

At a Glance	
Author	Not named; Jewish tradition gives it to Moses, and others suggest Job himself, Elihu or Solomon
Date written	Unknown; the events likely took place in the time of the patriarchs, about 2000 B.C.
Written to	God's people in every age who suffer and do not know why
Setting and time covered	The land of Uz, probably east of Israel; Job's trial and restoration, followed by about 140 more years of his life (42:16)
Chapters	42
Key word	Trusting God in suffering
Key verse	Job 19:25

Background

Job opens like a story told around a fire: "There was a man in the land of Uz; Job was his name" (1:1). We are told right away what kind of man he was. He was blameless and upright, he feared God, and he turned away from evil. He was also rich. He had seven sons, three daughters, and huge herds of sheep, camels, oxen and donkeys. The writer says "that man was greater than all the sons of the east" (1:3).

Job is the first of the five books of poetry and wisdom in our English Bibles. Only the opening two chapters and the closing part of chapter 42 are written as plain story. Everything in between is Hebrew poetry, and some of the hardest Hebrew in the Old Testament. That is worth knowing before you start. Job is not a quick read. It is a long, honest conversation about pain, and it moves slowly on purpose, the way real grief moves.

Who wrote it? The book does not say. Jewish tradition gives it to Moses, and others have suggested Job himself, Elihu or Solomon. The writer was a man of deep faith who knew God well, and that is as far as the evidence takes us. Scripture doesn't tell us his name.

When did Job live? The book gives us clues that point to the time of the patriarchs, the age of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, about 2000 B.C. Job lives about 140 years after his trials (42:16), which fits the long lives of that era. He offers sacrifices himself as the head of his family (1:5), with no priest or temple. His wealth is counted in herds, not in land or silver. And the book never mentions the Law of Moses, the exodus or Israel. When the book was written down is a different question, and the honest answer is that we don't know. Some place the writing close to Job's own time, some in the days of Moses, and some in the time of Solomon or later, when much of Israel's wisdom writing was gathered.

Job was a real man. Ezekiel names him with Noah and Daniel as an example of righteousness (Ezekiel 14:14, 20), and James points to Job's endurance as an example for believers (James 5:11). Paul quotes Job 5:13 as Scripture (1 Corinthians 3:19). The Bible treats Job as history, and so do I.

Purpose

The book asks the question everyone asks sooner or later: why do good people suffer? But it asks a deeper question underneath that one. In the first chapter Satan stands before the LORD and says, "Has Job feared God for nothing?" (1:9). In other words, does anyone love God for who He is, or only for what He gives? Job's life becomes the answer.

The book also shows us what not to say to people who are hurting. Job's three friends come to comfort him, and they do well for seven days, while they sit with him in silence (2:13). Then they open their mouths. For the rest of the book they argue that Job must have sinned, because God always punishes the wicked and blesses the good. At the end God says plainly that they were wrong (42:7).

Here is how the story unfolds. In one day Job loses his oxen, his donkeys, his sheep, his camels, his servants and then all ten of his children, each messenger arriving before the last one has finished speaking (1:13-19). Job tears his robe, falls to the ground and worships. Then Satan comes back and says that a man will give anything to save his own skin. God allows him to strike Job's body, and Job is covered with painful sores from head to foot (2:7). His wife tells him to curse God and die. Job answers, "Shall we also accept the good from God, and not accept the evil?" (2:10).

Then the friends arrive, and the long middle of the book begins. Job's first speech in chapter 3 is raw. He does not curse God, but he curses the day he was born, and he asks why he did not die at birth. From there the arguments grow sharper. Eliphaz appeals to a vision he had in the night. Bildad appeals to the wisdom of the fathers. Zophar simply tells Job he deserves worse than he is getting (11:6). Job, for his part, swings between despair and hope, sometimes in the same chapter. In chapters 29-31 he remembers the days when he was honored, describes how low he has fallen, and then swears he is innocent of every sin he can think of. He ends by asking God to answer him (31:35).

Finally, Job teaches us to trust God when He does not explain Himself. God never tells Job about the conversation in heaven. He does something better. He shows Job Himself.

Main Themes

God is sovereign, even over Satan. Satan cannot touch Job without God's permission, and he cannot go one step past the limit God sets (1:12; 2:6). That truth does not make suffering easy, but it means suffering is never out of God's hands. Evil is real, and it is on a leash.

Suffering is not always punishment. The friends hold a simple rule: if you suffer, you sinned. Some suffering does come from sin, but the book of Job shows that the rule is not always true. Job was suffering because he was righteous, not because he was wicked (1:8). Jesus taught the same thing about the man born blind (John 9:1-3).

Honest faith can bring its questions to God. Job does not curse God, but he does complain, argue and cry out. He says, "He will kill me; I will hope in Him" (13:15). God rebukes Job for speaking without knowledge (38:2), yet He also says Job spoke what was right, and the friends did not (42:7). God would rather have our honest prayers than our polished words.

God's wisdom is beyond ours. Chapter 28 is a poem on wisdom. Men can dig in the earth for silver and gold, but they cannot dig up wisdom. Only God knows where it lives, and He tells man that the fear of the Lord is wisdom (28:28). When God speaks in chapters 38-41, He asks Job more than seventy questions about creation, and Job cannot answer one of them.

God restores. The LORD "turned back the captivity of Job when he prayed for his friends" (42:10) and gave him twice what he had before. Not every believer gets his health and wealth back in this life. But Job's ending points to the end of the whole story, when God will make everything right.

Outline

- Chapters 1-2: Job tested. Satan accuses Job, and in two waves of loss Job loses his wealth, his children and his health.
- Chapter 3: Job's lament. Job curses the day he was born.
- Chapters 4-31: Debates with his three friends. Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar speak in three rounds, and Job answers each one; Job closes with his own long defense (chapters 29-31).
- Chapters 32-37: Elihu speaks. A younger man, angry at both Job and the friends, says God uses suffering to teach and correct.
- Chapters 38-41: God speaks. The LORD answers Job out of the whirlwind.
- Chapter 42: Job repents and is restored.

Key Verses

Job 1:21 *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's first words after losing everything are worship. He knew where his blessings came from, and he blessed God when they were gone.

Job 13:15 *Look, He will kill me; I will hope in Him. Nevertheless I will argue my ways to His face.*

This is faith at the edge. Job did not understand God, but he would not let go of Him.

Job 19:25-26 *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,*

In the darkest part of the book, Job says he knows his Redeemer lives and that he will see God. This is one of the clearest hopes of resurrection in the Old Testament.

Job 38:4 *Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell **Me**, if you know understanding.*

God's first question to Job sets the tone for His whole answer. The One who made the earth does not owe us an explanation, but He can be trusted.

Job 42:5-6 *By the hearing of the ear I had heard of You, and now my eye has seen You. Therefore I reject **it**, and I repent on dust and ashes.*

Job had heard about God. Now he has seen Him. That changed everything.

Christ in Job

Job never names the Messiah, and I won't force the book to say more than it does. But Job cries out for exactly what God later gives in Christ. In 9:33 he says, "There is no arbiter between us, who might lay his hand on the two of us." An arbiter is a go-between, someone who can stand between two parties and bring them together. Job felt God was so far above him that no one could bridge the gap. Paul tells us that there is "one mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). Jesus is God and man, so He can put one hand on God and one hand on us.

Then in 19:25 Job says, "I know that my Redeemer lives." A redeemer in Israel was a close relative who stepped in to buy back what was lost, to free a family member, or to defend his cause (Leviticus 25:25; Ruth 4). Job is sure that God will stand up for him in the end, and that after his body has decayed he will see God (19:26). The New Testament shows us that our Redeemer is Jesus, who bought us with His blood (1 Peter 1:18-19) and who rose from the dead and lives forever (Hebrews 7:25).

Job's suffering also gives us a picture of Christ. Here was a righteous man who suffered terribly, was accused by his friends, and then prayed for those same friends (42:8-10). That is a theme, not a direct prophecy, but it is hard to miss. Jesus, the only truly innocent sufferer, prayed for those who crucified Him (Luke 23:34).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Job may be the oldest story in the Bible after Genesis 1-11, and it deals with the oldest problem in a fallen world: pain. Genesis 3 tells us how suffering and death came into the world. Job shows us one man living inside that broken world, with no Bible, no temple and no promise spelled out in detail, holding on to God anyway.

The book also pulls back the curtain on the unseen world. Like Daniel 10 and Revelation 12, it shows that there is more going on in our lives than we can see. Satan is the accuser (Revelation 12:10), and he still claims that God's people love Him only for His gifts. Every believer who keeps trusting God in loss proves him wrong.

Job's restoration looks forward to the end of the Bible. God will one day wipe away every tear (Revelation 21:4). Job got a taste of that in this life. We will get the whole thing.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

The main debate is about when the book was written. The book's own clues place Job himself in the time of the patriarchs. But the writing could have come later. Some conservative scholars think it was written early, perhaps by Moses or someone near Job's time. Others think a later writer, perhaps in Solomon's day, put Job's story and speeches into this polished poetry. Both views take the book as true and inspired. I don't think we can settle it, and the message of the book doesn't depend on it.

Teachers also differ over Elihu. Some see him as a young man who speaks for God and prepares the way for God's own speech. Others see him as a fourth friend who mostly repeats the same mistakes. It is worth noticing that God rebukes the three friends at the end (42:7) but says nothing about Elihu either way.

Read It This Way

Read chapters 1-2 slowly, because they are the key to the rest. You know something Job never knows: that his suffering began with a challenge in heaven, and that God was proud of him (1:8). Keep that in your mind the whole way through.

When you get to the speeches, don't take every line as a truth to live by. The friends say some true things about God, but they apply them wrongly, and God says they did not speak what is right (42:7). Job says some wrong things in his pain. The book records them honestly. So ask, who is speaking, and does God agree with him at the end?

Read the speeches in rounds. Eliphaz speaks, Job answers. Bildad speaks, Job answers. Zophar speaks, Job answers. Then the cycle starts again. By the third round the friends are running out of things to say, and Zophar doesn't speak at all.

Watch Job's hope rise and fall. In 9:33 he wishes for an arbiter. In 16:19 he says his witness is in heaven. In 19:25 he declares that his Redeemer lives. Even in the darkness, Job keeps reaching for God, and each time he reaches a little higher.

Then read chapters 38-41 out loud. God's speech is some of the most beautiful poetry ever written. He takes Job on a tour of the stars, the sea, the storm, the wild animals, and two great creatures, Behemoth and Leviathan. Ask yourself the question God asks Job: where were you when He made all this?

You might ask, why does God speak about ostriches and wild donkeys when Job is grieving his children? It's simple. Job wanted a reason. God gave him a Person. Every question in those chapters says the same thing: I made all of this, I feed it, I rule it, and I know what I am doing. If God can run the universe, He can be trusted with one man's pain. Job never learns about the conversation in heaven, and he doesn't need to. He has seen God, and that is enough (42:5).

If you are hurting, Job gives you permission to be honest with God. It also gives you a warning about the kind of friend you should be. Sit with people. Weep with them. Be slow to explain their pain.

Study Questions

1. Satan asked whether Job feared God for nothing. How would you answer that question about your own faith (1:9-11)?
2. Job's friends did well while they sat with him in silence. What changed when they started to speak (2:11-13; 4:7-8)?
3. What did Job long for when he said there was no arbiter between him and God, and how does Jesus answer that longing (9:32-33; 1 Timothy 2:5)?
4. God never told Job why he suffered. Why do you think He answered with questions about creation instead (38:1-7)?
5. Job's fortunes were restored when he prayed for the friends who had hurt him. What does that teach us about forgiveness (42:7-10)?

Psalms

At a Glance	
Author	Many writers: David (at least 73 psalms), Asaph, the sons of Korah, Solomon, Moses, Heman, Ethan and others not named
Date written	Over about 1,000 years, from Moses (about 1410 B.C.) to the return from exile (after 538 B.C.); most in the time of David and Solomon
Written to	Israel, for worship at the tabernacle and temple and for private prayer, and God's people in every age
Setting and time covered	From the wilderness years to the years after the exile in Babylon
Chapters	150
Key word	Praise
Key verse	Psalm 23:1

Background

If you could keep only one book of the Old Testament, many believers would pick the Psalms. It is the longest book in the Bible, with 150 psalms, and it has been the prayer book and song book of God's people for three thousand years. Jesus prayed the Psalms. The apostles quoted them more than almost any other Old Testament book. And Christians in every age have turned to them in the hospital, at the graveside, and at the kitchen table at two in the morning.

The Hebrew title of the book means "praises." Our English word psalm comes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, where it meant a song sung with stringed instruments. That tells you what this book is. It is not a set of lectures about God. It is people talking to God, and singing about Him, out loud.

The Psalms have many writers. David's name is on at least 73 of them. He was a shepherd, a musician, a warrior and a king, and you can hear every one of those in his psalms. Others come from Asaph, one of David's chief musicians, and from the sons of Korah, a family of Levites who led worship. Solomon wrote two (72 and 127), Moses wrote one (90), and Heman and Ethan wrote one each (88 and 89). About fifty psalms name no writer at all.

The psalms were written over about a thousand years. The oldest is likely Moses' prayer in Psalm 90, from the wilderness years about 1410 B.C. Most come from the time of David and Solomon, around 1000 B.C. A few, like Psalm 137, come from the exile in Babylon or after the return in 538 B.C. The collection was gathered and arranged over time, probably reaching its final form after the exile.

A word on the name of God. When you see LORD in capital letters in the SLB, it stands for God's personal name, YHWH (often written Yahweh), which He made known to Moses (Exodus 3:14-15). When you see Lord in regular letters, it usually translates Adonai, a title meaning Master. When you see God, it usually translates Elohim, the general Hebrew word for God. The Psalms use all three, and paying attention to them helps. Psalm 110:1 only makes sense when you see that the LORD, God Himself, is speaking to David's Lord, the Messiah.

Many psalms open with a heading, such as "A psalm of David" or a note on the occasion or the music. In the Hebrew text these headings are part of the psalm. The SLB prints them as verse 0. Some of the musical words in them, and the word Selah found inside many psalms, are old terms whose exact meaning is not certain.

Purpose

The Psalms teach God's people how to worship and how to pray. They give us words when we have none. They also show us that every part of life can be brought to God: joy and grief, thanks and anger, guilt and fear, doubt and hope.

I think that is one of the most freeing things about this book. Many Christians believe they must clean up their feelings before they talk to God. The Psalms show the opposite. David pours out his fear, his sorrow and his sin before the LORD, and then, very often within the same psalm, he comes back around to trust. The Psalms do not leave us where we start. They walk us from honest prayer to settled faith.

The Psalms were also meant to be sung together. Israel sang them at the temple and on the road to the feasts. The early church kept singing them. Paul tells believers to speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), and James says anyone who is cheerful should sing praise (James 5:13). Before Jesus went out to the Mount of Olives on the night He was betrayed, He and His disciples sang a hymn (Matthew 26:30). Many believe it was from Psalms 113-118, which Jewish families sang at Passover.

Finally, the Psalms keep pointing ahead. Again and again they speak of a King God promised to David, a King who would suffer, rise and reign forever. Jesus said that the things written about Him "the psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44).

Main Themes

God is worthy of praise. The book moves from cries for help near the beginning to nothing but praise at the end. Psalm 150 closes the whole collection with one command: "Let everything that has breath praise the LORD" (150:6).

God is a refuge in trouble. Many psalms are laments, prayers from people in danger, sickness, or sorrow. They cry, "How long, LORD?" (13:1) and they find that God is "a refuge and strength for us, a help in troubles" (46:1).

God's Word is a delight. Psalm 1 opens the book with the man who delights in the law of the LORD, and Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible, spends 176 verses on the beauty of God's Word. The book assumes that the way to know God is to listen to what He has said.

Sin must be confessed. Psalms 32 and 51 are David's prayers after his sin with Bathsheba. They show what true repentance looks like: no excuses, full honesty, and trust in God's mercy. "Create for me a pure heart, God" (51:10).

God's King will reign. The royal psalms (such as 2, 45, 72 and 110) speak of the king from David's line. They say things about him that no ordinary king could live up to. The New Testament shows that they find their full meaning in Jesus.

Outline

The Psalms are arranged in five books. The first four each end with a short blessing of praise (41:13; 72:18-19; 89:52; 106:48), and Psalm 150 closes the fifth.

- Psalms 1-41: Book One. Mostly psalms of David, many of them cries for help and songs of trust.
- Psalms 42-72: Book Two. Psalms of the sons of Korah and of David, ending with Solomon's psalm of the King (72:20 notes that the prayers of David are finished).
- Psalms 73-89: Book Three. Psalms of Asaph and the sons of Korah, many wrestling with national disaster and God's promises to David.
- Psalms 90-106: Book Four. Opening with Moses' prayer, these psalms celebrate the LORD as King.
- Psalms 107-150: Book Five. Psalms of thanks, Psalm 119 on God's Word, the Songs of Ascents (120-134) sung on the way up to Jerusalem, and a closing wave of praise.

Key Verses

Psalms 1:1-2 *How blessed **is** the man who has not walked in the counsel of **the** wicked, and in the way of sinners has not stood, and in the seat of mockers has not sat! But rather his delight **is** in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates by day and night.*

The doorway into the whole book. The blessed life starts with what we listen to and what we delight in.

Psalms 23:1 *The LORD **is** my shepherd; I will not lack.*

The best-known psalm in the world, and for good reason. If the LORD is my shepherd, then everything I truly need, He will supply.

Psalms 46:1 *God **is** a refuge and strength for us, a help in troubles, found abundantly.*

When the earth shakes, God does not. This is the psalm Martin Luther's great hymn was built on.

Psalms 51:10 *Create for me a pure heart, God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

David asks God not just to forgive him, but to make his heart new. Only God can do that.

Psalms 119:105 *A lamp to my foot **is** Your word, and a light to my pathway.*

God's Word does not always light up the whole road. It lights the next step, and that is enough.

Christ in Psalms

The New Testament tells us plainly that the Psalms speak of Christ. Jesus said so (Luke 24:44), and the apostles preached Him from the Psalms. Here are the clearest places where the New Testament itself makes the connection.

Psalm 2 shows the LORD's anointed King, whom God calls His Son: "You are My Son; I, today I have begotten You" (2:7). Paul applies this to the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 13:33), and Hebrews uses it to show that Jesus is greater than the angels (Hebrews 1:5).

Psalm 16 speaks of One whom God will not leave in the grave: "You will not give Your godly one to see the pit" (16:10). Peter preached on the day of Pentecost that David could not have meant himself, because David died and his tomb was still with them. David was speaking as a prophet about the resurrection of the Messiah (Acts 2:25-31).

Psalm 22 begins with the words Jesus cried from the cross: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" (22:1; Matthew 27:46). The psalm goes on to describe mocking crowds, thirst, the dividing of clothing by lot (22:18; John 19:24), and hands and feet pierced (22:16). It ends in victory, with all the ends of the earth turning to the LORD (22:27).

Psalm 110 is the Old Testament passage most often quoted in the New. The LORD says to David's Lord, "Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet" (110:1). Jesus used it to show that the Messiah is more than David's son. He is David's Lord (Matthew 22:41-45). Verse 4 calls this King a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek, and Hebrews builds a whole argument on it (Hebrews 5-7).

There are others. Psalm 118:22 speaks of the stone the builders rejected (Matthew 21:42). Psalm 40:6-8 is put in the mouth of Christ coming into the world (Hebrews 10:5-7). Psalm 69:9, zeal for God's house, was remembered when Jesus cleared the temple (John 2:17). Psalm 45:6-7 is applied to the Son (Hebrews 1:8-9).

The Psalms also show us Christ in a quieter way. Jesus is the true Son of David, the perfect King, and the One who prayed the Psalms with a perfect heart. When we pray them, we pray along with Him.

How It Fits the Whole Story

The Psalms are the heart of the Old Testament set to music. The history books tell us what God did. The Law tells us what God commanded. The prophets tell us what God was about to do. The Psalms tell us how God's people felt about all of it, and how they answered Him.

The book's five-part shape is worth a second look. Many Jewish and Christian teachers have seen it as an echo of the five books of Moses, as if God's people answer His Law with their praise. I don't build anything on that, but it is a helpful way to remember that the Psalms are a response. God speaks first, and His people answer.

They also carry forward God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7, that a son of David would reign forever. Psalm 89 holds God to that promise even when the throne seems lost, and the royal psalms keep the hope alive through exile and return. That hope is answered when the angel tells Mary that her Son will be given "the throne of David His father" (Luke 1:32).

And the Psalms look all the way to the end, when the King rules the nations (Psalm 2:8-9; Revelation 19:15) and every creature praises God (Psalm 150; Revelation 5:13).

Read It This Way

Read the Psalms as poetry. Hebrew poetry does not rhyme. Its main feature is parallel lines. A writer says something, then says it again in other words, or builds on it, or sets its opposite beside it. "A lamp to my foot is Your word, and a light to my pathway" (119:105). Once you see the pattern, the second line often explains the first.

Notice what kind of psalm you are reading. Some are songs of praise. Some are laments, cries for help that usually turn toward trust by the end. Some are thanksgiving for a prayer answered. Some are wisdom psalms that teach how to live. Some are royal psalms about the king. Some are psalms of confession. Knowing the kind helps you know how to pray it.

Take Psalm 23 as an example. It is only six verses long, but it walks through a whole life. The LORD is a shepherd who feeds and leads (verses 1-3). He is with His sheep in the valley of the shadow of death (verse 4). Then the picture changes, and He becomes a host who spreads a table and fills the cup (verse 5). The psalm ends in the house of the LORD forever (verse 6). David had been a shepherd boy, and he knew what sheep needed. He also knew what he needed. Jesus took the same picture when He said He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:11).

Look for patterns in the longer psalms too. Psalm 119 is an acrostic. It has twenty-two stanzas of eight verses, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and in Hebrew every verse in a stanza starts with the same letter. It is as if the writer wanted to say everything about God's Word from A to Z. Nearly every verse names God's Word with a word like law, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments or judgments.

The Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134) are short songs that pilgrims sang as they went up to Jerusalem for the feasts. Read them in order and you can almost feel the journey: starting far from home in 120, lifting eyes to the hills in 121, arriving at the gates of Jerusalem in 122, and ending in the temple at night, blessing the LORD, in 134.

Read the headings. When a heading tells you that David wrote Psalm 51 after Nathan confronted him, or Psalm 3 when he fled from Absalom, the psalm comes alive. You can turn to the history in 1 and 2 Samuel and read the two side by side.

You will meet some hard lines. A few psalms ask God to bring judgment on the wicked (for example 69, 109 and 137). How should a Christian read them? These are prayers, not actions. The writer hands his enemies over to God instead of taking revenge himself, and he asks God to do what is right. Paul tells us the same: do not take revenge, but leave room for God's wrath (Romans 12:19). Those prayers will be fully answered when Christ returns and judges the earth in righteousness.

Most of all, pray them. Read a psalm a day, out loud if you can. Five psalms a day takes you through the book in a month. Let the psalmist's words become your words.

Study Questions

1. Psalm 1 describes two ways to live. What does the blessed man avoid, and what does he delight in (1:1-2)?

2. In many laments the writer starts in fear and ends in trust. Trace that movement in one psalm and ask what changed (13:1-6).
3. What does David ask God to do for him after his sin, and what does that teach you about real repentance (51:1-12)?
4. How did Peter use Psalm 16 to preach the resurrection of Jesus (16:8-11; Acts 2:25-31)?
5. Jesus quoted Psalm 110 to show that the Messiah is David's Lord. Why does that matter for who Jesus is (110:1; Matthew 22:41-45)?

Go deeper: My Psalms Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through forty of the best-loved psalms, chosen from all five books. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Proverbs

At a Glance	
Author	Mainly Solomon (1:1; 10:1; 25:1), with sayings from other wise men, Agur (chapter 30) and King Lemuel (chapter 31)
Date written	Solomon spoke his proverbs about 970 to 930 B.C.; Hezekiah's men copied more of them about 700 B.C. (25:1)
Written to	Young people learning to live wisely, and every believer who wants to live God's way
Setting and time covered	Everyday life in Israel under the kings: home, work, market, court and city gate
Chapters	31
Key word	Wisdom
Key verse	Proverbs 1:7

Background

Proverbs is the most practical book in the Bible. It talks about money, work, sleep, food, friends, marriage, raising children, gossip, anger and what to do with your mouth. If you have ever wished the Bible would just tell you how to handle a hard day at work or a difficult neighbor, Proverbs is the place to go.

Most of the book comes from Solomon, the son of David and the third king of Israel. When Solomon became king he asked God for wisdom to govern the people, and God gave him wisdom, along with riches and honor he had not asked for (1 Kings 3:5-14). The Bible tells us that Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs and that people came from all the nations to hear his wisdom (1 Kings 4:29-34). The book of Proverbs is a selection from that wisdom, along with some sayings from other wise men.

The book names its sources. Chapters 1-9 are Solomon's opening call to wisdom. Chapters 10:1-22:16 are short proverbs of Solomon, most of them two lines long. Then 22:17-24:34 gathers "the words of wise ones," sayings from wise men who are not named. Chapters 25-29 are more proverbs of Solomon "which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, copied" (25:1). Hezekiah reigned about two hundred years after Solomon, about 715 to 686 B.C., and he led a great return to the LORD in Judah. His scribes gathered these sayings about 700 B.C. Chapter 30 is "the words of Agur," and chapter 31 is "the words of Lemuel the king," which his mother taught him (31:1). Scripture doesn't tell us anything more about Agur or Lemuel than these chapters say.

So when was Proverbs written? Solomon spoke his proverbs during his reign, about 970 to 930 B.C. The book reached the form we have at least by the time of Hezekiah's men, and perhaps a little after, when the last chapters were added.

What is a proverb? A proverb is a short, memorable saying about how life usually works. The Hebrew word can also mean a comparison. Many proverbs put two things side by side, the wise and the fool, the hard worker and the lazy man, the honest and the liar, and let you see the

difference. They are short on purpose. They are meant to be remembered, repeated and chewed on.

Most of the book is written as a father speaking to his son. Over and over we hear "my son" (1:8; 2:1; 3:1). The mother is there too: "do not forsake the instruction of your mother" (1:8). Proverbs pictures the home as the first school of wisdom, where parents pass on to their children what they have learned about God and life.

Purpose

The book tells us its purpose in the first verses. It was written so that people would know wisdom and discipline, understand words of insight, and receive training in wise living, righteousness, justice and fairness (1:2-3). It is for the simple, the young man who has not yet learned (1:4), but it is also for the wise, who can always learn more (1:5).

What does the Bible mean by wisdom? Wisdom in Proverbs is not mainly about being smart. It is skill in living. The same Hebrew word is used for the skill of the craftsmen who built the tabernacle (Exodus 31:3). A wise person knows how to live life the way God designed it, the way a good carpenter knows how to work with the grain of the wood.

And that wisdom has a starting point. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (1:7). To fear the LORD is not to be terrified of Him. It is to take Him seriously, to honor Him as God, to trust Him and to want to please Him. You cannot be truly wise while leaving God out. That is why Proverbs calls a person who ignores God a fool, no matter how many degrees he has.

Main Themes

The fear of the LORD comes first. The phrase runs through the whole book, from the opening (1:7) to the middle (9:10; 15:33) to the last chapter, where the worthy woman is praised because she "fears the LORD" (31:30). Wisdom is not a technique. It grows out of a relationship with God.

There are two ways to live. Proverbs sets wisdom against folly, and in chapters 1-9 both are pictured as women calling out to young men. Lady Wisdom calls from the high places of the city (8:1-4; 9:1-6). The foolish woman calls from the door of her house, and her guests end up in the depths of Sheol (9:13-18). Every day we choose whose invitation to accept.

Words have power. Few books say as much about speech. The tongue can heal or wound, calm anger or stir it up, build a friendship or ruin it (12:18; 15:1; 16:28; 18:21). A wise person listens before he answers (18:13) and knows when to keep quiet (17:28).

Work matters, and so does money. Proverbs praises hard work and warns against laziness. Go to the ant, it says, and learn from her (6:6-11). It warns against debt, cosigning, bribes and getting rich by cheating (22:7; 6:1-5; 17:23; 13:11). It also says riches do not last and cannot buy what matters most (23:4-5; 15:16).

The home is where wisdom is learned. The book speaks to marriage, faithfulness and the raising of children. It warns young men strongly against adultery (chapters 5-7) and praises the joy of a faithful marriage (5:18-19). It ends with the worthy wife of chapter 31, a woman of strength, wisdom and faith.

Proverbs also has a lot to say about pride. The LORD hates a proud look (6:16-17). Pride goes before destruction (16:18). The humble receive wisdom, and the proud receive shame (11:2). That theme ties Proverbs to the rest of the Bible, from the fall in Genesis 3, where man wanted to be wise apart from God, to the words of James and Peter, who both quote Proverbs 3:34: God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5).

Outline

- Chapters 1-9: A father's call to wisdom. Long speeches from father to son, with wisdom and folly pictured as two women.
- Chapters 10-22: Proverbs of Solomon (10:1-22:16). Short sayings, most of them two lines, on every part of life.
- Chapters 22-24: Words of the wise (22:17-24:34). Longer sayings from wise men who are not named.
- Chapters 25-29: Proverbs of Solomon copied by Hezekiah's men.
- Chapter 30: The words of Agur. A humble man's sayings, many in numbered lists.
- Chapter 31: The words of Lemuel and the worthy wife. A king's lessons from his mother, and a poem on the woman of strength (31:10-31).

Key Verses

Proverbs 1:7 *The fear of the LORD **is** the beginning of knowledge; wisdom and discipline fools have despised.*

This is the motto of the whole book. Every other piece of wisdom in Proverbs rests on this one.

Proverbs 3:5-6 *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and on your **own** understanding do not lean. In all your ways know Him, and He will make your paths straight.*

Trusting God means not leaning on our own understanding. He knows the road better than we do.

Proverbs 4:23 *More than all guarding, guard your heart, for from it **are** the outflows of life.*

What happens in the heart comes out in the life. Guard what goes in.

Proverbs 9:10 *The beginning of wisdom **is** the fear of the LORD, and the knowledge of the Holy One **is** understanding.*

The first nine chapters end where the book began, with the fear of the LORD.

Proverbs 22:6 *Train the youth according to his way; even when he is old he will not turn aside from it.*

A word to parents. It is a general principle about how training usually works, not a guarantee, but it calls us to take that training seriously.

Christ in Proverbs

Proverbs does not have many direct prophecies of the Messiah, and I won't pretend it does. Its link to Christ is mostly a theme. But it is a rich one.

In chapter 8, wisdom speaks as a person who was with the LORD before the world was made. "The LORD possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old" (8:22). Wisdom was beside God as He set the heavens in place and marked out the foundations of the earth (8:27-30). In its first setting this is a poem. Wisdom is pictured as a person to show how close wisdom is to God's own heart and how deep it runs in creation.

The New Testament takes this further. Paul calls Christ "the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24) and says that in Him "all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge are hidden" (Colossians 2:3). John tells us that the Word was with God in the beginning and that all things came into being through Him (John 1:1-3). Hebrews says God made the ages through His Son (Hebrews 1:2). What Proverbs 8 pictures in poetry, the New Testament shows us in a Person.

I want to be careful here. Some in the early church tried to use 8:22 to argue that the Son was created. That is not what the passage teaches, and it is not what the New Testament teaches. The Son is eternal (John 1:1; Hebrews 13:8). Proverbs 8 is a poem about God's wisdom, and Jesus is the fullness of that wisdom, but the chapter is not a doctrinal statement about how the Son came to be.

Jesus Himself is also the perfect wise man of Proverbs. He grew in wisdom as a boy (Luke 2:52), He taught in short, memorable sayings and parables, and He said that something greater than Solomon was here (Matthew 12:42). The wise son who listens to his father is a picture we see perfectly in the Son who said He did nothing on His own, but spoke just as the Father taught Him (John 8:28).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Proverbs shows us what life under God's rule looks like on an ordinary Tuesday. The Law of Moses gave Israel God's commands. The Psalms gave them words for worship. Proverbs took the same truth and brought it into the market, the field and the kitchen.

Proverbs also stands next to Job and Ecclesiastes, and the three books need each other. Proverbs says that, as a rule, wisdom leads to life and folly leads to ruin. Job shows that a righteous man can still suffer terribly. Ecclesiastes shows that even the wisest life under the sun cannot satisfy without God. Read together, they keep us from turning Proverbs into a set of promises it never makes.

And Proverbs points forward to the New Testament letters, especially James, which is full of the same practical wisdom about the tongue, money, pride and work. James even tells us that if anyone lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously (James 1:5). That is what Solomon did, and God still answers that prayer.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

The main debate is about chapter 8 and how directly it speaks of Christ. Some teachers read the figure of Wisdom as a picture of the Son before His coming. Others read it as a poem about God's wisdom which the New Testament later fills out in Christ. Both groups agree that Jesus is the wisdom of God and that He is eternal, not created. Those who hold the second reading say it lets the poem be a poem while still letting the New Testament show us where it leads.

Read It This Way

Read Proverbs as proverbs, not as promises. A proverb tells you how life usually works under God. "Train the youth according to his way; even when he is old he will not turn aside from it" (22:6) is wise and true as a principle, but it is not a guarantee that every child raised well will follow the Lord. Godly parents sometimes have children who walk away, and that does not mean God broke a promise.

You can see this in the book itself. Proverbs 26:4 says, "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you become like him." The very next verse says, "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes" (26:5). Is that a contradiction? No. It is wisdom. Sometimes it is wise to ignore a fool, and sometimes it is wise to answer him. Knowing which one fits the moment is the skill Proverbs is trying to teach.

Read chapters 1-9 straight through first, since they set the stage. Then slow down for chapters 10-29. Many of those proverbs are not grouped by topic, so it helps to read a few at a time and think about each one. Some readers like to read one chapter a day, since there are 31 chapters and most months have about that many days.

Try reading by topic as well. Pick a subject, such as the tongue, anger, laziness or friendship, and look for every proverb on it. You will be surprised how much the book says.

Don't skip the last two chapters. Agur begins with a confession that he is not wise at all, and he asks who has gone up to heaven and come down, and what is the name of God's son (30:2-4). He then gives several numbered sayings: three things, even four, that are too wonderful for him, or that the earth cannot bear (30:18-31). These lists slow us down and make us look closely at the world God made.

Chapter 31 ends the book with a poem in praise of the worthy wife. In Hebrew it is an acrostic, each of its twenty-two verses starting with the next letter of the alphabet. She works hard, cares for the poor, plans ahead, speaks with wisdom and kindness, and earns the trust of her husband and the praise of her children. Some readers feel crushed by her, as if she sets a standard no woman could reach. I don't think that is the point. She is wisdom lived out in a real home, and the poem ends by naming the root of it all: "a woman who fears the LORD, she will be praised" (31:30). The book closes where it began, with the fear of the LORD.

Last, notice the pairs. Many proverbs in chapters 10-15 use the word but in the middle. The first line says one thing, and the second line gives the opposite. "A soft answer turns away rage, and a word of pain raises anger" (15:1). The contrast is the lesson.

Study Questions

1. What does it mean to fear the LORD, and why does Proverbs call it the beginning of knowledge (1:7)?
2. What does Lady Wisdom offer the people who listen to her, and what does folly offer (9:1-6, 13-18)?
3. Pick three proverbs about the tongue. What do they teach you about your own words this week (15:1; 18:21; 12:18)?
4. Why is it important to read 22:6 as a general principle and not as a guarantee (22:6; 26:4-5)?
5. What qualities make the woman of chapter 31 worthy of praise, and where does her strength come from (31:10-31)?

Ecclesiastes

At a Glance	
Author	Solomon, who calls himself "the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1, 12)
Date written	Likely late in Solomon's life, about 935 B.C.
Written to	Israel, and anyone who is trying to find meaning in life apart from God
Setting and time covered	Jerusalem in the days of Solomon, looking back over a lifetime
Chapters	12
Key word	Futility
Key verse	Ecclesiastes 12:13

Background

Ecclesiastes may be the most surprising book in the Bible. It opens with a sentence that sounds more like a cynic than a saint: "Futility of futilities," said the Preacher, "futility of futilities! Everything is futility" (1:2). Many people read that line, decide the book is depressing, and never come back. That is a shame, because Ecclesiastes is one of the most honest and most helpful books God ever gave us.

The writer calls himself "the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1). The Hebrew word behind Preacher is Qoheleth, which means someone who gathers an assembly and speaks to it. Our English name Ecclesiastes comes from the Greek word for the same idea. He tells us he was king over Israel in Jerusalem (1:12), that he had more wisdom than all who were before him in Jerusalem (1:16), and that he built houses, planted vineyards, gathered silver and gold and had more pleasure than anyone (2:4-10). Only one son of David fits that description, and that is Solomon. The church and the synagogue have long read the book as Solomon's, and the SLB introduction follows that view.

When did he write it? Most likely late in his life, about 935 B.C. That fits the tone of the book. This is an old man looking back. And Solomon had a lot to look back on. 1 Kings 11 tells us that in his old age his many wives turned his heart after other gods, and the LORD was angry with him. Ecclesiastes reads like the hard lessons of a man who had everything, tried everything, wandered far, and came back to the one thing that matters.

The key word of the book is futility. The Hebrew word, hebel, means a vapor, a breath or a puff of smoke. It is the same word as the name Abel. It does not mean that life is worthless. It means that life under the sun is brief, hard to hold, and unable to satisfy on its own. You can see a breath on a cold morning, but you can't grab it.

The other key phrase is under the sun. It shows up nearly thirty times. It means life as we see it from the ground, life lived with God left out of the center. The Preacher sets out to test whether anything under the sun can give life its meaning. His answer is no. But that is not the end of the book.

Purpose

Why would God put a book like this in the Bible? I think there are two reasons.

First, Ecclesiastes tells the truth about life in a fallen world. Since Genesis 3, the ground has been cursed, work is hard, and death comes to everyone. The Preacher does not pretend otherwise. Paul tells us that creation was subjected to futility (Romans 8:20), and Ecclesiastes is a long look at what that means.

Second, Ecclesiastes clears away the false hopes we cling to, so we can see the real one. Solomon tried learning. He tried pleasure, wine and laughter. He tried great building projects. He tried wealth and fame and hard work. He tried wisdom itself. None of it filled the emptiness. All of it ended at the grave. If the richest and wisest man of his day could not find meaning under the sun, neither can we.

And so the book points up. It ends with the conclusion of the matter: "fear God and keep His commandments, for this is all of man" (12:13), because God will bring every deed into judgment (12:14). Life does have meaning, but that meaning comes from above the sun.

Main Themes

Everything under the sun is futility. Learning (1:16-18), pleasure (2:1-3), great works (2:4-11), toil (2:18-23), power (4:13-16) and wealth (5:10-17) all pass away like breath. The man who loves money will never be satisfied with money (5:10). That is as true today as it was three thousand years ago.

Death comes to all. The wise man dies just like the fool (2:16). Man and beast both return to dust (3:19-20). The Preacher keeps bringing us to the graveside, not to make us hopeless, but to make us think. It is better to go to a house of mourning than a house of feasting, he says, because that is the end of every man (7:2).

God gives life as a gift to enjoy. Again and again the Preacher stops and says, enjoy your food, enjoy your work, enjoy your wife, because these are gifts from the hand of God (2:24; 3:12-13; 5:18-20; 9:7-10). That is not a contradiction of the futility theme. It is the answer to it. When we stop trying to squeeze meaning out of God's gifts and simply receive them from His hand, we can enjoy them.

God is sovereign over time. "For everything there is an appointed time" (3:1). Birth and death, planting and harvest, weeping and laughing all come in their season. We don't control them. God does, and He has made everything beautiful in its time (3:11).

God will judge. The book ends with judgment because judgment means our lives matter. If there is no judge, nothing we do lasts. Because God will bring every deed into judgment, every deed counts (12:14; 11:9).

Outline

- Chapters 1-2: Everything is futility. The Preacher states his theme and tests wisdom, pleasure, work and wealth.

- Chapters 3-5: Time, work and the ways of God. A time for everything, the injustice of the world, and how to come before God with reverence.
- Chapters 6-8: Wisdom and its limits. Wisdom is better than folly, but even the wise cannot find out all that God is doing.
- Chapters 9-11: Living well under the sun. One fate comes to all, so enjoy life, work hard, and be generous while you can.
- Chapter 12: Remember your Creator. A poem on old age and death, and the conclusion of the whole matter.

Key Verses

Ecclesiastes 1:2 *"Futility of futilities," said **the** Preacher, "futility of futilities! Everything **is** futility."*

The theme of the book. Life under the sun, without God at the center, is a breath that cannot be held.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 *For everything **there is** an appointed time, and a time for every matter under the heavens:*

God sets the seasons of our lives. We can rest in His timing.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 *He has made everything beautiful in its time; also He has put eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from beginning to end.*

God has put eternity in the human heart. That is why nothing under the sun can fully satisfy us. We were made for more.

Ecclesiastes 12:1 *And remember your Creator in the days of your young manhood, before the days of evil come and the years arrive of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them";*

A call to the young: give your life to God while you are young, before the hard years come.

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 *The end of the matter, everything has been heard: fear God and keep His commandments, for this **is** all of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether good or evil.*

The conclusion of the matter. Fear God, keep His commandments, and remember that He will judge.

Christ in Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes has no direct prophecy of Christ. Its link to Him is a theme, and it is a powerful one. The whole book is a question waiting for an answer.

The Preacher says that "there is not any new thing under the sun" (1:9). But God promised through Isaiah that He would do a new thing (Isaiah 43:19), and Paul says that if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). The new thing came from above the sun. It came when the Son of God was born.

The Preacher says that God "has put eternity in their heart" (3:11), but man cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end. Jesus came to make the Father known (John 1:18). He is the answer to the longing God put in us.

The Preacher sees death as the end of every man and asks who knows what happens after (3:21). Jesus rose from the dead and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10). Because He lives, Paul can say that our labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58). That is the exact opposite of futility. In Christ, the work we do for God lasts forever.

Jesus also gives what the Preacher searched for and could not find. Solomon tried to fill his life with things and pleasures. Jesus said He came that we might have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10). Ecclesiastes shows us the emptiness. Jesus fills it.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Ecclesiastes sits between Proverbs and the Song of Songs, and all three are connected with Solomon. Proverbs gives the rules of wise living. Ecclesiastes shows the limits of that wisdom. Even a perfectly wise life under the sun ends in the grave. The Song of Songs then celebrates one of God's best gifts, married love. Together they give a full picture of life lived in God's world.

The book also looks back to Genesis. The Preacher's world is the world after the fall, where man works by the sweat of his brow and returns to the dust he came from (Genesis 3:19; Ecclesiastes 3:20; 12:7). It looks forward to Romans 8, where creation groans under futility and waits to be set free when God's children are revealed (Romans 8:19-23).

And it gets the reader ready for the gospel. Many people do not come to Christ until they have found out for themselves that nothing else works. Ecclesiastes saves us the trouble of learning that lesson the hard way.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

The main debate is about the author. The book does not use the name Solomon, and it speaks of "the Preacher." Many modern scholars believe a later writer, perhaps after the exile in the 400s or 300s B.C., wrote in Solomon's voice as a way of teaching. They point to some later Hebrew words and to the way the book speaks of kings from the outside in places (for example 8:2-4; 10:20). The traditional view, which the SLB introduction follows, points to the book's own words: Solomon, the son of David, king in Jerusalem, who had the wisdom and wealth the book describes (1:1, 12, 16; 1 Kings 4:29-34). Those who hold it add that we have little Hebrew from Solomon's day to compare the language with.

Teachers also disagree about how to read the Preacher's darker statements. Some think he speaks only as a man without God until the last chapter. Others think he is a believer all along, telling the truth about how life looks from the ground and then pointing upward. Those who hold the second point out that the Preacher keeps bringing God in throughout the book (3:14; 5:1-7; 7:13-14; 11:9).

Read It This Way

Read the whole book in one sitting if you can. It takes about half an hour. Its message comes together only when you see where it ends.

Keep the phrase under the sun in front of you. When the Preacher says something that sounds hopeless, ask, is he describing life from the ground, with God left out? Usually he is. He is not telling you what to believe. He is telling you what it looks like when you try to live without God.

Watch for the bright spots. Ecclesiastes has a rhythm. The Preacher looks at something under the sun, finds it empty, and then he turns and says, eat your bread with joy, enjoy life with your wife, do your work with all your might, for this is God's gift (9:7-10). Those are not throw-away lines. They are the heart of the book.

Notice what the Preacher says about worship in 5:1-7. Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools. Don't be quick with your mouth, because God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. If you make a vow to God, pay it. That short passage tells us the Preacher is not a man who has given up on God. He takes God so seriously that he warns us against careless worship.

Watch for the better than sayings, especially in chapter 7. A good name is better than fine oil. Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face can make the heart better. The end of a matter is better than its beginning. Patience is better than pride (7:1-8). These sayings sound upside down at first. They teach us to judge life by the end, not by the moment, which is exactly what the whole book is trying to do.

Look at chapter 11 too. The Preacher tells us to cast our bread on the waters and to sow our seed in the morning and the evening, because we don't know which will succeed (11:1-6). In other words, since we cannot control the future, we should be generous and keep working, and leave the results to God. That is not despair. That is faith with its sleeves rolled up.

Read chapter 12 slowly. Verses 1-7 are a poem on old age: the keepers of the house tremble, the grinders stop because they are few, those who look through the windows grow dim. Many readers see the arms, the teeth and the eyes in those pictures. Then the silver cord is snapped, the dust returns to the earth, and the spirit returns to God who gave it (12:6-7). It is one of the most beautiful pictures of death ever written, and it is there to move us to remember our Creator now.

And let it speak to your own life. Where are you looking for satisfaction? Your career? Your bank account? Your house, your hobbies, your reputation? Ecclesiastes is not against any of those things. It just tells you they are a breath. Hold them loosely, enjoy them as gifts, and give your heart to the One who made you.

Study Questions

1. What does the word futility mean in this book, and how does it help you understand the opening line (1:2)?
2. Solomon tested pleasure, work and wealth. Why did none of them satisfy him (2:1-11)?

3. What does it mean that God has put eternity in our hearts, and how does that explain our restlessness (3:11)?

4. The Preacher keeps telling us to enjoy life as a gift from God. How is that different from living for pleasure (2:24; 9:7-10)?

5. How does the conclusion of the book change the way you read everything before it (12:13-14)?

Song of Songs

At a Glance	
Author	Solomon (1:1), who wrote 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:32)
Date written	Likely early in Solomon's reign, about 965 B.C.
Written to	Israel, and God's people in every age, as a song in praise of faithful married love
Setting and time covered	Jerusalem and the countryside of Israel; from courtship to wedding to married life
Chapters	8
Key word	Love
Key verse	Song of Songs 8:6

Background

The Song of Songs surprises many first-time readers. It is a love song. It never mentions the Law, the temple, prayer or sin, and the name of God appears at most once (8:6). Instead it is full of gardens, vineyards, gazelles, spices and two people who cannot stop talking about how much they love each other. Some readers blush and turn the page. But God put this book in the Bible, and He did it on purpose.

The book opens with its title: "The song of the songs, which is of Solomon" (1:1). In Hebrew, saying something twice like that is a way of saying the best. Just as the holy of holies was the holiest place, and the King of kings is the greatest King, the song of songs is the finest song. 1 Kings 4:32 tells us Solomon wrote 1,005 songs. This is the one God chose to keep.

I take Solomon as the author, as the title says. Solomon's name appears several times in the book (1:5; 3:7-11; 8:11-12), and the setting, with its royal court, its wealth and its long list of plants and animals, fits his day and his interest in nature (1 Kings 4:33). The book was likely written early in his reign, about 965 B.C., before his many marriages turned his heart away from the LORD (1 Kings 11:1-4). Some readers find it hard to square a song about faithful love with a man who later had seven hundred wives. That is a fair question. One answer is that the song comes from Solomon's early years and shows what God meant marriage to be, even though Solomon himself later fell far short of it.

The two main voices in the song are the king and a young woman from the countryside called the Shulammite (6:13). She has worked in the vineyards and has been darkened by the sun (1:5-6). There is also a group called the daughters of Jerusalem, who act something like a chorus, and now and then the woman's brothers are heard. Because the book is poetry, it is not always easy to tell who is speaking. Many Bibles add headings to help, but those headings are not part of the Hebrew text.

Purpose

Why is there a love song in the Bible? Because God made love and marriage, and He wants us to see them as good.

In the beginning God made the man and the woman, brought them together, and called it very good (Genesis 1:31; 2:22-25). The two were naked and were not ashamed. Then sin came in, and shame came with it. Ever since, people have tended to go one of two wrong ways with married love. Some treat it as something dirty, to be put up with but never celebrated. Others treat it as a god, chasing pleasure wherever they can find it. The Song of Songs corrects both mistakes. It says that married love is a pure and beautiful gift from God, worth celebrating and worth guarding.

The book also teaches patience and purity. Three times the woman tells the daughters of Jerusalem not to "rouse" and not to "arouse the love until it pleases" (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). Love has its proper time, and that time is marriage. In a world that rushes everything, that is a word we need.

Main Themes

Married love is God's good gift. The man and the woman delight in each other, body and heart. "All of you is beautiful, my darling, and there is no blemish in you" (4:7). The book is not ashamed of that delight, and neither should we be, within the marriage God designed.

Love belongs to each other. "My beloved is mine, and I am his" (2:16). The woman says it again later, with the order turned around: "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine" (6:3). Real love is not about getting. It is about belonging, a promise that runs both ways.

Love must wait for its time. The repeated warning not to stir up love until it pleases (2:7; 3:5; 8:4) shows that desire is powerful and must be kept for its right place. God's timing guards love rather than spoiling it.

Love goes through hard times. In 3:1-4 and 5:2-8 the woman looks for her beloved and cannot find him. In the second scene she is slow to open the door to him, and when she does, he has gone. Love does not stay at the level of the wedding day by itself. It has to be sought, repaired and renewed.

Love is strong. The book's high point says love is strong like death, a flame of the LORD that many waters cannot quench (8:6-7). Love cannot be bought. A man who tried to buy it with all his wealth would be despised (8:7).

Outline

- Chapters 1-3: Courtship (1:1-3:5). The woman longs for the king, they praise each other, and she learns to wait.
- Chapters 3-5: The wedding (3:6-5:1). Solomon's royal procession arrives, he praises his bride, and the marriage is celebrated.
- Chapters 5-7: Love tested and restored (5:2-7:13). A night of distance and searching, followed by renewed praise and delight.
- Chapter 8: Love made strong. The great statement on the strength of love, and a look back at the woman's home and family.

Key Verses

Song of Songs 2:4 *He has brought me into the house of the wine, and his banner over me **is** love.*

The woman feels safe and honored in his love. His love over her is like a banner over an army, visible to everyone.

Song of Songs 2:16 *My beloved **is** mine, and I **am** his, who pastures among the lilies.*

Married love is mutual belonging. Each gives himself or herself to the other.

Song of Songs 4:7 *All of you **is** beautiful, my darling, and there is no blemish in you.*

The king sees his bride as wholly beautiful. Love sees the beloved through eyes of delight.

Song of Songs 8:6-7 *Set me like the seal on your heart, like the seal on your arm, for love **is** strong like death, jealousy **is** hard like Sheol; its flashes **are** flashes of fire, a flame of **the** LORD. Many waters are not able to quench the love, and rivers will not overflow it. If a man would give all the wealth of his house for the love, they would utterly despise him.*

The high point of the book. True love is as strong as death and cannot be bought or put out.

Christ in Song of Songs

The New Testament never quotes the Song of Songs, and it never says that this book is about Christ. So I want to be careful. The plain meaning of the book is a real love song between Solomon and his bride, and we should read it that way first.

But the Bible does use marriage as a picture of God and His people again and again. The LORD calls Himself Israel's husband (Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 3:14). Hosea's whole marriage was a living picture of God's love for unfaithful Israel (Hosea 1-3). John the Baptist called Jesus the bridegroom and himself the friend of the bridegroom (John 3:29). Jesus called Himself the bridegroom too (Mark 2:19-20). Paul says that the love of a husband for his wife is meant to show the love of Christ, who loved the church and gave Himself for her (Ephesians 5:25-32). And the Bible ends with the marriage supper of the Lamb and the bride made ready (Revelation 19:7-9; 21:2).

So when we read a song about a love that is strong as death and cannot be quenched by many waters, it is natural for a believer to think of the love of Christ. His love was stronger than death. He laid down His life for His bride, and nothing can separate us from His love (Romans 8:38-39). That is a reflection, a theme the rest of Scripture invites us to see, not a direct prophecy. I think it is a fair and beautiful way to apply the book, as long as we don't lose sight of what it says first.

How It Fits the Whole Story

The Bible begins with a wedding in a garden (Genesis 2) and ends with a wedding in a city (Revelation 21). In between, sin has broken everything, including marriage. The Song of Songs gives us a glimpse of what love between a man and his wife can be when it is lived God's way, in a world that is still fallen. The book is full of garden pictures (4:12-5:1). It is almost as if the song takes us back toward Eden.

It also sits beside Ecclesiastes for a reason. Ecclesiastes says that under the sun everything is a breath, but it also tells a man to enjoy life with the wife he loves (Ecclesiastes 9:9). The Song of Songs shows what that looks like. In a world of futility, faithful love is one of the gifts God gives to make life sweet.

And the song looks ahead. The New Testament tells us that marriage itself is a picture of something greater, the union of Christ and His church (Ephesians 5:32). One day the picture will give way to the real thing, at the marriage of the Lamb.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

For most of church history, and in Jewish tradition before that, many teachers read the Song mainly as an allegory. An allegory is a story where each detail stands for something else. Jewish teachers often read it as a picture of God and Israel. Many Christian teachers read it as a picture of Christ and the church, or of Christ and the believer's soul. Some went very far with this, turning every spice and every body part into a hidden symbol.

Many teachers today read the book first as what it plainly is: a real love song between Solomon and his bride, celebrating married love. Many of them also see a picture of God and His people, or of Christ and the church, reflected in it, because the rest of Scripture uses marriage that way.

Good, Bible-believing teachers stand on both sides of this, and I am not going to settle it for you. Here is what both sides can agree on. The Song is at least a real love song, and it means what it says about the goodness of married love. The rest of Scripture does use marriage as a picture of God's love for His people. And we should be careful not to build doctrine out of hidden meanings in the details that the New Testament never gives us. Read it first for what it plainly says, then ask what it shows you about the love of God.

Teachers also disagree about the story line. Some see only two main characters, Solomon and the Shulammite. Others see three: a shepherd lover, the woman who loves him, and King Solomon, who tries to win her away. The three-character view is held by some careful scholars. Those who see two characters answer that the book never clearly separates a shepherd from the king, and that the title and the wedding in chapter 3 point to Solomon as the groom.

Read It This Way

Read the Song as poetry. Its pictures are meant to be felt, not measured. When the man says the woman's hair is like a flock of goats coming down from Gilead (4:1), he is not saying she looks like a goat. He is painting a picture of dark, flowing hair, the way goats on a hillside in the evening light move like a wave. The pictures come from the countryside of Israel, and to a reader of that day they were beautiful.

Try to tell who is speaking. The woman speaks most of the lines, and that alone is worth noticing. In a world where women were often silent, the longest voice in this book belongs to her. Look for changes between she and he, and for the daughters of Jerusalem, and you will usually find the flow.

Read it with the rest of the Bible's teaching on marriage beside you: Genesis 2:18-25, Proverbs 5:15-19, Matthew 19:4-6, 1 Corinthians 7:1-5, Ephesians 5:22-33 and Hebrews 13:4.

Together they show that God designed marriage, that He blesses love between a husband and wife, and that He calls us to keep it pure.

If you are married, let the Song remind you to keep pursuing your spouse. If you are single, let it remind you that God's design is good and worth waiting for. And if you have failed in this area, remember that the God who gave this song is also the God who forgives and makes new (1 John 1:9).

Listen for the refrains. Certain lines come back again and again, like the chorus of a song. The warning to the daughters of Jerusalem returns three times (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). The words of belonging return twice (2:16; 6:3). The question "Who is this coming up from the wilderness" comes in 3:6 and again in 8:5. These repeated lines help mark the sections of the book, and they tell you what the writer most wants you to remember.

Pay attention to the wedding scene in 3:6-11. Solomon's carriage comes up from the wilderness surrounded by sixty mighty men, and the king wears the crown his mother gave him "on the day of his wedding" (3:11). Then in chapter 4 the groom praises his bride from head to toe, and in 4:16-5:1 the marriage is joined. The book handles the most private moment of married life with great beauty and restraint. It never becomes crude, and that too is a lesson.

Finally, let the book's last great statement settle in your heart: love is strong like death. If that is true of a husband's and a wife's love, how much more is it true of the love of God for His people?

Study Questions

1. Why do you think God included a love song in the Bible, and what does that say about His view of marriage (1:1-4; Genesis 2:24-25)?
2. What does the woman mean when she warns not to stir up love until it pleases, and why is that wise (2:7)?
3. What do you learn from the scene where the woman is slow to open the door and then cannot find her beloved (5:2-8)?
4. What does it mean that love is strong like death and that many waters cannot quench it (8:6-7)?
5. How does Paul's teaching on marriage help you see a greater love reflected in this book (Ephesians 5:25-32)?

Part Four: The Major Prophets

With Isaiah we come to the prophets, the last great section of the Old Testament. Seventeen books follow, from Isaiah to Malachi. They are often split into two groups. The first five, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel, are called the Major Prophets. The other twelve are called the Minor Prophets. The words major and minor have to do with length, not importance. Isaiah has 66 chapters. Obadiah has one. Both are God's word.

What is a prophet? A prophet is a person God called to speak His word to His people. Moses was the model (Deuteronomy 18:15-18). Many people think of prophecy as predicting the future, and the prophets did that, sometimes in remarkable detail. But most of what they said was aimed at the people standing in front of them. They called Israel back to the covenant God made at Sinai. They named sin plainly: idolatry, injustice, empty worship, trusting in kings and armies instead of God. They warned that judgment would come if the people did not turn. And then, almost always, they looked past the judgment to the hope beyond it.

The Major Prophets cover about two hundred years of the most painful history in the Old Testament. Isaiah preached in Jerusalem from about 739 to 681 B.C., while Assyria swallowed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. and then threatened Judah. Jeremiah preached in Jerusalem during Judah's last forty years, from about 627 B.C. until the Babylonians burned the city and the temple in 586 B.C. Lamentations is five poems of grief written over the ruins. Ezekiel was carried to Babylon in 597 B.C. and preached to the exiles there. Daniel was taken to Babylon even earlier, in 605 B.C., and served in the courts of Babylon and Persia until after Cyrus let the Jews go home in 538 B.C.

So these books follow God's people from warning, to judgment, to exile, to the first light of return. The history is told in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. The prophets tell us what God was saying while it happened.

How should we read them? First, find the setting. Who was king? Who was the enemy? Was the prophet speaking before the fall of Jerusalem or after it? A few minutes with a time line will save you a lot of confusion. Second, remember that the prophets wrote mostly in poetry, full of pictures. When Isaiah says the trees of the field will clap their hands (Isaiah 55:12), he is not describing botany. Third, notice that prophecy often has more than one horizon. A prophet might speak of the return from Babylon, the first coming of Christ and His second coming in the same breath, the way mountain ranges can look like one ridge from a distance. Let the New Testament show you where each promise lands.

Most of all, look for Christ. Jesus told His disciples that Moses and all the prophets spoke of Him (Luke 24:25-27). The Major Prophets give us His virgin birth, His names, His suffering for our sins, the new covenant in His blood, and His coming with the clouds to receive an everlasting kingdom. They also show us that God has made promises to the nation of Israel that He will keep. When you read these books, you are reading God's plan for the world, written down hundreds of years before it was fulfilled. That should give us great confidence in the promises that are still to come.

Isaiah

At a Glance	
Author	Isaiah son of Amoz (1:1; John 12:38-41)
Date written	During Isaiah's ministry, about 739 to 681 B.C.
Written to	Judah and Jerusalem, and through them to God's people in exile and in every age
Setting and time covered	Jerusalem under Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah; looking ahead to the exile, the return, the Messiah and the new heavens and new earth
Chapters	66
Key word	Salvation
Key verse	Isaiah 53:5

Background

Isaiah is the first of the Major Prophets and, for many readers, the greatest.

The book opens, "The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, the kings of Judah" (1:1). Isaiah lived in Jerusalem. He was married to a woman he calls the prophetess (8:3), and he had at least two sons whose names were messages from God. Shear-jashub means a remnant will return (7:3; 10:21). Maher-shalal-hash-baz means the spoil speeds, the prey hastens (8:1-3). Isaiah had access to kings, and he spoke to them face to face (7:3; 37:21; 38:1). His name means the LORD is salvation, and that one phrase sums up the whole book.

His ministry ran for about sixty years, from about 739 to 681 B.C. He received his call in the year King Uzziah died (6:1). He saw the northern kingdom of Israel fall to Assyria in 722 B.C. He saw the Assyrian king Sennacherib sweep through Judah in 701 B.C. and surround Jerusalem, and he saw God strike down the Assyrian army in one night (37:36). He records Sennacherib's death (37:38), which took place about 681 B.C. Jewish tradition says Isaiah was put to death under Hezekiah's wicked son Manasseh, but Scripture does not tell us how he died.

Isaiah's world was dangerous. Assyria was the superpower of the day, and its armies were feared for their cruelty. Judah was a small kingdom caught between Assyria in the north and Egypt in the south. Its kings kept trying to save themselves by making deals with one side or the other. Isaiah's message never changed: trust the LORD, not horses and chariots. "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help" (31:1).

Isaiah also looked far beyond his own day. He warned that Babylon would one day carry Judah away (39:6). He spoke comfort to the exiles who would sit by the rivers of Babylon more than a century later. He even named Cyrus, the Persian king who would let the Jews go home, about 150 years before Cyrus issued his decree, and long before he was born (44:28-45:1). And he looked further still, to the coming of the Messiah, His suffering and death, His reign over the earth, and the new heavens and new earth.

Purpose

Isaiah wrote to call God's people to turn from sin, to warn them of the judgment that was coming, and to comfort them with God's promise of salvation through the Messiah.

The book has two great halves. Chapters 1-39 are heavy with judgment. Judah has rebelled. Its worship is empty, its leaders are corrupt, and its people trust in alliances and idols instead of God. Assyria will come as the rod of God's anger (10:5). Chapters 40-66 open with a different word: "Comfort, comfort My people," says your God (40:1). They speak to the people who will live through the exile and return, and they reveal the Servant of the LORD who will bear the sins of many.

One of the sharpest passages in the book is Isaiah's mockery of idols in chapter 44. A man cuts down a tree. With half of it he builds a fire, roasts his meat and warms himself. With the other half he carves a god, bows down to it and prays, "Deliver me, for you are my god" (44:17). Isaiah says such a man feeds on ashes, and his deceived heart has led him astray (44:20). We may not carve wooden statues today, but we still take good things God made and ask them to save us. Isaiah's words still sting.

In between stand chapters 36-39, the story of Hezekiah, Sennacherib and the envoys from Babylon. Those chapters are the hinge of the book. They close the Assyrian period and point to the Babylonian one. Sennacherib's officer stands outside the walls of Jerusalem and mocks the LORD in front of the people (36:4-20). Hezekiah takes the enemy's letter into the temple, spreads it out before the LORD and prays (37:14-20). That night the angel of the LORD strikes the Assyrian camp, and Sennacherib goes home in disgrace (37:36-37). Then Hezekiah falls sick, prays, and receives fifteen more years of life (38:1-5). But when envoys from Babylon come to visit, he proudly shows them all his treasures, and Isaiah tells him that one day all of it will be carried to Babylon (39:1-7). The great deliverance from Assyria ends with a warning about Babylon, and the second half of the book picks up from there.

Main Themes

God is holy. Isaiah's favorite name for God is the Holy One of Israel. It appears more than twenty times in the book and only a handful of times in the rest of the Old Testament. In chapter 6 Isaiah sees the LORD on His throne and hears the seraphim cry, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of armies" (6:3). Everything else in the book flows from that vision.

Sin brings judgment. God judges Judah for rebellion, injustice and idolatry (1:2-23). He judges the nations too: Babylon, Assyria, Moab, Egypt, Tyre and others (chapters 13-23). No nation is outside His rule.

God saves a remnant. Judgment is never the last word. A remnant will return (10:20-22). The stump of a cut-down tree still holds a holy seed (6:13). God always keeps a people for Himself.

The Messiah is coming. Isaiah tells us more about the Messiah than any other prophet: His virgin birth (7:14), His divine names (9:6), His descent from Jesse (11:1), His Spirit-filled reign (11:2-5), His gentle ministry (42:1-4), His suffering and death for our sins (52:13-53:12) and His anointing to bring good news (61:1-2).

God will make all things new. The book ends with Jerusalem restored, the nations coming to worship, and "new heavens and a new earth" (65:17; 66:22). It is the same place the Bible itself ends (Revelation 21:1).

Outline

- Chapters 1-12: Judgment and hope for Judah. God's case against His people, Isaiah's call in chapter 6, and the Book of Immanuel (7-12) with the virgin's Son, the Child and the Branch.
- Chapters 13-23: Words against the nations. Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, Cush, Egypt, Edom, Arabia, Jerusalem and Tyre.
- Chapters 24-27: The LORD's final judgment and victory. The whole earth judged, death swallowed up, and the dead raised.
- Chapters 28-35: Woes and promises. Warnings against trusting Egypt, the King who will reign in righteousness, and the joy of the redeemed.
- Chapters 36-39: Hezekiah and Assyria. Jerusalem delivered from Sennacherib, Hezekiah healed, and a warning about Babylon.
- Chapters 40-48: Comfort for God's people. God's greatness, the folly of idols, and Cyrus the deliverer.
- Chapters 49-57: The Servant of the LORD. The Servant who suffers and saves, and the invitation to come and drink.
- Chapters 58-66: Future glory. True worship, the Redeemer who comes to Zion, and the new heavens and new earth.

Key Verses

Isaiah 6:3 *And this one called to this one and said, "Holy, holy, holy **is** the LORD of armies; the fullness of all the earth **is** His glory."*

The vision of God's holiness that changed Isaiah's life and shaped his whole message.

Isaiah 7:14 *Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Look, the virgin **is** pregnant and bearing a son, and she will call his name Immanuel.*

The sign of the virgin and her Son, Immanuel, which means God with us. Matthew tells us it was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:22-23).

Isaiah 9:6 *For a child has been born to us, a son has been given to us; and the dominion is on His shoulder; and **one** has called His name Wonder, Counselor, Mighty God, Father of Eternity, Prince of Peace.*

The Child who is born is also Mighty God. Only Jesus fits these names.

Isaiah 40:31 *and those who wait for the LORD will renew power; they will go up **with** wings like the eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not grow faint.*

Strength for the weary comes from waiting on the LORD.

Isaiah 53:5-6 *And He **was** pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; the chastening of our peace **was** on Him, and by His wound **there** was healing for us. All of us like the sheep have gone astray; each to his own way we have turned; and the LORD has caused to fall on Him the iniquity of all of us.*

The center of the gospel in the Old Testament. The Servant was pierced for our transgressions, and the LORD laid our iniquity on Him.

Christ in Isaiah

The New Testament quotes Isaiah more than any other prophet, and most of those quotations point to Jesus. Here are the clearest ones, each confirmed by the New Testament itself.

His birth. "Look, the virgin is pregnant and bearing a son, and she will call his name Immanuel" (7:14). Matthew says Jesus' birth fulfilled this (Matthew 1:22-23).

His ministry in Galilee. Isaiah said a great light would shine on the people in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, Galilee of the Gentiles (9:1-2). Matthew says this was fulfilled when Jesus began to preach in Capernaum (Matthew 4:12-16).

His forerunner. A voice is calling, "In the wilderness clear the way of the LORD" (40:3). All four Gospels apply this to John the Baptist (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23).

His gentleness. The Servant would not cry out or break a bruised reed (42:1-4). Matthew applies this to Jesus' quiet healing ministry (Matthew 12:17-21).

His suffering. Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is the clearest picture of the cross in the Old Testament. The Servant was despised and rejected (53:3). He was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (53:5). He was silent like a lamb led to the slaughter (53:7). He was buried with the rich (53:9). He made His life a guilt offering, and after His suffering He would see His offspring and prolong His days (53:10-11). Philip used this chapter to tell the Ethiopian official about Jesus (Acts 8:32-35). Peter quoted it to describe the cross (1 Peter 2:22-25).

His mission. In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read Isaiah 61:1-2, rolled up the scroll and said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:21). Notice where He stopped reading. He read about the favorable year of the LORD, but He did not read the next words, about the day of vengeance of our God (61:2). That part waits for His second coming.

His reign. The Child born to us will sit on the throne of David and His government will have no end (9:6-7). The Branch from Jesse will judge with righteousness, and the wolf will dwell with the lamb (11:1-9). Paul applies 11:10 to Christ ruling over the Gentiles (Romans 15:12). I believe these promises will be fulfilled in full in the thousand-year kingdom, when Christ reigns on the earth (Revelation 20:1-6).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Many readers have noticed that Isaiah's 66 chapters line up with the 66 books of the Bible. The first 39 chapters, like the 39 books of the Old Testament, are heavy with law, sin and judgment. The last 27 chapters, like the 27 books of the New Testament, open with a voice crying in the

wilderness, the verse all four Gospels connect to John the Baptist, and close with the new heavens and new earth. I don't build any doctrine on that pattern. Chapter divisions were added long after Isaiah wrote. But it is a helpful way to remember how the book moves.

Isaiah ties together much of the Bible. He looks back to the promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 and forward to the Son of David who will reign forever. He takes the history in 2 Kings 15-20 and 2 Chronicles 26-32 and shows us what God was saying through it. He worked at the same time as Micah, and the two books share a famous passage about swords beaten into plowshares (Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-3). The Gospels quote him again and again. Paul builds much of Romans 9-11 and 15 on him. And Revelation borrows his pictures of the throne room, the fall of Babylon and the new creation.

Isaiah also speaks plainly about Israel's future. God will gather the scattered people of Israel from the four corners of the earth (11:11-12). Paul quotes Isaiah 59:20 when he says that all Israel will be saved and the Deliverer will come from Zion (Romans 11:26). God has not finished with the nation of Israel, and Isaiah is one of the clearest places that shows it.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

The biggest debate is about who wrote Isaiah. Many modern scholars teach that chapters 40-66 were written by one or two later writers, often called Second and Third Isaiah, who lived during or after the exile. Their main reasons are that chapters 40-66 speak to people already in Babylon, that the style changes, and above all that they name Cyrus long before he lived.

I believe one Isaiah wrote the whole book. The book names only one author (1:1). The New Testament quotes both halves and names Isaiah for both. In John 12:38-41, John quotes Isaiah 53:1 and Isaiah 6:10 side by side and says that "Isaiah said these things when he saw His glory, and he spoke concerning Him." Jesus and the apostles treated the whole book as Isaiah's. The change in style fits a change in subject, from judgment to comfort, over a ministry of sixty years. And naming Cyrus ahead of time is not a problem for a God who declares "the end from the beginning" (46:10). In fact, in chapters 41-48 God points to His ability to tell the future as the very thing that proves He is God and the idols are not (41:21-23; 44:7; 48:3-5).

Teachers also differ on how plainly to take Isaiah's promises of a restored Israel and a renewed earth. Some read them as pictures of the church and of heaven. I read them as real promises that God will keep, first in the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, and then in the new heavens and new earth.

Read It This Way

Isaiah is long, so take it in sections. Read chapter 6 first. Isaiah's vision of God's holiness is the key to the whole book. Then read chapters 1-12, 36-39 and 40-55 and you will have the heart of it.

Watch for the movement between judgment and hope. Isaiah will often spend several verses on judgment and then turn suddenly to a promise. "Come now, and let us argue the case together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they will become white like snow" (1:18). That pattern is God's heart. He warns because He wants to save.

Keep a map of the nations in mind. Assyria in the north, Babylon further east, Egypt in the south, and little Judah in the middle. Many of the prophecies make more sense when you know who is threatening whom.

Read Isaiah 52:13-53:12 slowly, and read it more than once. Ask who the Servant is, and why He suffered. Then read Acts 8:26-35 and see how Philip answered that same question.

And let Isaiah lift your eyes. When life feels small and dark, read chapter 40. God measured the waters in the hollow of His hand. He calls every star by name. He gives strength to the weary. "Those who wait for the LORD will renew power" (40:31).

Study Questions

1. How did Isaiah's vision of God's holiness change the way he saw himself and his people (6:1-8)?
2. What sign did God give in 7:14, and how does Matthew show it was fulfilled in Jesus (7:14; Matthew 1:22-23)?
3. Why did Isaiah warn Judah not to trust Egypt, and what are the Egypts we lean on today (31:1)?
4. Read Isaiah 53. List what the Servant suffered and why. How does this chapter describe what Jesus did for you (53:3-6)?
5. How does John 12:38-41 help us know who wrote Isaiah, and whose glory Isaiah saw (6:1-10; John 12:38-41)?

Go deeper: My Isaiah Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Jeremiah

At a Glance	
Author	Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, a priest from Anathoth (1:1); his helper Baruch wrote down his words (36:4)
Date written	During Jeremiah's ministry, about 627 to 580 B.C.
Written to	Judah in its last forty years, the exiles in Babylon, and the nations around them
Setting and time covered	Jerusalem from the thirteenth year of Josiah (627 B.C.) through the fall of the city in 586 B.C. and the flight to Egypt
Chapters	52
Key word	The new covenant
Key verse	Jeremiah 31:33

Background

Jeremiah is sometimes called the weeping prophet, and he earned the name. He preached for about forty years to people who would not listen. He was mocked, beaten, put in stocks, thrown into prison, lowered into a muddy cistern and left to die, and finally dragged off to Egypt against his will. Through it all he kept speaking God's word. He also wept. "Who will give that my head be water, and my eye a fountain of tears, that I may weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" (9:1).

The book opens, "The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, from the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin" (1:1). Anathoth was a small town a few miles northeast of Jerusalem. Jeremiah came from a family of priests, but God called him to be a prophet, someone who speaks God's word to His people. God called him while he was still young. When Jeremiah protested, "Look, I do not know how to speak, for I am a youth" (1:6), God told him not to be afraid, touched his mouth, and put His words there (1:7-9). God also told him not to marry or have children, as a sign of how terrible the coming days would be (16:1-4).

We know more about Jeremiah's life than about any other writing prophet. His friend and scribe Baruch wrote down his words (36:4), and the book includes many scenes from his life, along with his private prayers to God, which are often called his confessions (for example 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 20:7-18).

Jeremiah preached from about 627 B.C., the thirteenth year of King Josiah, until after Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C. Those were Judah's last forty years. Josiah was a good king who led a great reform after the Book of the Law was found in the temple in 622 B.C. (2 Kings 22-23), but the reform did not reach the people's hearts. After Josiah was killed in battle in 609 B.C., the kings who followed, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah, turned away from the LORD. Meanwhile Babylon was rising. Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt at Carchemish in 605 B.C., took captives from Jerusalem that same year (including Daniel), took King Jehoiachin and many others in 597 B.C. (including Ezekiel), and finally burned Jerusalem and the temple in 586 B.C.

Jeremiah lived through all of it. When the city fell, the Babylonians let him stay in the land. But after the governor Gedaliah was murdered, the people fled to Egypt and forced Jeremiah to go with them (chapters 40-44). That is the last we hear of him. Scripture doesn't tell us how or where he died.

Purpose

Jeremiah's message to Judah was simple and hard: you have broken God's covenant, and judgment is coming. A covenant is a binding agreement. At Sinai, God had bound Himself to Israel and Israel to Him, and He had warned them what would happen if they turned to other gods (Deuteronomy 28). Now that day had come.

God's charge against His people is one of the most famous lines in the book: "For My people has done two evils: they have forsaken Me, a spring of living water, to hew out for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, which cannot hold the water" (2:13). They had left the fresh spring for leaky tanks they dug themselves.

But Jeremiah's purpose was not only to warn. He called the people to repent again and again. And in the middle of the darkest days, God gave him words of hope: Judah would go into exile for seventy years, and then God would bring them back (25:11; 29:10). Beyond that, God would make a new covenant, written not on stone but on the heart (31:31-34).

Main Themes

God's people have broken His covenant. Judah worshiped Baal and other gods, even sacrificing children (7:31; 19:5). They trusted in the temple as if it were a good-luck charm, saying, "The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD are these" (7:4). God warned that He would do to Jerusalem's temple what He had done at Shiloh, where the tabernacle once stood (7:12-14).

The human heart is the real problem. "The heart is deceitful more than everything, and it is incurable; who can know it?" (17:9). Judah's sin was not just bad behavior. It came from hearts that were sick. Only God can fix that.

God is sovereign over the nations. At the potter's house, Jeremiah watched a potter remake a spoiled pot. God said, "like the clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in My hand" (18:6). God raises up Babylon to judge Judah, and then He judges Babylon (chapters 50-51).

Faithfulness costs something. Jeremiah obeyed God and suffered for it. His life shows that being faithful does not always bring success or comfort in this life. It brings God's presence.

God promises a new covenant. Chapters 30-33, often called the Book of Comfort, promise that God will bring Israel and Judah back to the land, raise up a righteous Branch from David, and make a new covenant in which He will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more (31:34).

Outline

- Chapter 1: Jeremiah's call. God appoints him a prophet to the nations and shows him two visions.
- Chapters 2-25: Warnings to Judah. Sermons against idolatry and empty religion, the temple sermon, the potter, and the seventy years.
- Chapters 26-29: Conflicts with false prophets and kings. Jeremiah's trial, the yoke of Babylon, Hananiah the false prophet, and the letter to the exiles.
- Chapters 30-33: The book of comfort and the new covenant. Restoration, the new covenant, and Jeremiah buying a field.
- Chapters 34-45: The last days of Jerusalem. The burned scroll, Jeremiah in prison and in the cistern, the fall of the city, and the flight to Egypt.
- Chapters 46-51: Words against the nations. Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Kedar, Elam and Babylon.
- Chapter 52: The fall of Jerusalem. A history of the city's fall and of King Jehoiachin's release in Babylon.

Key Verses

Jeremiah 1:5 *"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."*

God knew Jeremiah and set him apart before he was born. God's call on our lives starts before we do.

Jeremiah 17:9 *The heart **is** deceitful more than everything, and it **is** incurable; who can know it?*

The Bible's diagnosis of the human heart. We need more than advice. We need a new heart.

Jeremiah 29:11 *For I, I know the plans which I am planning concerning you,' declares the LORD, 'plans of welfare and not for calamity, to give you a latter end and a hope.*

Spoken to exiles who would spend seventy years in Babylon. God's plans for His people are good, even when the waiting is long.

Jeremiah 31:33 *For this **is** the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put My law in their inward part, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be God to them, and they, they will be a people to Me.*

The heart of the new covenant. God Himself will write His law on the hearts of His people.

Jeremiah 33:3 *'Call to Me, and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and inaccessible things which you have not known.'*

God invites His people to call on Him, and He promises to answer.

Christ in Jeremiah

The clearest link between Jeremiah and Christ is the new covenant. At the Last Supper Jesus took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is being poured out for you" (Luke 22:20). Hebrews 8:8-12 quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34 in full and says that Jesus is the mediator of this better covenant. Hebrews 10:15-18 quotes it again to show that because God has forgiven our sins through Christ, no more sacrifice for sin is needed.

What is new about the new covenant? The old covenant at Sinai was written on stone, and Israel broke it. In the new covenant God promises to put His law within His people, to write it on their hearts, to be their God, and to forgive their sins completely (31:33-34). Only the death of Jesus could pay for that forgiveness, and only the Holy Spirit living in us can write God's law on our hearts (2 Corinthians 3:3-6).

Jeremiah also speaks of the coming King. "I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king" (23:5). His name will be "The LORD Our Righteousness" (23:6). Jesus is that Branch, the Son of David who will reign, and He is our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30).

Jeremiah's life itself looks forward to Christ in some ways. Some people even thought Jesus might be Jeremiah come back (Matthew 16:14). Both wept over Jerusalem (Jeremiah 9:1; Luke 19:41). Both were rejected by their own people and accused of speaking against the temple (Jeremiah 26:8-11; Mark 14:57-58). That is a theme, not a prophecy, but it helps us see how much the Lord Jesus entered into the sorrow of the prophets who came before Him.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Jeremiah stands at the end of the kingdom of Judah. The history books, especially 2 Kings 22-25 and 2 Chronicles 34-36, tell what happened. Jeremiah tells us what God was saying while it happened. He confirms what Moses warned in Deuteronomy 28: if the people turned away, they would be scattered among the nations.

Jeremiah's prophecy of seventy years became a turning point for the next generation. Daniel read it in Babylon and began to pray for his people (Daniel 9:2). Ezra tells us that Cyrus's decree in 538 B.C. came "to fulfill the word of the LORD from the mouth of Jeremiah" (Ezra 1:1).

And Jeremiah's new covenant is the bridge to the New Testament. The very name New Testament comes from this idea, since testament is an old word for covenant. God's answer to Israel's broken covenant is not to give up on His people. It is to make a new covenant through His Son. And Jeremiah makes clear that this covenant is with "the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (31:31). God has not forgotten the nation. In the very next verses He says that Israel will not cease to be a nation before Him as long as the sun, moon and stars remain (31:35-37). Paul looks to that same faithfulness when he says that all Israel will be saved (Romans 11:26-27). Believers from every nation share in the blessings of the new covenant now through Christ, and God will one day keep every promise He made to Israel.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

One real question about Jeremiah has to do with the text itself. The old Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint, has a version of Jeremiah that is about one-eighth shorter

than the Hebrew text our Bibles follow, and it puts the words against the nations in a different place. Some scholars think the shorter Greek version reflects an earlier form of the book. Others think the Greek translators shortened it. Jeremiah 36 itself tells us that the book was written down more than once, and that the second scroll had many words added (36:32), so it is not surprising that more than one edition circulated. Our English Bibles follow the Hebrew text, and nothing in the book's message changes either way.

Teachers also differ on how the promises of chapters 30-33 will be fulfilled. Some see them fulfilled only in the church. I believe the new covenant blessings come to all believers through Christ now, and that the promises to the nation of Israel, including the return to the land and the Son of David on the throne, will still be kept to Israel, as 31:35-37 says.

Read It This Way

Jeremiah is not in time order, and that can be confusing. The book is arranged more by subject than by date. Chapter 21 takes place near the end of Zedekiah's reign, while chapter 26 goes back to the start of Jehoiakim's reign. When a chapter names a king or a year, write it in the margin. A simple list of Judah's last kings helps: Josiah (640-609 B.C.), Jehoahaz (609), Jehoiakim (609-598), Jehoiachin (598-597) and Zedekiah (597-586).

Pay attention to the acted-out messages. Jeremiah buries a linen belt until it rots (13:1-11). He smashes a clay jar in front of the elders (19:1-11). He wears a wooden yoke on his neck (27:2). He buys a field while the Babylonians are camped outside the walls, as a sign that houses and fields will again be bought in the land (32:6-15). God often taught through pictures, and these scenes stick in the mind.

Read Jeremiah's private prayers too. He tells God exactly how he feels. At one point he says he will not speak in God's name again, but God's word becomes "like a burning fire shut up in my bones" (20:9), and he cannot hold it in. If you have ever felt worn out from serving God, Jeremiah understands.

Read the story of the burned scroll in chapter 36. King Jehoiakim cut Jeremiah's scroll into pieces with a knife and threw it into the fire as it was read to him. God simply had Jeremiah write it again, with more added (36:27-32). Men can burn a Bible. They cannot burn God's word.

Read Jeremiah 29 as a letter to people far from home. God told the exiles to build houses, plant gardens, raise families and seek the welfare of the city where He had sent them (29:4-7). Then He gave them the promise of 29:11. That verse is often quoted on graduation cards, but its first readers had seventy years of waiting ahead of them. It is a promise for people who must be faithful a long time before they see the answer.

Watch how Jeremiah handles false prophets. In chapter 28 a prophet named Hananiah breaks the wooden yoke off Jeremiah's neck and says that within two years God will break the yoke of Babylon. It was exactly what the people wanted to hear. Jeremiah answers that a prophet who promises peace will be known as a true prophet only when his word comes true (28:9). Within a year Hananiah was dead (28:17). Then as now, the most popular message is not always the true one.

Don't skip the last chapter. Jeremiah 52 tells the fall of Jerusalem again, much like 2 Kings 25. But it ends with a small light. Thirty-seven years into the exile, the king of Babylon released King Jehoiachin from prison, spoke kindly to him, and gave him a seat at his table for the rest of his life (52:31-34). The line of David was still alive. God had not forgotten His promise.

Finally, spend time in chapters 30-33. After so much darkness, the light of those chapters shines all the brighter. "Is anything too difficult for Me?" God asks (32:27). The answer is no.

Study Questions

1. What did Jeremiah say when God called him, and how did God answer his fear (1:4-10)?
2. What are the broken cisterns in your own life, the things you turn to instead of the spring of living water (2:13)?
3. Why did the people think the temple would protect them, and why was that a false hope (7:1-15)?
4. What did God tell the exiles to do while they waited in Babylon, and how does that speak to waiting today (29:4-11)?
5. What makes the new covenant new, and how did Jesus fulfill it (31:31-34; Luke 22:20)?

Lamentations

At a Glance	
Author	Not named; long held to be Jeremiah (2 Chronicles 35:25)
Date written	Soon after Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C.
Written to	The survivors of Judah, grieving the loss of their city and temple
Setting and time covered	Jerusalem in ruins after the Babylonian conquest of 586 B.C.
Chapters	5
Key word	Grief and hope
Key verse	Lamentations 3:22-23

Background

Lamentations is a book of tears. It is five poems of grief written over the ruins of Jerusalem. The first word of the book in Hebrew is a cry, often translated how, and it sets the tone: "How she sits alone, the city great with people! She has become like a widow" (1:1).

To feel the weight of this book, you have to know what happened. In 588 B.C. the army of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon surrounded Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:1). The siege lasted until 586 B.C. Food ran out. People starved in the streets. Mothers did the unthinkable (4:10). In 586 B.C. the walls were broken through. King Zedekiah tried to escape and was caught. The Babylonians killed his sons in front of him, put out his eyes, and took him to Babylon in chains (2 Kings 25:1-7). Then they burned the temple Solomon had built, burned the king's palace and the great houses, tore down the walls, and carried most of the survivors away (2 Kings 25:8-11). For a Jew in that day, it felt like the end of the world.

Who wrote these poems? The book does not say. Jewish and Christian tradition have long held that Jeremiah wrote them. That makes good sense. Jeremiah saw the city fall with his own eyes, he was known for his tears (Jeremiah 9:1), and Scripture tells us he wrote laments, songs of mourning, for King Josiah (2 Chronicles 35:25). The old Greek translation of the Old Testament opens the book with a note that Jeremiah wrote it. The style and themes of the two books are close. Some scholars think another eyewitness wrote some or all of the poems. Either way, the writer was there, and his grief is real.

The book was written soon after the city fell, while the smoke was still in the air. Even today, Jewish people read Lamentations every year on the ninth of Av, a day of fasting that remembers the destruction of the temple.

Purpose

Lamentations gives God's people words for grief. It does not rush past sorrow. It sits in the ashes and weeps. In a world that often wants us to smile and move on, that matters. The Bible gives us a whole book that says, it is right to mourn what is lost.

But the book also tells the truth about why the city fell. Jerusalem was not destroyed by bad luck or by Babylon's strength alone. "The LORD has done what He purposed" (2:17). He had warned His people for centuries through Moses and the prophets, and they would not listen. The writer says plainly, "Jerusalem has sinned a sin" (1:8), a Hebrew way of saying she sinned deeply.

And at the very center of the book, the writer finds hope. Not hope in Judah, or in its kings, or in Egypt, but in the character of God. "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" (3:22-23).

Main Themes

Sin has consequences. The book says again and again that the city fell because of its sin (1:5, 8; 4:13). God is not blamed unfairly. He did what He said He would do (2:17; Deuteronomy 28:49-52).

Grief is honest. The writer does not hide his pain or dress it up. He weeps until his eyes fail (2:11). The book teaches us that bringing our grief to God is an act of faith, not a lack of it.

God is faithful. Even in judgment, God's steadfast love has not run out. His mercies are new every morning (3:22-23). "The LORD is my portion," says my soul; "therefore I will wait for Him" (3:24).

The way back is repentance. "Let us search our ways, and let us examine them, and let us return to the LORD" (3:40). The book ends with a prayer for God to bring His people back to Himself (5:21).

Outline

- Chapter 1: The city sits alone. Jerusalem pictured as a widow weeping in the night with no one to comfort her.
- Chapter 2: The LORD's anger. God Himself has torn down the city He loved.
- Chapter 3: Hope in the middle of suffering. One man's lament turns to the faithfulness of God.
- Chapter 4: The siege remembered. Then and now: the gold grown dim, children starving, and the leaders who failed.
- Chapter 5: A prayer for restoration. The people's prayer: remember us, bring us back.

Key Verses

Lamentations 1:12 *Not to you, all who pass by on the road? Look and see if there is pain like my pain, which has been dealt to me, with which the LORD has caused grief in the day of the burning of His anger.*

The city cries out to all who pass by. Is anyone's pain like this? Many Christians have heard these words as a picture of Christ's suffering too.

Lamentations 3:22-23 *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.*

The bright center of a dark book. God's mercies are new every morning.

Lamentations 3:40 *Let us search our ways, and let us examine **them**, and let us return to the LORD.*

Grief should lead us to search our hearts and come back to God.

Lamentations 5:21 *Cause us to return, O LORD, to Yourself, and let us return; renew our days as of old.*

The book's last plea. Only God can turn us back to Him and make things new.

Christ in Lamentations

The New Testament never quotes Lamentations, so its link to Christ is a theme rather than a prophecy. But the theme runs deep.

Jesus wept over the same city. As He came near Jerusalem, He saw it and wept over it, because it did not know the time of its visitation (Luke 19:41-44). He foretold that its enemies would surround it and leave not one stone on another. That happened in A.D. 70, when Rome destroyed the second temple, on the same day of the year, by Jewish tradition, as the first destruction.

Lamentations shows what it looks like when God's wrath against sin falls. The cross shows us that same wrath falling on Jesus in our place. "With which the LORD has caused grief in the day of the burning of His anger" (1:12), the city says. On the cross, Jesus bore the burning of God's anger against our sin, so that those who trust in Him will never face it (Romans 5:9; 1 Thessalonians 1:10).

And the mercy that is new every morning is the mercy God gives us in Christ. The steadfast love of the LORD did not come to an end at the fall of Jerusalem, and it did not come to an end at the cross. It rose again on the third day.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Lamentations stands right after Jeremiah in our Bibles, and the two belong together. Jeremiah warned that the city would fall. Lamentations weeps because it did. Together they show both the justice and the heart of God. He keeps His word when He warns, and He grieves when He must judge.

The book also looks back to the warnings of Moses. Deuteronomy 28 said that if Israel turned away, a nation from far away would come, besiege their cities, and bring famine so terrible that parents would eat their children (Deuteronomy 28:49-57). Lamentations 4 records that it happened. God's word is true in both its promises and its warnings.

And Lamentations looks forward. The prayer that ends the book, "Cause us to return, O LORD, to Yourself" (5:21), was answered in part when the exiles came home under Cyrus in 538 B.C. It will be answered in full when God gathers Israel and gives them a new heart (Ezekiel 36:24-28; Romans 11:26-27), and when He wipes away every tear from every eye (Revelation 21:4).

Read It This Way

Read Lamentations slowly, and read it out loud. These poems were meant to be heard and felt.

Notice the shape. Chapters 1, 2 and 4 are acrostics. Each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet, twenty-two verses for twenty-two letters. Chapter 3 is the most careful of all: it has sixty-six verses, three for each letter. Chapter 5 has twenty-two verses but does not follow the alphabet. Why write grief in such a careful form? One reason may be that it helped people remember. Another may be that it gave shape to pain that felt shapeless. Grief from A to Z, said fully and then laid down before God.

Notice where the hope is. It is not at the beginning or the end. It is in the middle, in chapter 3. The writer starts in the dark (3:1-20), then says, "This I bring back to my heart; therefore I will wait" (3:21). The hope does not come from his circumstances changing. They haven't. It comes from remembering who God is.

Let the book teach you how to grieve. When you lose something or someone, you don't have to pretend. You can weep and still trust. You can say how bad it is and still say, great is Your faithfulness. That is not a contradiction. It is faith.

Study Questions

1. What pictures does the writer use for Jerusalem in chapter 1, and what do they tell you about the depth of the loss (1:1-3)?
2. Why does the writer say the city fell, and how does that match what God warned (1:8; 2:17; Deuteronomy 28:49-52)?
3. What did the writer call to mind that gave him hope, even though nothing around him had changed (3:19-24)?
4. What does it look like to search our ways and return to the LORD in a hard season (3:40)?
5. How does Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem help you understand the heart of God in this book (Luke 19:41-44)?

Ezekiel

At a Glance	
Author	Ezekiel son of Buzi, a priest (1:3)
Date written	During Ezekiel's ministry, about 593 to 571 B.C.
Written to	The Jewish exiles in Babylon, before and after the fall of Jerusalem
Setting and time covered	By the Chebar River in Babylon, from the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's exile (593 B.C.) to about 571 B.C.
Chapters	48
Key word	The glory of the LORD
Key verse	Ezekiel 36:26

Background

Ezekiel was a priest who never served in the temple. He was born into a priestly family, and in the normal course of things he would have begun serving in Jerusalem around the age of thirty. Instead, in 597 B.C., when he was still a young man, the Babylonians took him away with King Jehoiachin and about ten thousand of Jerusalem's leaders and craftsmen (2 Kings 24:10-16). He was settled with other exiles by the Chebar River, a canal near the city of Babylon.

Five years later, "in the thirtieth year" (1:1), probably his own age, the heavens opened. Ezekiel saw a storm coming out of the north, and in it four living creatures, wheels full of eyes, a sparkling expanse, a throne, and on the throne a figure like a man, surrounded by brightness like a rainbow. "That was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And I saw it, and I fell on my face" (1:28). God called him that day to be a prophet to the exiles. Notice what this meant. The exiles thought God had stayed behind in Jerusalem. Ezekiel learned that the glory of God was not limited to one building. God was with His people even in Babylon.

Ezekiel served for about twenty-two years, from about 593 to 571 B.C. The book is carefully dated, more than any other prophet, and most of its dates count from the year Jehoiachin was taken captive. The last dated message comes in the twenty-seventh year (29:17), about 571 B.C. He lived at the same time as Jeremiah, who was still preaching in Jerusalem, and as Daniel, who was serving in the king's court in Babylon. Ezekiel even mentions Daniel by name, along with Noah and Job, as a man known for righteousness (14:14, 20).

God often called Ezekiel to act out his message. He lay on his side for 390 days and then 40 more, to picture the years of Israel's and Judah's sin (4:4-6). He shaved his head and beard and divided the hair into three piles, burning one, striking one with a sword, and scattering one to the wind (5:1-4). He packed his bags and dug through a wall at night like a refugee (12:3-7). Most painful of all, God told him that his wife, the delight of his eyes, would die, and that he must not mourn in public, as a sign to the people of how stunned they would be when the temple fell (24:15-24). It happened that very evening.

Purpose

Ezekiel had two main jobs, and the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. divides them.

Before the fall, his message to the exiles was: don't get your hopes up. Many of them believed Jerusalem would never fall, that their exile would be short, and that they would soon go home. False prophets told them so (13:1-16). Ezekiel told them the truth. Jerusalem's sin was so great that God's glory would leave the temple, and the city would be destroyed. In chapters 8-11 he is carried in a vision to Jerusalem, where he sees idol worship in the temple itself, and then watches the glory of the LORD rise and leave, first to the threshold, then to the east gate, then to the mountain east of the city (10:18-19; 11:22-23).

After the fall, when the news reached Babylon (33:21), his message changed to hope. God would gather His people again, give them a new heart, raise up a shepherd from David's line, defeat their enemies, and return in glory to a new temple. The book that began with God's glory leaving ends with God's glory coming back (43:1-5), and with a city named "The LORD Is There" (48:35).

Running through the whole book is one phrase that comes more than sixty times, in slightly different forms: they will know that I am the LORD. Everything God does, in judgment and in salvation, is meant to make Himself known.

Main Themes

God's glory is holy. God will not stay where He is mocked. When His people filled the temple with idols, His glory left (chapters 8-11). His holiness is not something to take lightly.

Each person answers to God. The exiles had a proverb that they were suffering for their fathers' sins. God rejected it. "The soul that sins, it shall die" (18:4). Each person is responsible before God, and each person who turns from sin will live. "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked man, but in a wicked man turning back from his way, and that he live" (33:11).

The prophet is a watchman. God made Ezekiel a watchman for Israel (3:17; 33:7). A watchman stood on the city wall and warned of danger. If he warned and the people ignored him, their blood was on their own heads. If he stayed silent, he was guilty. That calling still speaks to anyone who knows the truth.

God will give a new heart. The people's real problem was a heart of stone. God promised to give them a new heart and a new spirit and to put His own Spirit within them (36:26-27; 11:19).

God will restore Israel. God promised to bring Israel back to the land, make the two kingdoms one nation again under one king (37:15-28), and dwell among them forever. He would do it, He said, not because they deserved it but for the sake of His holy name (36:22).

Outline

- Chapters 1-3: Ezekiel's call. The vision of God's glory by the Chebar River, the scroll Ezekiel eats, and his appointment as watchman.

- Chapters 4-24: Judgment on Jerusalem. Acted-out signs, the glory leaving the temple, parables of the vine, the unfaithful wife and the two sisters, and the death of Ezekiel's wife.
- Chapters 25-32: Judgment on the nations. Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon and Egypt.
- Chapters 33-39: Restoration of Israel. The watchman renewed, the good shepherd, the new heart, the valley of dry bones, the two sticks made one, and the defeat of Gog.
- Chapters 40-48: The new temple. A detailed vision of a temple, the glory returning, the river of life, and the land divided among the tribes.

Key Verses

Ezekiel 2:3 *And He said to me, Son of man, I am sending you to the sons of Israel, to nations, the rebelling **ones** who have rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day.*

God sent Ezekiel to a rebellious people. He was called to be faithful, not to be popular.

Ezekiel 18:4 *Look, all the souls are Mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son, they are Mine. The soul that sins, it shall die.*

Every soul belongs to God, and each one is accountable to Him.

Ezekiel 36:26-27 *And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And My Spirit I will put within you, and I will bring about that you walk in My statutes, and you shall keep My judgments and do **them**.*

God's answer to the human heart. He does not just improve it; He replaces it, and He puts His Spirit within.

Ezekiel 37:5 *Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Look, I am bringing breath into you, and you shall live.*

God speaks to dry bones, and they live. Nothing is too dead for Him.

Ezekiel 43:5 *And a spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner courtyard; and look, the glory of the LORD filled the house.*

The glory that left in chapter 10 comes back. God's last word to His people is His presence.

Christ in Ezekiel

Ezekiel's clearest picture of Christ is the shepherd. In chapter 34 God condemns Israel's leaders, the shepherds who fed themselves and not the flock. Then He says, "I, I Myself, will search for My flock and seek them out" (34:11). And He says He will raise up "one shepherd, and he shall shepherd them, My servant David" (34:23). David had been dead for four hundred years, so this is the Son of David. Jesus stood in Jerusalem and said, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11). He said He would bring other sheep too, so that there would be one flock and one shepherd (John 10:16).

Those who heard Him knew Ezekiel 34. Jesus was claiming to be both the LORD who seeks His sheep and the Son of David who shepherds them.

The new heart and the Spirit within (36:26-27) point to the new birth. Jesus told Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel, that a man must be born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5), and seemed surprised that Nicodemus did not understand (John 3:10). Many believe Jesus had this very passage in mind. That is a fair connection, though John does not cite Ezekiel by name.

The river flowing from the temple in chapter 47, which brings life wherever it goes, is echoed in Revelation 22:1-2, where the river of the water of life flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb. When Jesus cried out that rivers of living water would flow from those who believe in Him (John 7:38), He was pointing to the life He gives by the Spirit. I would call this a theme the New Testament takes up rather than a direct prophecy.

Ezekiel is also called son of man again and again. In Ezekiel the phrase simply means a human being, a mortal man standing before the glory of God. Jesus' use of Son of Man as a title comes mainly from Daniel 7:13, but it is worth noticing that Jesus, too, was fully a man who stood in the presence of God on our behalf.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Ezekiel fills in what was happening among the exiles while Jeremiah was preaching in Jerusalem and Daniel was serving in Babylon's court. Read together, the three show us God at work in every place His people were.

Ezekiel's promises carry the story forward to the end. The valley of dry bones (37:1-14) is a picture of the nation of Israel coming back to life, first gathered to the land and then given breath by the Spirit. The two sticks joined into one (37:15-22) promise that the divided kingdoms will become one nation under one king. The battle with Gog from the land of Magog (chapters 38-39) shows God defending His people in the last days, and Revelation takes up the names Gog and Magog in its own vision (Revelation 20:8). And the last chapters give us a temple, a river and a city where God dwells with His people, which Revelation 21-22 also draws on.

These chapters show that God has a future for the nation of Israel. He promised to gather them from the nations and bring them into their own land (37:21), and Paul says that all Israel will be saved (Romans 11:26). God's promises to Israel have not been handed over to someone else. They will be kept.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

The biggest debate in Ezekiel is how to read the temple vision of chapters 40-48. The details are very specific: measurements, gates, chambers, priests, offerings, feasts and the division of the land among the twelve tribes.

Some teachers read it as a symbol. They see the temple as a picture of the church, or of God's presence with His people in heaven, or of the new creation in Revelation 21-22. They point out that the New Testament teaches that Christ's sacrifice ended the need for animal sacrifices (Hebrews 10:11-18).

Others read it as a real temple that will be built in the future, in the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. They point to the detailed measurements, which are hard to explain as pure symbol, and to the fact that the temple stands in a restored land of Israel divided among real tribes. In this reading, the sacrifices in the millennial temple do not take away sin. They look back to the cross as a memorial, much as the Lord's Supper does today.

The literal future temple is the reading that fits my belief in a future thousand-year reign of Christ on earth (Revelation 20:1-6) and God's future for Israel. It should be held with humility. Good, Bible-believing teachers have read these chapters differently, and the sacrifices in particular raise questions we cannot fully answer yet.

A smaller debate concerns the lament over the king of Tyre in 28:11-19. It speaks of a being who was in Eden, the garden of God, an anointed cherub who was blameless until unrighteousness was found in him and he was cast down. Many teachers, from the early church on, have seen in these words a picture of the fall of Satan standing behind the proud human king. Others read the passage as poetry about the king alone, using Eden language to show how high he rose and how far he fell. The passage is clearly addressed to the king of Tyre (28:12), and the words go beyond any mere man. Many find it fair to see the power behind the throne in them, but Scripture doesn't spell that out, so it is best held loosely.

Read It This Way

Ezekiel can be strange, and at times overwhelming. Don't let that keep you away.

Start with chapter 1, but don't get lost in the details. Ezekiel himself keeps saying it was like this, the appearance of that. He is describing something too great for words. The point is that God is glorious, holy and on the move.

Then follow the glory. Mark these verses in your Bible: 1:28, 10:18-19, 11:22-23 and 43:1-5. That thread holds the whole book together: the glory appears, the glory leaves, the glory returns.

Read chapter 18 and chapter 33 together. They show God's justice and His heart. He judges each person fairly, and He begs the wicked to turn and live. "Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! And why will you die, O house of Israel?" (33:11). If you have ever wondered whether God wants to save sinners, read that verse again.

Chapters 16 and 23 are hard to read. God uses blunt pictures of an unfaithful wife to show how deeply Israel's idolatry hurt Him. They are meant to shock. Sin is not a small thing to God.

Read chapter 37 aloud. Imagine standing in a valley full of dry bones and hearing God ask, "Son of man, shall these bones live?" (37:3). Ezekiel's answer is the right answer for us too: "O Lord GOD, You, You know." Then watch what God's word and God's Spirit can do.

For chapters 40-48, a simple drawing of the temple helps. Many study Bibles have one. Don't let the measurements bog you down. Look for the big picture: God is holy, His presence is returning, and life flows out from where He dwells (47:9).

Study Questions

1. What did Ezekiel see by the Chebar River, and why would that vision have mattered so much to exiles far from the temple (1:1, 28)?
2. What is the job of a watchman, and how does that calling apply to believers today (3:17-21; 33:1-9)?
3. Why did God's glory leave the temple, and what does that teach about how God views sin among His people (8:6; 10:18-19)?
4. What does God promise in 36:26-27, and how does Jesus' teaching on the new birth connect to it (36:26-27; John 3:5-8)?
5. How does Jesus fulfill the promise of the one shepherd, My servant David (34:11-16, 23; John 10:11-16)?

Daniel

At a Glance	
Author	Daniel (9:2; 12:4); Jesus called him "Daniel the prophet" (Matthew 24:15)
Date written	Near the end of Daniel's life, about 530 B.C.
Written to	The Jewish exiles in Babylon and God's people living under foreign rule, to the end of the age
Setting and time covered	Babylon, from 605 B.C. to the third year of Cyrus king of Persia, about 536 B.C.
Chapters	12
Key word	God rules
Key verse	Daniel 4:17

Background

Daniel was a teenager when his world fell apart. In 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, took some of the temple vessels, and carried off a group of young men from the royal family and the nobles of Judah (1:1-3). They were chosen because they were handsome, smart and well trained. Babylon planned to reshape them into servants of the empire. They were given new names, a new language, a new education and a seat at the king's table. Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (better known by their Babylonian names Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego), were among them.

Daniel served the kings of Babylon and then of Persia for about seventy years. He rose to high office under Nebuchadnezzar, interpreted the handwriting on the wall on the night Babylon fell in 539 B.C., and served again under Darius the Mede and Cyrus the Persian. His last dated vision comes in the third year of Cyrus, about 536 B.C. (10:1). He likely finished the book near the end of his life, about 530 B.C.

Daniel wrote the book. It speaks of him in the third person in chapters 1-6 and in the first person, I, Daniel, in chapters 7-12 (7:2, 15; 8:1; 9:2; 10:2; 12:5). His name means God is my Judge. Ezekiel, who lived at the same time, names Daniel with Noah and Job as a man of righteousness (Ezekiel 14:14, 20). And Jesus Himself spoke of "the abomination of desolation, which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet" (Matthew 24:15).

The book was written in two languages. Daniel 1:1-2:4a and chapters 8-12 are in Hebrew, the language of God's people. Daniel 2:4b-7:28 is in Aramaic, the common language of the Babylonian and Persian empires. It is fitting that the middle section, which is about the kingdoms of the world, was given in the world's language.

The book is in two halves. Chapters 1-6 are stories of Daniel and his friends staying faithful in a foreign land. Chapters 7-12 are visions of the future. The stories are mostly in time order, and the visions each carry their own dates, so some visions came before some stories. For example, the visions of chapters 7 and 8 came under Belshazzar, before the feast of chapter 5, and the lions' den in chapter 6 came after Babylon fell.

Purpose

The message of Daniel boils down to one truth: God is in control. Kings rise, and kings fall. Empires look unbeatable for a while, and then they are gone. Through it all, "the Most High rules over the kingdom of mankind, and to whomever He wills He gives it" (4:17).

That message came to exiles who had every reason to think their God had lost. Jerusalem was in ruins. The temple was burned. The king of Babylon had carried off the holy vessels and put them in the house of his own god (1:2). Daniel shows that none of this was outside God's plan. In the stories, we see God protect and honor people who stay faithful under pressure. In the visions, we see God lay out the whole sweep of history, from Daniel's day to the return of Christ and His everlasting kingdom.

Main Themes

God is sovereign over kings and kingdoms. Nebuchadnezzar had to learn that lesson the hard way. After his pride, God made him live like an animal until he acknowledged that the Most High rules (4:28-37). When he came to his senses, he blessed the God whose dominion is everlasting (4:34-35).

God's people can stay faithful in a hostile culture. Daniel "set on his heart that he would not defile himself" (1:8). His friends refused to bow to the golden image, even with the furnace in front of them. "And if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not serving your god" (3:18). Daniel kept praying three times a day with his windows open toward Jerusalem, knowing it meant the lions (6:10).

History is heading toward God's kingdom. The statue of chapter 2 and the beasts of chapter 7 picture four great kingdoms. In the days of those kings, God will set up "a kingdom which will never be destroyed" (2:44). The stone cut without hands strikes the statue and becomes a great mountain that fills the earth (2:34-35).

God reveals the future. Daniel's visions give more detail about the future than almost any other part of the Bible: the rise of Persia and Greece (chapter 8), the seventy weeks (chapter 9), the kings of the north and south (chapter 11), and the time of the end (chapter 12).

There is a resurrection. "And many of those who sleep in the ground of dust will awake, these to everlasting life, and these to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence" (12:2). This is one of the clearest promises of resurrection in the Old Testament.

Outline

- Chapter 1: Daniel's faithfulness in Babylon. Daniel and his friends refuse the king's food and God blesses them.
- Chapter 2: Nebuchadnezzar's dream. The great statue, four kingdoms, and the kingdom of God.
- Chapter 3: The furnace. The golden image and the fourth man in the fire.
- Chapter 4: Nebuchadnezzar humbled. The great tree cut down and the king restored.
- Chapter 5: The writing on the wall. Belshazzar's feast and the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C.

- Chapter 6: The lions' den. Daniel's prayer and God's deliverance under Darius.
- Chapters 7-8: Visions of the kingdoms. Four beasts and the Son of Man; the ram, the goat and the little horn.
- Chapter 9: The seventy weeks. Daniel's prayer and Gabriel's answer.
- Chapters 10-12: The final vision. The unseen war, the kings of the north and south, and the time of the end.

Key Verses

Daniel 1:8 *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; and he sought from the chief of the officials that he might not defile himself.*

Faithfulness starts with a decision of the heart, made before the pressure comes.

Daniel 2:44 *And in the days of those kings the God of the heavens will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and the kingdom will not be left to another people; it will shatter and put an end to all these kingdoms, and it will stand forever,*

God's kingdom will outlast every empire of man.

Daniel 4:17 *The edict **is** by the decree of the watchers, and the matter **is** by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules over the kingdom of mankind, and to whomever He wills He gives it, and He sets up over it the lowly of men.'*

The key to the whole book. God rules, and He gives power to whom He wills.

Daniel 7:13-14 *I was seeing in the visions of the night, and look, with the clouds of the heavens **one** like a son of man was coming; and he reached the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before Him. And to him was given dominion and honor and a kingdom, and all the peoples, nations, and languages will serve him. His dominion **is** an everlasting dominion, which will not pass away, and his kingdom **one** which will not be destroyed.*

The Son of Man comes with the clouds and receives an everlasting kingdom. Jesus applied this to Himself.

Daniel 9:25 *And you shall know and gain insight: from the going forth of **the** word to restore and to build Jerusalem until an anointed one, a prince, **shall be** seven sevens and sixty-two sevens; it will again be built, plaza and moat, even in the distress of the times.*

The seventy weeks point to the time of Messiah's coming.

Christ in Daniel

Daniel 7:13-14 is one of the most important passages in the Old Testament for understanding Jesus. Daniel saw "one like a son of man" coming with the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days and receiving dominion, honor and an everlasting kingdom. Son of Man was Jesus' favorite way of speaking of Himself. When the high priest asked Him at His trial whether He was the Christ, Jesus answered that they would see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming

with the clouds of heaven (Mark 14:61-62). The high priest tore his robes. He understood exactly what Jesus was claiming.

The seventy weeks of chapter 9 point to the time of Messiah's coming. Gabriel told Daniel that from the decree to restore and build Jerusalem until an anointed one, a prince, would be seven sevens and sixty-two sevens, and then an anointed one would be "cut off, and there will be nothing for him" (9:25-26). A seven here means a period of seven years. The two starting points most often proposed are both from Artaxerxes: his decree to Ezra about 457 B.C. (Ezra 7:11-26), which counts to about A.D. 27 and the start of Jesus' ministry, and his permission to Nehemiah about 445 or 444 B.C. (Nehemiah 2:1-8), which, counted in years of 360 days, reaches the days when Jesus was presented as King and then crucified. Faithful scholars hold both. Either way, Daniel foretold the time of Messiah's coming centuries ahead. After that, the city and the sanctuary would be destroyed, which happened when Rome destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Christ is also the stone cut out without hands that strikes the kingdoms of the world and becomes a mountain that fills the earth (2:34-35, 44-45). And many believe the fourth man in the fiery furnace, who looked "like a son of the gods" (3:25), was the Son of God Himself. Scripture doesn't say so directly, and the king who said it was a pagan, so that one is best held loosely. But the lesson is clear: God was in the fire with His servants.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Daniel and Revelation fit together like two halves of one message. Daniel was told to seal up his book until the time of the end (12:4). John was told not to seal up his (Revelation 22:10). Daniel's beasts return in Revelation 13. His little horn matches the beast of Revelation. His time, times and half a time (7:25; 12:7) matches the forty-two months and 1,260 days of Revelation (Revelation 12:6, 14; 13:5). You can't fully understand Revelation without Daniel, and you can't fully understand Daniel without Revelation.

Daniel also ties into the history of the return. He read Jeremiah's prophecy of seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11; 29:10) and began to pray and confess his people's sin (9:1-19). Soon after, Cyrus issued his decree in 538 B.C., and the first exiles went home (Ezra 1:1-4).

And Daniel lays the groundwork for New Testament teaching on the end times. The seventieth week of 9:27 is a seven-year period still to come. A coming ruler will make a covenant with the many for one seven, and in the middle of it he will stop the sacrifices and set up the abomination of desolation. Jesus pointed to that very event (Matthew 24:15), and Paul describes the man of sin who sets himself up in the temple of God (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4). I believe that seventieth week is the seven-year Tribulation. Before it begins, Christ will come for His church and catch up believers to meet Him in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52; John 14:1-3). After the Tribulation, Christ will return visibly in glory (Revelation 19:11-16) and set up His kingdom on the earth for a thousand years (Revelation 20:1-6). That is the kingdom of the Son of Man, which will never be destroyed. It will lead into the new heavens and new earth. Daniel also makes clear that these prophecies concern "your people" and "your holy city" (9:24). God's plan for the nation of Israel is not finished (Romans 11:25-29).

Where Good Teachers Disagree

The biggest debate is about when Daniel was written. Many critical scholars date the book to about 165 B.C., during the time of the Maccabees, when the Greek king Antiochus IV Epiphanes was persecuting the Jews and defiling the temple. Their main reason is that the predictions, especially in chapter 11, match history so closely up to the 160s B.C. that they believe the book was written after those events. They also point to some of its language and to its place among the Writings rather than the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible.

I believe Daniel wrote the book in the 500s B.C., and that his prophecies are real prediction. Jesus called him "Daniel the prophet" (Matthew 24:15). A God who declares the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10) has no trouble telling Daniel what is coming. The accuracy of Daniel is not a problem to explain away. It is evidence that God spoke. And some of Daniel's prophecies reach beyond the 160s B.C. altogether, to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (9:26) and to the end of the age.

Teachers also differ on the four kingdoms. I hold the traditional view: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome, with the ten horns of the fourth beast pointing to a final form of that power in the last days (2:40-43; 7:7-8, 23-24). Others make the second and third kingdoms Media and Persia separately, which ends the series with Greece. And good teachers who believe in a future seventieth week differ on details, such as the exact starting date and the exact calendar used to count the sixty-nine weeks.

Read It This Way

Read chapters 1-6 as true stories of real people. They were written to encourage believers who live under pressure, and they still do. Ask in each chapter: what did faithfulness cost, and how did God show Himself?

Read chapters 7-12 slowly, with Revelation open beside you. Some things in them are explained right in the text. The ram is Media and Persia, and the goat is Greece (8:20-21). Start with what Daniel explains, and let that guide the rest.

Use a simple time line. Daniel's life runs from 605 B.C. to about 536 B.C. Babylon falls to the Medes and Persians in 539 B.C. Cyrus lets the Jews go home in 538 B.C. Knowing that order helps you see where each story and vision fits.

Be careful about date setting. Daniel tells us God has set times and seasons, but Jesus said no one knows the day or the hour (Matthew 24:36). Daniel's visions are given to make us faithful and watchful, not to give us a calendar for the future.

Notice Daniel's prayer life. He prayed three times a day for years (6:10). When he understood from Jeremiah that the seventy years were nearly over, he did not just celebrate. He fasted and confessed the sins of his people, including his own (9:3-20). The man who received the greatest visions of the future was a man on his knees.

Study Questions

1. How did Daniel stay faithful without being rude or rebellious toward his Babylonian masters (1:8-16)?
2. What did Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego mean when they said, and if not, and how does their answer speak to you (3:16-18)?
3. What did Nebuchadnezzar learn about God, and why did it take so long (4:28-37)?
4. Who is the one like a son of man in Daniel 7, and how did Jesus apply this passage to Himself (7:13-14; Mark 14:61-62)?
5. What does Daniel's prayer in chapter 9 teach you about how to respond to God's promises (9:1-19)?

Go deeper: My Daniel Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Part Five: The Minor Prophets

The Old Testament ends with twelve short books: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. We call them the Minor Prophets, but there is nothing minor about their message. They are called minor only because they are short. In the Hebrew Bible all twelve were written on a single scroll and counted as one book, called simply the Twelve.

These twelve men preached over about three hundred and fifty years, from the 700s B.C. to the 400s B.C. They are not in strict time order, but they fall roughly into three groups.

The first group preached while Assyria was the great power. Hosea and Amos spoke to the northern kingdom of Israel in its last wealthy, careless years before Samaria fell in 722 B.C. Jonah was sent to Nineveh, Assyria's great city, to call it to repent. Micah preached to both Samaria and Jerusalem at the same time as Isaiah. Joel may belong to this early period too, though his date is uncertain.

The second group preached as Assyria fell and Babylon rose. Nahum announced the fall of Nineveh, which came in 612 B.C. Zephaniah warned Judah of the day of the LORD in the days of King Josiah. Habakkuk wrestled with God over why He would use the Babylonians to judge His people. Obadiah announced judgment on Edom for cheering when Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C.

The third group preached after the return from exile. Haggai and Zechariah stirred up the returned Jews to finish rebuilding the temple in 520 B.C. Malachi, about a century later, called a cold and careless people back to wholehearted worship. After him, the prophets fell silent for about four hundred years.

Why read these books? Because they speak with unusual force to the problems God's people face in every age. They confront empty religion, injustice toward the poor, pride, spiritual drift and trusting in anything but God. They call us to return to Him. And again and again they show us God's heart. He is holy and will judge sin. He is also "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and great in steadfast love" (Joel 2:13). Hosea's marriage, Jonah's runaway journey and Habakkuk's questions put that heart on display in ways we don't forget.

These books also look far ahead. Several of them speak of the day of the LORD, the time when God steps in to judge, and above all the final day at the end of the age. They speak of God's future for the nation of Israel, gathered back to the land and turned to the Lord. And they point plainly to Christ: born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), called out of Egypt (Hosea 11:1), three days in the heart of the earth as Jonah was in the fish (Matthew 12:40), riding into Jerusalem on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9), sold for thirty pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12-13), pierced (Zechariah 12:10), and announced by a messenger who prepares His way (Malachi 3:1).

How should we read them? Find the setting first. Knowing which empire was on the rise and which king was on the throne makes each book clearer. Read each one straight through, since most can be read in a single sitting. Watch for the turn from judgment to hope that almost every one of them makes. And remember that these were real men who paid a price for speaking God's

word. Their words were written for us too, so that we would take God at His word and be ready for His coming.

Hosea

At a Glance	
Author	Hosea son of Beeri (1:1)
Date written	During Hosea's ministry, about 755 to 710 B.C.
Written to	Israel, the northern kingdom (often called Ephraim), in its last years
Setting and time covered	The northern kingdom from the reign of Jeroboam II to the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. and just after
Chapters	14
Key word	Steadfast love
Key verse	Hosea 3:1

Background

Hosea is the first of the twelve Minor Prophets, and it may be the most personal book of prophecy in the Bible. God did not only give Hosea a message. He asked Hosea to live it. God told him to marry a woman who would be unfaithful to him, so that his marriage would become a living picture of what Israel had done to God.

Hosea preached to the northern kingdom of Israel. After Solomon died, about 930 B.C., the kingdom split in two. The ten northern tribes kept the name Israel. Hosea often calls them Ephraim, after the largest tribe, and their capital was Samaria. The two southern tribes became Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital. From the very start, the northern kingdom worshiped golden calves at Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:28-30), and later many turned to Baal, the Canaanite god of storms and fertility.

Hosea's ministry began in the days of Jeroboam II, king of Israel, and of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah (1:1). That covers about 755 to 710 B.C. Jeroboam II's long reign was a time of wealth and success, and the people took it as a sign that God was pleased with them. But after Jeroboam died, the kingdom fell apart. Within about thirty years Israel had six kings. Four of them were murdered (2 Kings 15). The nation swung back and forth between trying to buy off Assyria and running to Egypt for help (7:11). Finally Assyria besieged Samaria, and in 722 B.C. the city fell and the people were carried into exile (2 Kings 17:5-6). Hosea lived to see it.

Why was Baal such a temptation? Israel was a farming people, and their lives depended on rain. The Canaanites taught that Baal brought the storms and made the fields fruitful, and his worship included feasts, drunkenness and ritual prostitution at the high places (4:13-14). It offered what people wanted: good crops and a religion that made no moral demands. Many Israelites did not think they had stopped worshiping the LORD. They simply added Baal alongside Him, and even began to speak of the LORD as if He were a Baal (2:16-17). Hosea shows that God will not share His people with anyone.

Hosea was a contemporary of Amos, who also preached to Israel, and of Isaiah and Micah, who preached to Judah. Scripture doesn't tell us anything about Hosea's life beyond his marriage and his message.

Purpose

Hosea was sent to show Israel that its sin was not just law-breaking. It was unfaithfulness. God had loved Israel like a husband loves his wife. He had brought her out of Egypt, cared for her in the wilderness and given her a land of plenty. And she had gone after other lovers. The people thought Baal gave them their grain, wine and oil. They did not know that it was the LORD who gave them those things all along (2:8).

So God told Hosea to marry Gomer. She bore him three children, and God named each one as a message. The first son was Jezreel, because God would judge the house of Jehu for the blood it shed at the city of Jezreel (1:4). The daughter was No Mercy, "for I will not again have compassion any more on the house of Israel" (1:6). The third child was Not My People, "for you are not My people, and I will not be for you" (1:9). Those names must have been hard to say out loud.

But that is not the end. In the very next verses God promised that one day, in the place where it was said, "You are not My people," it will be said to them, "Sons of the living God" (1:10). Then in chapter 3 God told Hosea to go and love his wife again, even though she had committed adultery, "like the love of the LORD for the sons of Israel" (3:1). Hosea bought her back for fifteen pieces of silver and some barley (3:2). That is the heart of the book. God's love does not give up. Even the name Jezreel turns around. It means God sows. At first it pointed to judgment, but in 2:22-23 God says He will sow His people in the land, have compassion on No Mercy, and say to Not My People, "You are My people." Every name of judgment becomes a name of grace.

Main Themes

Sin is spiritual adultery. Israel's worship of Baal and the calves was like a wife running after other men. Hosea uses the language of prostitution again and again to show how deeply that wounded God (4:12; 9:1).

God wants to be known. "My people have been destroyed for lack of the knowledge" (4:6). In Hosea, to know God is more than to know facts about Him. It is to have a close and faithful relationship with Him, the way a husband and wife know each other. The priests had failed to teach God's law, and the people were perishing.

God desires love, not empty ritual. "For steadfast love I desire, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (6:6). Israel kept up its religious feasts while living in sin. God was not impressed.

Sin has consequences. "For they sow wind, and they will reap a storm-wind" (8:7). Israel's alliances, idols and false worship would bring Assyria down on them. God's discipline was real.

God's love will not let go. Chapter 11 is one of the most tender passages in the Old Testament. God remembers teaching Ephraim to walk, holding them by the arms. "How will I give you up, Ephraim?" He says. "My heart is overturned within Me" (11:8). The book ends with God's promise: "I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely" (14:4).

Outline

- Chapters 1-3: Hosea's marriage. Gomer, the three children with message names, Israel's unfaithfulness pictured, and Hosea buying his wife back.
- Chapters 4-7: Israel's unfaithfulness. God's case against the priests and people, their lack of knowledge, and their shallow repentance.
- Chapters 8-10: Israel's judgment. Sowing the wind and reaping the storm, the calf of Samaria, and the coming exile.
- Chapters 11-14: God's love and Israel's restoration. God's fatherly love, His refusal to give up His people, and the call to return.

Key Verses

Hosea 3:1 *And the LORD said to me, "Again, go, love a woman loved by a companion and committing adultery, like the love of the LORD **for** the sons of Israel, and they are turning to other gods and loving raisin cakes."*

The heart of the book. God tells Hosea to love his unfaithful wife the way the LORD loves Israel.

Hosea 4:6 *My people have been destroyed for lack of the knowledge; because you have rejected the knowledge, I will reject you from serving as priest to Me; and you have forgotten the law of your God; I will forget your sons, I also.*

A warning for every generation. People perish when they do not know God and His Word.

Hosea 6:6 *For steadfast love I desire, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.*

God wants hearts that love Him, not religion without love. Jesus quoted this verse twice.

Hosea 11:1 *For Israel **was** a youth, and I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.*

God's love for Israel goes back to the exodus. Matthew saw this verse fulfilled in Jesus.

Hosea 14:4 *I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for My anger has turned away from him.*

God's final word to His people is healing and free love.

Christ in Hosea

Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1, "out of Egypt I called My son," when he tells how Joseph took Mary and the young Jesus to Egypt to escape Herod and later brought Him back (Matthew 2:15). In Hosea the verse looks back to the exodus, when God brought Israel, His son, out of Egypt (Exodus 4:22). Matthew shows that Jesus is the true Son who lived out Israel's story, and did it perfectly. Where Israel failed in the wilderness, Jesus did not (Matthew 4:1-11).

Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6 twice. When the Pharisees complained that He ate with tax collectors and sinners, He told them to go and learn what it means: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice"

(Matthew 9:13). He said it again when they accused His disciples of breaking the Sabbath (Matthew 12:7). Jesus came to show the kind of steadfast love God had always wanted.

Paul quotes Hosea 2:23 and 1:10 to show that God is calling a people from the Jews and the Gentiles, people who were once "not My people" but are now His (Romans 9:24-26). Peter uses the same words (1 Peter 2:10). Paul also takes up Hosea 13:14 in his great chapter on the resurrection: "Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55). Christ has ransomed us from the power of the grave.

And Hosea buying back his unfaithful wife is a picture of what Christ did for us. That is a theme, not a direct prophecy, but it is a powerful one. We were the unfaithful ones. Jesus paid the price to redeem us, not with silver and barley, but with His own blood (1 Peter 1:18-19).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Hosea looks back to the covenant at Sinai, which the prophets often describe as a marriage between God and Israel. He looks back to the exodus (11:1; 12:13), to Jacob (12:2-4), and to the warnings of Deuteronomy. He shows that the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 B.C. was not an accident of politics. It was God's judgment on a people who would not return.

But Hosea also looks forward. "Afterward the sons of Israel will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king; and they will come in dread to the LORD and to His goodness at the end of the days" (3:5). Since David had been dead for centuries, this points to the Son of David, Jesus Christ. In the last days, Israel will turn to the LORD and to their Messiah. Paul says the same: a hardening has come on part of Israel until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and then all Israel will be saved (Romans 11:25-27). God has not given up on Israel, any more than Hosea gave up on Gomer.

The picture of God as husband runs through the whole Bible, from Isaiah 54:5 and Jeremiah 3 to Ephesians 5, where Paul says marriage is a picture of Christ and the church, and Revelation 19, where the bride is made ready for the marriage of the Lamb.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Teachers disagree on what kind of woman Gomer was when Hosea married her. Some believe she was already a prostitute, perhaps connected with Baal worship. Others believe she was pure when he married her and became unfaithful later, and that God called her a wife of prostitutions because He knew what she would become. Those who hold the second view say it fits the picture, since Israel too was faithful at first and later went astray (Jeremiah 2:2). Those who hold the first point to the plain wording of 1:2. Both views take the marriage as real. A few teachers have read chapters 1-3 as a vision or a parable rather than events, but nothing in the text suggests that.

They also differ on whether the woman in chapter 3 is Gomer. Most believe she is, since the point of the chapter is that Hosea loved his own unfaithful wife again, as God loves Israel.

Read It This Way

Read chapters 1-3 first and read them as a real story. Picture what it would have been like for Hosea to name his children, to watch his wife leave, and then to go and buy her back. Everything in chapters 4-14 grows out of that story.

Chapters 4-14 are harder. They are a collection of short, intense messages, often without clear breaks. Hosea jumps from one picture to the next: Israel is a stubborn heifer (4:16), a cake not turned (7:8), a silly dove (7:11), a treacherous bow (7:16), a luxuriant vine (10:1). Don't try to make every picture fit with the others. Let each one hit you as it comes.

Notice how often Hosea moves from anger to tenderness in a moment. That is not a prophet who can't make up his mind. It is a window into God's heart. He is both holy and loving, and He grieves when He must judge.

Watch for the word return. It runs through the book (3:5; 6:1; 12:6; 14:1-2). "Come, and let us return to the LORD; for He has torn, and He will heal us" (6:1). The door is always open. The last chapter even gives Israel the words to say when they come back (14:2-3).

Look at how Hosea uses Israel's history. In chapter 12 he points back to Jacob, who grabbed his brother's heel in the womb, wrestled with the angel, wept and sought His favor, and met God at Bethel (12:3-4). The nation carried Jacob's name, and it had Jacob's grasping, scheming heart. But Jacob was also a man God changed. Hosea is saying: the God who met your father at Bethel can meet you too, if you will return.

Finally, read the book as God's word to you. Every believer knows what it is to drift, to give our hearts to things that cannot love us back. Hosea shows us a God who comes after us, pays the price, and brings us home. The book ends with a simple word: "Who is wise, and let him understand these things" (14:9).

Study Questions

1. Why do you think God asked Hosea to live out his message in his own marriage (1:2-3; 3:1-3)?
2. What were the names of Hosea's children, and how does God reverse those names later in the book (1:4-9; 2:23)?
3. What does it mean to know God in the way Hosea describes, and why did Israel's lack of knowledge lead to ruin (4:1-6; 6:6)?
4. How does chapter 11 show the heart of God toward His people, even in judgment (11:1-9)?
5. How did Jesus use Hosea 6:6 to answer the Pharisees, and what does it teach about mercy (6:6; Matthew 9:10-13)?

Joel

At a Glance	
Author	Joel son of Pethuel (1:1)
Date written	Uncertain; many place him about 835 to 800 B.C., in the days of King Joash of Judah
Written to	Judah and Jerusalem
Setting and time covered	Judah after a great locust plague and drought, looking ahead to the day of the LORD
Chapters	3
Key word	The day of the LORD
Key verse	Joel 2:28

Background

Imagine walking out to your fields one morning and finding nothing green. The wheat is gone. The barley is gone. The vines are stripped and the fig trees are bare down to white wood. That is what Judah woke up to in the days of Joel. A huge plague of locusts had swept over the land in wave after wave, and a drought followed close behind. "The remainder of the cutting locust the swarming locust has eaten" (1:4), and so on down the line, until there was nothing left.

Locusts were one of the most feared disasters in the ancient world, and they still are in some parts of the world today. A swarm can stretch for miles and eat every green thing in its path. For a farming people like Judah, it meant hunger, ruin, and an end to the grain and wine offerings at the temple (1:9, 13). Even the animals groaned (1:18-20).

Joel took that disaster and used it to preach. He said, in effect: if you think this is bad, there is a day coming that is far worse. "Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near" (1:15). The locusts were a warning, a small picture of the greater judgment to come.

We know very little about Joel himself. The book tells us only that he was the son of Pethuel (1:1). His name means the LORD is God. He seems to have lived in or near Jerusalem, since he speaks often of Zion, the temple, the priests and the altar.

When did he preach? The book does not name a king, so the date is uncertain. Many conservative scholars place Joel about 835 to 800 B.C., in the early years of King Joash of Judah, who came to the throne as a boy while the priest Jehoiada guided the kingdom (2 Kings 11-12). That would explain why Joel speaks to the priests and elders but never mentions a king. It would also fit the nations Joel names as enemies, such as Tyre, Sidon, Philistia, Egypt and Edom, rather than Assyria or Babylon, which became the great threats later. If that date is right, Joel is one of the earliest of the writing prophets.

Purpose

Joel had two goals. The first was to call Judah to repent. The locust plague was not just bad luck. It was a call from God to wake up. Joel told the priests to put on sackcloth, call a fast and gather the people at the temple to cry out to the LORD (1:13-14; 2:15-17). Then God Himself speaks: "return to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with wailing" (2:12).

What kind of repentance did God want? Not a show. "And tear your heart and not your garments" (2:13). In Israel, people tore their clothes as a sign of grief. God says He wants more than outward signs. He wants hearts that are broken over sin and turned back to Him. And He gives the reason to come: He is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and great in steadfast love" (2:13).

The second goal was to give hope. When the people turn, God answers. He promises to send grain, wine and oil again (2:19), to drive the locust army away (2:20), and to "repay to you the years which the swarming locust has eaten" (2:25). Then He looks further ahead, to the day He will pour out His Spirit on all flesh (2:28), judge the nations (3:1-16) and dwell in Zion with His people forever (3:17-21).

Notice whose army the locusts are. God calls them "My great army which I sent among you" (2:25). That is a hard truth, but it is also a comforting one. The disaster was not outside God's control. The same God who sent the locusts could send them away, and the same God who allowed the loss could restore it. When we face loss, it helps to know that nothing reaches us without passing through His hands.

Main Themes

The day of the LORD is coming. This phrase is the key to the book (1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14). The day of the LORD is any time God steps into history to judge sin, and above all the final time He will do so at the end of the age. For the wicked it is darkness. For those who trust Him it is rescue (3:16).

God calls for true repentance. Ritual alone means nothing. God wants a torn heart, a heart that grieves over sin and turns back to Him (2:12-13).

God restores. Few verses have comforted more people than 2:25. God can give back what sin and loss have taken. He doesn't always give it back in the same form, but He is a God who restores.

God will pour out His Spirit. In Joel's day the Spirit came on a few chosen people: prophets, kings, judges. Joel promised a day when the Spirit would come on all kinds of people, sons and daughters, old and young, even servants (2:28-29).

God will judge the nations and keep His promises to Israel. God will gather the nations to the valley of Jehoshaphat, which means the LORD judges, and judge them for how they treated His people and divided His land (3:2). Then Judah will be inhabited forever (3:20).

Outline

- Chapter 1: The locust plague. The disaster described, and a call to the priests and people to mourn and cry out to God.

- Chapter 2:1-17: The coming day of the LORD and the call to repent. A terrible army on the move, and the call to return with all the heart.
- Chapter 2:18-32: The LORD's promise to restore. The land healed, the years restored, and the Spirit poured out on all flesh.
- Chapter 3: The nations judged and Judah blessed. The valley of decision, and the LORD dwelling in Zion.

Key Verses

Joel 1:15 *Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD **is** near, and like devastation from the Almighty it will come.*

Joel's warning in one line. The locusts were a preview of a greater day.

Joel 2:13 *And tear your heart and not your garments, and return to the LORD your God; for He **is** gracious and merciful, slow to anger and great in steadfast love, and relenting over the harm.*

The kind of repentance God wants, and the reason we can come to Him with confidence.

Joel 2:25 *And I will repay to you the years which the swarming locust has eaten, the hopping locust and the destroying locust and the cutting locust, My great army which I sent among you.*

God promises to restore what was lost. He is the God of second chances.

Joel 2:28 *And it will be afterward **that** I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy; your old men will dream dreams; your young men will see visions.*

The promise of the Spirit, which Peter said began to be fulfilled at Pentecost.

Joel 2:32 *And it will be **that** everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will escape; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem **there** will be escape, just as the LORD has said, and among the survivors whom the LORD **is** calling.*

Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will escape. Paul applies this promise to all who call on Jesus.

Christ in Joel

The New Testament draws on Joel in two great places.

The first is the day of Pentecost. Fifty days after Jesus rose, and ten days after He ascended, the Holy Spirit came on the disciples in Jerusalem. They spoke in other languages, and a crowd gathered. Some mocked and said they were drunk. Peter stood up and said, "this is that which has been spoken through the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16), and quoted Joel 2:28-32 (Acts 2:17-21). The Spirit Joel promised had come because Jesus, raised and exalted to the right hand of God, had poured Him out (Acts 2:33). The promise that God would pour out His Spirit on all flesh is fulfilled in the church, where every believer receives the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 12:13).

The second is Joel 2:32, "everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will escape." Paul quotes it in Romans 10:13: "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." In Joel, the LORD is

God's personal name. Paul applies it to Jesus, whom we confess as Lord (Romans 10:9). That is one of the clearest places where the New Testament shows that Jesus is the LORD of the Old Testament. And it shows that the promise is for Jew and Greek alike (Romans 10:12).

The day of the LORD also points to Christ. Jesus spoke of the sun being darkened and the moon not giving its light before the Son of Man comes in glory (Matthew 24:29-30), echoing Joel 2:31 and 3:15. The One who will judge the nations in the valley of decision is the Lord Jesus Christ (John 5:22; Revelation 19:11-16).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Joel is one of the first prophets to speak at length about the day of the LORD. Later prophets take up the phrase: Amos (5:18-20), Isaiah (13:6-9), Zephaniah (1:14-18), Zechariah (14:1) and Malachi (4:5). The New Testament continues it, speaking of the day of the Lord coming like a thief (1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10).

How does Joel's day of the LORD fit with the rest of prophecy? I believe the great and awesome day of the LORD includes the coming seven-year Tribulation and the visible return of Christ to the earth. Before that day begins, Christ will come for His church and take us to be with Him (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 5:9). Then God will finish His work with Israel and the nations. Joel 3 describes the nations gathered against Jerusalem and the LORD roaring from Zion, which Revelation 16:14-16 and 19:11-21 describe in their own way. After that, the LORD will dwell in Zion, and Judah and Jerusalem will be inhabited forever (3:17-21). That is the thousand-year reign of Christ (Revelation 20:1-6).

What about Pentecost? Peter said, "this is that" (Acts 2:16). The outpouring of the Spirit had truly begun. But not every part of Joel's prophecy happened that day. The sun was not turned to darkness and the moon to blood. So many teachers see Pentecost as the beginning of the fulfillment, and the rest, the signs in the heavens and the great day itself, is still to come. The last days began with the first coming of Christ (Hebrews 1:2) and will end with His second.

Joel also shows that God has not finished with Israel. He judges the nations "on account of My people and My inheritance Israel" (3:2). God's covenant with Israel stands, and He will keep it (Romans 11:29).

Where Good Teachers Disagree

The date of Joel is a real debate. The early date, about 835 to 800 B.C., in the days of Joash, is held by many conservative scholars, for the reasons given above. Others place Joel after the exile, in the 400s or 300s B.C. They point out that Joel never mentions a king, that he speaks of Israel scattered among the nations (3:2), that he mentions Greeks (3:6), and that the temple seems to be standing with priests and elders leading the people, as in the days after the return. Some also place him around 600 B.C., just before Babylon came. The message of the book does not depend on the date, and I don't think we can be sure. Scripture doesn't tell us.

Teachers also differ on the locusts of chapter 2. Some read them as the same real locusts of chapter 1, described again as a great army. Others see them as a picture of a human army invading Judah, or as a picture of the armies of the last days. Joel's language moves from the present

disaster toward the future day, and I think that is the point. The locusts of Joel's day were a small preview of a greater invasion and a greater day.

Read It This Way

Joel is only three chapters. Read it in one sitting. Then read Acts 2 right after it, and Romans 10:9-13.

Notice how the book turns. Chapter 1 through 2:17 is all disaster and warning. Then in 2:18 everything changes: "And the LORD became jealous for His land and had compassion on His people." From that verse on, it is all promise. What happened in between? The people repented. That turning point is the hinge of the book.

Pay attention to the pictures in 2:1-11. The locust army runs like horses, leaps on the mountaintops with a sound like chariots, climbs walls, goes in through windows like a thief. If you have ever seen footage of a real locust swarm, you will know why Joel wrote this way.

Take Joel's call personally. Is there an area of your life where you have been tearing your garments and not your heart, going through the motions without real sorrow over sin? Joel's call is still open: "return to the LORD your God" (2:13).

And take the promise of 2:25 personally too. You may have lost years to sin, to foolishness or to grief. God does not erase the past, but He can redeem it. He knows how to give back what the locusts have eaten.

Notice also Joel's care for the next generation. The very first command in the book is to tell this story to your children, and they to their children (1:3). God wants each generation to learn from what He has done.

Study Questions

1. How did Joel use the locust plague to warn the people of something greater (1:4, 15)?
2. What is the difference between tearing your heart and tearing your garments, and why does God want the first (2:12-13)?
3. What does God mean when He promises to repay the years the locust has eaten, and where have you seen Him do that (2:25-27)?
4. How did Peter explain Pentecost from Joel, and what parts of Joel's prophecy are still to come (2:28-32; Acts 2:14-21)?
5. Paul quoted Joel 2:32 about Jesus. What does that tell you about who Jesus is (2:32; Romans 10:9-13)?

Amos

At a Glance	
Author	Amos, a shepherd and fig farmer from Tekoa in Judah (1:1; 7:14)
Date written	About 760 to 750 B.C., two years before an earthquake (1:1)
Written to	Israel, the northern kingdom, in a time of peace and wealth
Setting and time covered	Bethel and Samaria in the reigns of Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam II of Israel
Chapters	9
Key word	Justice
Key verse	Amos 5:24

Background

Amos was not a preacher by trade. He was a working man. He tells us he was "a herdsman and a tender of sycamores" (7:14), the kind of wild fig that grew in the low country. The book opens by calling him one of "the sheep-breeders from Tekoa" (1:1), a small town in the hills about ten miles south of Jerusalem, on the edge of the wilderness of Judah. He was a man from the south, sent to preach in the north.

God sent Amos across the border to the northern kingdom of Israel. It was a strange time to preach judgment. Under King Jeroboam II, Israel was enjoying its best years since Solomon. Its borders had been pushed back out (2 Kings 14:25), trade was booming, and the wealthy were building summer houses and winter houses, decorated with ivory (3:15). The worship centers at Bethel and Gilgal were full of people bringing offerings and keeping the feasts (4:4-5). By every outward measure, things were going well.

But underneath, the nation was rotten. The rich were getting richer by crushing the poor. Judges took bribes. Merchants used false scales and couldn't wait for the Sabbath to end so they could start cheating again (8:4-6). The poor were sold for silver, "and the needy for a pair of sandals" (2:6). The same people who did these things went to worship and thought God was pleased with them.

Amos preached about 760 to 750 B.C., "two years before the earthquake" (1:1). That earthquake must have been a big one, because people still remembered it more than two hundred years later. Zechariah mentions it when he speaks of people fleeing "from before the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah" (Zechariah 14:5). Amos was a contemporary of Hosea, who also preached to Israel, and of Isaiah and Micah in Judah. Within about thirty years of Amos's preaching, Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom and carried its people into exile in 722 B.C.

Purpose

Amos came to tell a comfortable people that God was not comfortable with them. Their religion was busy, but their hearts were far from God, and their treatment of the poor proved it.

The book shows that God cares how we treat other people. Worship that is not joined to justice is worthless to Him. "I hate, I reject your feasts, and I will not smell your solemn assemblies" (5:21). What does God want instead? "And let justice roll like the waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing wadi" (5:24). A wadi is a desert streambed that runs only in the rainy season. God wants righteousness that never dries up.

Amos also wanted Israel to understand that being God's chosen people did not make them safe from judgment. It made them more responsible. "Only you have I known from all the clans of the ground; therefore I will visit on you all your iniquities" (3:2). The more light we have, the more we are accountable for.

Yet even in the middle of judgment, the door stayed open. "Seek Me and live," God says (5:4), and He says it again two verses later (5:6). Amos is full of warning, but the warnings are an invitation. God would rather His people turn and live than stay and die.

Amos also explains why he could not keep quiet. In 3:3-8 he asks a string of questions. Do two walk together unless they have agreed to meet? Does a lion roar when it has no prey? Does a trap spring when nothing has touched it? Each question has an obvious answer: nothing happens without a cause. Then he comes to the point: "A lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who will not prophesy?" (3:8). When God speaks, His servant must speak too.

Main Themes

God judges sin in every nation. Amos opens with judgment on Israel's neighbors: Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab. Each one is judged for cruelty and violence. God holds even nations without His law accountable for how they treat people.

God judges His own people most of all. After the nations, Amos turns to Judah, and then to Israel itself, and Israel's list is the longest (2:4-16). The crowd that cheered at the first six oracles must have gone silent.

Religion without justice is empty. God rejects feasts, offerings and songs from people who oppress the poor (5:21-23). True worship shows itself in how we treat the weak.

Wealth can blind us. Amos speaks sharply to the rich women of Samaria, whom he calls "cows of the Bashan" (4:1), and to those "at ease in Zion" (6:1), lying on ivory beds and drinking wine from bowls while the nation falls apart (6:4-6).

God will restore David's house. The book ends with a promise. After judgment, God will raise up the fallen booth of David, bring His people back, and plant them in their land so they will never be uprooted again (9:11-15).

Outline

- Chapters 1-2: Judgment on the nations and Israel. Eight oracles, each beginning with the same formula of three transgressions and four, ending with Israel.
- Chapters 3-6: Three messages to Israel. Each begins with "Hear this word" (3:1; 4:1; 5:1), followed by woes on those who long for the day of the LORD and those at ease in Zion.

- Chapters 7-9:10: Five visions. Locusts, fire, a plumb line, a basket of summer fruit, and the LORD standing by the altar, with Amos's clash with the priest Amaziah in between.
- Chapter 9:11-15: The promise of restoration. David's fallen booth rebuilt and Israel planted in the land forever.

Key Verses

Amos 3:2 *"Only you have I known from all the clans of the ground; therefore I will visit on you all your iniquities."*

Privilege brings responsibility. Israel's special relationship with God made its sin more serious, not less.

Amos 4:12 *"Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel."*

After describing all the warnings Israel ignored, God says simply: prepare to meet your God.

Amos 5:24 *And let justice roll like the waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing wadi.*

The most famous line in the book. God wants justice and righteousness that keep flowing like a river.

Amos 8:11 *Look, days **are** coming, declares the Lord GOD, and I will send a famine in the land, not a famine for bread, and not a thirst for water, but for hearing the words of the LORD.*

The worst famine is not of bread but of hearing God's word.

Amos 9:11 *In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is falling, and I will wall up their breaches, and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as **in** the days of old,*

God's promise to rebuild the house of David, which James applied to the church in Acts 15.

Christ in Amos

The clearest link between Amos and Christ comes in Acts 15. The early church met in Jerusalem to decide whether Gentiles who believed in Jesus had to become Jews by being circumcised and keeping the Law of Moses. James, the brother of Jesus, stood up and quoted Amos 9:11-12: "After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David which has fallen" (Acts 15:16). He went on to say that the rest of mankind would seek the Lord, "all the Gentiles upon whom My name has been called" (Acts 15:17).

James's point was that God had always planned to bring Gentiles in. The fallen booth of David, the royal house that had collapsed, would be raised up again, and when it was, the nations would come. Jesus is the Son of David who rose from the dead, and through Him Gentiles are now being saved.

Does that mean the promise to Israel in Amos 9:14-15 has been used up? No. James said the words of the prophets agree with what God was doing among the Gentiles (Acts 15:15). He did not say Israel's promise was cancelled. Amos ends with God planting Israel in their land, "and they will

not be plucked up again from upon their land which I have given to them" (9:15). That has not yet happened in full. I believe it will, when Christ returns and reigns from the throne of David in the thousand-year kingdom (Luke 1:32-33; Revelation 20:1-6).

Stephen also quoted Amos in his speech before he was stoned, using 5:25-27 to show that Israel had turned to idols even in the wilderness (Acts 7:42-43). And Amos's picture of a famine of the word of God (8:11) reminds us that Jesus is the Word made flesh (John 1:14), the bread from heaven who satisfies all who come to Him (John 6:35).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Amos stands at the beginning of the age of the writing prophets, along with Hosea, Jonah and Joel. He preached about thirty years before the northern kingdom fell. His warnings came true in 722 B.C., when Assyria carried Israel into exile "beyond Damascus" (5:27), just as he said.

Amos also echoes the Law of Moses. The Law commanded Israel to care for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger, to use honest weights and to give fair judgment (Leviticus 19:15, 35-36; Deuteronomy 24:14-22). Israel knew what God wanted. They simply didn't do it. Amos holds them to the covenant they had already received.

And Amos looks forward. His day of the LORD, which is "darkness and not light" (5:18), is taken up by later prophets and by the New Testament. His concern for justice runs straight into the teaching of Jesus and of James, who warns rich oppressors in words Amos would have loved (James 5:1-6). His promise of David's rebuilt house points to the King who is coming.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Some scholars think the hopeful ending of Amos (9:11-15) was added by a later writer, because it is so different from the rest of the book. I don't agree. Nearly every prophet who warned of judgment also promised restoration, and Amos's own visions show God's mercy holding back judgment twice when Amos prays (7:1-6). James quoted these verses as the words of the prophets (Acts 15:15-17). I take the ending as Amos's own.

Teachers also differ on how to apply Amos's call for justice today. Some read it mainly as a call to personal honesty and generosity. Others read it as a call to work for justice in society and its laws. Amos spoke to a nation that was supposed to live under God's law, so we have to apply him with care. But both groups agree that God cares deeply how His people treat the poor, and that worship without justice does not please Him.

Read It This Way

Read the first two chapters as Amos's first listeners would have heard them. Picture a crowd at Bethel. Amos starts with Damascus, Israel's enemy to the north, and the crowd nods. Then Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab, and the crowd cheers. Then Judah, their rival to the south, and they cheer louder. Then he says, "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four" (2:6), and the cheering stops. It is a brilliant sermon, and it still catches us. We are quick to see sin in others.

Notice the phrase for three transgressions, and for four. It is a Hebrew way of saying the sins had piled up and the cup was full. It does not mean God was counting exactly four.

Read chapter 7 slowly. In the first two visions, the locusts and the fire, Amos prays, and God holds back judgment (7:1-6). In the third, God holds up a plumb line, a weight on a string that builders used to check if a wall was straight. Israel's wall was crooked, and it would fall (7:7-9). Right after this, the priest Amaziah tells Amos to go home to Judah and stop preaching at Bethel, "a sanctuary of a king" (7:13). Amos answers that he never asked to be a prophet. The LORD took him from following the flock and said, "Go, prophesy to My people Israel" (7:15). That is all the authority he needed.

Look at chapter 4 as well. God lists the warnings He had already sent Israel: hunger, drought, blight on the crops, locusts, plague, war, and the overthrow of some of their cities. After each one comes the same sad refrain: yet you have not returned to Me, declares the LORD (4:6-11). Five times God says it. Then comes the verdict: "prepare to meet your God, O Israel" (4:12). The God who sends hard times is often calling us home through them.

Let Amos search you. Where do you see injustice in your own life, your work or your church? Are you comfortable while others suffer? Is your worship joined to the way you treat people on Monday? Amos is not easy reading, but God uses him to wake us up.

And don't miss the ending. After nine chapters of judgment, the last five verses are pure hope. God never warns just to destroy. He warns so that He can restore. The same God who held up the plumb line is the God who promises to rebuild the ruins, and He keeps both His warnings and His promises.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think Amos began with Israel's enemies before turning to Israel (1:3-2:8)?
2. What sins did Amos name in Israel, and do any of them sound familiar in our day (2:6-8; 8:4-6)?
3. Why does God reject worship from people who oppress the poor, and what does He want instead (5:21-24)?
4. What did Amos mean by a famine of hearing the words of the LORD, and could that happen today (8:11-12)?
5. How did James use Amos 9:11-12 at the council in Jerusalem, and what does it show about God's plan for the Gentiles (9:11-12; Acts 15:13-18)?

Obadiah

At a Glance	
Author	Obadiah, whose name means servant of the LORD (1:1)
Date written	Likely soon after Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C.
Written to	Judah, about its neighbor Edom
Setting and time covered	Edom's betrayal of Judah when Jerusalem fell, and the coming day of the LORD
Chapters	1
Key word	Pride brings a fall
Key verse	Obadiah 1:15

Background

Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament. It has just twenty-one verses, and you can read it in about five minutes. But it carries a message as old as Genesis and as current as this morning's news: God sees how we treat our brother, and pride goes before a fall.

The book is about Edom. To understand Edom, you have to go back to Genesis. Isaac and Rebekah had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Before they were born, God told Rebekah, "Two nations are in your womb" (Genesis 25:23). Esau became the father of the Edomites, and Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel, became the father of the Israelites. The two brothers fought from the womb. Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of stew (Genesis 25:29-34), and Jacob took his blessing by deceit (Genesis 27). Later the brothers made peace (Genesis 33), but their descendants never really did.

Edom lived in the rugged mountains south and southeast of the Dead Sea. Its people built their towns high in the cliffs, where they felt safe from any attack. When Israel came out of Egypt, Edom refused to let them pass through its land (Numbers 20:14-21). Over the centuries the two nations fought again and again. Yet God told Israel, "You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother" (Deuteronomy 23:7).

Then came Edom's worst act. When the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C., Edom did not help its brother. It stood by and watched. Then it cheered, joined in the looting, and stood at the crossroads to catch the people who were running for their lives and hand them over to the enemy (verses 11-14). Psalm 137:7 remembers how the sons of Edom cried out on the day of Jerusalem's fall, "Lay it bare, lay it bare, to the foundation in it!"

Obadiah's name means servant of the LORD. It was a common name in Israel, and at least a dozen men in the Old Testament carry it. Scripture doesn't tell us anything more about this Obadiah. His book is his whole biography.

Purpose

Obadiah was written to announce God's judgment on Edom and to comfort Judah. The people of Judah had lost their city, their temple and their land. Their own relatives had laughed at their pain and profited from it. Obadiah's message to them was: God has seen it, and He will set it right.

The book also warns everyone who is tempted to pride. Edom thought it was safe in its mountain fortresses. "Who will bring me down to the ground?" it said (verse 3). God's answer was plain: "If you soar high like the eagle, and if your nest is set among the stars, from there I will bring you down" (verse 4).

Main Themes

Pride deceives. "The arrogance of your heart has deceived you" (verse 3). Edom trusted its high walls, its wise men and its allies (verses 3-9). None of them would save it. Pride always tells us we are safer than we are.

God sees how we treat our brother. Edom's sin was not only that it attacked Judah. It was that it stood aloof, gloated and took advantage of its brother on his worst day (verses 10-14). God takes cruelty to family seriously, especially when it comes from people who should have helped.

What you sow, you reap. "As you have done, it will be done to you; your recompense will return on your own head" (verse 15). God's justice fits the crime.

The kingdom will be the LORD's. The book ends not with Edom but with God. Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion, the house of Jacob will possess its land again, and "the kingship will be the LORD's" (verse 21).

Outline

- Verses 1-9: Edom's fall. God will bring down proud Edom from its mountain heights, and its allies will turn on it.
- Verses 10-14: Edom's crimes. Edom's violence against its brother Jacob in the day of Jerusalem's disaster.
- Verses 15-21: The day of the LORD and Israel's rescue. The nations judged, Edom paid back, and Israel restored to the land, with the kingdom belonging to the LORD.

Key Verses

Obadiah 1:3-4 *The arrogance of your heart has deceived you, you who dwell in the clefts of **the** rock, **in** the height of his dwelling, who says in his heart, "Who will bring me down **to the** ground?" If you soar high like the eagle, and if your nest **is** set among the stars, from there I will bring you down, declares the LORD.*

Edom's pride, and God's answer to it. No one is too high for God to bring down.

Obadiah 1:15 *For the day of the LORD **is** near upon all the nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your recompense will return on your own head.*

The principle of the whole book: God pays back what is done, on Edom and on all the nations.

Obadiah 1:21 *And deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to judge Mount Esau, and the kingship will be the LORD's.*

The last word of the book. In the end, the kingdom belongs to the LORD.

Christ in Obadiah

The New Testament never quotes Obadiah, so the link to Christ is a theme. But it is a clear one.

The book ends with "the kingship will be the LORD's" (verse 21). That looks forward to the day when Christ reigns over all. In Revelation, when the seventh trumpet sounds, loud voices in heaven say, "The kingdoms of the world have become those of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign to the ages of the ages" (Revelation 11:15). Obadiah's last line is a small preview of that day.

There is another connection. The family feud between Jacob and Esau runs all the way into the New Testament. Herod the Great, the king who tried to kill the baby Jesus (Matthew 2:16), was an Idumean, a descendant of the Edomites. His son Herod Antipas mocked Jesus at His trial (Luke 23:11). The old hostility of Esau against Jacob came to a head against Jacob's greatest Son. After the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Edomites disappear from history, just as Obadiah said they would be cut off forever (verse 10). Christ's kingdom, meanwhile, will never end.

And Obadiah shows us the opposite of Christ. Edom stood aloof while its brother suffered. Jesus came near. He did not stand at the crossroads to cut off those who were fleeing. He opened His arms to sinners and gave His life for His enemies (Romans 5:8-10).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Obadiah picks up a thread that runs through the whole Bible: the story of Jacob and Esau. It starts in Genesis 25 and continues through Numbers 20, the history books (2 Samuel 8:14; 2 Kings 8:20-22), the Psalms (137:7), and the prophets (Isaiah 34; Jeremiah 49:7-22; Ezekiel 25:12-14; 35; Amos 1:11-12; Malachi 1:2-5). Paul uses Jacob and Esau to explain God's choosing (Romans 9:10-13), and Hebrews uses Esau as a warning against trading away what is holy for something that lasts only a moment (Hebrews 12:16-17).

Obadiah also shows that God keeps His promises to Israel. Judah had lost everything, but God promised that on Mount Zion there would be deliverance and that "the house of Jacob will possess their possessions" (verse 17). God's purpose for His people did not end in 586 B.C. It will be completed when the Messiah reigns from Zion (Zechariah 14:9; Romans 11:26).

Finally, Obadiah reaches past Edom to all nations. "For the day of the LORD is near upon all the nations" (verse 15). Edom is a picture of every proud nation and every proud heart that sets itself against God and His people. Each one will answer to Him.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

The main debate is about the date. Most scholars, conservative and otherwise, place Obadiah soon after Jerusalem fell to Babylon in 586 B.C., since verses 11-14 match what Edom did then, and

Psalm 137:7 records it. Some conservative scholars place the book much earlier, about 845 B.C., in the reign of Jehoram of Judah, when the Philistines and Arabians attacked Jerusalem and Edom rebelled (2 Kings 8:20-22; 2 Chronicles 21:8-17). That would make Obadiah one of the earliest writing prophets. The 586 B.C. date fits the description of the city's fall best, and I follow it, but the message is the same either way.

Teachers also note that Obadiah 1-9 is very close to Jeremiah 49:7-22. Either one prophet used the other's words, or both drew on an earlier message. We don't know which, and it doesn't change the meaning.

Read It This Way

Read Genesis 25-27 and 33 before you read Obadiah. The story of the twins makes the whole book come alive.

Then read Obadiah aloud, all twenty-one verses. Notice how many times verses 11-14 repeat the phrase on the day: the day of his misfortune, the day of their perishing, the day of trouble, the day of his disaster. Obadiah is hammering the point home. Edom should have helped on that day, and instead it did the worst thing it could do.

Then notice the turn at verse 15. The day of Judah's disaster becomes the day of the LORD for Edom and all nations.

Let Obadiah ask you some hard questions. Is there a brother or sister you have stood aloof from in their trouble? Have you ever felt a little glad when someone you resented fell? Have you trusted your own high places, your money, your position, your cleverness, as if nothing could touch you? Obadiah is short, but it reaches deep.

And take comfort from it too. If you have been wronged, God has seen it. You don't have to take revenge. "As you have done, it will be done to you" (verse 15) is God's work, not ours (Romans 12:19). The kingdom is the LORD's.

Study Questions

1. How does the story of Jacob and Esau help you understand why Edom's sin was so serious (verse 10; Genesis 25:23)?
2. What did Edom trust in, and why did that make it proud (verses 3-4)?
3. Verses 12-14 list what Edom should not have done. Which one of those do you find yourself tempted toward (verses 12-14)?
4. What does it mean that as you have done, it will be done to you, and how should that shape the way we treat others (verse 15)?
5. How does the last verse of Obadiah point ahead to the kingdom of Christ (verse 21; Revelation 11:15)?

Jonah

At a Glance	
Author	Jonah son of Amittai, from Gath-hepher in Galilee (1:1; 2 Kings 14:25)
Date written	Jonah served about 785 to 760 B.C., in the time of Jeroboam II
Written to	Israel, and God's people in every age who would rather see their enemies judged than saved
Setting and time covered	A few weeks or months in Jonah's life: Joppa, the sea, and Nineveh, the capital of Assyria
Chapters	4
Key word	God's mercy
Key verse	Jonah 4:2

Background

Most people know the story of Jonah and the great fish. Fewer people know what the book is really about. It is not mainly about a fish. It is about a God whose mercy is bigger than His prophet's heart.

Jonah was a real prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel. 2 Kings 14:25 tells us that he was "Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath-hepher," a village in Galilee, a few miles from where Nazareth would later stand. He prophesied that King Jeroboam II would win back Israel's lost territory, and it happened. So Jonah served about 785 to 760 B.C., and he was probably well liked at home. He had brought good news.

Then God gave him a very different job. "Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before Me" (1:2). Nineveh was one of the great cities of Assyria, and later its capital. The Assyrians were the most feared people of the day. They were known for their cruelty in war, and within a few decades they would destroy Israel itself (2 Kings 17:5-6). For an Israelite prophet, going to preach in Nineveh meant walking into the capital of the enemy everyone feared most.

Jonah ran. Nineveh was about five hundred miles to the east. Jonah went down to the port of Joppa and bought a ticket on a ship to Tarshish, far to the west, probably in Spain. He was trying to get as far from Nineveh, and from the LORD, as he could (1:3).

Who wrote the book? It tells Jonah's story in the third person, and it does not name its writer. Tradition holds that Jonah wrote it himself, and the SLB introduction names him. That fits well. Who else would know what Jonah prayed inside the fish, or what God said to him under the plant?

Purpose

Why did Jonah run? He tells us himself, and it is not what most people think. He was not afraid of the Ninevites. He was afraid God would forgive them. "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" (4:2). Jonah wanted Nineveh judged. He knew if he preached, they might repent, and God might spare them. That is exactly what happened.

So the book exposes a prophet who loved God's mercy for himself but not for his enemies. And it shows a God who cares about every person He made, even the cruel, pagan Assyrians, and even their animals (4:11).

The book also shows that God is in charge of everything. He hurls a great wind on the sea (1:4). He appoints a great fish (1:17), a plant (4:6), a worm (4:7) and a hot east wind (4:8). The sailors obey Him. The fish obeys Him. The plant and the worm obey Him. Nineveh obeys Him. Only His prophet argues.

Main Themes

God is sovereign over all creation. Wind, sea, fish, plant and worm all do what God says. You cannot run from Him (Psalm 139:7-10).

God's mercy reaches the nations. The pagan sailors come to fear the LORD and offer Him sacrifices (1:16). The whole city of Nineveh repents, from the king down (3:5-9). God's heart was never only for Israel.

Salvation belongs to the LORD. Jonah's prayer from inside the fish ends with this great line (2:9). He cannot save himself. Neither can Nineveh. Only God can save.

God gives second chances. "And the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time" (3:1). God did not give up on His runaway prophet.

Our hearts can be smaller than God's. Jonah is angry that God spared Nineveh, and then angry that his shade plant died. God's question to him hangs over the end of the book, and over us: should He not have compassion on a great city?

Outline

- Chapter 1: Jonah runs from God. The storm, the sailors, and Jonah thrown into the sea and swallowed by a great fish.
- Chapter 2: Jonah's prayer in the fish. A psalm of distress and thanksgiving, and Jonah thrown up on dry land.
- Chapter 3: Nineveh repents. Jonah preaches, the city fasts and turns, and God relents.
- Chapter 4: Jonah's anger and God's mercy. Jonah sulks, God appoints a plant and a worm, and asks His final question.

Key Verses

Jonah 1:3 *And Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from before the LORD; and he went down **to** Joppa, and he found a ship going **to** Tarshish; and he paid its fare, and he went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from before the LORD.*

Jonah ran the opposite way from God's call. We still do.

Jonah 2:9 *And I, with a voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation* ***belongs*** *to the LORD.*

The theme of the Bible in four words: salvation belongs to the LORD.

Jonah 3:10 *And God saw their deeds, that they turned back from their evil way; and God relented concerning the evil which He had spoken of doing to them, and He did not do* ***it****.*

God saw real repentance and showed real mercy.

Jonah 4:2 *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 knew God's character perfectly, and that is exactly why he ran.

Christ in Jonah

Jesus Himself tells us how Jonah points to Him. When some of the scribes and Pharisees asked Him for a sign, He said no sign would be given "except the sign of Jonah the prophet." Then He explained: "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). Jonah's time in the fish was a picture of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection on the third day.

Jesus went on: "Ninevite men will stand up in the judgment with this generation and will condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and look, something greater than Jonah is here" (Matthew 12:41). Nineveh repented at the preaching of a reluctant prophet who did not even want them saved. Israel refused to repent at the preaching of the Son of God, who wept over them.

Jesus is greater than Jonah in every way. Jonah ran from God's call. Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). Jonah was thrown into the sea for his own disobedience. Jesus went to the cross for our disobedience. Jonah was angry that his enemies were spared. Jesus prayed for His enemies as they crucified Him (Luke 23:34). And Jonah's message to the Gentiles of Nineveh looks forward to the day Jesus would send His followers to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19).

How It Fits the Whole Story

From the very beginning, God planned to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham (Genesis 12:3). Israel was meant to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49:6). Jonah shows what happens when God's people forget that. They want God's blessings for themselves and His judgment for everyone else.

Jonah also shows that God's warnings are often an invitation. Jonah's message was only eight words in English: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overturned" (3:4). There was no promise in it. But the people believed God, repented, and God relented. Jeremiah later states the principle

plainly: if a nation God has warned turns from its evil, God will relent concerning the disaster He planned (Jeremiah 18:7-8).

Nineveh's repentance did not last forever. About a hundred years later, Nahum announced Nineveh's final destruction, and the city fell in 612 B.C. God's mercy to one generation does not cancel His justice toward a later generation that returns to evil.

And Jonah points ahead to the gospel going to the Gentiles. In the book of Acts, Peter is in the same city, Joppa, when God calls him to go to the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10). Unlike Jonah, Peter went.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Many modern scholars read Jonah as a parable or a teaching story, not as history. They point to the fish, the size of Nineveh, and the city's sudden repentance, and they note that Assyrian records do not mention it.

I believe Jonah is history. Jesus spoke of Jonah as a real man and of Nineveh's repentance as a real event. He said the men of Nineveh will stand up in the judgment (Matthew 12:40-41). Real people will not stand in the judgment to condemn others for repenting at a story that never happened. Jesus also put Jonah's three days in the fish side by side with His own three days in the grave. If one is a parable, why not the other? 2 Kings 14:25 places Jonah in real history, in a real town, under a real king. And the God who raised Jesus from the dead has no trouble keeping a man alive inside a fish.

Read It This Way

Jonah is short. Read all four chapters in one sitting, the way you would read a short story. Then go back and read it again, watching Jonah's heart.

Notice the word down. Jonah went down to Joppa, down into the ship, down into the hold, down to the roots of the mountains (1:3, 5; 2:6). Running from God is always a downward road.

Notice how well the pagans behave. The sailors try hard to save Jonah's life before they throw him overboard, and they pray to the LORD (1:13-14). The king of Nineveh calls a fast and tells everyone to turn from violence (3:6-9). Meanwhile God's own prophet sleeps through the storm and sulks under a plant. The book holds up a mirror.

Read Jonah's prayer in chapter 2 carefully. It is full of phrases from the Psalms. Jonah knew his Bible, even in the belly of a fish.

Most of all, sit with the ending. The book does not tell us how Jonah answered God's last question. It just stops. "And I, should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city?" (4:11). I think that is on purpose. The question is left open for every reader to answer. Who is your Nineveh? Who would you rather see judged than saved? God's heart is bigger than ours, and He calls us to make ours more like His.

Study Questions

1. Why did Jonah run from God, in his own words, and what does that tell you about his heart (1:1-3; 4:1-2)?
2. How did the pagan sailors respond to God, and what does that show about God's heart for the nations (1:13-16)?
3. What does it mean that salvation belongs to the LORD, and how does Jonah's prayer show it (2:1-9)?
4. How did Jesus use Jonah to point to His own death and resurrection (Matthew 12:38-41)?
5. God ends the book with a question. How would you answer it, and who is the Nineveh in your life (4:9-11)?

Micah

At a Glance	
Author	Micah of Moresheth, a small town in Judah (1:1)
Date written	During Micah's ministry, about 735 to 700 B.C.
Written to	Samaria and Jerusalem, the capitals of Israel and Judah
Setting and time covered	The reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of Judah, through the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. and the Assyrian invasion of Judah in 701 B.C.
Chapters	7
Key word	What the LORD requires
Key verse	Micah 6:8

Background

Micah was a country preacher. He came from Moresheth, a small farming town in the low hills of Judah, about twenty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem, near the border with the Philistines. The book calls him "Micah the Morashtite" (1:1). His name is a question: who is like the LORD? He closes his book by asking that very question (7:18).

Micah prophesied "in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah" (1:1), about 735 to 700 B.C. That makes him a contemporary of Isaiah, who preached in the capital, and of Hosea in the north. Isaiah was a man at home in the king's court. Micah was a man of the small towns. But God gave them the same message, and the two books share one of the most famous passages in the Bible, the promise that nations will beat their swords into plowshares (Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-3).

Those were years of upheaval. Assyria was on the march. In 722 B.C. it destroyed Samaria and carried the northern kingdom into exile. Micah saw it coming and warned about it (1:6-7). Then in 701 B.C. the Assyrian king Sennacherib swept through Judah, captured many of its fortified towns, including Lachish, not far from Micah's home, and surrounded Jerusalem. Micah's list of doomed towns in 1:10-16 traces the very route an invading army would take through his own part of Judah.

Inside the nation, things were just as bad. The rich lay awake at night planning how to take other people's fields and houses (2:1-2). Rulers hated good and loved evil (3:2). Judges took bribes, priests taught for pay, and prophets told fortunes for money, and then they all said, "Is not the LORD in our midst? Evil will not come upon us" (3:11).

Micah was not afraid to grieve. When he saw what was coming, he said he would go barefoot and naked and wail like the jackals (1:8). A true prophet does not enjoy announcing judgment. He feels it.

Micah's preaching made a difference. More than a century later, when Jeremiah was on trial for his life, some of the elders of the land stood up and reminded the crowd that Micah had once warned that Zion would be plowed as a field. King Hezekiah did not put him to death, they said.

Instead he feared the LORD and sought His favor, and God relented (Jeremiah 26:17-19). Micah's warning led to one of the great revivals in Judah's history.

Purpose

Micah wrote to expose sin, announce judgment, and give hope. He tells us plainly what God sent him to do: "But as for me, I am full of power with the Spirit of the LORD, and of justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" (3:8). The false prophets preached peace to anyone who fed them (3:5). Micah preached the truth.

But Micah never leaves the reader in judgment. The book moves back and forth, from doom to hope and back again, three times. Each time the hope gets brighter. God will gather a remnant like sheep in a fold (2:12-13). The mountain of the LORD's house will be raised above every other, and the nations will stream to it (4:1-5). A ruler will come out of Bethlehem (5:2). And God will throw all our sins into the depths of the sea (7:19).

And Micah answers one of the great questions of religion: what does God actually want from us? Not thousands of rams or rivers of oil, or even our firstborn children. "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require from you but to do justice, and to love steadfast love, and to walk humbly with your God?" (6:8).

Main Themes

God hates injustice. Micah condemns those who seize land, cheat in business, take bribes and treat the poor like meat for the pot (2:1-2; 3:1-3; 6:10-12). God sees, and He will act.

Leaders are held to a higher standard. Micah's sharpest words are for rulers, priests and prophets who used their positions for profit (3:1-12). God holds leaders accountable for those they lead.

Empty worship does not please God. Sacrifices cannot make up for a crooked life. God wants justice, steadfast love and a humble walk with Him (6:6-8).

God will send a King from Bethlehem. Out of little Bethlehem will come a ruler whose goings out are from of old (5:2). He will shepherd His flock in the strength of the LORD, and He will be great to the ends of the earth (5:4).

God delights in mercy. The book ends with a song of forgiveness. "He does not hold on to His anger forever, for He delights in steadfast love" (7:18).

Outline

- Chapters 1-2: Judgment on Samaria and Judah. The LORD comes out of His place, Samaria will fall, the towns of Judah mourn, and greedy landowners are condemned, followed by a promise to gather the remnant.
- Chapters 3-5: Leaders condemned and a coming kingdom. Corrupt rulers, priests and prophets, Zion plowed like a field, then the mountain of the LORD lifted up and the ruler from Bethlehem.

- Chapter 6: The LORD's case against His people. God takes Israel to court, and Micah tells what the LORD requires.
- Chapter 7: Confession and hope. Micah mourns the nation's sin, waits for God, and praises Him for His forgiveness.

Key Verses

Micah 5:2 *And you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, **too** little to be among the clans of Judah, from you for Me **One** will go out to be ruler over Israel; and His goings out **are** from of old, from **the** days of antiquity.*

Seven hundred years before Jesus was born, Micah named the town where it would happen.

Micah 6:8 *He has told you, O man, what **is** good; and what does the LORD require from you but to do justice, and to love steadfast love, and to walk humbly with your God?*

One of the clearest summaries in the Bible of what God wants from His people.

Micah 7:7 *And I, I will watch for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.*

In a time of collapse, Micah chooses to watch and wait for God.

Micah 7:18-19 *Who **is** a God like You, forgiving iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of His inheritance? He does not hold on to His anger forever, for He delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; He will subdue our iniquities; and You will cast all their sins into the depths of **the** sea.*

Who is a God like You? He forgives, He delights in mercy, and He throws our sins into the sea.

Christ in Micah

Micah 5:2 is one of the clearest prophecies of Christ in the Old Testament. "And you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you for Me One will go out to be ruler over Israel; and His goings out are from of old, from the days of antiquity."

When the wise men came to Jerusalem asking where the King of the Jews had been born, Herod called the chief priests and scribes. They answered at once: in Bethlehem of Judea, because that is what the prophet wrote. Then they quoted Micah 5:2 (Matthew 2:4-6). The Jewish leaders of Jesus' day understood this verse as a prophecy of the Messiah. Even the crowds knew that the Christ would come from Bethlehem, the village of David (John 7:42).

Notice two things about the One who comes. He comes from a small, unimportant town, too little to count among the clans of Judah. And yet His goings out are from of old, from the days of antiquity. He has a beginning in Bethlehem and a past that reaches back long before Bethlehem. That fits only Jesus, who was born in a manger and who also was with God in the beginning (John 1:1-2, 14; 8:58).

Micah 5:4 adds that He will shepherd His flock in the strength of the LORD, and 5:5 says, "this One will be peace." Jesus is the Good Shepherd (John 10:11), and He is our peace (Ephesians 2:14).

Micah 7:6, about a man's enemies being the people of his own house, is quoted by Jesus when He warned that following Him would sometimes divide families (Matthew 10:35-36). And 7:18-19 is the gospel in Old Testament form: a God who pardons iniquity and casts our sins into the sea. That forgiveness was bought at the cross.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Micah links the history of 2 Kings 15-20 and 2 Chronicles 27-32 to the promises of God. He saw the fall of Samaria and the threat to Jerusalem, and he told both kingdoms why it was happening.

He also looks back to the great acts of God. In chapter 6 God reminds His people that He brought them up from Egypt, sent Moses, Aaron and Miriam, and turned Balaam's curse into a blessing (6:4-5). And the book ends by remembering the promises God swore to Abraham and Jacob from the days of old (7:20). God's mercy to Israel is anchored in His covenant.

And Micah looks forward to the end. "And it will be at the end of the days that the mountain of the house of the LORD will be established at the head of the mountains" (4:1). Nations will come to Jerusalem to learn God's ways, God will judge between them, and they will not learn war anymore (4:2-3). Each man will sit under his vine and fig tree, and no one will make him afraid (4:4). That has never happened yet. I believe it describes the thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth, when the King from Bethlehem rules the nations from Jerusalem (Revelation 20:1-6; Zechariah 14:9). God will also gather the remnant of Israel, the lame and the outcast, and make them a strong nation, and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion forever (4:6-7). God has not finished with Israel.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Some scholars think chapters 4-7, with their bright promises, were added by later writers after the exile. They point to the mention of Babylon in 4:10. I believe Micah wrote the whole book. Isaiah, at the same time, also spoke of Babylon as the place of exile (Isaiah 39:6-7), and Micah's habit of moving from judgment to hope runs through all seven chapters.

Teachers also differ on how to read 4:1-5. Some read it as a picture of the church, with the nations coming to Christ through the gospel. I read it as a real kingdom on the earth, since it describes real nations, a real Jerusalem and an end to real war.

Read It This Way

Read Micah in its three cycles. Each one starts with "Hear" (1:2; 3:1; 6:1), moves through judgment, and ends in hope. Once you see the pattern, the book is much easier to follow.

Don't be put off by the list of towns in 1:10-16. In Hebrew it is full of wordplay, where the name of each town sounds like what will happen to it. It is a little like saying, Dallas will be dull, and Boston will be broken. You can't see the puns in English, but you can feel the advancing army.

Read chapter 6 as a courtroom. God calls the mountains as witnesses and lays His case against His people. "O My people, what have I done to you? And how have I wearied you? Testify against Me" (6:3). Then He reminds them of everything He has done for them. Then the people ask what they could possibly bring to make it right, and Micah answers in 6:8.

Take 6:8 apart slowly. To do justice means to treat people fairly, especially those who can't protect themselves. To love steadfast love means to delight in loyal, faithful kindness, not just to do it when we must. To walk humbly with your God means to live every day aware that He is God and we are not. All three belong together.

Read the first half of chapter 7 as a lament. Micah looks around and finds no one faithful left. He feels like a man who goes out to pick fruit after the harvest and finds not one cluster on the vine (7:1-2). Leaders are skilled at doing evil. Neighbors can't be trusted. Even families turn on each other (7:3-6). Then comes one of the great turns in the prophets: "And I, I will watch for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me" (7:7). Micah does not wait for things to get better before he trusts God. He trusts God while things are falling apart. "When I have fallen, I will arise; when I sit in the darkness, the LORD is a light for me" (7:8). If you are in a dark season, those two verses are worth memorizing.

And end where Micah ends. Read 7:18-20 out loud. If you have ever wondered whether God could forgive you, these verses are for you. He does not stay angry. He delights in mercy. He will tread our sins underfoot and cast them into the depths of the sea.

Study Questions

1. What sins did Micah see in the rulers, priests and prophets of his day, and why did their false confidence make it worse (3:9-12)?
2. How did Micah's warning affect King Hezekiah, according to Jeremiah, and what does that teach about responding to God's word (3:12; Jeremiah 26:17-19)?
3. What do the nations do in 4:1-4, and when do you think this will happen (4:1-4)?
4. What two things does Micah 5:2 tell us about the ruler who comes from Bethlehem, and how do they fit Jesus (5:2; Matthew 2:4-6)?
5. Take the three parts of 6:8 one at a time. Which one is hardest for you right now, and why (6:6-8)?

Nahum

At a Glance	
Author	Nahum of Elkosh (1:1); the place is unknown
Date written	Between the fall of Thebes in 663 B.C. (3:8) and the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C., likely about 650 B.C.
Written to	Judah, still suffering under Assyria, about the coming fall of Nineveh
Setting and time covered	The last decades of the Assyrian empire, looking ahead to Nineveh's destruction
Chapters	3
Key word	Comfort through justice
Key verse	Nahum 1:7

Background

Nahum is the sequel to Jonah. More than a hundred years earlier, God had sent Jonah to Nineveh, the people had repented, and God had spared the city. But that repentance did not last. Nineveh went back to its old ways, and worse. By Nahum's day, Assyria had become the most brutal empire the world had yet seen. Its own records boast of burning cities, impaling captives and piling up heads. It had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C., carried its people away, invaded Judah in 701 B.C., and kept Judah under its heavy hand for decades afterward.

Nahum's message was simple: Nineveh will fall. The whole book is about that one city. It opens, "The oracle of Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite" (1:1). An oracle is a weighty message from God, often a message of judgment. Nahum's name means comfort, and that is what his book was for God's people. The cruel power that had crushed them for a century was about to be crushed itself.

We know almost nothing about Nahum. He was from a town called Elkosh, but no one is sure where it was. Some suggest a place in Galilee, some a place in southern Judah. Scripture doesn't tell us more.

We can date the book fairly closely from what it says. Nahum mentions the fall of Thebes, the great city of Egypt, as something already past (3:8-10). The Assyrians destroyed Thebes in 663 B.C. And Nahum speaks of Nineveh's fall as still to come. Nineveh fell in 612 B.C. to an army of Babylonians and Medes. So Nahum wrote somewhere in those fifty years, likely about 650 B.C., when Assyria still looked unbeatable. That makes his prophecy all the more striking. He announced the end of a superpower at the height of its strength.

Purpose

Nahum was written to comfort God's people with the truth that God is just. Evil does not get the last word. The LORD sees the oppressor, and He will act.

That is a message many people need. When cruel people seem to win, we start to wonder if God cares. Nahum answers: He does, and His patience is not weakness. "The LORD is slow to anger

and great in power, and He will certainly not leave the guilty unpunished" (1:3). God had given Nineveh a century and a half since Jonah. Now its time was up.

Nahum also shows God as a refuge for those who trust Him. Right in the middle of the description of God's power and wrath stands this verse: "The LORD is good, a stronghold in a day of trouble; and He knows those who take refuge in Him" (1:7). The same power that brings down Nineveh protects the people who hide in Him.

Main Themes

God is slow to anger, but He is not soft on evil. God's patience gives people time to repent, as Nineveh once did. But patience is not the same as approval. When the wicked refuse to turn, judgment comes (1:2-3).

God is a refuge. For those who trust Him, God's power is a shelter, not a threat (1:7).

God rules the nations. Assyria seemed invincible. God brought it down in a few short years. No empire lasts unless God allows it (Daniel 2:21).

God brings good news to the oppressed. "Look, on the mountains the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace!" (1:15). For Judah, Nineveh's fall meant freedom.

Outline

- Chapter 1: The LORD's justice declared. A hymn about God's power, patience and wrath, and a promise of relief for Judah.
- Chapter 2: Nineveh's fall described. A vivid picture of the attack, the flood at the gates and the plunder of the city.
- Chapter 3: Why Nineveh falls. Woe to the city of blood, and a comparison with fallen Thebes.

Key Verses

Nahum 1:3 *The LORD **is** slow to anger and great in power, and He will certainly not leave **the guilty** unpunished. The LORD, in **the** whirlwind and in **the** storm **is** His way, and cloud **is** the dust of His feet.*

God's patience and God's justice in one verse.

Nahum 1:7 *The LORD **is** good, a stronghold in a day of trouble; and He knows those who take refuge in Him.*

In the middle of judgment, God is a stronghold for those who trust Him.

Nahum 1:15 *Look, on the mountains the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace! Celebrate your festivals, O Judah; pay your vows; for **the** worthless **one** will not again pass through you; all of him is cut off.*

Good news for the oppressed. Paul echoes this picture for the preaching of the gospel.

Nahum 2:13 *Look, I **am** against you, declares the LORD of armies, and I will burn her chariotry in smoke, and **the** sword will consume your young lions; and I will cut off your prey from the earth, and the voice of your messengers will not be heard again.*

No power on earth can stand when the LORD of armies says, I am against you.

Christ in Nahum

Nahum's link to Christ is mostly a theme, with one echo the New Testament picks up. In 1:15 Nahum pictures a messenger running over the mountains with good news of peace, because the oppressor has fallen. Isaiah uses almost the same words for the news that God reigns and His people are redeemed (Isaiah 52:7). Paul draws on these verses when he writes, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace" (Romans 10:15). The fall of Nineveh was good news for Judah. The cross and the empty tomb are good news for the whole world, because the greatest oppressor of all, sin and death and the devil, has been defeated (Hebrews 2:14-15; Colossians 2:15).

Nahum also shows us the side of God that the cross takes seriously. God "will certainly not leave the guilty unpunished" (1:3). How then can God forgive anyone? Because Jesus took the punishment in our place. God's justice was not set aside at the cross. It was satisfied there (Romans 3:25-26). Those who take refuge in Christ find that God is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble. Those who refuse Him will one day face the same justice Nineveh did, when Christ returns to judge (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Nahum should be read with Jonah. Together they show both sides of God's character. Jonah shows God's mercy: He spared Nineveh when it repented. Nahum shows God's justice: He destroyed Nineveh when it returned to evil. Both books describe God as slow to anger (Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3). In Jonah, that patience leads to mercy. In Nahum, patience has run its course.

Nahum's prophecy came true in 612 B.C., when the Babylonians and Medes destroyed Nineveh. The city was so completely ruined that it lay buried under mounds of earth for more than two thousand years, until archaeologists dug it up in the 1800s. Nahum had said, "There is no relief for your fracture; your wound is severe" (3:19). It never rose again.

Nahum also prepares us for Babylon's turn. The nation God used to judge Assyria would itself be judged, as Habakkuk, Isaiah and Jeremiah all say. And in Revelation 17-18, the last great Babylon, the final world system that sets itself against God, falls just as suddenly. God has always brought down proud empires, and He will do it one last time.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Some readers struggle with Nahum because it seems to celebrate the destruction of a city. Isn't that out of step with the God of Jonah, who cared about Nineveh's children and animals? Teachers answer this in different ways, but most agree on this much: Nahum is not gloating. He is announcing God's justice on a people who had done terrible evil for a long time, after God had

already shown them mercy. The book gives voice to the oppressed, who had cried out for justice. Scripture holds God's mercy and God's justice together, and both are good.

Some scholars also debate whether 1:2-8 was once an acrostic poem, with lines starting with letters of the Hebrew alphabet in order. Part of it seems to follow that pattern, but not all. It doesn't change the meaning.

Read It This Way

Read Jonah first, then Nahum. You will feel the weight of what happened to Nineveh between the two books.

Read chapter 1 as a hymn about who God is. Notice how it moves between His power in nature, His wrath on His enemies, and His goodness to those who trust Him. Then read chapters 2-3 as a war report. Nahum writes like a reporter on the scene: chariots racing in the streets, shields red, gates of the rivers opened, the palace melting away (2:3-6). It is some of the most vivid writing in the prophets.

As you read, think about the people who first heard it. They had lived their whole lives under Assyria's shadow. Their fathers had seen Samaria carried away. Nahum told them God had not forgotten them.

Then think about your own world. Are there cruel powers that seem to win? Are there wrongs done to you that have never been made right? Nahum does not tell you to take revenge. He tells you God is just, and that He will act in His time. Meanwhile, He is your stronghold. "He knows those who take refuge in Him" (1:7).

Study Questions

1. What did Nineveh do between the time of Jonah and the time of Nahum, and why did God's response change (Jonah 3:10; Nahum 3:1-4)?
2. How can God be both slow to anger and certain to punish the guilty (1:2-3)?
3. What does it mean to you that the LORD is a stronghold in the day of trouble (1:7)?
4. How does the good news in 1:15 point forward to the good news of the gospel (1:15; Romans 10:15)?
5. How does Nahum help you trust God when evil seems to be winning (1:7-8; 3:19)?

Habakkuk

At a Glance	
Author	Habakkuk the prophet (1:1)
Date written	About 609 to 605 B.C., just before Babylon invaded Judah
Written to	Judah, and every believer who has asked God why
Setting and time covered	Judah in the last years before the Babylonian invasion; a conversation between the prophet and God
Chapters	3
Key word	Living by faith
Key verse	Habakkuk 2:4

Background

Most prophets speak for God to the people. Habakkuk speaks to God for the people, and he doesn't hold back. His book is a conversation. He asks God hard questions, God answers, he asks a harder question, God answers again, and Habakkuk ends with a song of trust.

We know very little about Habakkuk himself. The book calls him simply "the prophet" (1:1). The note at the end of chapter 3, "To the choirmaster, on my stringed instruments" (3:19), suggests he may have been connected with the temple music, but Scripture doesn't tell us more.

The book fits best in the years just before Babylon came, about 609 to 605 B.C. Good King Josiah had been killed in battle in 609 B.C. His son Jehoiakim was a selfish and violent king who taxed the people heavily, built himself a fine palace without paying his workers, and shed innocent blood (2 Kings 23:34-37; Jeremiah 22:13-17). The reforms of Josiah's day had faded. At the same time, Babylon was rising. In 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt at Carchemish and became master of the region. That same year he came to Jerusalem and took the first captives, including Daniel. God tells Habakkuk that He is raising up the Chaldeans, another name for the Babylonians (1:6). It sounds as if that rise had not yet happened, or was just beginning.

Purpose

Habakkuk is for anyone who has looked at the world and asked God, why? Why do You let evil go on? Why don't You answer my prayers? Why do the wicked seem to win?

His first question comes in 1:2: "How long, O LORD, have I cried for help, and You do not hear?" He cries out about violence, and God does not seem to save. Judah was full of violence and injustice. The law was ignored. The wicked surrounded the righteous (1:3-4). Why wasn't God doing something?

God's answer was shocking. He was doing something. "I am working a work in your days that you will not believe if it is told" (1:5). He was raising up the Babylonians to judge Judah (1:6-11).

That answer raised a harder question. The Babylonians were worse than Judah. How could a holy God use a more wicked nation to punish His own people? "You are too pure of eyes to see evil" (1:13). So Habakkuk climbed up to his watchtower and waited for God's answer (2:1).

God's second answer is the heart of the book. The vision will come at the appointed time. If it seems slow, wait for it (2:3). The proud will fall, "and the righteous will live by his faithfulness" (2:4). Babylon's pride would destroy it, as the five woes of chapter 2 make clear. God's people were to trust Him and keep on being faithful while they waited.

Main Themes

It is right to bring our questions to God. Habakkuk does not complain about God behind His back. He complains to God's face, and God answers him. Honest questions, brought to God in faith, are part of a real relationship with Him.

God is at work even when He seems silent. Habakkuk thought God was doing nothing. In fact God was preparing the biggest event of the age (1:5).

The righteous live by faith. This is the key to the book, and one of the key verses in the whole Bible (2:4). The proud trust in themselves. The righteous trust in God and stay faithful to Him.

God will judge the proud. The five woes against Babylon (2:6-20) show that God sees greed, violence, drunkenness and idol worship, and He will bring every proud nation down.

Joy in God does not depend on circumstances. The book ends with a man who has lost everything still rejoicing in the God of his salvation (3:17-18).

Outline

- Chapter 1:1-11: Habakkuk's first question and God's answer. Why does God allow violence in Judah? God is raising up Babylon.
- Chapter 1:12-2:1: Habakkuk's second question. How can a holy God use the wicked Babylonians? Habakkuk waits on his watchtower.
- Chapter 2:2-20: God's answer: five woes. Write the vision, the righteous will live by faith, and five woes on proud Babylon.
- Chapter 3: Habakkuk's prayer of trust. A song recalling God's mighty acts, ending in quiet faith and joy.

Key Verses

Habakkuk 1:13 ***You are*** *too pure of eyes to see evil, and You are not able to look at trouble; why do You look at the treacherous,* ***and why*** *are You silent when the wicked swallows up* ***one*** *more righteous than he?*

Habakkuk's hard question, still asked by believers today.

Habakkuk 2:4 *Look, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him; and the righteous will live by his faithfulness.*

God's answer to the proud and the faithful. The New Testament quotes it three times.

Habakkuk 2:14 *For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover over **the** sea.*

Whatever empires rise and fall, the end of history is the whole earth filled with the knowledge of God's glory.

Habakkuk 3:17-18 *Though the fig tree does not bud, and there is no produce on the vines, the yield of the olive fails, and the fields do not make food, the flock is cut off from the fold, and there are no cattle in the stalls, and I, I will exult in the LORD; I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.*

Faith that rejoices in God even when every earthly support is gone.

Christ in Habakkuk

The New Testament quotes Habakkuk 2:4 three times, and each time it shows a different side of what it means to be made right with God through faith in Christ.

In Romans 1:17, Paul quotes it to state the theme of his whole letter: "And the righteous by faith will live." The gospel reveals a righteousness from God that comes to us through faith, not through our own works. In Galatians 3:11, Paul uses it to show that "no one is justified by law before God," because "The righteous by faith will live." Justification means being declared righteous by God. We are not justified by keeping the law, but by trusting Christ. And in Hebrews 10:38, the writer uses it to call believers to keep trusting God through hard times: "the righteous will live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul takes no pleasure in him."

You may notice that the SLB of Habakkuk 2:4 reads "by his faithfulness," while the New Testament quotations read "by faith." The Hebrew word means firmness or faithfulness, a steady trust in God that shows itself in a steady life. Faith and faithfulness are two sides of the same coin. The New Testament writers, following the Greek translation of their day, brought out the root: the one who trusts God is the one God counts as righteous, and that trust keeps him going.

Paul also quoted Habakkuk 1:5 when he preached in Pisidian Antioch, warning his hearers not to scoff at the work God was doing in their day, the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 13:40-41).

And Habakkuk 2:14 looks forward to the reign of Christ, when "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover over the sea." Isaiah says nearly the same thing about the reign of the Branch from Jesse (Isaiah 11:9).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Habakkuk stands near the end of Judah's history, just before the Babylonian invasions of 605, 597 and 586 B.C. Jeremiah was preaching in Jerusalem at the same time. Habakkuk gives us a window into the heart of a godly man who saw judgment coming and had to learn to trust God through it.

His great verse, 2:4, became one of the foundation stones of the New Testament. When the early church preached that we are saved by grace through faith, Habakkuk was one of the places they pointed. Centuries later, Martin Luther's study of Romans 1:17 and its quotation of Habakkuk helped spark the Protestant Reformation. A short book by a little-known prophet helped change the world.

And the book's end points to the end of history. The proud kingdoms of men will fall. The earth will be filled with the knowledge of God's glory. Until then, the righteous live by faith.

Read It This Way

Read Habakkuk as a conversation, and keep track of who is speaking. Habakkuk speaks in 1:2-4, God in 1:5-11, Habakkuk in 1:12-2:1, God in 2:2-20, and Habakkuk again in chapter 3.

Notice how Habakkuk moves. He starts with "How long?" (1:2) and ends with "I will exult in the LORD" (3:18). His circumstances have not changed. If anything, they are about to get much worse, because Babylon is coming. What changed was Habakkuk. He has heard from God, and he has learned to wait.

Read chapter 3 out loud. It is a song, and it remembers how God came down at Sinai and led His people through the sea (3:3-15). Habakkuk strengthens his faith by remembering what God has done. Then he says, "Though the fig tree does not bud, and there is no produce on the vines," and the flocks and herds are gone, "and I, I will exult in the LORD" (3:17-18). For a farming people, that list meant losing everything. Habakkuk's joy was not in his crops. It was in his God.

Let Habakkuk give you permission to ask your questions, and let him teach you what to do with God's answers. Go to your watchtower. Wait. Remember what God has done. And choose joy in the God of your salvation.

Study Questions

1. What was Habakkuk's first complaint, and have you ever felt the same way (1:2-4)?
2. Why was God's first answer so hard for Habakkuk to accept (1:5-6, 12-13)?
3. What did Habakkuk do while he waited for God to answer, and what can we learn from it (2:1-3)?
4. How do Romans, Galatians and Hebrews each use Habakkuk 2:4 (2:4; Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38)?
5. What would it look like for you to rejoice in the LORD even if everything in 3:17 happened to you (3:17-19)?

Zephaniah

At a Glance	
Author	Zephaniah, a great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah (1:1)
Date written	During the reign of Josiah, about 640 to 625 B.C., likely before Josiah's reforms in 622 B.C.
Written to	Judah and Jerusalem, and the nations around them
Setting and time covered	Jerusalem early in Josiah's reign, after the long evil reigns of Manasseh and Amon
Chapters	3
Key word	The day of the LORD
Key verse	Zephaniah 3:17

Background

Zephaniah is a short book with two very different moods. Most of it is thunder: the great day of the LORD is near, a day of wrath, darkness and judgment. But it ends with one of the most tender verses in the Bible, a picture of God singing over His people with joy (3:17). The book moves from God's fury to God's song, and it shows us how He gets from one to the other.

Zephaniah gives us a longer family tree than any other prophet. He was "son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah" (1:1). Most scholars believe this Hezekiah was the good king of Judah, which would make Zephaniah a member of the royal family and a distant relative of King Josiah. That may explain why he speaks so directly about the princes and the king's sons (1:8). It may also explain why he traced his family back four generations: to show that he came from the line of a king who had walked with God.

He preached "in the days of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah" (1:1). Josiah reigned from 640 to 609 B.C. He came to the throne at eight years old, after his grandfather Manasseh and his father Amon had filled Judah with idols for more than fifty years. Manasseh built altars to Baal and to the stars in the temple courts, sacrificed his own son, and shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from one end to another (2 Kings 21:1-16). Zephaniah's description of Judah fits those days: Baal worship, priests of foreign gods, people bowing to the stars on their rooftops, and people swearing by the LORD and by Milcom at the same time (1:4-5).

In 622 B.C., when the Book of the Law was found in the temple, Josiah led a great reform. He tore down the altars, removed the idols and called the people back to the covenant (2 Kings 22-23). Since Zephaniah describes idolatry still in full force, he likely preached before that reform, between about 640 and 625 B.C. His preaching may have helped prepare the way for it. Jeremiah began his ministry around the same time, in 627 B.C.

Purpose

Zephaniah wrote to warn Judah that the day of the LORD was near, and to call the humble to seek God before it came.

Many people in Jerusalem had settled into a comfortable unbelief. They said in their hearts, "The LORD will not do good, and He will not do harm" (1:12). In other words, God doesn't really do anything. Zephaniah calls them men "thickening on their dregs," like wine left too long on its sediment until it turns thick and stale. God says He will search Jerusalem with lamps to find them (1:12).

The day of the LORD is the time when God steps in to judge. "A day of fury is that day, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom" (1:15). For Judah, it came in 586 B.C., when Babylon burned Jerusalem. But Zephaniah's words reach further, to a final day when God judges all the earth (1:2-3, 18; 3:8).

Yet there is a way of escape. "Seek the LORD, all the humble of the land" (2:3). And on the far side of judgment, God will gather a humble remnant, purify the speech of the nations, and rejoice over His people.

Zephaniah's judgment reaches into every corner of the city. He names the Fish Gate, the Second Quarter and the Mortar, the market district, and says wailing will be heard from each (1:10-11). The merchants who weighed out silver will be cut off. Their houses and vineyards will be lost before they can enjoy them (1:13). No one will be able to buy his way out: "Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to deliver them on the day of the fury of the LORD" (1:18).

Main Themes

The day of the LORD is near. Zephaniah speaks of it more than any other prophet. It is a day of wrath on sin, both for Judah and for the whole world (1:14-18).

God judges complacency. The worst sin Zephaniah names may be the quiet belief that God doesn't matter (1:12). Indifference toward God is not neutral.

Seek the LORD in humility. Pride is the root sin of Jerusalem and the nations (2:10, 15; 3:11). Humility is the way to safety (2:3; 3:12).

God judges the nations. Philistia to the west, Moab and Ammon to the east, Cush to the south and Assyria to the north will all answer to God (2:4-15). Nineveh, still standing when Zephaniah wrote, would become a desolation (2:13).

God rejoices over His restored people. After judgment, God will gather His people, remove their shame and live among them as King. He will rejoice over them with singing (3:14-20).

Outline

- Chapter 1: The day of the LORD on Judah. Judgment on idolatry, on the complacent, and the great day described.
- Chapter 2: Judgment on the nations. A call to seek the LORD, and words against Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Cush and Assyria.
- Chapter 3: Jerusalem judged and restored. The rebellious city rebuked, then the nations purified, the remnant gathered, and God rejoicing over His people.

Key Verses

Zephaniah 1:14 *Near **is** the great day of the LORD, near and hurrying exceedingly. The sound of the day of the LORD; bitter, a warrior is shouting there.*

The day of the LORD is near, and coming fast. Zephaniah wants us to feel the urgency.

Zephaniah 2:3 *Seek the LORD, all the humble of the land, who have done His justice; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD.*

The way of escape: seek the LORD, seek righteousness, seek humility.

Zephaniah 3:9 *For then I will turn to peoples a purified lip, for all of them to call on the name of the LORD, to serve Him **with** one shoulder.*

God will one day purify the speech of the nations, so that they all call on His name.

Zephaniah 3:17 *The LORD your God **is** in your midst, a warrior **who** will save. He will rejoice over you with joy; He will be silent in His love; He will be glad over you with a shout of joy.*

God in the midst of His people, saving them, quieting them with His love, and singing over them.

Christ in Zephaniah

The New Testament does not quote Zephaniah directly, so its link to Christ is a theme. But it is a rich one.

Zephaniah promises that "the King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst" (3:15). When Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the crowds cried out, "Blessed is the One coming in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel!" (John 12:13). Nathanael said the same: "You are the King of Israel" (John 1:49). The King Zephaniah promised came to dwell among His people. And He will come again to reign in their midst.

Zephaniah 3:9 promises that God will give the peoples a purified lip, so that all of them call on the name of the LORD. Many see a first taste of that at Pentecost, when people from many nations heard the gospel in their own languages (Acts 2:5-11), undoing in a small way the confusion of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). That is a connection the New Testament does not state, so I offer it as a picture, not a fulfillment. The full answer will come when people from every nation, tribe and tongue worship the Lamb (Revelation 7:9-10).

And the day of the LORD points to Christ as Judge. The New Testament teaches that God has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness through the Man He appointed, and He proved it by raising Jesus from the dead (Acts 17:31).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Zephaniah stands between the dark days of Manasseh and the fall of Jerusalem. His warnings came true in 586 B.C. But like all the prophets, he looks beyond the near event to the final one. The day of the LORD in Zephaniah includes the great time of trouble at the end of the age, when God judges all nations (3:8). I believe that day includes the seven-year Tribulation and the return of

Christ (Daniel 9:27; Revelation 19:11-16). Before it begins, Christ will take His church to Himself (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 5:9).

And Zephaniah's last verses show God's future for Israel. He will gather the scattered, remove their shame, and make them "a name and a praise among all the peoples of the earth" (3:20). That has not yet happened in full. It will, when Christ reigns from Jerusalem (Romans 11:26-27).

Read It This Way

Zephaniah is three chapters. Read it in one sitting, and notice the turn from wrath to joy.

Start by reading chapter 1 slowly. Count how many times the word day appears in 1:14-18. Zephaniah piles up words on purpose, so we will feel the weight of God's judgment.

Then read 2:3 as an invitation. Zephaniah says perhaps you will be hidden on the day of the LORD's anger. The word perhaps is not doubt about God's mercy. It is humility. No one can demand to be spared. We can only seek the LORD.

Then read 3:14-20 as a song. After all the darkness, Zephaniah calls Jerusalem to sing, shout and rejoice. Then he turns it around: God Himself will rejoice over His people. "He will rejoice over you with joy; He will be silent in His love; He will be glad over you with a shout of joy" (3:17). Think about that. The God whose wrath fills chapter 1 is the God who sings over His people in chapter 3. What makes the difference? Seeking Him in humility, and being found in Him.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think Zephaniah traced his family back to Hezekiah (1:1)?
2. What did the complacent people of Jerusalem believe about God, and where do you see that attitude today (1:12)?
3. What does it mean to seek the LORD, seek righteousness and seek humility (2:3)?
4. How does Zephaniah's picture of the King of Israel in the midst of His people point to Jesus (3:15; John 1:49; 12:13)?
5. What does 3:17 tell you about how God feels toward His people, and how does that change the way you see Him (3:17)?

Haggai

At a Glance	
Author	Haggai the prophet (1:1; Ezra 5:1)
Date written	Four messages given in 520 B.C., the second year of Darius, king of Persia
Written to	Zerubbabel the governor, Joshua the high priest, and the returned exiles in Jerusalem
Setting and time covered	Jerusalem, about four months in 520 B.C., while the temple lay unfinished
Chapters	2
Key word	Put God first
Key verse	Haggai 1:4

Background

Haggai is the second shortest book in the Old Testament, after Obadiah, and one of the most practical. It is four short sermons, all preached within about four months, and every one of them is dated to the day. They were preached to people who had stopped building God's house and started building their own.

To understand the book, you need to know what came before. In 538 B.C. Cyrus king of Persia issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:1-4). About fifty thousand people went back with Zerubbabel, a descendant of King David, and Joshua the high priest (Ezra 2:64-65). In the second year after their return, they laid the foundation of the temple. The people shouted for joy, though some of the old men who had seen Solomon's temple wept (Ezra 3:8-13).

Then opposition came. The people of the land frightened the builders, hired counselors against them, and wrote letters to the Persian kings. The work stopped (Ezra 4:4-5, 24). The work sat idle for about sixteen years, until the second year of Darius (Ezra 4:24). During those years the people settled in. They built their own houses, some of them with fine paneling (1:4). They planted crops, but the harvests kept failing. And God's house lay in ruins.

Then in 520 B.C., the second year of Darius king of Persia, God raised up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to stir the people back to work (Ezra 5:1-2). Haggai's first message came on the first day of the sixth month (1:1). Within about three weeks, the people were back at work (1:14-15). The temple was finished in 515 B.C., in the sixth year of Darius (Ezra 6:15).

We know almost nothing about Haggai himself. His name probably comes from the Hebrew word for feast. Some have suggested that he was an old man who had seen Solomon's temple, based on 2:3, but Scripture doesn't tell us that.

Purpose

Haggai wrote to get God's people to put God first. His message boils down to one question: "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this house is desolate?" (1:4).

The people had not rejected God. They had simply put Him off. They said, "It is not a time to come, the time for the house of the LORD to be built" (1:2). There was always something else to do first. Haggai told them to look at the results. "You have sown much and brought in little; you have eaten, and there is no satisfaction" (1:6). They earned wages, but it was like putting money "into a pierced bag." They were working hard and getting nowhere, because God was withholding His blessing (1:9-11).

"Set your heart on your ways," Haggai said (1:5, 7). Think about what is happening and why.

When the people obeyed, God gave them a short, beautiful promise: "I am with you, declares the LORD" (1:13). Then He encouraged them not to lose heart over how small the new temple looked compared to Solomon's. He would fill it with glory (2:6-9). He would bless them from that day on (2:19). And He would make Zerubbabel like a signet ring, a sign that He had chosen David's line and would keep His promise (2:23).

Main Themes

Put God first. When we put our own comfort ahead of God's work, nothing satisfies. When we put Him first, He provides (1:2-11; Matthew 6:33).

God is with those who obey. The moment the people began to work, God said, "I am with you" (1:13; 2:4). His presence is the greatest blessing.

Don't despise small beginnings. The new temple looked like nothing next to Solomon's (2:3). But God promised that its latter glory would be greater than the former (2:9). Zechariah, preaching at the same time, asked who had despised the day of small things (Zechariah 4:10).

Holiness is not contagious, but uncleanness is. Haggai asks the priests two questions about the Law (2:11-13). Holy meat does not make other things holy by touching them, but touching a dead body makes a person unclean. Being near the temple does not make people holy. Their own sin was defiling their work (2:14).

God keeps His promise to David. Zerubbabel, David's descendant, is called God's servant and His signet ring (2:23). The royal line was not finished.

Outline

- Chapter 1: Call to rebuild. The people's excuses, the failed harvests, and the people's obedience.
- Chapter 2:1-9: The greater glory. Encouragement for those discouraged by the small new temple.
- Chapter 2:10-19: Blessing for a clean people. A lesson on holiness and uncleanness, and the promise, from this day I will bless.
- Chapter 2:20-23: Zerubbabel the signet ring. God will shake the nations and honor His chosen servant.

Key Verses

Haggai 1:4 ***Is it*** *a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this house* ***is*** *desolate?*

The question at the heart of the book. Whose house comes first?

Haggai 1:13 *And Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke by the message of the LORD to the people, saying, "I* ***am*** *with you, declares the LORD."*

When God's people obey, He gives them His presence.

Haggai 2:4 *And now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the LORD; and be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest; and be strong, all people of the land, declares the LORD; and work, for I* ***am*** *with you, declares the LORD of armies,*

Be strong and work, for God is with you. A word for every discouraged worker.

Haggai 2:9 *Great will be the glory of this house, the latter more than the former, says the LORD of armies; and in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of armies.*

God's promise that the small temple would see greater glory than Solomon's.

Christ in Haggai

How could the plain second temple have greater glory than Solomon's? Solomon's temple was covered in gold and filled with the cloud of God's glory (1 Kings 8:10-11). The second temple had no ark, and Scripture never records the cloud of glory filling it.

The answer is that the Lord Himself came to it. Herod the Great later rebuilt and enlarged the second temple, but it was still the second temple. Jesus was presented there as a baby, and Simeon took Him in his arms and called Him "glory of Your people Israel" (Luke 2:32). He taught there as a boy. He cleansed it, taught in its courts and healed the blind and lame there (Matthew 21:12-14). The glory of God came to that house in the person of His Son (John 1:14). That is a greater glory than gold.

Haggai 2:6 is quoted in Hebrews 12:26: "Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven." The writer of Hebrews says this points to the final shaking at the end of the age, when everything that can be shaken will be removed and only the kingdom that cannot be shaken will remain (Hebrews 12:27-28). That kingdom belongs to Christ.

And Zerubbabel the signet ring points to Christ. A signet ring carried the king's seal and authority. Zerubbabel never became king. But he is named in the family line of Jesus in both Matthew and Luke (Matthew 1:12-13; Luke 3:27). God's promise to David passed through Zerubbabel to the true King, Jesus, who will reign forever.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Haggai belongs with Ezra 1-6 and Zechariah. Ezra tells the history of the return and the rebuilding of the temple. Haggai and Zechariah give us the sermons God used to get the work going again (Ezra 5:1-2; 6:14). Together they show that God's word moves God's people to action.

Haggai also looks ahead. He speaks of God shaking the heavens and the earth and overthrowing the thrones of kingdoms (2:21-22). That reaches past the Persian empire to the end of history, when Christ returns and all the kingdoms of the world become His (Revelation 11:15).

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Teachers differ on Haggai 2:7. Older English Bibles often translated it as the desire of all nations will come, and many read it as a prophecy of the Messiah, the One all nations long for. The SLB reads, "they will come, the desire of all the nations; and I will fill this house with glory." Many modern teachers read it as the treasures of the nations, the silver and gold that will flow into the temple, which fits 2:8: "The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine." Both readings are possible from the Hebrew. Either way, the verse ends with God filling the house with glory, and Jesus is the One who brought that glory.

Read It This Way

Haggai is only two chapters. Read it in one sitting, and write the four dates in your margin: the first day of the sixth month (1:1), the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month (1:15), the twenty-first day of the seventh month (2:1), and the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month (2:10, 20).

Then ask Haggai's question of yourself. What have you put ahead of God? Haggai is not saying that houses, jobs and crops don't matter. He is saying that when we give God the leftovers, we end up with less of everything.

Notice how quickly the people responded. Within twenty-three days, they were back at work. And notice that God stirred up their spirit (1:14). Even our obedience is His gift.

Finally, if you are discouraged because your work for God seems small, read 2:1-9 again. God sees what we can't see yet. God's word to them still stands: be strong, "and work, for I am with you" (2:4).

Study Questions

1. What excuse did the people give for not building the temple, and what excuses do we use for putting God off (1:2-4)?
2. Why did the people's hard work bring so little, and what was God trying to show them (1:5-11)?
3. What happened when the people obeyed, and what did God promise them (1:12-14)?
4. Why were some people discouraged by the new temple, and how did God encourage them (2:3-9)?
5. How was the glory of the second temple greater than the first, through Jesus (2:9; Luke 2:27-32)?

Zechariah

At a Glance	
Author	Zechariah son of Berechiah, son of Iddo (1:1), a priest and a prophet
Date written	Chapters 1-8 about 520 to 518 B.C.; chapters 9-14 likely later, perhaps after 480 B.C.
Written to	The returned exiles in Jerusalem, rebuilding the temple, and God's people looking for their King
Setting and time covered	Jerusalem under Persian rule, from the second year of Darius (520 B.C.), looking ahead to the Messiah and the last days
Chapters	14
Key word	The coming King
Key verse	Zechariah 9:9

Background

Zechariah is the longest of the Minor Prophets, and one of the hardest to read. It is full of strange visions: horses among myrtle trees, a flying scroll, a woman sitting in a basket, chariots coming out from between mountains of bronze. But it is also one of the richest books in the Old Testament for seeing Jesus. Only Isaiah gives us more about the Messiah. The Gospel writers turned to Zechariah again and again as they told the story of Jesus' last week.

Zechariah was "son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, the prophet" (1:1). Iddo was one of the heads of the priestly families who came back from Babylon with Zerubbabel (Nehemiah 12:4, 16), so Zechariah was a priest as well as a prophet. Ezra calls him "Zechariah the son of Iddo" (Ezra 5:1), probably because his father died young and he followed his grandfather as head of the family. He seems to have been a young man when he began to prophesy (2:4). His name means the LORD remembers, and that is the message of the book. God had not forgotten His people.

Zechariah began to preach in the eighth month of the second year of Darius, 520 B.C. (1:1), just two months after Haggai's first message. The two prophets worked side by side to stir up the returned exiles to finish the temple (Ezra 5:1-2; 6:14). The people had been back in the land for about eighteen years. The temple foundation had been laid, but the work had stopped. The people were discouraged. They were few, they were poor, and they were a small province in the huge Persian Empire. They needed to know that God was still with them and that His great promises were still coming.

Chapters 1-8 are dated to about 520 to 518 B.C. (1:1, 7; 7:1). Chapters 9-14 carry no dates. Their style is different and their view reaches much further into the future. They were likely written later in Zechariah's life, perhaps after 480 B.C., after the temple had been finished in 515 B.C. Chapter 9 even mentions Greece (9:13), which would become a world power under Alexander the Great about 150 years later.

Purpose

Zechariah wrote to encourage God's people to return to Him, to finish the temple, and to look forward to their King.

The book opens with a call: "Return to Me, declares the LORD of armies, that I may return to you" (1:3). God reminded the people that their fathers had refused to listen to the prophets, and judgment had come. The new generation must not make the same mistake.

Then came eight night visions (1:7-6:8), all in one night, each with an angel to explain it. Together they say: God is jealous for Jerusalem. He will judge the nations that scattered His people. He will protect and fill the city. He will cleanse His priesthood. He will finish the temple, "not by strength and not by power, but by My Spirit" (4:6). He will remove sin from the land. And His Spirit is at rest because His work among the nations is done.

The second half of the book looks further ahead. It speaks of the King who comes riding on a donkey (9:9), the Good Shepherd rejected and sold for thirty pieces of silver (11:12-13), the One whom they pierced (12:10), a fountain opened to cleanse from sin (13:1), the Shepherd struck and the sheep scattered (13:7), and the day when the LORD's feet will stand on the Mount of Olives and He will be King over all the earth (14:4, 9).

Main Themes

Return to God. God is ready to return to His people when they return to Him (1:3). That call comes at the start and runs through the whole book.

God's work is done by His Spirit. Zerubbabel did not have an army or wealth. He had God's Spirit, and that was enough. "Who has despised the day of small things?" (4:10).

God is jealous for Jerusalem. God loves Zion with a great jealousy (1:14; 8:2). He will return to it, dwell in it and make it "the City of Truth" (8:3).

The Messiah is both King and Priest. In 6:9-15 Zechariah sets a crown on Joshua the high priest and speaks of the Branch who will build the temple of the LORD and sit as a priest on His throne. In Israel, kings and priests came from different tribes. Only the Messiah could be both.

The LORD will reign over all the earth. The book ends with the nations judged, Jerusalem saved, and the LORD King over the whole earth (14:9). Even the pots in Jerusalem will be holy (14:20-21).

Outline

- Chapter 1:1-6: A call to return. Don't be like your fathers.
- Chapters 1:7-6:8: Eight night visions. The horseman among the myrtles, four horns and four craftsmen, the measuring line, Joshua cleansed, the lampstand and two olive trees, the flying scroll, the woman in the basket, and the four chariots.
- Chapter 6:9-15: The crowning of Joshua. A picture of the Branch who will be King and Priest.

- Chapters 7-8: Fasting and future joy. A question about fasting, a call to justice, and promises that fasts will become feasts.
- Chapters 9-11: The coming King. The King on a donkey, the scattered flock gathered, and the Good Shepherd rejected.
- Chapters 12-14: The final victory of the LORD. Jerusalem attacked and defended, Israel mourning for the One they pierced, cleansing from sin, and the LORD King over all the earth.

Key Verses

Zechariah 1:3 *And you will say to them, 'Thus says the LORD of armies: Return to Me, declares the LORD of armies, that I may return to you, says the LORD of armies.*

God's call and promise in one verse. Return to Him, and He will return to you.

Zechariah 4:6 *And he answered and said to me, saying, This **is** the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel, saying, 'Not by strength and not by power, but by My Spirit,' says the LORD of armies.*

God's work is not done by human strength. It is done by His Spirit.

Zechariah 9:9 *Rejoice exceedingly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Look, your King comes to you; He **is** righteous and saved, lowly and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, a son of female donkeys.*

The King comes humble, riding a donkey. Jesus fulfilled it on Palm Sunday.

Zechariah 12:10 *And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplications; and they will look to Me, **to Him** whom they have pierced; and they will mourn over Him like a mourning over the only **son**, and **they will** show bitterness over Him as **one** shows bitterness over the firstborn.*

One day Israel will look on the One they pierced and mourn for Him.

Zechariah 14:9 *And the LORD will be King over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one, and His name one.*

The LORD will be King over all the earth.

Christ in Zechariah

The New Testament itself shows us Christ in Zechariah again and again, especially in the events of His last week.

The King on a donkey. "Look, your King comes to you; He is righteous and saved, lowly and riding on a donkey" (9:9). When Jesus rode into Jerusalem, Matthew and John both tell us this prophecy was fulfilled (Matthew 21:4-5; John 12:14-16). He came not on a war horse but on a donkey, as a King of peace.

Thirty pieces of silver. In 11:12-13 the shepherd is paid thirty pieces of silver, the price of a slave (Exodus 21:32), and told to throw it to the potter in the house of the LORD. Judas was paid thirty

pieces of silver to betray Jesus (Matthew 26:15). When he threw the money into the temple, the priests used it to buy the potter's field (Matthew 27:3-10).

The shepherd struck. "Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered" (13:7). On the night He was arrested, Jesus quoted this verse and told His disciples they would all fall away (Matthew 26:31). They did.

The pierced One. "They will look to Me, to Him whom they have pierced" (12:10). John quotes this when the soldier pierced Jesus' side with a spear (John 19:37). And Revelation 1:7 says that when Jesus comes with the clouds, every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him.

Notice what 12:10 says. The LORD is speaking, and He says they will look to Me, whom they have pierced. God Himself would be pierced. That only makes sense if Jesus is God in the flesh.

The Branch. Zechariah calls the Messiah "My servant the Branch" (3:8), the same title Isaiah and Jeremiah use for the Son of David (Isaiah 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5). He will build the temple of the LORD, rule on His throne and be a priest on His throne (6:12-13). Hebrews shows that Jesus is our King and our High Priest forever (Hebrews 7:1-3, 24-26; 8:1).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Zechariah ties the return from exile to the end of history. In the near view, God wanted the temple finished, and it was, in 515 B.C. (Ezra 6:15). In the far view, God showed Zechariah the coming of the King, His rejection, His death, and His return in glory.

Zechariah's last chapters line up with the New Testament's teaching on the end times. Chapter 12 shows the nations gathered against Jerusalem, and God defending the city. Chapter 12:10-13:1 shows Israel turning to the Messiah they rejected, mourning for Him, and being cleansed from sin. Paul says the same: "all Israel will be saved," and "The One who delivers will come out of Zion" (Romans 11:26). God has a future for the nation of Israel.

Chapter 14 shows the LORD coming in person. "And His feet will stand on that day on the Mount of Olives" (14:4). That is the very mountain Jesus ascended from, and the angels told the disciples He would come back the same way He went (Acts 1:9-12). I believe this is the visible return of Christ at the end of the Tribulation (Revelation 19:11-16). Then He will be King over all the earth (14:9), and the nations will go up year by year to worship the King and keep the Feast of Booths (14:16). That is the thousand-year kingdom (Revelation 20:1-6).

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Many critical scholars believe chapters 9-14 were written by one or more later writers, not by Zechariah. They point to the change in style, the lack of dates, the mention of Greece, and the fact that Zechariah's name does not appear in these chapters. I take the book as Zechariah's, as the SLB intro does. A prophet's style can change over a long ministry, and these chapters are prophecy about the far future, written in a different form than the dated visions. The mention of Greece fits a prophet who saw the future, just as Daniel did (Daniel 8:21).

There is also a well-known question about Matthew 27:9, which quotes words close to Zechariah 11:12-13 but names Jeremiah. Many believe Matthew was combining Zechariah's thirty

pieces of silver with Jeremiah's purchase of a field and visit to the potter (Jeremiah 18-19; 32:6-9), and named the more prominent prophet, as writers sometimes did. Others note that Jewish tradition sometimes placed Jeremiah first in the scroll of the Prophets, so his name could stand for the collection. Good teachers differ on the best explanation.

And teachers differ on chapter 14. Some read it as symbolic of the church's victory. I read it as the real, visible return of Christ to the Mount of Olives and His reign on the earth.

Read It This Way

Don't let the visions scare you off. For each one, ask three questions: What did Zechariah see? What did the angel say it meant? What does it tell me about God? Usually the angel explains enough to give you the main point.

Read chapter 3 slowly. Joshua the high priest stands before the angel of the LORD in filthy clothes, and Satan stands at his right hand to accuse him. The LORD rebukes Satan, and Joshua's filthy clothes are taken off and replaced with clean ones (3:1-5). That is a picture of what God does for every sinner who trusts in Christ. Our filthy rags are removed, and we are clothed in His righteousness.

Read chapters 7-8 as a turning point. Men came from Bethel to ask whether they should keep fasting over the fall of Jerusalem, as they had for seventy years. God answered with a question of His own: when you fasted, was it really for Me? (7:5). What He wanted was true justice, kindness and mercy, care for the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the poor (7:9-10). Then He gave them ten short promises in chapter 8, each starting with thus says the LORD of armies. Old men and women will sit again in the streets of Jerusalem, and boys and girls will play there (8:4-5). The fasts will become feasts of joy (8:19). And ten men from the nations will grab the robe of a Jew and say, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you" (8:23).

Read chapters 9-14 with the Gospels open. Mark each fulfilled prophecy in your margin. You will be amazed how much of Jesus' last week is written here, five hundred years ahead of time.

And let 4:6 speak to you. Whatever God has called you to do, it will not be done by your strength or power. It will be done by His Spirit.

Study Questions

1. What does God promise in 1:3, and what does it mean to return to Him (1:1-6)?
2. What does the vision of Joshua the high priest teach about how God deals with our sin (3:1-5)?
3. Why would 4:6 have encouraged Zerubbabel, and where do you need that encouragement (4:6-10)?
4. List the prophecies in chapters 9-13 that the Gospels say were fulfilled in Jesus. Which one stands out to you most (9:9; 11:12-13; 12:10; 13:7)?
5. What will happen when the LORD's feet stand on the Mount of Olives, and how does Acts 1 connect to it (14:3-9; Acts 1:9-12)?

Malachi

At a Glance	
Author	Malachi (1:1), whose name means my messenger
Date written	About 433 to 420 B.C., around the time of Nehemiah's second visit to Jerusalem
Written to	Israel, the returned Jews in Judah and Jerusalem, who had grown cold toward God
Setting and time covered	Jerusalem under Persian rule, about eighty years after the second temple was finished
Chapters	4
Key word	I have loved you
Key verse	Malachi 3:1

Background

Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament, and its last prophet. After Malachi, God's voice through the prophets went quiet for about four hundred years, until John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness. So Malachi is God's final word to Israel before the coming of Christ. It ends with a promise that someone is coming.

The book opens, "The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by the hand of Malachi" (1:1). His name means my messenger. That fits a book that speaks about God's messengers: the priest who should be "the messenger of the LORD of armies" (2:7), the messenger who will clear the way (3:1), and the messenger of the covenant (3:1). Some have wondered if Malachi is a title rather than a name, but the book reads like the work of a real prophet, and I take it as his name. Scripture doesn't tell us anything else about him.

Malachi preached about 433 to 420 B.C. The book doesn't name a king, but the setting fits the days of Nehemiah very closely. The temple had been rebuilt and finished in 515 B.C., so it had been standing for about eighty years. Sacrifices were being offered again (1:7-8). A Persian governor ruled the province (1:8). And the same sins Nehemiah fought on his second visit to Jerusalem, about 432 B.C., are the ones Malachi names: corrupt priests, men marrying pagan wives, and people holding back their tithes (Nehemiah 13:4-31).

The excitement of the return was long gone. The great promises of Haggai and Zechariah had not yet come true, at least not the way the people expected. There was no king from David's line on the throne. Life was hard, and God seemed far away. Over time, the people's hearts grew cold. They still went through the motions of religion, but they no longer cared.

Purpose

Malachi was written to wake up a people who had grown careless toward God.

The book is a series of six arguments, or disputes. In each one, God makes a statement, the people answer with a question, and God answers the question. It sounds like a courtroom, or like a hard conversation between a father and his grown children. The first one sets the pattern. "I have

loved you, says the LORD." The people answer, "In what have You loved us?" (1:2). The people actually doubted God's love. Everything else grows from that.

God answers each objection. The priests are offering blind, lame and sick animals on the altar. Would you dare offer that to your governor? (1:8). The men of Judah are divorcing the wives of their youth and marrying women who worship other gods (2:11-16). The people are saying God doesn't care about justice (2:17). They are robbing God by holding back their tithes (3:8). And they say it is useless to serve God (3:14).

But Malachi also holds out hope. God will send His messenger to prepare the way, and then "suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come to His temple" (3:1). He will purify the priests like a refiner purifies silver (3:3). He has a book of remembrance for those who fear Him (3:16). And for them, "the sun of righteousness will rise, and healing is in its wings" (4:2).

Main Themes

God loves His people. The book begins with God's love (1:2). Even His rebukes are the rebukes of a Father who loves His children.

God deserves our best. Offering God the leftovers, the sick and the lame, is despising His name (1:6-14). God is "a great King" (1:14), and He deserves to be honored like one.

Leaders must be faithful. The priests were supposed to teach God's law and live it (2:5-7). Instead they caused many to stumble (2:8). God holds spiritual leaders to a high standard.

Marriage is a covenant. God was a witness between a man and the wife of his youth (2:14). Breaking faith with her is breaking faith with God.

God does not change. "For I am the LORD; I have not changed" (3:6). That is why Israel had not been destroyed. God keeps His promises even when His people don't.

God will come. The book ends with a promise of judgment for the wicked and healing for those who fear God, and with the promise of Elijah before the great day of the LORD (4:1-6).

Outline

- Chapter 1:1-5: God's love for Israel. I have loved you, and the contrast between Jacob and Esau.
- Chapters 1:6-2:9: Unfaithful priests. Blemished sacrifices, a warning to the priests, and the covenant with Levi.
- Chapter 2:10-16: Unfaithful people. Marrying foreign wives who worship other gods, and divorcing the wives of their youth.
- Chapters 2:17-3:5: The coming messenger and judgment. Where is the God of justice? He is coming to His temple.
- Chapter 3:6-12: Robbing God. Return to Me, bring the whole tithe, and test Me.
- Chapters 3:13-4:6: The book of remembrance and the coming day. Those who fear God remembered, the day burning like a furnace, and the promise of Elijah.

Key Verses

Malachi 1:2 *I have loved you, says the LORD. And you say, "In what have You loved us?" **Was** not Esau a brother to Jacob? declares the LORD. And I loved Jacob,*

God's first word to His people in this book is love.

Malachi 3:1 *Look, I am sending My messenger, and he will clear a way before Me; and suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come to His temple, and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight; look, He is coming, says the LORD of armies.*

The promise of the messenger and of the Lord coming to His temple, fulfilled in John the Baptist and Jesus.

Malachi 3:6 *For I **am** the LORD; I have not changed; and you, sons of Jacob, have not come to an end.*

Because God does not change, His people are not consumed.

Malachi 3:10 *Bring all the tithe into the storehouse, and let **there** be food in My house; and test Me, please, by this, says the LORD of armies, if I will not open for you the windows of the heavens, and pour out for you blessing until **there is** not enough **room**.*

God invites His people to trust Him with their giving and see what He will do.

Malachi 4:2 *And for you who fear My name the sun of righteousness will rise, and healing **is** in its wings; and you will go out and leap like calves of the stall.*

For those who fear God, the coming day means healing and joy.

Christ in Malachi

Malachi 3:1 is one of the clearest bridges between the Old and New Testaments. "Look, I am sending My messenger, and he will clear a way before Me; and suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come to His temple."

Mark begins his Gospel by quoting this verse together with Isaiah 40:3 (Mark 1:2-3). Jesus Himself said that John the Baptist was the messenger Malachi wrote about (Matthew 11:10). Notice who is speaking in Malachi 3:1. The LORD says the messenger will clear the way "before Me." Then it is the Lord who comes to His temple. When John prepared the way for Jesus, he was preparing the way for God Himself.

Malachi 4:5 promises, "Look, I am sending to you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD." Before John was born, the angel told his father that John would go before the Lord "in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to children" (Luke 1:17), using Malachi's own words. Jesus said of John, "he himself is Elijah, who is about to come," if they were willing to receive it (Matthew 11:14; 17:10-13).

Christ is also the Lord who came to His temple. Jesus was brought there as a baby (Luke 2:22-38), and as a man He cleansed it (John 2:13-17). He is the refiner who purifies His people (3:2-3). And

He is the sun of righteousness who rises with healing in His wings (4:2). Many believers have seen in that verse a picture of the risen Christ, who brings light and healing to all who fear God's name. That is a fitting picture, though the New Testament does not quote the verse directly.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Malachi closes the Old Testament, and it does so by looking both backward and forward. Its last words tell the people to remember the Law of Moses (4:4) and to look for Elijah (4:5-6). Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets. It is no accident that those two men appeared with Jesus on the mount of transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-3).

After Malachi came about four hundred years with no new prophet. Then an angel appeared to a priest named Zechariah in the temple and told him his son would come in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:13-17). The promise of Malachi's last page is fulfilled on the first pages of the New Testament.

Malachi also shows that God's love for Israel is lasting. "I have loved you" (1:2), He says, and "I have not changed; and you, sons of Jacob, have not come to an end" (3:6). Paul quotes Malachi 1:2-3 in Romans 9:13 when he explains God's choosing of Israel, and later he says that God's gifts and calling are irrevocable (Romans 11:29). God's promises to Israel still stand.

And Malachi looks ahead to the final day of the LORD, "burning like the furnace" (4:1). John came in the spirit of Elijah at Christ's first coming. Many teachers believe Malachi 4:5 also looks to the end, before the great and awesome day of the LORD that comes with the Tribulation and Christ's return. Some connect this with the two witnesses of Revelation 11:3-6, who do miracles like Elijah's. Scripture doesn't settle that, so it is best held loosely.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Teachers differ on Malachi 2:16. Many English Bibles have God saying that He hates divorce. The SLB reads, "For he hates sending away," and many modern scholars read the Hebrew as describing the man who hates his wife and sends her away, which God calls covering one's garment with violence. Either way, the passage makes the same point: God takes the marriage covenant seriously, and He sees the treachery of a man who abandons the wife of his youth (2:14-16).

Teachers also differ on the tithe. Some believe the command to bring the whole tithe (3:10) applies directly to Christians today. Others believe it was part of the Law of Moses for Israel, and that the New Testament calls believers to give generously, cheerfully and in proportion to what God has given (1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 9:6-7). Both agree that God deserves our first and best, not our leftovers.

Read It This Way

Read Malachi as a conversation. Each time you see "And you say," stop and notice the people's question. Then watch how God answers. You may find yourself asking some of the same questions.

Think carefully about 1:2-5. How did God prove His love? He pointed to Esau. Israel and Edom were brother nations, but God had chosen Jacob, and Edom was left in ruins while Israel had been brought back. When God says "Esau I hated" (1:3), He is using strong Hebrew language for choosing one and not the other, not describing a feeling of spite. The point for Israel was simple: look at how differently I have treated you. You exist as a people because I chose you and kept you. Paul uses this same passage to show that God's choosing rests on His mercy, not on our works (Romans 9:10-16).

Notice too how big God's vision is, even in this small book. In the middle of rebuking lazy priests, God says, "from the rising of the sun to its setting My name is great among the nations" (1:11). The people of Judah thought small. God was thinking about the whole world. That promise points forward to the day when people from every nation would worship Him through Christ.

And don't miss the refiner in 3:2-3. When the Lord comes, who can endure it? He will sit like a refiner of silver and purify the sons of Levi. A refiner heats silver until the impurities rise to the top and can be skimmed away. It is a hot, slow process, but the goal is pure silver. God's fire in the lives of His people is meant to purify, not destroy.

Look for the heart behind the sins. The priests didn't openly reject God. They just thought serving Him was a burden. "Look, what a weariness!" they said (1:13). The people didn't stop going to the temple. They just gave God what was left. Malachi shows how easily religion can stay on the outside while love grows cold on the inside.

Read 3:16-18 slowly. In a cold and careless generation, there were still people who feared the LORD and talked about Him with each other. God heard them, wrote their names in a book of remembrance, and called them His treasured possession. He still notices people like that.

And read the last verses as the last words of the Old Testament. God's final promise before the long silence was this: the sun of righteousness will rise. Turn the page, and you will see Him come.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think the people doubted God's love, and how did God answer them (1:2-5)?
2. What were the priests offering to God, and in what ways are we tempted to give God our leftovers (1:6-14)?
3. How does Malachi describe marriage, and why does God care so much about faithfulness to the wife of your youth (2:13-16)?
4. What does God promise to those who bring the whole tithe, and what does that teach about trusting Him (3:8-12)?
5. How did John the Baptist and Jesus fulfill Malachi's promises of the messenger and the Lord coming to His temple (3:1; 4:5-6; Matthew 11:10-14)?

Between the Testaments: The 400 Silent Years

Turn the page from Malachi to Matthew and you skip about four hundred years. When Malachi laid down his pen, around 430 B.C., the Jews were a small province in the Persian Empire. They had a rebuilt temple, a priesthood and the Law of Moses, but no king and no independence. When Matthew opens, everything looks different. Rome rules the world. A king named Herod sits on a throne in Jerusalem. The temple has been rebuilt on a grand scale. People speak Greek in the marketplace. There are synagogues in every town, and groups called Pharisees and Sadducees argue about the Law. What happened?

These centuries are often called the silent years, because God sent no new prophet and no new Scripture was written. But God was not idle. He was setting the stage for the coming of His Son. Paul puts it this way: "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under law" (Galatians 4:4). The years between the Testaments are the story of how the time became full.

Much of what we know about this period comes from outside the Bible: from Greek and Roman historians, from the Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote near the end of the first century A.D., and from the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees, which are found in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles but not in the Protestant canon. They are useful as history, and I will draw on the main events they record, but they are not Scripture. The Bible itself gives us a preview of this period. Daniel, writing in the 500s B.C., foretold the rise of Persia and Greece, the breakup of Alexander's empire, and the wars between the kings of the north and the south (Daniel 8; 11). Much of what follows reads like the fulfillment of those chapters.

The Persian Period (about 430 to 332 B.C.)

After Malachi, Judah remained under Persian rule for about another century. The Persians generally let their subject peoples keep their own religion, and the high priest in Jerusalem became the main leader of the Jewish community. Scripture and history tell us little about these years. What we do know is that the Jews who had returned held on to the Law and the temple, and they never again fell into the open idol worship that had brought on the exile. The exile had cured them of that.

Many Jews also stayed scattered in other lands. Large Jewish communities lived in Babylon, in Egypt and, later, in cities all around the Mediterranean. This scattering is often called the Diaspora, from a Greek word for scattering. It would matter a great deal later, when the apostles carried the gospel to the synagogues of these scattered Jews first (Acts 13:5, 14; 17:1-2).

The Greek Period (332 to 167 B.C.)

In 336 B.C. a young man named Alexander became king of Macedonia, north of Greece. In just over ten years he conquered the Persian Empire, Egypt and lands as far east as India. He took control of Judea in 332 B.C. Daniel had seen him centuries earlier as a goat with one great horn that came from the west so fast it did not touch the ground (Daniel 8:5-8, 21).

Alexander died in 323 B.C., and his empire was divided among his generals, just as Daniel foretold, when the great horn was broken and four horns came up in its place (8:8, 22). Two of those

kingdoms matter most for the Jews. The Ptolemies ruled from Egypt in the south. The Seleucids ruled from Syria in the north. Judea sat between them, and the two kingdoms fought over it again and again. These are the kings of the south and the kings of the north of Daniel 11.

The Ptolemies controlled Judea for most of the 200s B.C. They generally left the Jews alone to worship as they wished. Then in 198 B.C. the Seleucid king Antiochus III defeated the Egyptians, and Judea passed to Syrian control.

Alexander's conquests brought something more lasting than borders. They spread Greek culture, called Hellenism, across the whole eastern Mediterranean. Greek cities, theaters, gymnasiums and ideas spread everywhere. Above all, a common form of Greek, called Koine, became the language of trade and learning from Egypt to Persia. That is why the New Testament was written in Greek. A letter written in Greek could be read in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus and Jerusalem alike.

Hellenism was also a temptation. Many Jews, especially the wealthy and the priestly families, were drawn to Greek ways. Others resisted. The pressure between faithfulness to the Law and the pull of Greek culture would soon explode.

The Septuagint

During the Greek period, the Jews of Egypt, many of whom spoke Greek better than Hebrew, translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. The work was done in Alexandria, beginning with the five books of Moses in the 200s B.C., and the rest of the Old Testament was translated over the following century or so. This translation is called the Septuagint, from the Latin word for seventy, because of an old tradition that about seventy scholars did the work.

The Septuagint mattered enormously. For the first time, people who did not know Hebrew could read the Scriptures of Israel. And when the apostles quoted the Old Testament in their Greek letters, they often quoted from the Septuagint. God was preparing a Bible that the whole Greek-speaking world could read.

Antiochus Epiphanes and the Maccabean Revolt (167 to 142 B.C.)

In 175 B.C. a Seleucid king named Antiochus IV came to the throne. He called himself Epiphanes, meaning God made manifest. He was determined to unite his kingdom under Greek culture and religion, and he saw the Jews as stubborn rebels.

He sold the office of high priest to the highest bidder. Then, in 167 B.C., he outlawed the Jewish faith. Circumcision, Sabbath keeping and the reading of the Law were forbidden on pain of death. He set up an altar to the Greek god Zeus in the temple in Jerusalem, and pigs, unclean animals under the Law, were offered on it. Daniel had foretold this: forces from the king would "profane the sanctuary," remove the continual offering, and "set up the abomination that makes desolate" (Daniel 11:31). Jesus later pointed to a future abomination of desolation that would come at the end of the age (Matthew 24:15), so Antiochus was a preview of a greater enemy still to come.

Many Jews died rather than obey. Then, in the village of Modein, an old priest named Mattathias refused to offer a pagan sacrifice. When another Jew stepped forward to do it, Mattathias killed him and the king's officer, and fled to the hills with his five sons. The revolt had begun. After

Mattathias died, his son Judas took command. He was called Maccabeus, usually understood to mean the hammer, and his family became known as the Maccabees.

Against great odds, Judas and his small army defeated the Syrian forces again and again. In 164 B.C. they retook Jerusalem, cleansed the temple, tore down the defiled altar, built a new one and rededicated the temple to the LORD. The Jews celebrated for eight days. That festival is Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication, which Jewish people still keep today. John tells us that Jesus was in the temple in Jerusalem at "the Feast of Dedication" in winter (John 10:22). Jewish tradition tells of a single day's supply of oil that burned for eight days, but that story is not found in 1 or 2 Maccabees and comes from later writings.

Judas was killed in battle, and his brothers Jonathan and then Simon led the people after him. Under Simon, about 142 B.C., Judea won its independence from the Seleucids.

The Hasmonean Kingdom (142 to 63 B.C.)

For the first time since 586 B.C., the Jews had their own independent state. The family of the Maccabees, called the Hasmoneans after an ancestor, ruled as high priests and eventually as kings. Under John Hyrcanus, Simon's son, and his successors, the kingdom grew to about the size of Solomon's. Hyrcanus conquered the Idumeans, the descendants of the Edomites, and forced them to be circumcised and follow the Law.

But the Hasmoneans soon became much like the kings they had overthrown. They grew rich and worldly, and they combined the offices of king and high priest, even though they were not from the line of David and many Jews questioned their right to the high priesthood. The kingdom was torn by palace intrigue and civil war. Finally two brothers, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II, fought each other for the throne, and both appealed to Rome for help.

The Roman Period (63 B.C. onward)

In 63 B.C. the Roman general Pompey marched into Jerusalem, besieged the temple mount and took it. He entered the temple and went into the Most Holy Place, which only the high priest was allowed to enter, once a year. He found it empty. Judea's short independence was over. From then on, the Jews lived under Roman rule.

Out of the chaos rose Herod. He was the son of an Idumean official named Antipater, so he came from the very people John Hyrcanus had forced to become Jews. In 40 B.C. the Roman Senate named him king of Judea, and by 37 B.C. he had taken Jerusalem with Roman help. Herod the Great was a brilliant builder and a ruthless ruler. About 20 B.C. he began rebuilding the temple on a magnificent scale. The work went on long after his death. In Jesus' day the people could say it had been under construction "forty and six years" (John 2:20). Herod was also paranoid and cruel. He had one of his wives and three of his sons put to death. When Matthew tells us that Herod ordered the killing of the boys of Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16), it fits everything we know of the man. Herod died about 4 B.C., which is why Jesus was born a little before that date, about 6 to 4 B.C.

Rome brought its own gifts to God's plan. The Roman peace, the Pax Romana, ended many local wars. Roman roads and sea lanes linked the empire, and travel was safer and easier than it had

ever been. Paul would walk those roads and sail those seas to carry the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome.

Synagogues, Scribes and New Groups

When Jesus began to preach, He found a religious world that had changed a great deal since Malachi.

Synagogues were everywhere. A synagogue was a local meeting place where Jews gathered on the Sabbath to pray, read the Law and the Prophets, and hear them explained. No one knows exactly when they began, though many scholars trace them to the exile. By the first century A.D. there was a synagogue in nearly every town with a Jewish community. James could say that Moses "in every city" had those who proclaimed him, read in the synagogues every Sabbath (Acts 15:21). Jesus taught in synagogues (Luke 4:16), and Paul usually began his preaching in them.

Scribes had become important. In the Old Testament a scribe was mainly a writer or secretary. Ezra was "a scribe skilled in the law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6), and after him, scribes became experts who copied, studied and taught the Law. In the Gospels they are often called teachers of the Law or lawyers, and many of them were Pharisees.

The Pharisees probably grew out of the faithful Jews who resisted Greek ways in the time of the Maccabees. Their name likely means separated ones. They were devoted to keeping the Law in every detail, and they added a large body of oral tradition, the traditions of the elders, to help people keep it (Mark 7:3-5). They believed in the resurrection of the dead, in angels and in spirits (Acts 23:8). Jesus agreed with them on many points of doctrine, but He condemned their pride and the way their traditions sometimes set aside the commandment of God (Matthew 23; Mark 7:8-13). Paul himself had been a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5).

The Sadducees were mostly wealthy priestly families connected with the temple, and they were willing to work with Rome. They held most closely to the five books of Moses, rejected the oral traditions of the Pharisees, and denied the resurrection and the existence of angels and spirits (Acts 23:8; Matthew 22:23). The high priests of Jesus' day were Sadducees. The Sanhedrin, the ruling council in Jerusalem, included both Sadducees and Pharisees (Acts 23:6).

The Essenes are not named in the Bible, but ancient writers describe them. They were strict groups who separated themselves from the temple leadership, which they saw as corrupt, and many lived in communities that shared property and kept strict rules of purity. Many scholars connect them with the community at Qumran, near the Dead Sea, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found beginning in 1947. Those scrolls include copies of every Old Testament book except Esther, and they show how carefully the Scriptures had been preserved.

Other groups were stirring too. Some Jews, later called Zealots, wanted to throw off Rome by force. One of Jesus' disciples was Simon, "the one called Zealot" (Luke 6:15). Above all, many Jews were waiting for the Messiah, the anointed King God had promised. They expected Him to free Israel from Rome. When Jesus came, He fulfilled the promises in a way few expected.

The Fullness of Time

Step back and look at what God had done in those four hundred years. The Jews had been cured of idolatry and were deeply devoted to the one true God and His Law. They were scattered across the world, with synagogues in city after city, where the Scriptures were read every Sabbath and many Gentiles had come to listen. Those Scriptures were available in Greek, the language nearly everyone could read. A common language united the eastern world. Roman roads and Roman peace made travel possible. And the people of Israel were longing for their Messiah.

Then God broke the silence. An angel appeared to an old priest named Zechariah in the temple and told him that his son would go before the Lord "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17), just as Malachi had promised (Malachi 4:5-6). Six months later the same angel came to a young woman in Nazareth. The prophets had said the King would come. Now, in the fullness of the time, He came. When Jesus began His ministry, His first message was, "The time has been fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has drawn near; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

The silent years were not empty years. They were God's preparation. He works the same way in our lives. When heaven seems quiet, God is often setting the stage for what comes next.

Part Six: The Gospels

The New Testament opens with four books about one Person. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each tell the story of Jesus Christ: His birth or His coming, His teaching and miracles, His death on the cross, and His resurrection from the dead. We call these books Gospels. The word gospel means good news. These books are not mainly about how to live, though they teach us a great deal about that. They are about what God has done for us in His Son.

You might ask why we need four of them. Wouldn't one be enough? Think of four men who stand at the four corners of a house and each describe what they see. All four are telling the truth about the same house, but each one notices something the others do not. Matthew wrote mainly for Jewish readers and shows Jesus as the promised King, the Son of David. Mark wrote for Gentile readers, most likely in Rome, and shows Jesus as the Servant who came "to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Luke, a doctor, wrote a careful, orderly account for a man named Theophilus and shows Jesus as the Savior of all people, the perfect Son of Man. John wrote last and shows Jesus as the eternal Word who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Together they give us one Jesus, seen from four sides.

Matthew, Mark and Luke are often called the Synoptic Gospels. Synoptic means "seen together." These three follow much the same order of events and often use very similar wording. John is different. Most of what he records is not in the other three. He gives us long talks of Jesus, seven signs, and five chapters on the night before the cross. Scripture doesn't tell us exactly how the first three writers used one another's work, and scholars have argued about it for a long time. What matters most is that each writer was guided by the Holy Spirit, and each one either saw these things himself or carefully gathered them from those who did (Luke 1:1-4).

A Gospel is not a modern biography. It does not tell us what Jesus looked like, and it skips almost all of His childhood. About a third of the Gospels, taken together, is spent on the last week of His life. That tells you what the writers thought was most important. They were not writing to satisfy our curiosity. They were writing so that we would believe. John says it plainly: "these have been written 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 Gospels also stand at the turning point of the whole Bible. The Old Testament ends with Israel back in the land, the temple rebuilt, and the people waiting. Malachi promised that the Lord would send a messenger to prepare the way (Malachi 3:1). Then came about four hundred years with no new prophet. The Gospels open with that messenger, John the Baptist, and with the One he pointed to. Every promise God made, from the seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15 to the King on David's throne in 2 Samuel 7:16, now comes to a head in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus Himself said that Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms all spoke of Him (Luke 24:44).

How should you read the Gospels? Read them as history, because that is what they claim to be. Read each one on its own, start to finish, before you start comparing them. Notice what each writer chose to include and why. When the same story shows up in two or three Gospels, read them side by side and let each one add its own detail. And above all, keep asking the question

Jesus asked His disciples: "But you, who do you say Me to be?" (Matthew 16:15). Everything else in your life depends on how you answer it.

Matthew

At a Glance	
Author	Matthew, also called Levi, the tax collector who became an apostle (Matthew 9:9; Mark 2:14)
Date written	About A.D. 50 to 60, before the temple fell in A.D. 70
Written to	Mainly Jewish readers, to show them their Messiah
Setting and time covered	Judea and Galilee, from the birth of Jesus (about 6 to 4 B.C.) to His resurrection (about A.D. 30 to 33)
Chapters	28
Key word	The King and His kingdom
Key verse	Matthew 16:16

Background

Matthew is the first book of the New Testament, and it makes a good front door. It opens with a family line, and that may seem like a slow way to start. But for a Jewish reader, that list answered the first question anyone would ask about a man who claimed to be the Messiah: whose son is He? Matthew's answer comes in the first verse. Jesus Christ is "son of David, son of Abraham" (1:1). He is the heir of the promise God made to Abraham (Genesis 12:3) and of the throne God promised to David (2 Samuel 7:16).

The man who wrote it was an unlikely choice. Matthew, also called Levi, was a tax collector in Capernaum (9:9; Mark 2:14). Tax collectors worked for Rome and often took more than they should. Most Jews saw them as traitors and lumped them in with "sinners" (9:10-11). Jesus walked up to Matthew's booth and said, "Follow Me," and Matthew got up and followed (9:9). The book does not name its author, but the early church agreed that Matthew wrote it, and I see no good reason to doubt them. A man who kept records for a living was a fine choice to set down the words of Jesus in careful order. It may be no accident that Matthew is the Gospel that mentions coins and debts most often.

When was it written? Most of those who hold that Matthew wrote it date it about A.D. 50 to 60. Jesus speaks of the temple's coming destruction as something still in the future (24:1-2), and Matthew never mentions that it happened. The Romans destroyed the temple in A.D. 70, and it is hard to believe a writer so focused on fulfilled prophecy would have left out such a clear fulfillment.

Matthew wrote mainly for Jewish readers. You can see it everywhere. He quotes the Old Testament more than any other Gospel writer. Again and again he writes that something happened so that what the Lord spoke through the prophet "might be fulfilled" (1:22; 2:15; 4:14 and others). He does not stop to explain Jewish customs the way Mark does. He usually says "the kingdom of the heavens" (4:17), which most English Bibles put as the kingdom of heaven, where the other Gospels say "the kingdom of God," most likely out of the Jewish habit of honoring God's name by not saying it too often. The two phrases mean the same thing.

Purpose

Matthew writes to prove that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Christ, the King Israel had been waiting for. A messiah is an anointed one, and the word Christ means the same thing in Greek. Matthew wants his readers to see that every line of prophecy points to this one Man. For a first-century Jew, that was the question that mattered most. If Jesus is the Messiah, then the God of Abraham has kept His word, and the only right response is to bow before Him. If He is not, then His followers are fools. Matthew lays out the evidence like a careful record keeper, and he lets the facts speak.

He also writes to answer a hard question. If Jesus is Israel's King, why did Israel's leaders reject Him, and why does His kingdom not look the way people expected? Matthew shows that the King came, offered the kingdom, was rejected by His own leaders, died as a ransom, rose again, and now sends His people to make disciples of all nations until He comes back to reign.

Main Themes

Jesus is the promised King. The family line (1:1-17), the visit of the wise men looking for the "King of the Jews" (2:2), the triumphal entry (21:5), and the sign over the cross (27:37) all say the same thing. Jesus is David's Son and Israel's rightful King. Matthew uses the phrase kingdom of the heavens over thirty times.

Jesus fulfills the Scriptures. Jesus said He did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets "but to fulfill" (5:17). Matthew shows Him fulfilling Isaiah's virgin birth (1:23), Micah's Bethlehem (2:6), Hosea's call out of Egypt (2:15), and Zechariah's humble King on a donkey (21:5).

Jesus is a teacher with authority. Matthew gathers the teaching of Jesus into five long sermons. Each ends with words like "when Jesus had finished these words" (7:28; see also 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). The crowds were amazed because He taught "as one having authority" and not like their scribes (7:29).

The King was rejected. From Herod's attempt to kill the child (2:16) to the plot of the chief priests (26:3-4), opposition grows. Chapter 12 is a turning point, when the Pharisees say His power comes from Beelzebul (12:24). After that Jesus begins to teach in parables (13:10-13).

The kingdom reaches the nations. The book that opens with a Jewish family line ends with a command to "make disciples of all the nations" (28:19). Gentile wise men come to worship the baby (2:1-11), and a Roman centurion shows a faith Jesus had not found in Israel (8:10).

Outline

- Chapters 1-2: The birth of the King
- Chapters 3-4: The King prepares: John the Baptist, baptism and temptation
- Chapters 5-7: The Sermon on the Mount: the King's standard
- Chapters 8-10: The King's power shown, and the twelve sent out
- Chapters 11-13: Rising opposition and the parables of the kingdom
- Chapters 14-18: Training the twelve and Peter's confession

- Chapters 19-20: On the way to Jerusalem
- Chapters 21-25: The King in Jerusalem, and His teaching on the end of the age
- Chapters 26-27: The death of the King
- Chapter 28: The risen King and the Great Commission

Key Verses

Matthew 1:21 *And she will bear a son, and you will call His name Jesus, for He Himself will save His people from their sins.*

The name Jesus means the LORD saves. The angel tells Joseph the whole purpose of the birth before it happens: to save His people from their sins.

Matthew 5:17 *Do not think that I came to abolish the law or the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.*

Jesus did not throw out the Old Testament. He kept the Law perfectly and fulfilled everything it pointed to.

Matthew 16:16 *And Simon Peter, answering, said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*

Peter's confession is the hinge of the book. Everything before it asks who Jesus is. Everything after it heads toward the cross.

Matthew 20:28 *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.*

The King came to serve and to die in the place of others. A ransom is the price paid to set a captive free.

Matthew 28:18-20 *And Jesus, having come up, spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Therefore, having gone, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things, as many as I commanded you; and look, I am with you all the days, until the consummation of the age." Amen.*

The Great Commission. All authority belongs to the risen Jesus, and He sends His people to every nation with the promise of His presence.

Christ in Matthew

Matthew's whole book is about Christ, so the question is what he shows us about Him. First, He is Immanuel. Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 and gives the meaning of the name: "God with us" (1:23). The book ends with the same idea, Jesus promising "I am with you all the days" (28:20). The God who came to be with us in the manger stays with us to the end of the age.

Second, He is the Son of David. Blind men, a Canaanite woman and the crowds on Palm Sunday all call Him by that title (9:27; 15:22; 21:9). Jesus is the King God promised David, whose throne would

be established forever (2 Samuel 7:16). Matthew 2:6 quotes Micah 5:2 to show that this ruler would come from Bethlehem.

Third, He is the new and greater Moses. Like Moses, He was spared as a baby when a king killed the children around Him (2:16; Exodus 1:22). Like Israel, He came out of Egypt (2:15, quoting Hosea 11:1). He went into the wilderness and was tested (4:1-11), and where Israel failed, He answered the devil with Scripture from Deuteronomy each time. Then He went up on a mountain and gave the law of His kingdom (5:1). Moses gave five books; Matthew gives five sermons. I would not push that pattern too hard, but Matthew does seem to want us to notice it.

Fourth, He is the Son of God. Peter confesses Him as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16), and the Father speaks from heaven at His baptism and again on the mountain: "This is My Son, the beloved" (3:17; 17:5). He is more than a king. He is God in the flesh, the One with authority to forgive sins (9:6).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Matthew stands at the joint between the two testaments. The Old Testament ended with promises still waiting. Malachi said a messenger would come to prepare the way of the Lord (Malachi 3:1). Matthew opens with that messenger, John the Baptist, crying out in the wilderness (3:1-3). The family line in chapter 1 is a short walk through the whole Old Testament: Abraham, the patriarchs, David and the kings, the exile to Babylon, and then the Christ (1:17).

Matthew also looks ahead. In chapters 24 and 25, called the Olivet Discourse because Jesus taught it on the Mount of Olives, Jesus speaks of a time of great tribulation, the "abomination of desolation" Daniel spoke of (24:15; Daniel 9:27), and the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds with power and great glory (24:30). I believe these chapters speak mainly of the future seven-year Tribulation and Christ's visible return to the earth, which Revelation 6-19 describes in more detail. They show that the King who was rejected will come back and reign.

The book also opens the door for the rest of the New Testament. Jesus says, "I will build My church" (16:18), the first time the word church appears in the Gospels. Acts shows that church being built, starting in Jerusalem and going out to the nations, just as the Great Commission said.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Which Gospel came first? Many scholars today believe Mark wrote first and that Matthew and Luke used his book, since most of Mark is found in the other two. Many early church writers held that Matthew wrote first. Both views fit a faithful reading, and the answer does not change what any Gospel teaches. Luke tells us he used careful research (Luke 1:1-4), so it would not trouble me if the writers knew one another's work.

Good teachers also differ on how the kingdom of heaven in Matthew relates to the church today. Some see the kingdom as mainly present now in a spiritual form. I believe the kingdom was offered to Israel, rejected by its leaders, and will come in its full, visible form when Christ returns and reigns on the earth for a thousand years (Revelation 20:1-6). In the meantime the King rules in the hearts of those who follow Him, and the parables of chapter 13 describe this present age,

when the message of the kingdom is sown like seed, grows quietly, and lives side by side with evil until the harvest at the end of the age (13:24-30, 36-43).

Read It This Way

Read Matthew in big pieces. Notice how the book moves back and forth between stories and sermons: two chapters of action, then a long block of teaching, then more action. When you reach a sermon, slow down. The Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7) is not a list of rules to earn heaven. It shows what life looks like in the kingdom, and it shows us how far short we fall. That should send us running to the King for mercy.

Keep a pencil handy and mark each time Matthew says something was fulfilled. By the end you will have a list of Old Testament promises that came true in one Man's life. No one could arrange where he would be born, how he would die, or what would be done with his clothes. Those details point to God's hand.

Then read the last three chapters slowly. The trial, the cross and the empty tomb are the reason the book was written. And when you reach 28:19-20, remember that those words are not only for the eleven disciples on a hill in Galilee. They are for every believer, including you and me.

One more thing to watch for is how Matthew treats ordinary people. The heroes of this book are often the people nobody expected: a tax collector, a Roman soldier, a Canaanite mother who would not stop asking (15:21-28), and women who stayed at the cross after the men ran away (27:55-56). Meanwhile the most religious men in the nation, who knew the Scriptures best, missed their own King. That should humble us. Knowing a lot about the Bible is not the same as knowing the Lord of the Bible. Jesus warned that not everyone who calls Him Lord will enter the kingdom, but the one who does the will of His Father (7:21-23).

Last, notice how Matthew ends. There is no ascension scene, as in Luke and Acts. The book closes with Jesus on a mountain in Galilee, giving orders and making a promise. It is as if Matthew wants the last thing ringing in our ears to be the King's command and the King's presence. The story is not finished. We are now part of it.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think Matthew begins with a family line, and what does it tell you about Jesus (1:1-17)?
2. Jesus said He came to fulfill the Law, not to abolish it. What does that mean for how we read the Old Testament (5:17-20)?
3. Peter called Jesus "the Christ, the Son of the living God." Who do you say He is, and how does your answer show in your life (16:13-17)?
4. What do the parables of the kingdom teach about how God's kingdom grows in this age (13:1-52)?
5. What part of the Great Commission is God calling you to obey this week (28:18-20)?

Go deeper: My Matthew Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Mark

At a Glance	
Author	John Mark, a helper of Paul, Barnabas and Peter (Acts 12:12; 1 Peter 5:13)
Date written	About A.D. 50 to 65, most likely from Rome
Written to	Gentile believers, most likely in Rome
Setting and time covered	Galilee and Judea, from the preaching of John the Baptist to the resurrection, about three and a half years
Chapters	16
Key word	The Servant
Key verse	Mark 10:45

Background

Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels, and it moves fast. There is no family line, no birth story and no childhood. Mark opens with one line that tells you what the book is about, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1), and within a few verses Jesus is grown, baptized, tested in the wilderness, and preaching in Galilee. The word "immediately" shows up over forty times. Mark writes like a man in a hurry to get you to the cross.

Who was Mark? His full name was John Mark (Acts 12:12). His mother had a house in Jerusalem where the church met to pray when Peter was in prison. He was a cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10), and he set out with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Partway through, he left them and went home (Acts 13:13). Paul was so upset about it that he refused to take Mark on the second journey, and he and Barnabas split up over it (Acts 15:37-39). That could have been the end of Mark's story. It wasn't. Years later Paul wrote that Mark was "useful to me for ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11). Peter called him "Mark my son" (1 Peter 5:13). The young man who quit became the man God used to write the first account many people ever read of Jesus. If you have ever failed the Lord and wondered if He was done with you, Mark's life is good news.

The early church writers agreed that Mark wrote down the preaching of Peter. Scripture does not say this directly, but it fits what we find. Peter's story is told with a lot of honest detail, including his failures (14:66-72). Mark's account often reads like an eyewitness telling it: Jesus asleep "on the cushion" in the boat (4:38), the "green grass" at the feeding of the five thousand (6:39), and the look Jesus gave the rich young man before He loved him (10:21).

Mark also explains Jewish customs (7:3-4) and translates Aramaic words for his readers, such as "Talitha koumi" (5:41) and "Ephphatha" (7:34). Aramaic was the common language of Jews in Israel in Jesus' day. That tells us Mark was writing for people who were not Jewish, and early writers say he wrote in Rome. Most scholars date the book about A.D. 50 to 65. After a great fire in Rome in A.D. 64, the emperor Nero blamed the Christians and put many of them to death. A book about a Servant who suffered, and a call to take up the cross and follow Him (8:34), would have meant a great deal to those readers.

Purpose

Mark writes to show that Jesus is the Son of God, and that the Son of God came as a Servant. He wants his readers to see Jesus' power over sickness, demons, nature and death, and then to watch that same powerful Man choose the cross. He also wants to show what it costs to follow Him. Mark does not hide the cost. Following Jesus means denying yourself and losing your life for His sake, and it means finding real life in the end.

There is one more thing Mark wants us to notice. Again and again Jesus tells people not to spread the news of who He is. He tells a healed leper to say nothing to anyone (1:44). He silences demons who know Him (1:34). After Peter's confession, He warns the disciples to tell no one (8:30). Why would He do that? The crowds wanted a Messiah who would throw out Rome and fill their stomachs. Jesus would not let them make Him that kind of king. He would show them what kind of Messiah He was at the cross, and only after the resurrection would the full truth be preached openly (9:9). Mark helps us see that you cannot understand Jesus apart from His suffering. A Christ without a cross is not the Christ of the Bible.

Main Themes

Jesus is the Son of God. Mark opens with that title (1:1). The Father says it at the baptism (1:11) and on the mountain (9:7). Demons know it and cry it out (3:11; 5:7). And at the end, a Roman centurion who watched Him die says, "Truly this man was God's Son" (15:39). The first human being in Mark to say it plainly is a Gentile soldier at the cross.

Jesus is the Servant. The key to the book is 10:45. Jesus did not come to be served but to serve. Mark shows Him at work from morning until night, healing, teaching, feeding, and going without rest (1:32-35; 6:31). His greatest act of service was to give His life as a ransom.

Jesus has power over everything. In the first eight chapters Jesus calms a storm, casts out demons, heals a paralyzed man, a bleeding woman and the blind, feeds thousands, and raises a dead girl. The disciples ask, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?" (4:41). The book gives the answer.

The cost of following Him. After Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ (8:29), Jesus begins to teach plainly that He must suffer, be killed and rise again (8:31). Three times He predicts His death (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34), and each time the disciples miss the point. Then He calls them to take up their own cross (8:34).

Slow hearts and growing faith. Mark is honest about the disciples. They are often afraid, confused and slow to believe (4:40; 6:52; 8:17-21). One father prays, "I believe, Lord; help my unbelief" (9:24). That prayer fits many of us.

Outline

- Chapter 1:1-13: Preparing the Servant: John the Baptist, the baptism and the temptation
- Chapters 1:14-9:50: The Servant's ministry in Galilee: power, parables and Peter's confession
- Chapter 10: On the road to Jerusalem

- Chapters 11-15: The last week: the entry, the teaching in the temple, the upper room, the trials and the cross
- Chapter 16: The resurrection

Key Verses

Mark 1:1 ***The*** *beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ,* ***the*** *Son of God.*

Mark tells you up front who Jesus is. Everything that follows is evidence for this one line.

Mark 8:34-35 *And having called the crowd to* ***Him*** *with His disciples, He said to them, Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and let him take up his cross, and let him follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life on account of Me and the gospel, this* ***one*** *will save it.*

Following Jesus costs everything, and it gains everything. These words came right after Jesus first told His disciples that He would die.

Mark 10:45 *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life* ***as*** *a ransom for many.*

The key verse of the book. Jesus came to serve, and His death was a ransom, the price paid to set others free.

Mark 15:39 *And the centurion who stood by opposite Him, having seen that He, having cried out thus, expired, said, "Truly this man was God's Son."*

A Roman centurion saw how Jesus died and confessed Him as God's Son. Mark's Gentile readers would have seen themselves in that soldier.

Mark 16:6 *And he says to them, Do not be greatly alarmed. You are seeking Jesus the Nazarene, the* ***One*** *who has been crucified. He has been raised; He is not here. See the place where they laid Him.*

The tomb is empty. The One who was crucified has been raised, just as He said.

Christ in Mark

Mark gives us Jesus in action, and the picture that stands out is the Servant. Isaiah wrote of a Servant of the LORD who would suffer for the sins of others: "He was pierced for our transgressions" (Isaiah 53:5). The New Testament itself ties Isaiah's Servant to Jesus (Matthew 8:17; Acts 8:32-35; 1 Peter 2:24). Mark does not quote Isaiah 53 directly, but 10:45 sounds just like it. The Servant gives His life for "many," the same word Isaiah uses (Isaiah 53:11-12).

Mark also opens with Old Testament prophecy. He joins words from Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 to show that John the Baptist was the messenger sent to prepare the way of the Lord (1:2-3). If John prepared the way of the LORD, then the One who came after him is the LORD Himself.

Notice how Jesus speaks of Himself. His favorite title is "the Son of Man." It comes from Daniel 7:13-14, where one like a son of man comes with the clouds of heaven and receives an everlasting kingdom. At His trial the high priest asks Him straight out if He is the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One, and Jesus answers, "I am" (14:61-62), then quotes Daniel and Psalm 110 about Himself. That answer is why they condemned Him.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Mark shows the gospel at its simplest. The time has come, God's kingdom has drawn near, and people must "repent and believe in the gospel" (1:15). That is the same message the apostles preach all through Acts. In fact, Mark's outline is very close to the way Peter told the story of Jesus to Cornelius: it began in Galilee after John's baptism, God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power, He went about doing good and healing, they put Him to death on a cross, and God raised Him on the third day (Acts 10:37-41). That fits the early report that Mark wrote down Peter's preaching.

Mark also shows us the heart of the whole Bible: God's Son, giving His life as a ransom. From the first animal skins in Eden (Genesis 3:21) to the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:13) to the sacrifices of the Law, God had been teaching His people that sin brings death and that a substitute can die in the sinner's place. Mark shows us the final Substitute. When Jesus died, "the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (15:38). That heavy curtain had kept people out of the Most Holy Place, where God's presence dwelt. Torn from the top, it showed that God Himself had opened the way. The book of Hebrews explains what Mark shows us here: through the body of Jesus we now have a new and living way into God's presence (Hebrews 10:19-20).

Where Good Teachers Disagree

The biggest question in Mark is how the book ends. The SLB, like most English Bibles, prints 16:9-20. But two of the oldest complete Greek copies we have end at 16:8, with the women running from the tomb, afraid. Many scholars believe verses 9-20 were added later to give the book a fuller ending. Others point out that the longer ending is found in the great majority of copies and was known very early. Most modern Bibles print the verses with a note.

Here is what I would say. Nothing in 16:9-20 teaches a doctrine that is not found elsewhere in Scripture, except for the mention of handling snakes and drinking poison (16:18), and no one should build a practice on those words or test God with them. The resurrection itself does not stand or fall on these verses. It is clear in 16:6, and it is clear in every other Gospel.

Read It This Way

Mark is short enough to read in one sitting, and I'd encourage you to do just that. It takes a little over an hour. You will feel the pace of the book. You will also notice how it slows down. The first ten chapters cover about three years. The last six chapters cover about one week. Mark wants you to spend your time at the cross.

Watch how Mark often puts one story inside another, like a sandwich. Jesus is on His way to heal Jairus's daughter when a woman touches His robe (5:21-43). He curses a fig tree, clears the temple, and then the disciples see the fig tree withered (11:12-25). The middle story usually

explains the outer one. The dead fig tree, full of leaves and no fruit, is a picture of the temple, busy with religion and empty of real worship.

Last, look for yourself in the disciples. They see miracles and still don't understand. They promise loyalty and still run away. Yet the angel's message on Easter morning says, "tell His disciples and Peter" (16:7). Peter, who had denied Jesus three times, was named on purpose. Jesus does not give up on His people.

Study Questions

1. What does Mark's opening line tell you about the purpose of the whole book (1:1)?
2. Why do you think the disciples were so slow to understand who Jesus was, even after seeing His miracles (8:14-21)?
3. What does it mean for you to deny yourself and take up your cross today (8:34-38)?
4. How does Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane help you when God's will is hard (14:32-36)?
5. Why do you think the angel named Peter in particular, and what does that teach about Jesus (16:7)?

Go deeper: My Mark Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Luke

At a Glance	
Author	Luke, the doctor and traveling companion of Paul (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11)
Date written	About A.D. 60 to 62, before Acts
Written to	Theophilus, and through him to Gentile believers everywhere (1:3)
Setting and time covered	Judea and Galilee, from the announcement of John the Baptist's birth (about 6 B.C.) to the ascension (about A.D. 30 to 33)
Chapters	24
Key word	The Savior of all
Key verse	Luke 19:10

Background

Luke is the longest of the four Gospels, and it is the first half of a two-volume work. The second half is Acts. Both books are addressed to the same man, "most excellent Theophilus" (1:3; Acts 1:1). We don't know who Theophilus was. The title "most excellent" was used for Roman officials (Acts 23:26; 26:25), so he may have been a man of some rank. His name means friend of God, and some think Luke used it for any reader who loves God, but the plain way to read it is as a real person.

Luke never names himself, but the early church agreed that he wrote both books, and the evidence inside them fits. In Acts the writer switches from "they" to "we" at certain points, which shows he was traveling with Paul (Acts 16:10). Paul calls Luke "the beloved physician" (Colossians 4:14), and near the end of his life he writes, "Luke alone is with me" (2 Timothy 4:11). Colossians 4:10-14 seems to list Luke separately from the men "of the circumcision," which is why most believe he was a Gentile. If so, he is the only Gentile writer of a New Testament book, and his two books together make up more than a quarter of the New Testament.

Luke tells us how he worked. He was not an eyewitness himself. Many others had already written accounts, and Luke had "followed all things carefully from the first" so that Theophilus might "know the certainty" of what he had been taught (1:1-4). He talked to people who were there. Some think Mary herself may have been one of his sources, since only Luke tells us how she treasured up these things, "pondering them in her heart" (2:19; see 2:51). Scripture doesn't say so, but it is a reasonable guess.

When did he write? Acts ends with Paul still under house arrest in Rome, about A.D. 62, waiting for his trial (Acts 28:30-31). Since Luke wrote his Gospel before Acts, many date it about A.D. 60 to 62. Many other scholars date it after A.D. 70, because Jesus speaks of Jerusalem "being encircled by encampments" (21:20). I believe Jesus foretold that fall, so the prophecy does not require a later date.

Purpose

Luke writes so that Theophilus would have certainty. He is not writing a feel-good story. He is laying out facts, in order, so that a believer can know his faith rests on solid ground. He dates events by the rulers of the day: Caesar Augustus and Quirinius at the birth (2:1-2), and six different rulers at the start of John the Baptist's ministry (3:1-2). Luke is telling you to go and check.

He also writes to show that Jesus is the Savior of all kinds of people. The angels announce good news "which will be to all the people" (2:10). Simeon calls the baby "a light for revelation of the Gentiles" (2:32). Jesus says why He came: "to seek and to save that which has been lost" (19:10).

Main Themes

Jesus is the Savior. Luke is the only Synoptic Gospel to call Jesus "Savior" (2:11), and he uses the words saved and salvation more than the other Gospel writers. The angel tells the shepherds, "there has been born to you today a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (2:11).

Good news for outsiders. Luke shows Jesus caring for people others pushed aside: shepherds, lepers, tax collectors, a sinful woman (7:36-50), a Samaritan who returned to give thanks (17:11-19), and a thief on a cross (23:39-43). Chapter 15 gives three parables of lost things found, a sheep, a coin and a son, and each ends in joy.

The place of women. More than the other Gospels, Luke tells us about women: Elizabeth, Mary, Anna, the widow of Nain, Mary and Martha, and the women who supported Jesus and were first at the tomb (8:1-3; 24:1-10). In a world that often treated women as less, Luke shows that Jesus did not.

Prayer and the Holy Spirit. Luke shows Jesus praying at every turning point: at His baptism (3:21), before choosing the twelve (6:12), at the transfiguration (9:29), and on the cross (23:34, 46). He also shows the Holy Spirit at work from the first chapter (1:15, 35, 41, 67), which sets up the Spirit's coming in Acts.

Money and the heart. Luke has more of Jesus' teaching about money than any other Gospel: the rich fool (12:16-21), the shrewd manager (16:1-13), the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31), and Zacchaeus, who gave half of what he had to the poor (19:8).

Outline

- Chapters 1-2: The births of John and Jesus
- Chapters 3:1-4:13: Preparing for ministry: John's preaching, the baptism, the family line and the temptation
- Chapters 4:14-9:50: Ministry in Galilee
- Chapters 9:51-19:27: The journey to Jerusalem: parables and teaching along the way
- Chapters 19:28-23:56: The last week in Jerusalem: the entry, the Last Supper, the trials and the cross
- Chapter 24: The resurrection and the ascension

Key Verses

Luke 1:37 *For with God no declaration will be impossible.*

The angel's words to Mary. A virgin will bear a son, and nothing God says is impossible for Him to do.

Luke 2:11 *For there has been born to you today a Savior, who is Christ* ***the*** *Lord, in* ***the*** *city of David.*

The good news in one sentence. The baby in the manger is the Savior, the Christ and the Lord.

Luke 4:18 ***The*** *Spirit of* ***the*** *Lord* ***is*** *upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to* ***the*** *poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken in heart, to proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to* ***the*** *blind, to send away* ***the*** *oppressed in release,*

Jesus read these words from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue at Nazareth and said they were fulfilled that day. It sums up His mission.

Luke 15:7 *I say to you that in the same way there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, rather than over ninety-nine righteous* ***ones*** *who have no need of repentance.*

Heaven rejoices over one sinner who turns back to God. This is the heart behind the three parables of chapter 15.

Luke 19:10 *for the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which has been lost.*

The key verse of the book. Jesus spoke it in the house of Zacchaeus, a tax collector everyone else had written off.

Christ in Luke

Luke traces Jesus' family line all the way back to "the son of Adam, the son of God" (3:38). Matthew starts with Abraham, the father of Israel. Luke goes back to Adam, the father of us all. Jesus is the perfect Son of Man, the true human being, and Paul later calls Him the last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45). Where the first Adam fell in a garden, Jesus stood firm in a wilderness (4:1-13).

The Old Testament promises run all through Luke's opening chapters. The angel tells Mary that the Lord God will give her Son "the throne of David His father" and that "of His kingdom there will be no end" (1:32-33). That is God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:16 coming true. Mary's song, Zechariah's song and Simeon's song all echo the Psalms and the Prophets.

And then the last chapter. On the road to Emmaus, the risen Jesus walks with two discouraged disciples, and "having begun from Moses and from all the prophets, He was explaining to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (24:27). Later He tells the eleven that everything written about Him "in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled" (24:44). That is Jesus' own word that the whole Old Testament is about Him. When we look for Christ in the Old Testament, we are doing what He taught us to do.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Luke builds a bridge from the Old Testament to the church. His Gospel opens in the temple in Jerusalem, with an old priest named Zechariah offering incense (1:8-9), and it ends in the temple with the disciples praising God (24:53). The world of the Old Testament is still standing, but something new has begun. Acts then picks up right where Luke stops, with the ascension (Acts 1:9-11), and follows the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome.

A big turning point comes in 9:51, when Jesus "set His face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem." Almost ten chapters follow on that journey, much of it found only in Luke. The road leads to the cross. Jesus said it plainly: "it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise out from the dead on the third day" (24:46).

Luke also looks ahead. Jesus says that Jerusalem will be "trampled by the nations until the times of the nations are fulfilled" (21:24). That word "until" matters. It tells us God is not finished with Jerusalem or with Israel. Paul says the same thing in Romans 11:25-29. I believe God has a future for the nation of Israel, and that this future comes after the present age, when Christ returns.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Luke says the census at Jesus' birth was the first one taken while Quirinius was governing Syria (2:2). Ancient records, chiefly the Jewish historian Josephus, place a well-known census under Quirinius in about A.D. 6, roughly ten years after Herod the Great died, and Herod was alive when Jesus was born (Matthew 2:1). How do we put this together? Some teachers believe Quirinius held an earlier post in the region and oversaw an earlier census. Others read Luke's Greek to mean a census taken before the one under Quirinius. Others simply say we don't have all the records yet. I don't think the question shakes Luke's trustworthiness. He knew about the later census too (Acts 5:37), and a man that careful would not have mixed them up by accident. Where the evidence is thin, it is wise to wait rather than accuse the writer of an error.

Read It This Way

Read Luke as a careful report by a man who checked his facts. When he names a ruler or a place, he is giving you something you can test. Over the years, places and officials Luke names have often been confirmed by other sources. That should build your confidence.

Pay special attention to the parables found only in Luke: the good Samaritan (10:25-37), the rich fool (12:13-21), the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son (15:1-32), the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31), the persistent widow (18:1-8), and the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:9-14). Many of the best-known stories Jesus told are in this book alone. Ask who Jesus was talking to when He told each one. Chapter 15, for example, was told to Pharisees who grumbled that Jesus ate with sinners (15:1-2). The older brother at the end of the story is a picture of them. The story ends with the older brother outside the party, and Jesus never tells us whether he went in. He leaves the question open for every religious person who reads it.

Notice the songs too. Luke 1-2 has four of them: Mary's (1:46-55), Zechariah's (1:68-79), the angels' (2:14), and Simeon's (2:29-32). The church has sung them for centuries. They are full of

Old Testament words, and they show people who knew their Bibles recognizing the promise when it finally came.

Last, read the cross carefully. Only Luke tells us that Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (23:34). Only Luke tells us of the thief who asked to be remembered and heard, "today you will be with Me in Paradise" (23:43). That man did no good works, was never baptized, and never went to church. He simply turned to Jesus in faith. If you want to know how a sinner is saved, it is right there.

Then finish with the walk to Emmaus (24:13-35). Two followers of Jesus are walking home, sad and confused, because their hopes died on a cross. A stranger joins them and opens the Scriptures to them. Only when He breaks the bread do they see that it is Jesus. Afterward they say, "Was not our heart burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, and while He was opening the Scriptures to us?" (24:32). That is still how the risen Lord meets His people. He opens the Scriptures, and hearts burn. Read Luke with your Bible open to the Old Testament passages he points to, and ask the Lord to do the same for you.

Study Questions

1. Why did Luke write his Gospel, and how does his careful method help your faith (1:1-4)?
2. What does Mary's response to the angel teach you about trusting God's word (1:26-38)?
3. In the parable of the lost son, which son are you more like, and why (15:11-32)?
4. What does the story of Zacchaeus show about the kind of people Jesus came for (19:1-10)?
5. How did the risen Jesus use the Old Testament to explain Himself, and what does that teach you about how to read it (24:25-27, 44-47)?

Go deeper: My Luke Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

John

At a Glance	
Author	John the apostle, son of Zebedee, the disciple Jesus loved (13:23; 21:20, 24)
Date written	About A.D. 80 to 90, from Ephesus
Written to	Believers and seekers everywhere, so that they may believe (20:31)
Setting and time covered	Galilee, Samaria and Judea, from the ministry of John the Baptist to the resurrection appearances, about three years
Chapters	21
Key word	Believe
Key verse	John 20:31

Background

John is the fourth Gospel, and it feels different from the other three as soon as you start reading. Matthew begins with Abraham. Luke begins with Adam. John begins before the world existed: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1). Before he says one thing about Bethlehem or Galilee, John wants you to know who Jesus is. He is the eternal Son of God who stepped into His own creation.

Who wrote it? The book never gives the writer's name. It calls him "one of His disciples, whom Jesus was loving" (13:23), and it says this disciple "wrote these things" (21:24). He was one of the inner circle, at the Last Supper, at the cross, and at the empty tomb (13:23; 19:26; 20:2-8). He is never named, but Peter, James and John were the three closest to Jesus, and James was put to death early (Acts 12:2). The early church agreed that the writer was John the apostle, the son of Zebedee and the brother of James. He was a fisherman from Galilee whom Jesus nicknamed, along with his brother, "Sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17). The man who once wanted to call fire down on a Samaritan village (Luke 9:54) became the apostle of love.

Early church writers say John spent his later years in Ephesus and wrote his Gospel there, after the other three had been written. Most of what is in John is not found in the other Gospels. He leaves out the birth, the baptism scene, the temptation, the parables and the Last Supper meal itself. Instead he gives us seven signs, long conversations, and the five chapters of Jesus' words on the night before the cross (13-17). The SLB introduction dates the book about A.D. 80 to 90. Some scholars date it earlier, but the late date fits the early reports that John was the last Gospel writer.

Purpose

John tells us why he wrote, and he puts it near the end where you can't miss it: "these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (20:31). Every story in the book is picked for that purpose. John chose only some of the signs Jesus did (20:30; 21:25), and he chose the ones that would lead a reader to faith.

The word believe appears about a hundred times in John, far more than in any other Gospel. John never uses the noun faith. He always uses the verb. For John, believing is not just agreeing with

facts. It is trusting, receiving and coming to Jesus (1:12; 6:35). So who was John writing for? Some think he wrote mainly to bring unbelievers to faith. Others think he wrote mainly to strengthen believers, so they would keep on believing. The Greek copies differ slightly in 20:31, and either reading is possible. I think the honest answer is both. A seeker can pick up John and meet Jesus for the first time, and a believer of many years can read it and fall more deeply in love with the Savior. John wants every reader, whoever he is, to look at Jesus and trust Him.

Main Themes

Jesus is God the Son. John's first verse calls Jesus God. Near the end, Thomas falls at His feet and says, "My Lord and my God!" (20:28). In between, Jesus says, "I and the Father are one" (10:30), and the crowd picks up stones because they understood He was claiming to be God (10:33).

The seven signs. John calls Jesus' miracles signs, because each one points to something beyond itself. He records seven: water turned to wine (2:1-11), an official's son healed (4:46-54), a lame man healed at the pool (5:1-9), five thousand fed (6:1-14), Jesus walking on the water (6:16-21), a man born blind given sight (9:1-7), and Lazarus raised from the dead (11:1-44). The greatest sign of all is the resurrection of Jesus Himself.

The seven "I am" sayings. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" (6:35), "the light of the world" (8:12), "the door" (10:9), "the good shepherd" (10:11), "the resurrection and the life" (11:25), "the way and the truth and the life" (14:6), and "the vine" (15:5). Each one tells us what He is for us.

Eternal life now. In John, eternal life is not only life that lasts forever. It begins the moment a person believes. The one who believes "has eternal life" and "has passed out of death into life" (5:24). Jesus defines it in His prayer: knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He sent (17:3).

Light and darkness, belief and unbelief. John often sets things in pairs. Light shines, and darkness does not overcome it (1:5). Some receive Jesus and become children of God (1:12). Others love the darkness because their deeds are evil (3:19). The book shows both responses side by side, and it asks the reader to choose.

Outline

- Chapter 1:1-18: The Word became flesh
- Chapters 1:19-4: Signs and early ministry: the first disciples, Cana, Nicodemus and the woman at the well
- Chapters 5-12: Growing opposition: signs and sayings in Jerusalem and Galilee, to the raising of Lazarus
- Chapters 13-17: The upper room: the washing of feet, the farewell words and Jesus' prayer
- Chapters 18-19: Arrest, trial and cross
- Chapters 20-21: The resurrection and the restoring of Peter

Key Verses

John 1:1 *In **the** beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

The Word did not begin at Bethlehem. He was with God and was God before anything was made.

John 1:14 *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of an only begotten from **the** Father, full of grace and truth.*

The eternal Word became a real man. "Dwelt" means He pitched His tent among us, the way God's glory once dwelt in the tabernacle.

John 3:16 *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.*

The best-known verse in the Bible tells why God sent His Son and how anyone can have eternal life.

John 11:25 *Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. The **one** believing in Me, even if he dies, will live,*

Jesus spoke these words at a grave, then proved them by raising Lazarus. Death does not have the last word for the believer.

John 14:6 *Jesus says to him, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*

Jesus is not one way among many. He is the only way to the Father.

John 20:31 *but these have been written 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's purpose statement. He wrote so that you would believe and have life.

Christ in John

The whole Gospel is about Christ, and John uses Old Testament pictures to show Him. John the Baptist points to Him and says, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (1:29). That points back to the Passover lamb (Exodus 12) and to the Servant led like a lamb to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:7). John even notes that Jesus died at Passover time and that not one of His bones was broken, just like the Passover lamb (19:36; Exodus 12:46).

Jesus Himself points to more pictures. As Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness so that dying people could look and live, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life (3:14-15; Numbers 21:8-9). He is the true bread from heaven, greater than the manna Israel ate in the wilderness (6:31-35). He is the temple, and His body would be destroyed and raised in three days (2:19-21).

John also shows Jesus using God's own name. When God spoke to Moses from the bush, He called Himself "I AM" (Exodus 3:14). Jesus said, "before Abraham came into being, I am" (8:58). The

crowd knew exactly what He meant, and they picked up stones to throw at Him (8:59). John 12:41 tells us that when Isaiah saw the Lord on His throne (Isaiah 6), he saw the glory of Jesus.

How It Fits the Whole Story

John's opening words, "In the beginning," take us straight back to Genesis 1:1. The same God who spoke the world into being has now come into the world in the person of His Son. John 1:3 tells us all things came into being through Him. The Creator came to His own, and His own did not receive Him (1:11).

John also points ahead. In the upper room Jesus says, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I am coming again and will receive you to Myself, so that where I am, you also may be" (14:2-3). I believe this is the first clear promise of the rapture of the church. Jesus does not say He will come and meet us here and rule on the earth. He says He will take us to where He is, to His Father's house. Paul fills in the details later (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

Jesus also promises the Holy Spirit, the Helper, who would come after He left (14:16-17, 26; 16:7). That promise is fulfilled in Acts 2. And Jesus' prayer for His followers in chapter 17, that they would be one, guarded from the evil one, and with Him to see His glory, is a prayer for the church in every generation, including ours (17:20-24).

Where Good Teachers Disagree

The SLB, like most English Bibles, prints the story of the woman caught in adultery (7:53-8:11). Many of the oldest Greek copies do not have it, and in some copies it shows up in other places. Many scholars believe it is a true story from the life of Jesus that was added to John's book later. Others believe it belongs where it is. Most modern Bibles print it with a note. The story fits everything we know of Jesus: He does not excuse the sin, but He does not condemn the sinner who stands before Him, and He sends her away with the words "go, and sin no more" (8:11).

Readers also differ on the date. The SLB introduction gives about A.D. 80 to 90, and that is the date I follow here. Some date John before A.D. 70. Either way, the writer was an eyewitness.

Read It This Way

John is the Gospel many people give to someone who is just starting to read the Bible, and for good reason. The words are simple. A child can understand "God is love" and "I am the good shepherd." But the ideas are as deep as anything in Scripture. You can read John for fifty years and still find new things.

As you read, keep a list of the seven signs and the seven "I am" sayings. Ask what each one shows about Jesus. When He feeds the five thousand, He goes on to say He is the bread of life (6:35). When He gives sight to the man born blind, He has just said He is the light of the world (9:5). The sign and the saying explain each other.

Watch the people Jesus meets one at a time: Nicodemus, a respected teacher who came by night (3:1-21); the Samaritan woman at the well, an outcast in her own town (4:1-42); the man born blind, who was thrown out of the synagogue for telling the truth (9:1-41); and Mary and Martha

at their brother's grave (11:1-44). Jesus meets each one where they are and leads them to faith. Ask yourself where you are in that list.

Then slow way down in chapters 13-17. Jesus washes His disciples' feet like a servant. He tells them He is going away and coming back. He promises the Spirit. He calls them friends. Then He prays for them, and for you (17:20). These are some of the most tender words in the Bible.

Finally, read chapter 21 as a story of grace. Peter had denied Jesus three times by a charcoal fire (18:18). Now Jesus meets him by another charcoal fire on the shore (21:9), asks him three times if he loves Him, and gives him work to do. No failure is too big for the Lord to restore.

Study Questions

1. What does John 1:1-14 teach about who Jesus was before He was born in Bethlehem (1:1-14)?
2. What did Jesus mean when He told Nicodemus he must be born from above (3:1-16)?
3. Which "I am" saying means the most to you right now, and why (6:35; 8:12; 10:11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:5)?
4. What do Jesus' words in the upper room teach about His return for His people (14:1-3)?
5. Why do you think Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved Him (21:15-19)?

Go deeper: My John Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Part Seven: Acts

Part Seven has only one book in it, and that is on purpose. The Old Testament has twelve books of history, from Joshua to Esther. The New Testament has one. Acts is the only book in the Bible that tells the story of the church in its first years. Without it, we would read the four Gospels and then jump straight into Paul's letters, and we would be left wondering how a small group of frightened disciples in Jerusalem turned into churches all over the Roman world.

Acts is the second half of Luke's two-volume work. Luke's Gospel told what Jesus "began both to do and to teach" (Acts 1:1). Acts tells what the risen Jesus kept on doing through His Holy Spirit and His people. It covers about thirty years, from the ascension of Jesus, around A.D. 30 to 33, to Paul's house arrest in Rome, around A.D. 60 to 62. The book follows the plan Jesus gave in 1:8: Jerusalem first, then Judea and Samaria, and then the uttermost part of the earth.

Why does this book matter so much? It is the background for most of the New Testament. When you read Romans, 1 Corinthians, Philippians or 1 Thessalonians, it helps to know how those churches started, and Acts tells you. Paul's journeys in Acts give us the map and the timeline for his letters. The general letters of Peter, James and John make more sense when you have seen those men at work in Jerusalem.

How should you read it? Read it as history, because it is. Luke names cities, rulers, ships and harbors, and his details have held up well. Read it also as a book about God's power. The church grows, not because its people were clever or rich, but because the Holy Spirit was at work and the apostles preached Christ crucified and raised. And read it with some care. Acts tells us what happened, and not everything that happened in those first years is meant to happen the same way in every church today. Some events in Acts happened once, at a turning point, as the gospel crossed from Jews to Samaritans to Gentiles. Other things, like prayer, preaching, generosity and courage under pressure, are meant for every generation.

Notice too that Acts has no real ending. Paul is still in Rome, still preaching, and the story just stops. In a sense the book is still being written, wherever the church is carrying the gospel to people who have never heard it.

Acts

At a Glance	
Author	Luke, the writer of the third Gospel (1:1; Luke 1:1-4)
Date written	About A.D. 62, while Paul was still under house arrest in Rome
Written to	Theophilus, and through him to the whole church (1:1)
Setting and time covered	From Jerusalem to Rome, about thirty years, from the ascension (about A.D. 30 to 33) to Paul in Rome (about A.D. 60 to 62)
Chapters	28
Key word	Witnesses
Key verse	Acts 1:8

Background

Acts picks up exactly where Luke's Gospel leaves off. Luke ended with Jesus taking His disciples out to Bethany, blessing them, and being carried up into heaven (Luke 24:50-51). Acts opens by telling that same scene again, with more detail (1:9-11). Luke wrote both books for a man named Theophilus, and he calls his Gospel "the first account" of what Jesus "began both to do and to teach" (1:1). The word began matters. Jesus is not finished. In Acts, the risen Lord keeps on working from heaven through His Spirit and His church.

How do we know Luke wrote it? Both books are addressed to Theophilus, and Acts calls back to the first book. Then there are the "we" sections. In most of Acts, Luke writes "they" about Paul and his team. But starting in 16:10, he suddenly writes "we sought to go out to Macedonia." The writer was there. The "we" sections come and go through the rest of the book (16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16), and they fit Luke, the doctor who traveled with Paul (Colossians 4:14).

When was it written? The book ends with Paul in Rome, under house arrest for two whole years, preaching "with all boldness, unhindered" (28:30-31). Luke says nothing about Paul's trial, his release, or his death. He says nothing about Nero's persecution of Christians after A.D. 64, or about the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, even though that would have been big news for a book so focused on Jerusalem. Many conservative scholars take this as a sign that Luke finished the book about A.D. 62, before any of those things happened.

Acts covers about thirty years. Peter leads the story in the first twelve chapters, mostly among Jews in Jerusalem and Judea. Paul leads in chapters 13-28, as the gospel moves out to the Gentiles, people who were not Jewish. Paul's first journey, about A.D. 46 to 48, took him through Cyprus and into southern Galatia (13-14). His second journey crossed into Europe, to Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens and Corinth (15:36-18:22). His third journey centered on about three years in Ephesus (18:23-21:16). Then came his arrest in Jerusalem, two years in custody in Caesarea, a shipwreck on Malta, and at last Rome (21:17-28:31).

Purpose

Luke writes to show how the gospel spread from a small band of disciples in Jerusalem to the capital of the Roman world, just as Jesus said it would. He also shows that the gospel is for everyone. Jews, Samaritans, an Ethiopian official, a Roman centurion, a businesswoman in Philippi and a jailer all come to faith in the same way, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (15:11; 16:31).

Luke also seems to want to show that the Christian faith was no threat to Rome. Again and again, Roman officials find that Paul has done nothing worthy of death or chains (18:14-15; 23:29; 26:31-32). The trouble usually came from those who opposed the message, not from the believers.

Main Themes

The power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told His disciples to wait for the Spirit (1:4-5), and the Spirit came on the day of Pentecost (2:1-4). From then on, the Spirit fills believers, gives them boldness, guides the mission and sets apart workers (4:31; 13:2; 16:6-7). Some have said the book could be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

Witnesses to the risen Christ. The apostles' message is simple: God raised Jesus from the dead. "This Jesus God has raised up, of which we all are witnesses" (2:32). Every sermon in Acts comes back to the resurrection.

The word of God grows. Luke marks the progress of the gospel with short summary lines: "the word of God was increasing" (6:7), "the word of God was growing and being multiplied" (12:24), and "with might the word of the Lord was growing and prevailing" (19:20).

Jew and Gentile in one church. The hardest question in the early church was whether Gentiles had to become Jews to be saved. God answered it with Peter's vision and Cornelius (10:1-48), and the Jerusalem council settled it (15:1-35). Salvation is "through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" for Jew and Gentile alike (15:11).

Suffering and boldness. The church grows under pressure. Peter and John are arrested, Stephen is stoned, James is killed, Paul is beaten, jailed and shipwrecked. Their answer: "It is necessary to obey God rather than men" (5:29).

Outline

- Chapter 1: Waiting for the Spirit: the ascension and the choosing of Matthias
- Chapters 2-7: The church in Jerusalem: Pentecost, growth, persecution and Stephen
- Chapters 8-12: Judea and Samaria: Philip, the conversion of Saul, Cornelius and the church at Antioch
- Chapters 13-14: Paul's first journey
- Chapter 15:1-35: The Jerusalem council
- Chapters 15:36-21:16: Paul's second and third journeys
- Chapters 21:17-28: Paul arrested, tried and sent to Rome

Key Verses

Acts 1:8 *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be witnesses to Me both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to **the** uttermost part of the earth.*

The outline of the book in one verse: power from the Spirit, and witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

Acts 2:38 *And Peter said to them, Repent, and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

Peter's answer at Pentecost when the crowd asked what to do. Repentance and faith in Jesus bring forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit.

Acts 4:12 *And **there** is not salvation in any other; for neither is **there** another name under heaven which has been given among men by which we must be saved.*

Spoken before the same council that condemned Jesus. Salvation is found in no other name.

Acts 16:31 *And they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household."*

The jailer at Philippi asked what he must do to be saved. Paul's answer is the gospel in one line.

Acts 20:24 *But I make account of nothing, nor do I hold my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to solemnly testify **to** the gospel of the grace of God.*

Paul's life goal. He did not hold his life dear, as long as he could finish his course and testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Two men stand out in the turning chapters. Stephen, one of the seven chosen to serve the church's widows, preached a sermon that walked through Israel's history from Abraham to Solomon and showed how the nation had always resisted the men God sent (7:2-53). He was stoned for it, the first believer to die for Christ. Standing by and holding the coats of the men who threw the stones was a young Pharisee named Saul (7:58; 8:1). A Pharisee was a member of a strict Jewish party that kept the Law and the traditions with great care. Saul went on to drag believers to prison, until the risen Jesus stopped him on the road to Damascus (9:1-19). The man who hunted the church became its greatest missionary. That is the grace of God, and Paul never got over it (1 Timothy 1:15).

Christ in Acts

Acts is about Christ even though He is in heaven for almost the whole book. He is the One who gives the Spirit (2:33). Stephen sees Him standing at the right hand of God (7:55-56). He meets Saul on the road to Damascus and asks, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (9:4). Saul was persecuting the church, but Jesus calls it persecuting Him. The church is His body, and what happens to it happens to Him.

The apostles preach Christ from the Old Testament. Peter uses Psalm 16 to show that God would not let His Holy One see decay, and he says David was speaking of the resurrection of the Christ (2:25-32). He uses Psalm 110 to show that Jesus is now seated at God's right hand (2:34-35). Philip shows the Ethiopian official that the lamb led to the slaughter in Isaiah 53 is Jesus (8:32-35). Peter tells the council that Jesus is the stone the builders rejected (4:11; Psalm 118:22).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Acts shows the start of the church age, the time we are still living in. At the ascension, two angels told the disciples, "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same manner as you watched Him going into heaven" (1:11). That promise frames everything that follows. The church lives between the day He left and the day He comes again.

Acts also shows God keeping His promise to Abraham. God told Abraham that in him "all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3), and Peter quotes that same promise to the crowd in the temple (3:25). In Acts, the blessing goes out to the nations. Yet God does not forget Israel. Paul always goes to the synagogue first (13:5, 14; 17:1-2), and many Jews believe. The apostles asked, "Lord, are You at this time restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (1:6). Jesus did not say the kingdom would never come. He said it was not for them to know the times the Father had set (1:7). I believe the kingdom will be restored to Israel when Christ returns (Romans 11:25-29).

The day of Pentecost also reverses Babel. At Babel, God confused the languages of people who wanted to make a name for themselves (Genesis 11:1-9). At Pentecost, people from many nations heard the wonders of God in their own languages (2:5-11). God was gathering a people from every tongue, which is where the story ends in Revelation 5:9. Acts also gives us the setting for most of the letters that follow it in the New Testament. Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians from Corinth on his second journey, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Romans on his third journey, and Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon during the house arrest that closes the book. When you read a letter, turn back to Acts and find the chapter where that church began. The letter will make more sense.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Acts records speaking in tongues, healings and other miraculous signs. Do those gifts continue today in the same way? Good teachers differ. Some, often called cessationists, believe the sign gifts were given to confirm the apostles' message while the New Testament was being written, and that they ended with the apostles (Hebrews 2:3-4; 2 Corinthians 12:12). Others, often called continuationists, believe all the gifts are still available, since Scripture does not say they would stop before Christ returns (1 Corinthians 13:8-12). Both sides agree that God still answers prayer, still heals when He chooses, and still gives every believer His Spirit. I would only add that Acts is a book of transition. In it the Spirit came on Jews (2), Samaritans (8), Gentiles (10) and some disciples of John the Baptist (19), each at a turning point. We should be careful about making any one of those events a pattern every believer must follow.

Teachers also differ on how to read 2:38 and its mention of baptism. Some take baptism as part of what brings forgiveness. Most evangelical teachers read the verse in light of the rest of Acts, where forgiveness comes through faith (10:43; 16:31), and see baptism as the first public step of

obedience by one who has already believed. I hold the second view. Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Read It This Way

Acts is a long book, so it helps to have a map. Keep 1:8 in front of you and watch the gospel move outward: Jerusalem in chapters 1-7, Judea and Samaria in chapters 8-12, and then the uttermost part of the earth from chapter 13 on. When you get to Paul's journeys, look at a map in the back of your Bible. It makes the story come alive.

Pay attention to the sermons. About a third of Acts is speeches: Peter at Pentecost (2), Stephen before the council (7), Peter at Cornelius's house (10), Paul at Pisidian Antioch (13), Paul in Athens (17), and Paul before kings and governors (22-26). Notice how the message changes depending on who is listening. To Jews, Paul starts with the Scriptures. To the Greeks in Athens, who did not know the Scriptures, he starts with the Creator who made the world (17:24). But the center never changes: Jesus died, God raised Him, and all must repent and believe.

Watch the believers in Berea too. When Paul preached, they "received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures every day to see if these things might be so" (17:11). That is a good way to read any book, including this one. Don't take any teacher's word for it, mine included. Open your Bible and check.

Last, ask what Acts shows you about your own life as a witness. Most of the people in Acts were ordinary people: fishermen, a tentmaker, a widow who made clothes for the poor (9:36-39), a jailer, a seller of purple cloth. When the church in Jerusalem was scattered, it was ordinary believers, not the apostles, who went everywhere preaching the word (8:1, 4). Jesus still sends ordinary people.

And when you reach the last chapter, notice where Luke leaves Paul. He is not free. He is chained to a Roman soldier in a rented house. Yet the last word of the book in the Greek is "unhindered" (28:31). The messenger was bound, but the message was not. Paul later wrote the same thing from another prison: "the word of God has not been bound" (2 Timothy 2:9). Whatever limits you face, the gospel is not limited by them.

Study Questions

1. What did Jesus promise His disciples before He ascended, and how does that promise shape the rest of the book (1:8-11)?
2. What marks of a healthy church do you see in the first believers, and which of them does your church need most (2:42-47)?
3. How did God show Peter that the gospel was for Gentiles too, and why was that so hard for him to accept (10:9-35)?
4. Why do you think the Jerusalem council's answer mattered so much for the future of the church (15:1-11)?
5. How did Paul's view of his own life free him to face danger, and what would change if you had the same view (20:22-24)?

Go deeper: My Acts Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Part Eight: Paul's Letters

The next thirteen books of the New Testament are letters, and every one of them begins with the same name: Paul. Nine of them were written to churches: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Four were written to men: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon. Together they make up almost a quarter of the New Testament.

Who was Paul? He was born Saul, a Jew from the city of Tarsus, trained in the Law at the feet of a respected teacher named Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He was a Pharisee, a member of the strictest party of the Jewish faith, and he hated the followers of Jesus enough to hunt them down (Acts 8:3; Philippians 3:5-6). Then the risen Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, and everything changed (Acts 9:1-19). The Lord said of him, "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). Paul spent the rest of his life doing exactly that. He made three long missionary journeys, planted churches across what is now Turkey and Greece, was beaten, jailed and shipwrecked, and, as the early church reported, at last gave his life for Christ in Rome. He wrote these letters along the way.

A letter in Paul's day had a set pattern, and Paul follows it. He names himself, names his readers, gives a greeting, and usually gives thanks or prays for them. Then comes the body of the letter. Then come personal news, greetings to friends, and a final blessing. Paul often dictated his letters to a helper and then added a line in his own handwriting at the end (Romans 16:22; Galatians 6:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:17).

Our Bibles do not print Paul's letters in the order he wrote them. They are arranged roughly from longest to shortest: first the letters to churches, then the letters to people. Romans comes first because it is the longest, not because it was written first. If you want to read them in the order Paul wrote them, a common order is Galatians (if it is early), 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, then the four Prison Letters (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon), and last 1 Timothy, Titus and 2 Timothy. Acts gives the setting for most of them.

Most of Paul's letters have two parts. The first part teaches what God has done for us in Christ. The second part shows how to live because of it. Paul almost never gives a command without first giving the reason. You see it in Romans, where eleven chapters of teaching are followed by "Therefore I exhort you" (Romans 12:1), and in Ephesians, where three chapters on our riches in Christ are followed by a call to walk worthily of that calling (Ephesians 4:1). The order matters. We obey because we are saved, not to get saved.

How should you read these letters? Remember that you are reading someone else's mail. Each letter was written to real people with real problems, and it helps to ask what was going on in that church. At the same time, the Holy Spirit gave these letters for the whole church in every age. Peter himself put Paul's letters alongside "the other Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:16), and he admitted that some things in them are "hard to understand." So if you find Paul hard going at times, you are in good company. Read a short letter in one sitting, the way the first readers heard it read aloud in church. Then go back and take it slowly. Paul packs a lot into a few words, and some of his sentences will keep you thinking for years.

Romans

At a Glance	
Author	Paul the apostle (1:1), with Tertius writing it down (16:22)
Date written	About A.D. 57, from Corinth, near the end of Paul's third journey
Written to	The believers in Rome, Jews and Gentiles, a church Paul had not yet visited (1:7, 13)
Setting and time covered	A letter, not a story; written on the eve of Paul's trip to Jerusalem with the gift for the poor (15:25-26)
Chapters	16
Key word	The righteousness of God
Key verse	Romans 1:16

Background

If you could read only one letter of Paul's, many Bible teachers would point you to Romans. It is the longest and most complete explanation of the gospel in the Bible. It has changed lives for centuries. It is the book that showed many people, in many ages, that a sinner is made right with God by faith and not by works. Some of the best-known turning points in church history began with a man reading Romans and finally understanding grace. When this letter is read with an open heart, God still does that kind of work.

Paul wrote Romans near the end of his third missionary journey, about A.D. 57. He was staying in Corinth, most likely in the home of a believer named Gaius (16:23; 1 Corinthians 1:14). A man named Tertius wrote the letter down as Paul spoke it (16:22). A woman named Phoebe, a servant of the church in nearby Cenchreae, most likely carried it to Rome (16:1-2). Paul was about to take a gift of money from the Gentile churches to the poor believers in Jerusalem (15:25-27). After that he hoped to visit Rome and then go on to Spain (15:24, 28).

Paul had never been to Rome. He did not start the church there. Scripture doesn't tell us who did, but Jews from Rome were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10), and some of them may have carried the gospel home. By the time Paul wrote, the church had both Jewish and Gentile believers, and their faith was "being proclaimed in the whole world" (1:8). Paul knew many of them by name. Chapter 16 greets more than two dozen people, including Priscilla and Aquila, who had worked with him in Corinth and Ephesus (16:3-5; Acts 18:2).

Why would Paul write such a long, careful letter to a church he had never visited? He wanted them to know the gospel he preached, so they could support his mission to Spain. And there were tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome. The emperor Claudius had driven the Jews out of Rome for a time (Acts 18:2), and when they came back, the Gentile believers may have been running things. Paul shows both groups that they stand on the same ground before God: all have sinned, and all are saved the same way.

Purpose

Paul writes to lay out the gospel in full. He wants the Romans to see that the gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (1:16). He shows why everyone needs it, how God gives it, what it does in a believer's life, how it fits with God's promises to Israel, and how it changes the way we treat one another.

You can think of Romans as a courtroom. In the first three chapters, every person is brought before the Judge, and every mouth is closed (3:19). The verdict is guilty. Then Paul shows that the Judge Himself has paid the penalty, and He declares the guilty righteous when they trust in His Son. In chapters 6-8, Paul answers the next question: how does a pardoned sinner now live? In chapters 9-11 he answers another: can we trust a God who seems to have set aside His own people Israel? And in chapters 12-16 he shows the church what a life shaped by mercy looks like. Each section builds on the one before it, and you can't really understand any part of Romans without the whole.

Main Themes

All have sinned. Paul starts with bad news. The Gentile world has turned from the Creator to idols (1:18-32). The Jews have the Law but do not keep it (2:17-24). "There is not a righteous one, not even one" (3:10). Everyone falls short of the glory of God (3:23).

Justified by faith. To justify means to declare someone righteous, like a judge declaring a defendant not guilty. God does this for the sinner who believes in Jesus, "freely by His grace" (3:24). Abraham is the example. He "believed God, and it was reckoned to him for righteousness" (4:3; Genesis 15:6). Works do not enter into it (3:28).

New life in Christ. Grace does not give us permission to keep sinning (6:1-2). The believer has died with Christ to sin and been raised to walk in newness of life (6:4). There is "no condemnation to those in Christ Jesus" (8:1), and the Holy Spirit gives the power to live for God.

God's plan for Israel. If God saves Gentiles, has He gone back on His promises to Israel? Paul's answer in chapters 9-11 is no. A hardening has come upon part of Israel "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (11:25), and then "all Israel will be saved" (11:26). "The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (11:29).

The gospel in everyday life. Paul's teaching turns into practice in chapters 12-15: offering ourselves to God as a living sacrifice, using our gifts, loving one another, respecting rulers, and bearing with weaker believers over matters of conscience.

Outline

- Chapter 1:1-17: Introduction and theme
- Chapters 1:18-3:20: Sin: the whole world guilty before God
- Chapters 3:21-5: Salvation: made right with God by faith
- Chapters 6-8: Sanctification: new life in Christ and in the Spirit
- Chapters 9-11: God's plan for Israel
- Chapters 12-15: Service: living out the gospel

- Chapter 16: Greetings and final words

Key Verses

Romans 1:16 *For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ; for it is **the** power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, both to **the** Jew first and to **the** Greek.*

The theme of the letter. The gospel is God's own power to save anyone who believes.

Romans 3:23-24 *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,*

The bad news and the good news side by side. All sinned, and all who believe are justified freely by grace.

Romans 5:8 *But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

God did not wait for us to clean ourselves up. Christ died for us while we were still sinners.

Romans 6:23 *For the wages of sin **is** death, but the gift of God **is** eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Sin pays a wage, and the wage is death. Eternal life is not a wage. It is a gift.

Romans 8:28 *And we know that to those who love God all things work together for good, to those who are called according to **His** purpose.*

God works all things together for good for those who love Him. It does not say all things are good. It says God is working in them.

Romans 12:1-2 *Therefore I exhort you, brothers, through the compassions of God, to present your bodies **as** a living, holy sacrifice, well-pleasing to God, your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God **is**, the good and well-pleasing and perfect **will**.*

The turn from teaching to living. Because of God's mercies, we offer Him our whole selves.

Christ in Romans

Christ is at the center of every part of Romans. He is the One in whom "the righteousness of God" is revealed (1:17; 3:21-22). God put Him forward as a propitiation, a sacrifice that turns away God's wrath, so that God could be just and still justify the one who has faith in Jesus (3:25-26). That is the problem of the whole Old Testament solved. How can a holy God forgive guilty people without becoming unjust? The answer is the cross. God punished sin fully, in His Son, so He could pardon sinners freely.

In chapter 5 Paul shows Christ as the second Adam. "Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin" (5:12). Adam's one act of disobedience brought death to all. Christ's one act of obedience brings life to all who are in Him (5:18-19). Paul also says that "Christ is the end of law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (10:4). The Law was never a ladder to climb up to

God. It showed us our sin and pointed us to the One who would keep it for us. When we trust Christ, we stop trying to earn a righteousness we could never reach, and we receive His. Every person is either "in Adam" or "in Christ." There is no third option.

And in chapter 8 Paul ends his teaching on salvation with a promise about Christ. Nothing in all creation "will be able to separate us from the love of God" which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (8:38-39).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Romans reaches back to the very beginning. Chapter 1 goes back to creation, when God's eternal power and divine nature were clearly seen in what He made (1:20). Chapter 5 goes back to Adam and the fall. Chapter 4 goes back to Abraham, who was counted righteous by faith before he was ever circumcised and four hundred years before the Law was given (4:9-12). That proves the way of salvation has always been the same: grace through faith.

Romans also reaches forward. Chapter 8 says creation itself is groaning and waiting to be set free from its slavery to decay (8:19-22). That points to the new heavens and new earth of Revelation 21. Chapters 9-11 look ahead to the day when the Deliverer will come from Zion and turn ungodliness away from Jacob (11:26). I believe God has a future for the nation of Israel. The church has not replaced Israel. Paul pictures Gentile believers as wild olive branches grafted into a tree whose roots are God's promises to the patriarchs, and he warns them not to boast against the natural branches (11:17-24). God will graft Israel back in.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Romans 8:29-30 and chapter 9 raise the question of election, God's choosing of those who will be saved. Good teachers have disagreed about this for a long time. Some believe God chose specific people for salvation based only on His own will and grace, and they point to 9:11-16, where God chose Jacob over Esau before the twins were born. Others believe God chose in Christ all whom He knew would believe, based on His foreknowledge (8:29), and they point out that chapters 9-11 are mainly about God's plan for nations, Israel and the Gentiles, and that chapter 10 calls everyone to believe. Both sides agree that salvation is God's work from start to finish, that no one can boast, and that every person is responsible to repent and believe the gospel (10:9-13). I have chosen not to settle this question here. What Paul says plainly is enough to humble us and to give us assurance.

Teachers also differ on the "I" of Romans 7:14-25, the man who wants to do good but keeps doing what he hates. Some believe Paul is describing his life before he was saved. Others believe he is describing the ongoing struggle of a believer with sin. Many believers have found that chapter describes their own fight all too well, and the chapter ends with thanks to God through Jesus Christ (7:25).

Read It This Way

Romans is not a book to rush. Take it a section at a time and follow Paul's argument. He often asks a question his readers might ask, then answers it, usually with a strong "May it not be!" (6:1-2, 15; 7:7). Watch for those questions. They show you where the argument is going.

Pay attention to the word "therefore." It shows up at the big turns: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God" (5:1); "There is therefore now no condemnation" (8:1); "Therefore I exhort you, brothers" (12:1). Each one ties what comes next to what came before.

Some people have used a few verses from Romans to explain the gospel to a friend: 3:23, 6:23, 5:8, and 10:9. That is a good use of the book. "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" (10:9). Paul is clear that faith comes from hearing the message (10:17), which is why we must tell it.

Don't skip chapter 16 either. It looks like a list of names, but look closer. It includes men and women, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, all serving Christ together. Paul calls them coworkers, beloved, and approved in Christ. That list is the gospel of chapters 1-15 lived out in a real church.

And when you finish chapter 11, stop and read Paul's song of praise: "O depth of riches and of wisdom and of knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and untraceable His ways!" (11:33). After eleven chapters of the deepest teaching in the Bible, Paul does not end with a lecture. He ends with worship. Good theology should do that to us too. Paul's prayer near the end of the letter is a fine prayer for anyone reading it: "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing" (15:13).

Study Questions

1. Why is Paul not ashamed of the gospel, and are there times when you are tempted to be (1:16-17)?
2. Why does Paul spend almost three chapters on sin before he gets to the good news (1:18-3:20)?
3. What does it mean to be justified by faith, and how does Abraham's example help you understand it (4:1-8)?
4. How does Romans 8 give you confidence when you go through hard times (8:28-39)?
5. What would it look like for you to offer yourself to God as a living sacrifice this week (12:1-2)?

Go deeper: My Romans Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

1 Corinthians

At a Glance	
Author	Paul the apostle, with Sosthenes (1:1)
Date written	About A.D. 55, from Ephesus (16:8)
Written to	The church in Corinth, a gifted but troubled church Paul had planted (1:2)
Setting and time covered	A letter written during Paul's long stay in Ephesus on his third journey, a few years after he founded the church (Acts 18)
Chapters	16
Key word	Correction
Key verse	1 Corinthians 1:18

Background

Corinth was not an easy place to plant a church. It sat on a narrow strip of land in southern Greece, with a harbor on each side, and ships and trade poured through it. It was rich, crowded and proud. It was also known all over the Roman world for its immorality. The city was full of temples to pagan gods, and worship in some of them was mixed with sexual sin. If you wanted to start a church in the hardest kind of city, Corinth would be a good choice.

Paul first came to Corinth on his second missionary journey, about A.D. 50, after preaching in Athens (Acts 18:1). There he met Aquila and Priscilla, a Jewish couple who made tents as he did. He preached in the synagogue until the Jews there opposed him, then moved next door into the house of a man named Titius Justus. Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed, along with many Corinthians (Acts 18:4-8). The Lord told Paul in a vision not to be afraid, because He had many people in that city (Acts 18:9-10). Paul stayed a year and six months (Acts 18:11). When the Jews brought him before the Roman governor Gallio, Gallio threw the case out (Acts 18:12-17). An inscription found at Delphi in Greece dates Gallio's time in office to about A.D. 51 to 52, one of the best fixed dates we have for Paul's life.

After Paul left, things began to go wrong. A few years later, while he was in Ephesus, about A.D. 55 (16:8), he heard reports from "those of Chloe" that the church was splitting into groups (1:11). Then three men from the church arrived, Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus (16:17), probably carrying a letter with questions. Paul writes back to answer the reports and the questions. This was not even his first letter to them. He mentions an earlier letter that we do not have (5:9).

Purpose

Paul writes to correct a church that had a lot of gifts but very little maturity. They were proud of their wisdom, their knowledge and their spiritual gifts. Yet they were divided into fan clubs, tolerating open sin, suing one another, confused about marriage, careless with idols, disorderly in worship, and some of them doubted the resurrection. Paul does not give up on them. He calls them "saints" (1:2) and thanks God for them (1:4). Then he takes the problems one at a time and brings each one back to the cross of Christ.

Why would Paul call such a messy church saints? Because a saint in the Bible is not a person who has reached perfection. It is a person God has set apart for Himself in Christ Jesus (1:2). The Corinthians were saints by God's call, and they needed to start living like it. That is true of every believer. Paul's method is always the same: become what you already are. He reminds them of who they are in Christ, then tells them to live that way. "And such were some of you," he writes after a list of terrible sins, "but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified" (6:11). The past is real, but it is not the last word.

Main Themes

The cross ends our pride. The Corinthians loved clever speakers. Paul reminds them that "the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1:18). He came to them with nothing but "Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (2:2). No one can boast before God (1:29).

One church, not many camps. Some said they followed Paul, some Apollos, some Peter, some Christ (1:12). Paul says the leaders are only servants: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing it to grow" (3:6). The church is God's field, God's building, and God's temple (3:9, 16).

Holiness in body and life. The Corinthians thought what they did with their bodies didn't matter. Paul says the body is "a temple of the Holy Spirit" and that believers "were bought with a price" (6:19-20). He tells the church to remove a man living in open sin (5:1-13), and he answers their questions about marriage and singleness (7).

Freedom limited by love. Is it wrong to eat meat offered to idols? Paul says an idol is nothing, but love will give up a right to keep from tripping up a weaker brother (8:9-13). Whatever we do, "do all things to the glory of God" (10:31).

Gifts, love and the resurrection. Spiritual gifts are given for the good of the whole body, not for show (12:7). Love matters more than any gift (13). And Christ's resurrection is the foundation of our faith and the guarantee of our own (15).

Outline

- Chapters 1-4: Divisions in the church and the wisdom of the cross
- Chapters 5-6: Moral problems: immorality and lawsuits
- Chapter 7: Marriage and singleness
- Chapters 8-10: Food offered to idols and Christian freedom
- Chapter 11: Worship and the Lord's Supper
- Chapters 12-14: Spiritual gifts and love
- Chapter 15: The resurrection
- Chapter 16: The collection for Jerusalem and final greetings

Key Verses

1 Corinthians 1:18 *For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is **the** power of God.*

The message of the cross looks foolish to the world, but it is God's power to save.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 *Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit **who is** in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.*

Your body belongs to God twice over: He made it, and He bought it with the blood of His Son.

1 Corinthians 10:13 *No temptation has taken you except what is human; and God **is** faithful, who will not let you be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way out, so that you may be able to endure **it**.*

Every believer faces temptation, but God is faithful. He will always provide a way to endure it.

1 Corinthians 13:13 *But now faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these **is** love.*

Faith and hope will one day give way to sight. Love will last forever.

1 Corinthians 15:3-4 *For I delivered to you among **the** first **things** what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He has been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,*

The gospel in its simplest form: Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was raised the third day, all according to the Scriptures.

Christ in 1 Corinthians

Paul shows Christ as the fulfillment of the Passover. "For also our Passover was sacrificed for us: Christ" (5:7). The lamb whose blood marked the doors in Egypt (Exodus 12:13) pointed ahead to Jesus, who died at Passover time to deliver His people from death.

He shows Christ as the Rock that went with Israel in the wilderness (10:4). The water that came from the rock in Exodus 17 was a picture of the life Christ gives. Paul says Israel's history happened "as examples" for us (10:6, 11).

In the Lord's Supper, believers "proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes" (11:26). Every time the church takes the bread and the cup, it looks back to the cross and forward to the return of Christ.

And in chapter 15, Christ is "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (15:20). The firstfruits were the first part of the harvest offered to God, the promise that the rest of the harvest was coming (Leviticus 23:10-11). Jesus rose first, and those who belong to Him will follow. He is also "the last Adam" (15:45). Through the first Adam came death. Through Christ comes resurrection life.

How It Fits the Whole Story

1 Corinthians 15 is one of the most important chapters in the Bible on what happens at the end. Paul says that if Christ has not been raised, "our preaching is empty, and your faith also is empty" (15:14). Everything stands or falls on the resurrection.

Then he tells us a mystery, a truth God had not revealed before: "we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in an instant, in the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet" (15:51-52). I believe this describes the rapture of the church, when Christ comes for His people before the seven-year Tribulation. The dead in Christ will be raised with bodies that can never die, and living believers will be changed in a moment. Paul describes the same event in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. After that comes the order of the end: Christ reigns until He has put all enemies under His feet, and the last enemy to be done away with is death (15:24-26). That fits the thousand-year kingdom of Revelation 20 and the final victory of Revelation 21.

The chapter ends with a shout of victory: "Where, O death, is your sting? Where, O Hades, is your victory?" (15:55). Death came into the world in Genesis 3. Here we see its end.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Chapters 12-14 deal with spiritual gifts, including tongues, prophecy and healing. Do those sign gifts continue today? Good teachers differ. Some believe they ended when the apostles died and the New Testament was finished. They read "whether tongues, they will cease" (13:8) together with Hebrews 2:3-4, which speaks of signs confirming the apostles' message. Others believe all the gifts continue until Christ returns, since Paul says the partial things will be done away when "the perfect" comes and we see "face to face" (13:10, 12), which they take to mean the Lord's return. Both sides agree on what Paul stresses most: every gift is for building up the church (14:12), love is the greater way (12:31-13:3), and "all things be done properly and in order" (14:40).

Chapters 11 and 14 also raise questions about head coverings and about women speaking in church (11:2-16; 14:34-35). Sincere believers read these passages in different ways, and I won't try to settle them in a short overview. Read them with the whole letter in view, and with a humble spirit.

Read It This Way

1 Corinthians is one of the most practical books in the Bible. Many of the problems the Corinthians faced are still with us: churches split over favorite preachers, believers fall into sexual sin, Christians take one another to court, and people argue over worship and gifts. As you read, notice how Paul answers each problem. He does not just give a rule. He goes back to the gospel. Divisions? Was Paul crucified for you (1:13)? Immorality? You were bought with a price (6:20). Lawsuits? You will judge angels (6:3). Pride in gifts? It is one Spirit who gives them all (12:11).

Watch for the phrase "Now concerning" (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12). It usually marks the next question from the Corinthians' letter. That helps you follow the structure.

Read chapter 13 in its setting. It is often read at weddings, and it fits well there, but Paul wrote it to a church fighting over spiritual gifts. "Love is patient, is kind; love is not envious; love does not

boast, is not puffed up" (13:4). Every one of those lines was a quiet rebuke to the Corinthians. Try putting your own name in place of the word love, and see how far you have to go.

Finally, read chapter 15 slowly, and let it give you hope. Paul ends the chapter not with a theory about the future but with a call to work: "be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord" (15:58). Because Christ is risen, nothing you do for Him is wasted.

Don't skip chapter 16 either. It shows Paul organizing a collection for the poor believers in Jerusalem, asking each believer to set something aside on the first day of the week (16:1-2). Giving was part of worship from the start, and it was a way for Gentile churches to show love to the Jewish believers who had first carried the gospel to them. The letter closes with an Aramaic prayer the early church must have used often, "Maran atha" (16:22), which means our Lord, come. It is a fitting last word for a church that needed to remember the Lord was coming back.

Study Questions

1. Why does the message of the cross seem foolish to the world, and why is it really God's power (1:18-25)?
2. What divisions do you see among believers today, and how does Paul's answer apply to them (3:1-9)?
3. How should knowing your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit change the way you live (6:12-20)?
4. Which line of Paul's description of love is hardest for you, and why (13:4-7)?
5. Why does Paul say our faith is empty if Christ has not been raised (15:12-20)?

Go deeper: My 1 Corinthians Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

2 Corinthians

At a Glance	
Author	Paul the apostle, with Timothy (1:1)
Date written	About A.D. 56, from Macedonia
Written to	The church in Corinth and the believers throughout Achaia, southern Greece (1:1)
Setting and time covered	Paul's third journey, after Titus brought him news from Corinth (7:5-7)
Chapters	13
Key word	Strength in weakness
Key verse	2 Corinthians 12:9

Background

2 Corinthians is the most personal letter Paul ever wrote. In Romans you see Paul the teacher. In 2 Corinthians you see Paul the pastor with his heart torn open. He talks about his fears, his tears, his sufferings and his love for a church that had hurt him badly. If you have ever served people who did not appreciate you, or been attacked by people you poured your life into, this letter will speak to you.

To understand it, you need the story behind it, and it takes a little piecing together. Paul planted the church in Corinth on his second journey, about A.D. 50 to 52, and stayed a year and a half (Acts 18:1-18). Later, from Ephesus, he wrote 1 Corinthians to deal with a long list of problems. After that, things got worse. Men came to Corinth who called themselves apostles. They were proud, impressive speakers, and they attacked Paul's character. They said he was weak in person, unimpressive as a speaker, and not to be trusted (10:10; 11:5-6).

Paul made a short, painful visit to Corinth that did not go well (2:1; 12:14; 13:1-2). Then he wrote a severe letter "through many tears" (2:4), and sent Titus to deliver it. Paul was so anxious about how the church would take it that he could not settle down to preach in Troas and went on to Macedonia to find Titus (2:12-13). When Titus finally arrived, he brought good news. Most of the church had repented and wanted to see Paul again (7:5-16). Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia, about A.D. 56, to tell them how glad he was, to prepare them for his third visit, and to deal with the false apostles who were still causing trouble.

Purpose

Paul writes to defend his ministry, but he does it in an unusual way. The false apostles boasted of their strength, their letters of recommendation, their visions and their speaking ability. Paul boasts of his weakness. He lists his beatings, his shipwrecks, his sleepless nights, and the daily pressure of his care for all the churches (11:23-28). He tells them about a "thorn in the flesh" God would not remove (12:7). His point is simple. God's power shows most clearly in weak people, so that everyone knows the power is God's.

Paul also writes to finish the collection for the poor believers in Jerusalem. The Corinthians had started giving a year earlier but had not finished (8:10-11; 9:2). Chapters 8 and 9 are the longest

passage in the New Testament on giving. Paul wanted the gift to be ready before he arrived, so no one would be embarrassed and so that the gift would be given freely and not squeezed out of them (9:3-5). He also sent trusted men with the money, so that no one could accuse him of mishandling it (8:20-21). That is a good lesson for any church that handles money: do what is right, and make sure it is seen to be right.

Main Themes

God comforts us so we can comfort others. Paul opens by praising "the Father of compassions and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction" (1:3-4). The comfort we receive in our trouble is meant to be passed on.

The glory of the New Covenant. A covenant is a binding agreement God makes with His people. The Old Covenant, the Law given at Sinai, was glorious, but it could only condemn. The New Covenant gives life by the Spirit (3:6). Believers, "with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory" (3:18).

Treasure in clay jars. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from us" (4:7). The gospel is the treasure. We are the cheap pots that carry it. Our outer man is wasting away, but the inner man is renewed day by day (4:16).

New creation and reconciliation. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (5:17). God has reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and now He sends us as "ambassadors" with one message: "be reconciled to God" (5:20).

Cheerful giving. Paul points to the poor churches of Macedonia, who gave beyond their means (8:1-5), and above all to Christ, who "became poor, being rich, so that you by His poverty might become rich" (8:9). "God loves a cheerful giver" (9:7).

Outline

- Chapters 1-7: Paul's ministry explained: his change of plans, the New Covenant, treasure in clay jars, and the ministry of reconciliation
- Chapters 8-9: The collection for the believers in Jerusalem
- Chapters 10-13: Paul defends his authority against the false apostles

Key Verses

2 Corinthians 4:7 *But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from us:*

The power is God's, not ours. That is why He puts His treasure in ordinary, breakable people.

2 Corinthians 5:17 *Therefore if anyone **is** in Christ, **he is** a new creation; the old things have passed away; look, all things have become new.*

Salvation is not a fresh coat of paint. It makes a person new from the inside out.

2 Corinthians 5:21 *For He made the One who did not know sin **to be** sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

The great exchange. Jesus took our sin, and we receive His righteousness.

2 Corinthians 9:7 *Each **one should give** just as he purposes in the heart, not out of grief or out of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.*

God cares about the heart behind the gift more than the size of it.

2 Corinthians 12:9 *And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*

The Lord's answer to Paul's prayer about the thorn. Grace was enough, and weakness became the place where Christ's power rested.

Christ in 2 Corinthians

The clearest picture of Christ in this letter is 5:21: "He made the One who did not know sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Jesus never sinned. But on the cross, God treated Him as the sin-bearer, the way the sacrificial animal in the Old Testament carried the sins of the people. Isaiah said the LORD would lay on His Servant the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6). In exchange, God credits Christ's perfect righteousness to everyone who believes. Some call this the great exchange. Nothing in our salvation depends on what we bring.

Paul also shows Christ as the fulfillment of God's promises: "as many as are the promises of God, in Him is the Yes, and in Him the Amen" (1:20). Every promise God made in the Old Testament finds its yes in Jesus.

And Christ is the glory of God. In chapter 3, Paul goes back to Exodus 34, when Moses' face shone after he had been with God, and he put a veil over it. The glory of the Old Covenant was real but fading. Now God has shone in our hearts "for the illumination of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (4:6). The same God who said "Let there be light" in Genesis 1:3 turns on the light in a sinner's heart.

How It Fits the Whole Story

2 Corinthians shows how the New Covenant promised by Jeremiah has come. Jeremiah said the days were coming when God would make a new covenant with Israel and Judah and write His law on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Paul says believers are "ministers of a new covenant" (3:6), and he says the Corinthians themselves are a letter written "not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God" on hearts of flesh (3:3).

It also points us to the future. Paul calls our present bodies an earthly tent that will be taken down, and says we have "a building from God" waiting, eternal in the heavens (5:1). He would rather "be absent out of the body and to be at home with the Lord" (5:8). That tells us that when a believer dies, he goes straight into the Lord's presence. Paul also reminds us that "it is necessary

for all of us to be made manifest before the judgment seat of Christ" (5:10). That is not a judgment to decide whether a believer is saved. It is the time when Christ will reward His people for how they lived and served. It should make us take our lives seriously.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Some scholars believe 2 Corinthians is really two or more letters joined together. They notice that chapters 1-9 are warm and full of relief, while chapters 10-13 are sharp and stern. Some think chapters 10-13 may be part of the severe letter Paul mentions in 2:4. Others believe it was one letter from the start, and that Paul turned to the false apostles at the end after dealing first with the majority who had repented. No ancient copy of 2 Corinthians exists without all thirteen chapters, and this chapter reads the letter as it has come down to us.

Teachers also wonder about Paul's thorn in the flesh (12:7). Some think it was an eye problem, pointing to Galatians 4:13-15 and 6:11. Others think it was some other illness, or a person who opposed him. Scripture doesn't tell us, and that may be on purpose. Whatever your thorn is, God's answer is the same: His grace is enough.

Read It This Way

This letter can be hard to follow, because Paul's emotions rise and fall, and he sometimes breaks off one subject to talk about another. In fact, he starts telling the story of looking for Titus in 2:12-13, then breaks off for almost five chapters on the ministry, and picks it up again in 7:5. Don't let that throw you. Paul was writing from a full heart, not building an outline.

Read it as the letter of a pastor who loved his people even when they did not love him back. "And I will most gladly spend and be utterly spent for your souls," he says, "even if, loving you more abundantly, I am loved less" (12:15). Many pastors and church workers have read those words with a lump in their throats.

Read chapters 4 and 5 when you are tired or discouraged. "Therefore we do not lose heart" (4:16). Paul could face beatings and prison because he looked "not at the things being seen but at the things not being seen" (4:18). The troubles of this life are light and momentary compared with the weight of glory coming.

Read chapters 8 and 9 before you decide what to give. Notice that Paul never sets a percentage. He talks about willingness, about fairness, and about the example of Christ. And he promises that "he who sows with blessings will also reap with blessings" (9:6), not as a get-rich scheme, but because God gives to the generous so they can keep on giving (9:8-11).

And read 11:23-12:10 slowly. Here is a man who had been flogged five times, beaten with rods three times, stoned once, and shipwrecked three times (11:24-25). He prayed three times for God to take away his thorn, and God said no. Yet he could write, "when I am weak, then I am strong" (12:10). That is the secret of real ministry.

One last thing. Notice how often Paul calls the Corinthians to examine themselves. "Test yourselves to see whether you are in the faith" (13:5). They had spent a lot of energy judging Paul. He turns the question around. Before we criticize the servants God sends us, we would do well to look honestly at our own hearts. The letter ends with one of the clearest blessings in the Bible,

naming the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit together: the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (13:14). That is where Paul wanted to leave a hurting church, and it is a good place for us to rest too.

Study Questions

1. How has God comforted you in a hard time, and who could you pass that comfort on to (1:3-7)?
2. What does it mean that we are being transformed into Christ's image, and how does that happen (3:17-18)?
3. Why does God put the treasure of the gospel in weak, breakable people like us (4:7-12)?
4. What does it mean to be an ambassador for Christ where you live and work (5:17-21)?
5. What weakness in your life might be the place where God wants to show His power (12:7-10)?

Go deeper: My 2 Corinthians Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Galatians

At a Glance	
Author	Paul the apostle (1:1)
Date written	About A.D. 49, before the Jerusalem council, if written to southern Galatia; some date it about A.D. 53 to 57
Written to	The churches of Galatia, in what is now central Turkey (1:2)
Setting and time covered	A letter written soon after Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13-14), when false teachers had followed him
Chapters	6
Key word	Freedom in Christ
Key verse	Galatians 2:16

Background

Galatians is the angriest letter Paul ever wrote, and for good reason. Every other letter he wrote to a church opens with thanks or praise to God. Galatians doesn't. After the shortest of greetings, Paul gets right to it: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting from the One who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel" (1:6). Something had gone badly wrong, and the gospel itself was at stake.

Here is what happened. Paul and Barnabas had preached the gospel in the region of Galatia, in towns like Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (Acts 13-14). Many Gentiles believed. After Paul left, other teachers arrived. They said that faith in Jesus was a good start, but Gentiles also needed to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses to be fully accepted by God. Circumcision was the sign God gave Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:10-14), and for a Jew it marked a man as one of God's covenant people. These teachers are often called Judaizers, from a word meaning to live like a Jew. They also attacked Paul. They said he was not a real apostle like the ones in Jerusalem, and that he had watered down the message to please Gentiles.

Paul answers both charges. He shows that his gospel came straight from Jesus Christ (1:11-12), that the apostles in Jerusalem agreed with it (2:1-10), and that he even had to correct Peter when Peter stopped eating with Gentile believers (2:11-14). Then he shows from Scripture that a person is made right with God by faith and not by works of the Law.

The letter does not tell us exactly when it was written or which Galatian churches it went to. The SLB introduction leans toward the southern churches and an early date, and many conservative scholars take that view. I explain the debate below.

Purpose

Paul writes to stop the Galatians from trading the gospel of grace for a gospel of grace plus works. He wants them to see that adding anything to Christ is not a small change. It turns the gospel into "a different gospel, which is not another" (1:6-7). If righteousness could come through keeping the Law, "then Christ died for nothing" (2:21).

He also writes to show what freedom in Christ really means. Freedom is not a license to sin. It is the freedom to walk by the Spirit and to serve one another in love.

Main Themes

There is only one gospel. Paul says that if anyone, "or an angel out of heaven," preaches a gospel contrary to the one he preached, "let him be accursed" (1:8). Strong words, but the stakes are eternal. A gospel that adds human works to the work of Christ cannot save.

Justified by faith, not by works of the Law. Justify means to declare righteous. Paul says three times in one verse that no one is justified by works of law, but by faith in Christ (2:16). Abraham himself was counted righteous because he believed God (3:6; Genesis 15:6).

The Law's job. If the Law cannot save, why did God give it? Paul says it was added because of transgressions (3:19), to show sin for what it is. It was "our child-guardian to Christ" (3:24). In Paul's world, a child-guardian was a household slave who watched over a boy until he grew up. Once the son was grown, he no longer needed the guardian.

Sons, not slaves. In Christ, believers are adopted as sons. God sent "the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, Abba! Father!" (4:6). Going back to the Law would be like a grown son choosing to live as a slave (4:7-9).

Walk by the Spirit. Freedom is not an excuse for the flesh, our sinful nature (5:13). The answer to sin is not more rules but the Spirit: "walk by the Spirit, and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh" (5:16). The Spirit produces His fruit in us (5:22-23).

Outline

- Chapters 1-2: Paul's gospel came from God, not from men
- Chapters 3-4: Saved by faith, not by the Law: Abraham, the purpose of the Law, sons and heirs, Hagar and Sarah
- Chapters 5-6: Living in freedom by the Spirit

Key Verses

Galatians 1:8 *But even if we, or an angel out of heaven, should preach the gospel to you contrary to what we preached to you, let him be accursed.*

There is no other gospel. Not even an angel has the right to change it.

Galatians 2:16 *knowing that a man is not justified by works of law except through faith of Jesus Christ, even we believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith of Christ and not by works of law; because by works of law no flesh will be justified.*

The heart of the letter. We are justified by faith in Christ, not by works of law.

Galatians 2:20 *I have been crucified with Christ; and I live—no longer I, but Christ lives in me; and what I now live in **the** flesh, I live in faith, that of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.*

The Christian life in one verse. My old self was crucified with Christ, and now I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me.

Galatians 5:1 *In the freedom with which Christ set us free, stand firm therefore, and do not be entangled again in a yoke of slavery.*

Christ set us free. Don't go back under the yoke.

Galatians 5:22-23 *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such **things** there is no law.*

The fruit of the Spirit is one fruit with nine flavors. It is what the Spirit grows in a life that walks with Him.

Christ in Galatians

Paul ties Christ directly to the Old Testament in two places. The first is the curse of the Law. Deuteronomy 21:23 said that a man hanged on a tree was cursed. Paul says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us" (3:13). Jesus took the curse we earned by breaking the Law, so that the blessing promised to Abraham could come to the Gentiles (3:14).

The second is the seed of Abraham. God made His promises to Abraham and to his seed (Genesis 12:7; 22:18). Paul points out that the word is singular: "And to your seed," who is Christ (3:16). The promise God made to Abraham always pointed to one Descendant, Jesus. Everyone who belongs to Christ becomes Abraham's seed too, "heirs according to promise" (3:29).

Paul also gives the timing of Christ's coming: "when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under law" (4:4). Jesus came at exactly the moment God had planned, as a real man, under the Law, to redeem those under the Law.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Galatians shows how the promise to Abraham and the Law of Moses fit together. Some people think God saved people by the Law in the Old Testament and by grace in the New. Paul says no. The promise came first. God made His covenant with Abraham, and Abraham was counted righteous by faith. The Law came 430 years later and could not cancel the promise (3:17). The Law was a temporary guardian until Christ came. The way of salvation has always been grace through faith.

Paul also says the Scripture "preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham: In you all the nations will be blessed" (3:8). The gospel going to the Gentiles in Acts was not a change of plan. It was God's plan from Genesis 12:3.

In chapter 4 Paul uses the story of Abraham's two sons as a picture (4:21-31). Ishmael was born to Hagar, a slave woman, when Abraham and Sarah tried to bring about God's promise in their own strength (Genesis 16). Isaac was born to Sarah, the free woman, by God's power and promise when

it was humanly impossible (Genesis 21:1-3). Paul says Hagar stands for the covenant from Mount Sinai, which produces slaves, and Sarah stands for the promise, which produces free sons. Paul is not saying Genesis is only a story. He is drawing a lesson from real history. Trying to please God by the Law is like trying to make the promise happen by human effort. It only produces slavery. Believers, like Isaac, are "children of promise" (4:28).

Galatians shows us that Jew and Gentile now stand on the same ground in Christ. "There is not Jew nor Greek, there is not slave nor free, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:28). That does not erase every difference between people, and it does not cancel God's future promises to the nation of Israel (Romans 11:25-29). It means that no one is closer to God or more accepted by Him because of their birth, their status or their religious performance.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Who were the Galatians, and when did Paul write? Galatia was the name of an old region in central Turkey, settled by people called Galatians, and also the name of a larger Roman province that reached farther south. Many conservative scholars hold the south Galatia view. They believe Paul wrote to the churches in the southern part of the province, the ones he planted on his first journey (Acts 13-14), about A.D. 48 or 49, just before the Jerusalem council of Acts 15. If so, Galatians may be the first letter Paul wrote, and that would explain why he never mentions the council's decision, which would have settled the argument for him.

Others hold the north Galatia view. They believe Paul wrote to churches in the old ethnic region farther north, which he may have visited on his second or third journey (Acts 16:6; 18:23). They usually date the letter later, about A.D. 53 to 57, and they note how close its teaching is to Romans. Both views are held by faithful scholars. The SLB introduction leans toward the south, but the message of the letter is the same either way.

Read It This Way

Galatians is short enough to read in one sitting, and you should read it that way first. Feel the heat in it. Paul is not calm, and he is not trying to be. When the gospel is under attack, love for people sometimes sounds sharp. "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" (3:1). But listen to his heart too: "my little children, for whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you" (4:19).

Then ask where this letter speaks to you. Few of us are tempted to be circumcised. But many believers slip into thinking that God accepts them because of what they do: going to church, reading the Bible, giving, avoiding certain sins. Those are good things. But if we start trusting them instead of Christ, we have drifted into the same error as the Galatians. You are not justified by your performance. You are justified by faith in Jesus.

The opposite danger is just as real. Some people hear about grace and decide that how they live doesn't matter. Paul shuts that door too. "Do not be led astray; God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (6:7). Read chapter 5 carefully. The works of the flesh are plain, and Paul warns that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (5:19-21). The fruit of the Spirit is what grace grows. And grace makes us gentle with one another. When a brother is caught in a sin, those who are spiritual should restore him "in a spirit of gentleness," watching themselves so they are not tempted too (6:1). "Bear one another's burdens, and thus

fulfill the law of Christ" (6:2). Legalism tends to make people harsh and proud. The gospel makes them humble and kind.

Last, notice how Paul closes. He takes the pen from his helper and writes the final lines himself, in large letters (6:11). His last word is about the cross: "may it not be to boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (6:14). Everything in this letter comes back to that. The cross is where the Law's curse was paid and where our boasting ends. If you ever find yourself trusting your own record before God, come back to Galatians and stand at the cross again. That is where freedom starts, and that is where it stays.

Study Questions

1. Why does Paul say that adding anything to the gospel makes it a different gospel (1:6-9)?
2. What did Peter do wrong at Antioch, and why did Paul confront him in public (2:11-16)?
3. What does it mean to you personally that "I have been crucified with Christ" (2:20)?
4. If the Law cannot save, why did God give it (3:19-25)?
5. Which part of the fruit of the Spirit do you most need Him to grow in you right now (5:16-25)?

Go deeper: My Galatians Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Ephesians

At a Glance	
Author	Paul the apostle (1:1), writing from prison (3:1; 4:1)
Date written	About A.D. 60 to 62, from Rome
Written to	The believers in Ephesus, and likely other churches in the province of Asia (1:1)
Setting and time covered	A letter from Paul's house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:16, 30), carried by Tychicus (6:21-22)
Chapters	6
Key word	In Christ
Key verse	Ephesians 2:8-9

Background

Ephesians is one of four letters Paul wrote while under arrest, often called the Prison Letters. The other three are Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. Paul calls himself "the prisoner of Christ Jesus" (3:1) and "the prisoner in the Lord" (4:1), and he asks for prayer that he would speak boldly even in chains (6:19-20). Most of those who hold that Paul wrote it believe he wrote from Rome during his house arrest, around A.D. 60 to 62 (Acts 28:16, 30).

Ephesus was one of the largest cities in the Roman province of Asia, on the west coast of what is now Turkey. It was a busy port and trade center, and it was home to the great temple of the goddess Artemis, one of the wonders of the ancient world. Paul spent about three years there on his third journey (Acts 19:1-20; 20:31). The city was full of idol worship and magic. When people came to Christ there, many of them burned their books of magic in public (Acts 19:19). So many turned from idols that the silversmiths who made little shrines of Artemis started a riot (Acts 19:23-41).

Most of our Bibles say the letter was written to "the saints who are in Ephesus" (1:1). A few of the oldest Greek copies leave out the words "in Ephesus." For that reason, many scholars believe Ephesians was a circular letter, meant to be read in Ephesus first and then passed around to other churches in the area. That would also explain why a letter to a church Paul knew so well has no personal greetings. Either way, the readers were mostly Gentile believers (2:11; 3:1).

Tychicus carried this letter (6:21-22), and he also carried the letter to the Colossians (Colossians 4:7-9). Paul wrote the two at about the same time, to churches in the same region, which helps explain why they share so many themes and phrases.

The letter names Paul as its author twice (1:1; 3:1). Many modern scholars, though not all, believe a follower of Paul wrote it in his name after his death. They point to its long sentences, some words Paul does not use elsewhere, and its close likeness to Colossians. I take the letter at its word. It names Paul, speaks of his chains as a present fact, asks for prayer for his preaching, and sends news of him by a man the readers knew. Those are the marks of a real letter from a real prisoner.

Purpose

Ephesians is different from most of Paul's letters. He is not writing to fix a crisis, as in Galatians or 1 Corinthians. He writes to show believers how rich they already are in Christ, to show that Jews and Gentiles are now one body in Him, and to call them to live in a way that fits that calling.

Many Bible teachers have noticed that Ephesians moves from sitting, to walking, to standing. In chapter 2, God has "seated us together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (2:6). In chapters 4 and 5, Paul tells us five times how to walk (4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15). In chapter 6, he tells us to stand firm against the enemy (6:11, 13-14). That simple pattern is a good way to remember the whole letter. First we rest in what Christ has done. Then we live it out. Then we hold our ground.

Main Themes

Every spiritual blessing in Christ. God "blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (1:3). Paul lists them: chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, given understanding of God's plan, and sealed with the Holy Spirit (1:4-14). The phrase "in Christ" or "in Him" runs through the whole chapter.

Saved by grace through faith. We were "dead in the trespasses and the sins" (2:1). "But God, being rich in mercy" made us alive with Christ (2:4-5). Salvation is a gift, "not from works, so that no one may boast" (2:9). Good works follow salvation; they do not cause it (2:10).

One new body. Jews and Gentiles had been divided by a wall of hostility. Christ "Himself is our peace, who made both one and broke down the middle wall of the barrier" (2:14). Paul calls this a mystery, a truth once hidden and now revealed: "that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body" (3:6).

Walk worthy. The second half of the letter shows what that calling looks like: unity in the church (4:1-16), putting off the old self and putting on the new (4:17-32), walking in love and light (5:1-14), being filled with the Spirit (5:18), and living as Christ's people in marriage, family and work (5:21-6:9).

Stand firm in the battle. "Our wrestling is not against blood and flesh" (6:12), but against spiritual forces of evil. God gives His people His full armor so they can stand (6:10-18).

Outline

- Chapters 1-3: Our riches in Christ: every spiritual blessing, made alive by grace, one body, and Paul's prayers
- Chapters 4-6:9: Our walk in Christ: unity, holiness, love, light, and life at home and at work
- Chapter 6:10-24: Our battle in Christ: the armor of God and final words

Key Verses

Ephesians 1:3 *Blessed **be** the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly **places** in Christ,*

Paul opens with praise. Every spiritual blessing is already ours, and every one is found in Christ.

Ephesians 2:8-9 *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this **is** not from yourselves; the gift **is** of God, not from works, so that no one may boast.*

Salvation in a sentence. Grace is the source, faith is the means, and boasting is ruled out.

Ephesians 2:10 *For we are His workmanship, having been created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.*

We are not saved by good works, but we are saved for them. God has prepared them for us.

Ephesians 4:1 *I, therefore, the prisoner in **the** Lord, exhort you to walk worthily of the calling with which you were called,*

The hinge of the letter. Because of all God has done, walk in a way that fits your calling.

Ephesians 6:10-11 *Finally, my brothers, be empowered in **the** Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God so that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil,*

The strength for the battle is the Lord's, and the armor is God's. Our job is to put it on and stand.

Christ in Ephesians

Christ fills this letter. God's whole plan is "to sum up all things in Christ, both the things in the heavens and the things on the earth" (1:10). God raised Him from the dead, seated Him at His right hand far above every power, "and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body" (1:20-23). Paul uses Psalm 8:6 here, "He put all things under His feet," to show that the risen Jesus is the true Man who rules over creation.

Christ is also the cornerstone of a new temple. Believers are "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the cornerstone" (2:20). In the Old Testament, God dwelt in the tabernacle and then the temple. Now He dwells by His Spirit in His people (2:21-22).

And Christ is the Bridegroom. In 5:25-32, Paul quotes Genesis 2:24, the first marriage in Eden, and says, "This mystery is great, but I speak with reference to Christ and to the church" (5:32). From the beginning, God meant marriage to be a picture of Christ's love for His people. Husbands are to love their wives "even as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (5:25).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Ephesians shows the church as God's new creation, made up of Jews and Gentiles together. In the Old Testament, Gentiles were "strangers to the covenants of the promise, not having hope and without God in the world" (2:12). Now they are fellow citizens and members of God's household

(2:19). That is God keeping His promise to Abraham that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3).

Paul calls the church a mystery that was "not made known to the sons of men" in other generations as it has now been revealed (3:5). That matters for how we read the whole Bible. The church is not simply Israel under a new name. It is something new, one body made of believing Jews and Gentiles in this present age. God's promises to Israel as a nation still stand (Romans 11:25-29), and the church does not replace them.

Ephesians also points to the future. The Holy Spirit is "the pledge of our inheritance" (1:14), a down payment that guarantees the rest is coming. Christ is cleansing His church now so that He may present her to Himself in glory, "not having spot or wrinkle" (5:27). That is a picture of the day He comes for His bride.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Ephesians 1:4-5 says God "chose us in Him before the foundation of the world" and "predestined us" to adoption as sons. Bible teachers have long disagreed about how God's choosing works. Some believe God chose specific people for salvation based only on His own will and grace. Others believe God chose, in Christ, all who He knew would believe, based on His foreknowledge (Romans 8:29; 1 Peter 1:1-2). Both sides agree that salvation is God's work from start to finish, and that every person is called to repent and believe (Acts 17:30). I have chosen not to settle this question here. What the verses plainly say is enough to humble us and to give us great security: God set His love on His people before time began.

Teachers also discuss whether the gifts of apostles and prophets in 4:11 continue today. Since Paul says the church was built on "the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (2:20), many believe those roles were for the founding of the church. Others believe some form of them continues. Both agree that the purpose of every gift is "the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry" (4:12).

Read It This Way

Read Ephesians slowly. Chapter 1:3-14 is one long sentence in the original Greek, and Paul can hardly stop to take a breath. Read it out loud and let the praise sink in before you look at the details.

Notice Paul's two prayers. In 1:15-23 he prays that believers would know the hope of God's calling, the riches of His inheritance, and the greatness of His power. In 3:14-21 he prays that they would be strengthened by the Spirit and know the love of Christ that goes beyond knowledge. Pray those prayers for yourself and for others. They are better than most of what we usually ask for. And then Paul ends with praise to the God "who is able to do above all things, far more abundantly than what we ask or think" (3:20).

Don't jump to chapters 4-6 too fast. Many people love the practical part of Ephesians and skip the first three chapters. But Paul does not tell us how to walk until he has told us where we sit. If you try to live chapters 4-6 without the truth of chapters 1-3, you will wear yourself out. The commands rest on the blessings.

When you get to the armor of God (6:10-18), notice that every piece is something God has already provided: truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation and the word of God. The armor is really Christ Himself. And notice what comes right after the armor: prayer, at all times, in the Spirit, for all the saints (6:18). A soldier who puts on the armor and never prays is not ready for battle.

Last, read the household section (5:21-6:9) with the rest of the letter in view. It begins with all believers submitting to one another in the fear of Christ (5:21). Wives, husbands, children, fathers, servants and masters each get a word, and every word is tied to the Lord. A Christian home and a Christian workplace are where the riches of chapters 1-3 get lived out on ordinary days.

Study Questions

1. Which of the spiritual blessings in 1:3-14 means the most to you, and why (1:3-14)?
2. What does it mean that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works, and why does that rule out boasting (2:8-10)?
3. How did Christ break down the wall between Jews and Gentiles, and what walls in your church or life does He want to break down (2:11-22)?
4. What does it look like for you to "walk worthily of the calling" this week (4:1-3)?
5. Which piece of the armor of God do you most need to put on right now (6:10-18)?

Go deeper: My Ephesians Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Philippians

At a Glance	
Author	Paul the apostle, with Timothy (1:1)
Date written	About A.D. 61 to 62, from prison in Rome
Written to	The church at Philippi, the first church Paul planted in Europe (1:1; Acts 16)
Setting and time covered	A thank-you letter from Paul's house arrest, sent back with Epaphroditus (2:25-30; 4:18)
Chapters	4
Key word	Joy
Key verse	Philippians 1:21

Background

Philippians is a thank-you note from a prisoner, and it is full of joy. That alone should make us stop and think. Paul was chained to Roman soldiers, waiting for a trial that could end in his death. Some preachers in the city were trying to make his life harder (1:15-17). And yet the words joy and rejoice run all through this short letter. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice" (4:4). Paul had learned something about joy that does not depend on how things are going.

The church in Philippi had a remarkable start. On his second missionary journey, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia begging him to come over and help (Acts 16:9). Paul crossed the sea into Europe and came to Philippi, a Roman colony in northern Greece. Many retired Roman soldiers lived there, and its people were proud of their Roman citizenship. There was no synagogue, so Paul went down to the river on the Sabbath where some women gathered to pray. A businesswoman named Lydia, a seller of purple cloth, believed, and the church began in her home (Acts 16:13-15). Then Paul cast a spirit out of a slave girl, her owners had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown in jail, and at midnight, while the two men were praying and singing hymns, an earthquake shook the prison open. The jailer and his whole household came to faith that night (Acts 16:16-34). So the first church in Europe started with a businesswoman, a former slave girl, and a Roman jailer. Only God could put that group together.

The Philippians loved Paul. They sent him money more than once when he was in need (4:15-16). When they heard he was in prison, they sent a gift with a man named Epaphroditus. While he was with Paul, Epaphroditus became so sick he nearly died (2:25-27). When he recovered, Paul sent him home with this letter. Most Bible teachers believe Paul wrote from Rome during his house arrest, about A.D. 61 to 62 (Acts 28:16, 30). He mentions the whole praetorian guard, the emperor's soldiers, and the saints "of Caesar's household" (1:13; 4:22), which fits Rome well.

Purpose

Paul writes to thank the Philippians for their gift and for their partnership in the gospel "from the first day until now" (1:5). He writes to tell them how he is doing and to calm their worries about him. He wants them to know that his chains have actually helped the gospel spread (1:12-14).

He also writes to encourage unity. Two women in the church, Euodia and Syntyche, had fallen out with each other, and Paul begs them to agree in the Lord (4:2-3). He calls the whole church to humility, pointing them to the example of Christ (2:1-11). And he warns them about false teachers who put their confidence in the flesh, especially those who demanded that Gentile believers be circumcised (3:2-3).

Paul also gives them hope about his own future. He expected to be released and to see them again (1:25-26; 2:24). Many believe that is what happened: Paul was set free after this first Roman imprisonment, traveled again, and later was arrested a second time, when he wrote 2 Timothy. Scripture does not give us the details of those years, but the Pastoral Letters fit best in that time. Either way, Paul was at peace. He told the Philippians that whether he lived or died, Christ would be magnified in his body (1:20). That is the settled heart of a man who has nothing left to lose because he has already given everything to Christ.

Main Themes

Joy in every circumstance. Paul rejoices that Christ is preached, even by people with bad motives (1:18). He rejoices in the Philippians' faith (4:10). He calls them to rejoice in the Lord always (4:4). His joy did not depend on his circumstances but on his Lord.

To live is Christ. "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (1:21). Paul was ready either way. If he lived, he would serve Christ. If he died, he would "be with Christ, which is very much better" (1:23).

The humble mind of Christ. Paul tells the church to do "nothing according to selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility considering one another as surpassing yourselves" (2:3). Then he points to Jesus, who emptied Himself and became obedient to death on a cross (2:5-8).

Knowing Christ above all. Paul had every reason to boast in his religious background (3:4-6). He counts it all as loss "because of the surpassing worth of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" (3:8). His goal is "to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings" (3:10).

Peace and contentment. Instead of worrying, pray about everything with thanksgiving, and "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts" (4:6-7). Paul had learned "to be content in whatever circumstances I am" (4:11).

Outline

- Chapter 1: Paul's chains and Paul's joy
- Chapter 2: The mind of Christ, and the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus
- Chapter 3: Knowing Christ and pressing on toward the goal
- Chapter 4: Unity, peace, contentment and thanks for the gift

Key Verses

Philippians 1:6 *being confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will complete **it** until **the** day of Jesus Christ;*

What God starts, He finishes. The good work He began in every believer will be completed.

Philippians 1:21 *For to me, to live **is** Christ, and to die **is** gain.*

Paul's whole life summed up. Christ was his reason for living, and death would only bring him closer.

Philippians 2:5-8 *For let this be thought in you which **was** also in Christ Jesus, who, existing in **the** form of God, did not consider being equal with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, having taken **the** form of a slave, having come to be in **the** likeness of men; and having been found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself, having become obedient as far as death, even death of a cross.*

The humility of Christ, who left the glory of heaven to become a servant and die on a cross. This is the attitude Paul calls us to share.

Philippians 3:8 *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*

Nothing compares to knowing Christ. Paul counted everything else as rubbish.

Philippians 4:13 *I have strength **for** all things in the **One** who strengthens me, Christ.*

In context, this is about contentment. Paul could face plenty or hunger because Christ gave him strength.

Christ in Philippians

The great passage on Christ in this letter is 2:5-11. Many believe it may have been an early Christian hymn. It shows Jesus "existing in the form of God," fully God, yet He "did not consider being equal with God a thing to be grasped" (2:6). He did not cling to His rights. He "emptied Himself, having taken the form of a slave" (2:7). He did not stop being God. He took on a full human nature and set aside His glory and the use of His rights. Then He went lower still, "obedient as far as death, even death of a cross" (2:8). The cross was the death of slaves and criminals, the most shameful death the Romans knew.

Then the passage turns. "Therefore God also highly exalted Him and granted to Him a name, the one above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (2:9-10). Those words echo Isaiah 45:23, where the LORD says, "to Me every knee will bow." Paul takes words spoken by the LORD, the one true God, and applies them to Jesus. That is one of the clearest statements in the Bible that Jesus is God.

In Isaiah, the Servant of the LORD was humbled and then "lifted up and exalted" (Isaiah 52:13). Philippians 2 shows Jesus as that Servant: first the humbling, then the glory.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Philippians shows us the whole sweep of Christ's story in a few verses: from eternity as God, to His birth as a man, to the cross, to His exaltation, to the day when every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (2:6-11). That last part has not happened yet. One day it will. Some will bow in worship. Others will bow because they must. But every knee will bow.

Paul also looks forward to Christ's return. "For our citizenship exists in the heavens, from which also we eagerly await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform the body of our humiliation, so that it may become conformed to the body of His glory" (3:20-21). The Philippians were proud of being Roman citizens. Paul reminds them that their true citizenship is in heaven. We are waiting, not for death, but for the Savior. When He comes for His people, He will change our weak, dying bodies into bodies like His own resurrection body. Paul describes that change in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 and 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.

Paul calls that future moment "the day of Jesus Christ" (1:6), or "the day of Christ" (1:10; 2:16). He is confident that God will finish what He began in us by that day. Our salvation does not depend on how strong our grip is. It depends on the faithfulness of the One who started it.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Where was Paul when he wrote? Most Bible teachers believe he wrote from Rome during his house arrest, and that is the view I follow here. Some scholars suggest he wrote from an imprisonment in Ephesus, which would bring the date a few years earlier, into the mid-50s. Acts does not mention an imprisonment in Ephesus, though Paul does say he was often in prison (2 Corinthians 11:23). The mention of the praetorian guard and Caesar's household fits Rome best. The message of the letter is the same either way.

Read It This Way

Philippians is a short letter, only four chapters. Read it in one sitting, and then read it again in a week. As you read, circle every time Paul says joy or rejoice. Then circle every time he mentions Christ. You will find that the two go together. Paul's joy came from Christ, not from his comfort.

Notice how real the people are. Timothy, whom Paul trusts more than anyone (2:19-22). Epaphroditus, who almost died serving Paul and was more worried that the church would be upset about his illness than about himself (2:25-30). Euodia and Syntyche, two faithful women who had worked hard alongside Paul and now couldn't get along (4:2-3). This is a real church with real people, and that makes the letter easy to apply.

Be careful with 4:13: "I have strength for all things in the One who strengthens me, Christ." It is often quoted by athletes and on coffee mugs, as if it means Christ will help us win any game or reach any goal. Read the verses around it. Paul has just said he learned to be content whether he had plenty or was going hungry (4:11-12). The verse is about strength to be content in any situation, including hard ones. That is a far greater promise than winning a game.

And when you are anxious, turn to 4:6-8. Pray about everything. Give thanks. Then fill your mind with what is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely and worthy of praise. That is not just positive thinking. It is setting your mind on God and His works, and God promises His peace will guard

your heart. Notice too that Paul does not say the problem goes away. He says peace stands guard, like a soldier at a gate. The Philippians, living in a city full of Roman soldiers, would have pictured that easily.

One more thing. Paul says, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (2:12). That does not mean work for your salvation. The next verse explains: "God is the One who is working in you" (2:13). God works it in. We work it out, into our everyday lives. That is how the joy of this letter becomes real. It is not a mood we work up. It is the fruit of God at work in us, showing itself in humble service, honest prayer and a settled trust that the One who began the work will finish it.

Study Questions

1. How could Paul be full of joy while he was in prison, and what can you learn from him (1:12-21)?
2. What does Christ's humility teach you about how to treat other people (2:3-8)?
3. What things in your life might you need to count as loss for the sake of knowing Christ (3:7-11)?
4. What does it mean that our citizenship is in heaven, and how should that change how you live now (3:20-21)?
5. What worry do you need to turn into prayer with thanksgiving today (4:6-7)?

Go deeper: My Philippians Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Colossians

At a Glance	
Author	Paul the apostle, with Timothy (1:1)
Date written	About A.D. 60 to 62, from prison in Rome
Written to	The believers in Colossae, a church Paul had never visited (1:2; 2:1)
Setting and time covered	A letter from Paul's house arrest, carried by Tychicus with Onesimus (4:7-9)
Chapters	4
Key word	Christ is supreme
Key verse	Colossians 2:9-10

Background

Colossae was a small town in the Lycus River valley, in what is now western Turkey, about a hundred miles inland from Ephesus. It had once been an important city, but by Paul's day it had been passed by its larger neighbors, Laodicea and Hierapolis (4:13). If you were picking a place for one of the greatest letters about Jesus ever written, you probably would not have picked Colossae. God did.

Paul had never been there (2:1). The church was started by a man named Epaphras, one of their own, who had likely heard the gospel during Paul's long stay in Ephesus, when "all those dwelling in Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10). Epaphras carried the gospel home (1:7). Later he traveled to Rome to see Paul, who was under house arrest, and told him about the church. Most of the news was good. They had faith in Christ and love for all the saints (1:4). But a false teaching had begun to creep in, and Paul wrote to stop it before it took root.

Paul wrote Colossians from prison (4:3, 10, 18), about A.D. 60 to 62, at the same time as Ephesians and Philemon. Tychicus carried the letter, and with him went Onesimus, a runaway slave who had become a believer and was going home to his master in Colossae (4:7-9). Paul also tells the Colossians to swap letters with the church in Laodicea (4:16).

Purpose

Paul writes to show that Christ is supreme over everything and that He is all a believer needs. The false teaching in Colossae seems to have mixed several things. It had Jewish rules about food, feast days and Sabbaths (2:16). It had the "worship of the angels" and claims of special visions (2:18). It had strict rules about what not to handle, taste or touch (2:21). And it had a kind of human "philosophy and empty deceit" (2:8) that claimed to offer something more than the plain gospel. Scripture doesn't give us a name for this teaching, and scholars have tried to identify it in different ways. What is clear is what it did: it made Christ smaller and added things to Him.

Paul's answer is not to add something new to the Colossians' faith. His answer is to show them how big Christ already is. If you have Christ, you have everything. "In Him dwells all the fullness of the Deity bodily, and you have been filled in Him" (2:9-10).

Main Themes

Christ is Lord of creation. He is "the image of the invisible God" and "in Him all things were created" (1:15-16). He is "before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (1:17). The angels the false teachers wanted to worship were created by Him and for Him.

Christ is Lord of the church. "He is the head of the body, the church" and "the firstborn from the dead, so that in all things He Himself may come to hold first place" (1:18). Every believer is joined to Him and grows from Him (2:19).

Christ is enough. All the fullness of God dwells in Christ, and believers are complete in Him (2:9-10). There is nothing to add: no secret knowledge, no special rules, no angel worship. Those things are "a shadow of the things coming, but the body is of Christ" (2:17).

Raised with Christ, set your minds above. Because believers have died and been raised with Christ, they should "seek the things above, where Christ is" (3:1) and "set your minds on the things above, not the things on the earth" (3:2).

Put off the old, put on the new. Paul tells believers to put to death sinful practices and put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (3:5-14). The new life shows in the home, at work, in prayer and in how we speak to outsiders (3:18-4:6).

Outline

- Chapter 1: The supremacy of Christ: Paul's thanks and prayer, the hymn to Christ, and Paul's ministry
- Chapter 2: Freedom from false teaching: complete in Christ
- Chapters 3-4: The new life in Christ: the mind set above, the new self, the home, prayer and final greetings

Key Verses

Colossians 1:15-16 *who is **the** image of the invisible God, **the** firstborn of all creation; because in Him all things were created, the **things** in the heavens and the **things** on the earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or lordships or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and for Him.*

Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God and the Creator of everything, including every power in heaven.

Colossians 1:18 *And He is the head of the body, the church; who is **the** beginning, **the** firstborn from the dead, so that in all things He Himself may come to hold first place;*

Christ holds first place in creation, in the church and in the resurrection. He must hold first place in our lives too.

Colossians 2:9-10 *for in Him dwells all the fullness of the Deity bodily, and you have been filled in Him, who is the head of every ruler and authority;*

All of God lives in Christ in bodily form, and we are filled in Him. We do not need anything more.

Colossians 3:2 *Set **your** minds on the things above, not the things on the earth.*

The Christian mind is set on things above, where Christ is.

Colossians 3:17 *And everything, whatever you do in word or in deed, **do** all in **the** name of **the** Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the God and Father through Him.*

Everything we do, in word or deed, is to be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, with thanks.

Christ in Colossians

Colossians 1:15-20 is one of the highest views of Christ in the Bible. Some have called it a hymn. Paul calls Jesus "the firstborn of all creation" (1:15). That does not mean Jesus was the first thing God made. The very next verse says all things were created in Him. In the Old Testament, "firstborn" was a title of rank and inheritance. God called Israel His firstborn (Exodus 4:22), and He said of David's line, "I also will make him the firstborn" (Psalm 89:27), even though David was the youngest son in his family. Firstborn means the One with the highest place, the heir of all.

Paul also ties Christ to Genesis. Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (1:15). Adam was made in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27), and that image was damaged by sin. Christ is the perfect image, and believers are being renewed "according to the image of the One who created him" (3:10).

And Paul shows how Christ fulfills the Law's shadows. Food laws, feast days, new moons and Sabbaths were "a shadow of the things coming, but the body is of Christ" (2:16-17). A shadow tells you something real is nearby. Once the real thing arrives, you don't keep staring at the shadow.

Paul also tells us the heart of the "mystery" God had kept hidden for ages and has now revealed: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27). In the Old Testament, God dwelt among Israel in the tabernacle and the temple. Now Christ Himself lives in every believer, Jew or Gentile, by His Spirit. That is why Paul's goal in ministry was to "present every man perfect in Christ Jesus" (1:28). He did not aim to make people religious. He aimed to make them mature in Christ. Every teacher and every church should have the same goal.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Colossians takes us from creation to the end. Christ made all things (1:16). Christ holds all things together right now (1:17). Christ reconciled all things to God by "the blood of His cross" (1:20). And Christ will one day be revealed in glory, "then you also will be revealed with Him in glory" (3:4). Our lives are hidden with Christ in God for now (3:3), but the day is coming when what is hidden will be seen.

At the cross, God dealt with our debt. Paul says God made us alive with Christ, "having forgiven you all the trespasses, having blotted out the handwriting against us" (2:13-14). The picture is of a written record of debt, a list of everything we owed. God nailed it to the cross. He also disarmed the spiritual powers and made a public display of them, triumphing over them in Christ (2:15). Whatever power the false teachers feared, Christ had already defeated it.

The letter also shows how the gospel spreads. It was in all the world and "bearing fruit" (1:6). Epaphras brought it to a small town. Paul wrote to them from a prison cell. And the letter, passed from church to church, is still being read today.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Paul says, "fill up in turn the things lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His body, which is the church" (1:24). What could be lacking in Christ's afflictions? Good teachers explain it in different ways, but all who hold to the rest of Scripture agree on one thing: nothing is lacking in Christ's suffering to pay for sin. The letter itself says He made peace "through the blood of His cross" (1:20) and forgave all our trespasses (2:13). Many take Paul to mean that Christ still suffers in His people, as He told Saul on the Damascus road (Acts 9:4), and that Paul gladly shared those sufferings so the gospel could reach the church. Others think Paul means the sufferings the church must go through before Christ returns. Either way, the cross is complete.

Read It This Way

Read Colossians next to Ephesians. The two were written at the same time and carried by the same man, and they share many phrases. Ephesians focuses on the church, the body of Christ. Colossians focuses on Christ, the head of the body. Reading them together helps you see both.

When you read chapter 1, slow down at verses 15-20 and read them several times. Make a list of everything Paul says about Christ. Then ask yourself: Is my view of Jesus that big? Many believers trust Jesus for forgiveness but live as if He has little to do with their work, their money or their worries. Paul says He holds all things together, including your life.

When you read chapter 2, ask what you might be tempted to add to Christ. For the Colossians it was rules, visions and angel worship. For us it might be a new spiritual technique, a list of do's and don'ts, or the idea that we need some experience beyond Christ to be complete. Paul says rules like "Do not handle, nor taste, nor touch" (2:21) may look wise, but they have no value against the indulgence of the flesh (2:23). Only Christ changes the heart.

When you read chapter 3, notice how practical "the things above" turn out to be. Setting your mind on heaven doesn't make you useless on earth. It makes you kind, forgiving and patient (3:12-13). It shows in how husbands and wives treat each other, how parents raise children, and how workers do their jobs. "Whatever you do, work from the soul, as to the Lord and not to men" (3:23). Those words were spoken to slaves, and they lift every ordinary job to an act of worship.

And when you read chapter 4, notice the names. Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus called Justus, Epaphras, Luke, Demas (4:7-14). Paul did not work alone. Epaphras, the church's founder, was in Rome, "always struggling for you in the prayers" (4:12). That is a good model for anyone who loves a church: pray hard for it.

Last, take Paul's word about how believers speak to outsiders: "Let your word be always in grace, seasoned with salt, to know how you must answer each one" (4:6). Salt adds flavor and keeps food from going bad. Our words should do both. And notice that the letter ends with Paul's own hand: "Remember my chains" (4:18). The man who wrote so grandly about Christ's rule over all things

wrote it with a chain on his wrist. Christ's supremacy is not a theory for comfortable people. It is the truth that held Paul steady in prison, and it can hold you steady wherever you are.

Study Questions

1. What does Paul say about Christ in 1:15-20, and which of those truths do you most need to remember (1:15-20)?
2. What are some things people today try to add to Christ, and how does Paul's answer apply (2:8-10, 16-23)?
3. What does it mean to set your mind on things above, and how would that change your week (3:1-4)?
4. Which of the qualities in 3:12-14 do you most need to put on, and with whom (3:12-14)?
5. How can your work become something you do "as to the Lord and not to men" (3:23-24)?

Go deeper: My Colossians and Philemon Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study covers Colossians and Philemon verse by verse. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

1 Thessalonians

At a Glance	
Author	Paul, with Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy (1:1)
Date written	About A.D. 51, from Corinth; one of Paul's earliest letters
Written to	The young church in Thessalonica, in Macedonia, northern Greece (1:1)
Setting and time covered	A few months after Paul was forced to leave the city on his second journey (Acts 17:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:1-6)
Chapters	5
Key word	The Lord's coming
Key verse	1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

Background

1 Thessalonians is one of the first letters Paul ever wrote, and it may be one of the first books of the New Testament. It was written to a church that was only a few months old, made up mostly of people who had worshiped idols until very recently. It is a warm, encouraging letter, the kind a father writes to his children when he has had to leave them too soon.

Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, a busy port on the main Roman road that ran across northern Greece. Paul came there on his second missionary journey, after he and Silas were beaten and jailed in Philippi (Acts 16:22-24; 1 Thessalonians 2:2). For three Sabbaths he reasoned in the synagogue from the Scriptures, showing that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, and that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 17:2-3). Some Jews believed, along with a large number of God-fearing Greeks and a good many leading women. But other Jews stirred up a mob, attacked the house of a believer named Jason, and dragged him before the city officials. The believers sent Paul and Silas away by night (Acts 17:5-10).

Paul had to leave before he could finish teaching them. He worried about them. Would they stand firm under persecution, or would they give up? He tried to go back more than once, but "Satan hindered us" (2:18). Finally, from Athens, he sent Timothy to check on them (3:1-2). Timothy came back to Paul in Corinth with good news. The church was standing firm in faith and love, and they longed to see Paul again (3:6). Paul wrote this letter right away, about A.D. 51. Think about how short a time Paul had with them. Acts mentions three Sabbaths in the synagogue, and he may have stayed a little longer, since the Philippians sent him help more than once while he was there (Philippians 4:16). Even so, it was only weeks or a few months. Yet in that short time he had taught them about the Lord's return, the man of sin, and the day of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 2:5). Paul did not think prophecy was too hard for new believers. He thought it was part of the basic gospel.

Purpose

Paul writes first to thank God for the Thessalonians and to encourage them. Their faith had become known all over Macedonia and Achaia (1:7-8). He also writes to defend his own conduct, because his enemies in Thessalonica were saying he was just another traveling teacher out for

money (2:3-10). Paul reminds them that he worked night and day so as not to be a burden to them, and that he had been gentle among them "as a nursing mother would cherish her own children" (2:7, 9).

He also writes to fill in gaps in their teaching. They needed to grow in holiness, especially sexual purity (4:3-8). Some needed to get back to work (4:11-12). And they had a pressing question: what happens to believers who die before Jesus comes back? Some of their members had died, and they were grieving as if those loved ones had missed out. Paul's answer in 4:13-18 is one of the most important passages in the Bible on the Lord's return.

Main Themes

Faith, love and hope. Paul remembers their "work of faith and labor of love and endurance of hope" (1:3). Faith looks back to what Christ has done, love works in the present, and hope looks forward to His coming. The three show up again in 5:8.

Turning from idols. The Thessalonians "turned to God from the idols to serve a living and true God, and to await His Son from the heavens" (1:9-10). That is a short summary of what conversion looks like: turning, serving and waiting.

A life that pleases God. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification" (4:3). To sanctify means to set apart as holy. Paul calls the believers to sexual purity, brotherly love and quiet, honest work (4:3-12).

The Lord is coming. Every chapter ends with a mention of the Lord's return (1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:16-17; 5:23). Believers who have died will rise first, and living believers will be caught up with them to meet the Lord in the air (4:16-17).

Not appointed to wrath. The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night on the unbelieving world (5:2-3). But "God did not appoint us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:9). Believers should live awake and ready.

Outline

- Chapter 1: Thanks for their faith
- Chapters 2-3: Paul's ministry among them, and his joy at Timothy's report
- Chapter 4:1-12: Living to please God
- Chapters 4:13-5:11: The Lord's coming: the rapture and the day of the Lord
- Chapter 5:12-28: Final words for church life

Key Verses

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 *For they themselves report concerning us what sort of entrance we had to you, and how you turned to God from the idols to serve a living and true God, and to await His Son from the heavens, whom He raised out of* ***the*** *dead, Jesus, who is delivering us from the wrath that is coming.*

The Christian life in brief: turn from idols, serve the living God, and wait for His Son from heaven.

1 Thessalonians 4:3 *For this is **the** will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality;*

God's will is not hidden. He wants His people to be holy, and He names the area where many fall.

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 *because the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout of command, with **the** voice of an archangel and with **the** trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are living, who remain, will be caught away together with them in **the** clouds to meet the Lord in **the** air; and so we will always be with **the** Lord.*

The rapture of the church. The dead in Christ rise first, then living believers are caught up together with them to meet the Lord.

1 Thessalonians 5:9 *because God did not appoint us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,*

Believers are not appointed to God's wrath. That is a promise of rescue.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 *Rejoice always. Pray unceasingly. In everything give thanks; for this **is the** will of God in Christ Jesus toward you.*

Three short commands for every day: rejoice, pray, give thanks.

Christ in 1 Thessalonians

Christ in this letter is the coming Lord. Paul calls Him "Jesus, who is delivering us from the wrath that is coming" (1:10). He is the One who died and rose again (4:14), and because He rose, those who have died believing in Him will rise too. He will come "with all His saints" (3:13), and He will gather His people to Himself.

Paul's words in 4:16-17 echo things Jesus Himself said. Jesus spoke of a trumpet and of His people being gathered (Matthew 24:31). He promised in the upper room, "I am coming again and will receive you to Myself, so that where I am, you also may be" (John 14:3). Paul says he is speaking "in the word of the Lord" (4:15), which may mean he was passing on something Jesus taught, or something Jesus revealed to him directly. Either way, the promise has the Lord's authority behind it.

How It Fits the Whole Story

1 Thessalonians gives us the clearest picture in the Bible of the event many call the rapture. The word rapture comes from the Latin word used in old translations of 4:17 for "caught away." The Lord Himself will come down from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God. The dead in Christ will rise first. Then living believers "will be caught away together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will always be with the Lord" (4:17). Paul describes the same moment in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, when we will be changed "in the blink of an eye."

I believe this event comes before the seven-year Tribulation that Daniel foretold (Daniel 9:27) and Revelation describes (Revelation 6-19). Here is why. In this passage, the Lord comes in the air to meet His people, and He takes them to be with Him, just as Jesus said in John 14:3. In

Revelation 19:11-16, He comes all the way down to the earth with His people to judge and to reign. Those look like two stages of His coming. Right after the rapture passage, Paul turns to "the day of the Lord," which comes on the world "as a thief in the night" with sudden destruction (5:2-3). Then he says plainly that "God did not appoint us for wrath" (5:9), and that Jesus is the One delivering us from the wrath that is coming (1:10). The Tribulation is the time of God's wrath poured out on the earth (Revelation 6:16-17). The church is promised rescue from that wrath, not protection through it. And Paul tells the Thessalonians to "encourage one another with these words" (4:18). If the church had to go through the Tribulation first, it would be hard to see the comfort in that.

After the Tribulation, Christ will return visibly to the earth (Revelation 19:11-16), set up His thousand-year kingdom (Revelation 20:1-6), and finally bring in the new heavens and the new earth (Revelation 21:1). The rapture is the next event on God's calendar for the church.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Bible-believing teachers do not all agree about the timing of the rapture. Some believe the church will be caught up in the middle of the Tribulation. Others believe the rapture and Christ's visible return are one event at the end of the Tribulation. These are brothers and sisters in Christ who love the Lord's appearing, and the question is not a test of salvation. I hold the pre-Tribulation view for the reasons above: the promise that we are not appointed to wrath, the different pictures of the Lord coming for His people and with His people, and the comfort Paul intends these words to bring.

Read It This Way

Read 1 Thessalonians as a letter of encouragement. Notice how warm Paul is. He calls them brothers again and again. He says he was gentle among them like a nursing mother (2:7), and that he urged each one like a father with his own children (2:11). He says they are his "hope or joy or crown of boasting" at the Lord's coming (2:19). If you are a new believer, this letter will encourage you. If you are a pastor or teacher, it will show you what loving people looks like.

Notice how they received the message. They accepted it "not as the word of men, but just as it truly is, the word of God, which also works" in those who believe (2:13). How you receive the Bible matters. If you treat it as the opinions of men, it will not change you. If you receive it as God's word, it will go to work in your life.

When you read 4:13-18, notice that Paul does not say believers shouldn't grieve. He says we don't grieve "just as also the rest who have no hope" (4:13). Christians cry at funerals. Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus (John 11:35). But our grief is mixed with hope, because we know we will see our loved ones again. If you have lost a believing friend or family member, read this passage slowly. It was written for you.

Then read 5:12-22 as a short guide to church life. Respect those who lead you. Live at peace. Warn the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all. Don't pay back evil for evil. Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in everything. Don't quench the Spirit. Test everything and hold fast to what is good. A church that did those things would be a happy church.

Last, look at Paul's prayer near the end: "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved whole, blamelessly, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:23). The next verse tells you who will make it happen: "Faithful is the One who calls you, who also will do it" (5:24). Our holiness and our hope both rest on God's faithfulness.

Study Questions

1. What does 1:9-10 teach about what it means to turn to God, and how did you see those three steps in your own life (1:9-10)?
2. How did Paul care for the Thessalonians, and what does that teach about loving people in the church (2:7-12)?
3. What does God's will for your sanctification look like in your daily life (4:3-8)?
4. How do the promises of 4:13-18 change the way a believer grieves (4:13-18)?
5. Why does it matter that God has not appointed believers to wrath, and how should that affect the way we live while we wait (5:1-11)?

Go deeper: My 1 and 2 Thessalonians Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study covers both letters verse by verse. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

2 Thessalonians

At a Glance	
Author	Paul, with Silvanus and Timothy (1:1)
Date written	About A.D. 51 to 52, from Corinth, a few months after 1 Thessalonians
Written to	The church in Thessalonica, still under persecution (1:1, 4)
Setting and time covered	Paul's long stay in Corinth on his second journey (Acts 18:1-11)
Chapters	3
Key word	Stand firm
Key verse	2 Thessalonians 2:3

Background

Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians only a few months after his first letter, while he was still in Corinth with Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy. News had come back from Thessalonica, and it was mixed. The good news was that the church was still growing in faith and love, even under heavy persecution (1:3-4). The bad news was that some of them had been shaken by false teaching about the end times, and others had stopped working.

Here is what had happened. Someone had told the Thessalonians that "the day of Christ has come" (2:2). Most English Bibles read the day of the Lord here, following other Greek copies, and either way Paul means the same time of judgment he had written about in his first letter (1 Thessalonians 5:2). The false message may have come through a so-called prophecy, a spoken report, or even a letter forged in Paul's name (2:2). That is why, at the end of this letter, Paul writes the greeting in his own hand and says it is "a sign in every letter" (3:17).

Think about why this news would be so upsetting. In his first letter, Paul had told them that God "did not appoint us for wrath" (1 Thessalonians 5:9) and that Jesus would gather His people to Himself (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). If the day of the Lord, the time of God's wrath on the earth, had already come, then it would seem they had missed the Lord's coming for them. Paul writes to calm them down and set them straight. Some scholars have doubted that Paul wrote this letter, because its tone is cooler than the first and its teaching on the end seems different to them. But the letter names Paul, closes with his own signed greeting, and fits the situation of the first letter closely. The early church received it as Paul's, and I see no reason not to.

Purpose

Paul writes for three reasons, and they match the three chapters. First, to comfort believers who were suffering for their faith. God sees it, and He will make it right when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven (1:5-10). Second, to correct the false teaching that the day of the Lord had already come. Certain things must happen first, and they had not happened yet (2:1-12). Third, to deal with believers who had quit working and were living off others. Paul's rule is simple: "if anyone is not willing to work, neither let him eat" (3:10).

Main Themes

God's justice for His suffering people. It is right for God to repay affliction to those who afflict His people, and to give rest to the afflicted "at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of His power" (1:6-7). Those who do not know God will suffer "eternal destruction away from the face of the Lord" (1:9). That is a sobering word about the reality of judgment.

The day of the Lord has not come yet. Paul says, "it will not come unless the apostasy comes first and the man of sin is revealed, the son of destruction" (2:3). Apostasy means a falling away, a rebellion against God.

The man of sin. This coming ruler will exalt himself above every god and sit "in the temple of God as God, displaying himself that he is God" (2:4). He will come with false signs and wonders by the power of Satan (2:9). The Lord Jesus will destroy him "with the breath of His mouth" (2:8).

Stand firm. God chose the Thessalonians for salvation (2:13). So Paul tells them to "stand firm and hold fast the traditions which you were taught" (2:15). The Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and guard them (3:3).

Work and do good. Some had stopped working, perhaps thinking the Lord would come any day so work didn't matter. Paul says to keep working quietly, to earn your own bread, and "do not grow weary doing good" (3:12-13).

Outline

- Chapter 1: Comfort in persecution and the justice of God
- Chapter 2: The day of the Lord, the man of sin, and a call to stand firm
- Chapter 3: Prayer, and warnings about idleness

Key Verses

2 Thessalonians 1:7 *and to you who are being afflicted, rest with us at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with* ***the*** *angels of His power,*

The persecuted church will get rest when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven. The wait will be worth it.

2 Thessalonians 2:3 *Let no one deceive you in any way; because* ***it will not come*** *unless the apostasy comes first and the man of sin is revealed, the son of destruction,*

The day of the Lord will not come until the apostasy and the man of sin come first.

2 Thessalonians 2:15 *So then, brothers, stand firm and hold fast the traditions which you were taught, whether through word or through our letter.*

In a time of confusion, hold on to the teaching the apostles gave. We have it today in the New Testament.

2 Thessalonians 3:3 *But the Lord is faithful, who will strengthen you and guard **you** from the evil.*

Whatever the enemy does, the Lord is faithful. He strengthens and guards His people.

2 Thessalonians 3:10 *For even when we were with you, we were commanding you this, that if anyone is not willing to work, neither let him eat.*

Waiting for the Lord is no excuse for laziness. Those who can work should work.

Christ in 2 Thessalonians

Christ in this letter is the coming Judge and King. Paul speaks of "the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of His power," coming "in flaming fire" (1:7-8). He comes "to be glorified in His saints and to be marveled at among all those who believe" (1:10). The same Jesus who was mocked and crucified will be openly honored by His people and openly feared by His enemies.

Paul's picture of the lawless one's end comes from the Old Testament. Isaiah said of the coming King from Jesse's line, "with the breath of His lips He will put the wicked to death" (Isaiah 11:4). Paul says the Lord Jesus will consume the lawless one "with the breath of His mouth" (2:8). Paul takes a prophecy about the Messiah and applies it to Jesus. Christ will not need an army to defeat the greatest enemy the world has ever seen. He will only need to speak.

How It Fits the Whole Story

2 Thessalonians fills in some of the order of the end times. Paul speaks of "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him" (2:1), which points back to the rapture he described in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. Then he speaks of the day of the Lord, which will come only after the apostasy and the revealing of the man of sin.

This man is the same ruler Daniel saw, who would make a covenant for seven years and break it in the middle, setting up an abomination that makes desolate (Daniel 9:27). Jesus spoke of that same "abomination of desolation" standing in the holy place (Matthew 24:15). John calls him the beast (Revelation 13). His sitting in the temple of God (2:4) suggests a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem during the coming seven-year Tribulation. His reign will end when Christ returns in glory and destroys him (2:8; Revelation 19:19-20). After that comes Christ's thousand-year kingdom (Revelation 20:1-6).

Paul also says something is holding the lawless one back: "only the one restraining now will restrain until he is out of the midst. And then the lawless one will be revealed" (2:7-8). Many who hold the pre-Tribulation view take this restrainer to be the Holy Spirit working through the church in this present age. In that reading, when the church is caught up to meet the Lord, that restraining work will be taken out of the way, and the lawless one will be revealed. That fits the pre-Tribulation order: the church gathered to Christ first, then the man of sin, then the day of the Lord in full.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Who or what is the restrainer in 2:6-7? Paul says the Thessalonians knew (2:6), because he had told them in person (2:5), but he does not name it in the letter. Some teachers believe it was the Roman Empire or the rule of law in general, which holds back evil. Others believe it is the archangel Michael, who stands guard over Israel (Daniel 12:1). Many who hold the pre-Tribulation view, as I do, believe it is the Holy Spirit, working through the church. Paul uses a neuter word in 2:6 ("that which is restraining") and a masculine one in 2:7 ("the one restraining"), which fits the Spirit, whose name is neuter in Greek but who is a Person. Scripture doesn't settle it plainly, so it is wise to hold this one with some humility.

Teachers also disagree on whether "the apostasy" (2:3) means a great falling away from the faith or, as some suggest, the departure of the church at the rapture. Most take it to mean a rebellion against God. Either way, it has not fully happened yet, and the day of the Lord has not come.

Read It This Way

Read 2 Thessalonians alongside 1 Thessalonians. The two letters go together. The first letter comforts believers about those who died. The second calms believers who thought they had missed the Lord's coming. Both end with a call to live faithfully while we wait.

When you read chapter 2, don't get so caught up in figuring out every detail that you miss Paul's point. Paul's goal was not to give the Thessalonians a chart. It was to keep them from being "quickly shaken" (2:2). Some believers today get anxious, or even fearful, about prophecy. Paul wants the opposite. Knowing what God has said about the future should give us peace, not panic.

Notice the contrast between the two groups in chapter 2. The lawless one deceives "those who are perishing, because they did not receive the love of the truth" (2:10). But the believers are "beloved by the Lord" and chosen "for salvation in sanctification of the Spirit and faith in the truth" (2:13). The difference is not that one group was smarter. The difference is what they did with the truth. Love the truth, and hold on to it. In a world full of clever voices, the safest place to stand is on what God has actually said. That is why Paul points them back, again and again, to what he had taught them in person and in writing (2:5, 15). We have that same teaching today in the pages of the New Testament.

Then read chapter 3 as a practical word. Some people think that if Jesus is coming soon, nothing else matters. Paul says that is not the right response. Paul himself worked with his hands so that he could be an example (3:7-9). Waiting for the Lord does not mean sitting on a hilltop. It means doing your work faithfully, providing for your family, and doing good, so that when He comes, He finds you busy.

Paul also tells the church how to deal with a brother who refuses to work and won't listen. They are to keep away from him so he will be ashamed, but "do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother" (3:14-15). Church discipline is meant to restore, not to destroy.

And end with Paul's blessing: "Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace continually in every way" (3:16). That is what this letter is for. God does not want His people shaken. He wants them at peace.

One more thing is worth noticing. Paul asks the Thessalonians to pray for him, "that the word of the Lord may run and be glorified, just as also with you" (3:1). A suffering, confused young church was asked to pray for the great apostle. No believer is too new or too weak to pray, and no leader is too strong to need it. If you have a pastor, a missionary or a Bible teacher you love, this short letter is a good reminder to pray for them by name this week.

Study Questions

1. How does knowing that God will one day set things right help you when you suffer for doing right (1:4-10)?
2. Why were the Thessalonians so shaken by the idea that the day of the Lord had come (2:1-2)?
3. What does Paul say must happen before the day of the Lord, and how should that keep us from being deceived (2:3-12)?
4. What does it mean to love the truth, and how can you grow in that love (2:10-15)?
5. How should waiting for the Lord's return affect the way you work and serve others (3:6-13)?

Go deeper: My 1 and 2 Thessalonians Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study covers both letters verse by verse. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

1 Timothy

At a Glance	
Author	Paul the apostle (1:1)
Date written	About A.D. 62 to 64, after Paul's release from his first Roman imprisonment
Written to	Timothy, Paul's "genuine child in faith," leading the church in Ephesus (1:2-3)
Setting and time covered	Between Paul's two Roman imprisonments, after he had gone on to Macedonia (1:3)
Chapters	6
Key word	Conduct in God's household
Key verse	1 Timothy 3:15

Background

1 Timothy is the first of three letters that are often called the Pastoral Letters. The other two are 2 Timothy and Titus. They get that name because they were written to two men who were caring for churches, and they deal with how a church should be led, taught and cared for. If you have ever wondered what a church is supposed to look like, or what to look for in a pastor, these letters are the place to start.

Timothy was one of Paul's closest friends. He was from Lystra, in southern Galatia, the son of a Jewish mother who believed and a Greek father (Acts 16:1). His mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois had taught him the Scriptures from childhood (2 Timothy 1:5; 3:15). Paul met him on his second journey, and Timothy traveled with him from then on. Paul sent him on hard errands, to Thessalonica, to Corinth and to Philippi, and trusted him like a son (1 Thessalonians 3:2; 1 Corinthians 4:17; Philippians 2:19-22). Timothy seems to have been young for his role, perhaps shy, and sometimes sick (4:12; 5:23; 2 Timothy 1:7).

Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome, about A.D. 62. Paul expected to be released (Philippians 1:25; 2:24), and the Pastoral Letters fit best after that release. It seems Paul traveled again, left Timothy in Ephesus to deal with false teachers, and went on to Macedonia (1:3). From there, about A.D. 62 to 64, he wrote this letter to help Timothy do the job. Paul hoped to come soon, but in case he was delayed, he wanted Timothy to know "how one must conduct oneself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (3:14-15).

Ephesus was a hard place to lead. False teachers had come into the church, some of them perhaps from among the elders, just as Paul had warned years before (Acts 20:29-30). They were caught up in myths, endless family lines and arguments about the Law (1:4-7). Some forbade marriage and certain foods (4:3). Some saw religion as a way to get rich (6:5). Two men, Hymenaeus and Alexander, had shipwrecked their faith (1:19-20).

Purpose

Paul writes to help Timothy stop the false teaching, put the church in order, and set a godly example. He gives instructions for public prayer and worship (2), qualifications for church leaders (3), Timothy's own life and ministry (4), how to care for widows and elders (5), and warnings about money (6). Through it all, Paul keeps coming back to sound teaching. The word "sound" means healthy. Good doctrine produces healthy believers. False doctrine makes a church sick.

Main Themes

Guard sound teaching. Timothy must charge certain men "not to teach different doctrine" (1:3). The goal is not winning arguments but "love out of a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith" (1:5). Paul ends the letter the same way: "O Timothy, guard the deposit" (6:20).

The gospel for sinners. Paul never got over his own salvation. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am foremost" (1:15). If God could save the man who once persecuted the church, He can save anyone. Paul says he is a "pattern" of God's patience for all who will believe (1:16).

Prayer for all people. Paul urges prayers "on behalf of all men, for kings and all those who are in authority" (2:1-2). God "desires all men to be saved" (2:4), and Christ "gave Himself as a ransom for all" (2:6).

Leaders who are qualified. An overseer (also called an elder, a shepherd or pastor) "must be above reproach" (3:2). Paul's list is mostly about character: faithful in marriage, self-controlled, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent, not a lover of money, managing his own household well (3:1-7). Deacons, who serve the church in practical ways, must also be people of proven character (3:8-13).

Godliness and money. "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (6:6). But "the love of money is a root of all the evils" (6:10). The rich are to set their hope not on riches but "in the living God, who provides us all things richly for enjoyment" (6:17).

Outline

- Chapter 1: Guard sound teaching, and Paul's own testimony
- Chapter 2: Public worship: prayer, and men and women in the church
- Chapter 3: Church leaders: overseers and deacons, and the mystery of godliness
- Chapter 4: Timothy's ministry: false teaching foretold, and training in godliness
- Chapter 5: Caring for the church family: widows and elders
- Chapter 6: Money and godliness, and the final charge

Key Verses

1 Timothy 1:15 *Faithful **is** the word and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am foremost.*

Paul's testimony and the heart of the gospel. Christ came to save sinners, and no sinner is too far gone.

1 Timothy 2:5 *For **there is** one God, and one mediator of God and men, **the** man Christ Jesus,*

There is only one go-between for God and people, and He is the man Christ Jesus.

1 Timothy 3:15 *but if I delay, **I write** so that you may know how **one** must conduct oneself in **the** household of God, which is **the** church of **the** living God, **the** pillar and foundation of the truth.*

The reason for the letter. The church is God's household, and it holds up the truth like a pillar.

1 Timothy 4:12 *Let no one despise your youth, but be a pattern for the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity.*

Age does not disqualify a servant of God. A godly life speaks louder than years.

1 Timothy 6:10 *For the love of money is a root of all the evils, which some, stretching after **it**, have been led astray from the faith and have pierced themselves with many pains.*

Money is not evil, but loving it leads to every kind of evil, and it has drawn many away from the faith.

Christ in 1 Timothy

Christ in this letter is the one Mediator. "For there is one God, and one mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all" (2:5-6). A mediator stands between two parties to bring them together. In the Old Testament, Moses stood between God and Israel, and the high priest went into the Most Holy Place once a year on behalf of the people. Those were pictures. Jesus is the real thing. Because He is both God and man, He alone can bring God and people together. We do not need any other priest, saint or go-between.

Paul also gives what may be an early Christian hymn about Christ: "God was manifested in flesh, was justified in spirit, was seen by angels, was proclaimed among the Gentiles, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory" (3:16). In six short lines, it moves from the incarnation to the ascension. Paul calls it "the mystery of godliness," the truth at the center of the faith.

And Christ is the coming King. Paul charges Timothy to keep the command without fault "until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (6:14), and he praises God as "the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of those who reign as kings and Lord of those who rule as lords" (6:15). Revelation 19:16 gives Christ that same title, King of kings and Lord of lords, when He returns.

How It Fits the Whole Story

1 Timothy shows how the church is meant to live in the time between Christ's first coming and His return. It gives the church its basic order: overseers to shepherd and teach, deacons to serve,

care for those in need, and prayer for the world. That order was not left to each church to invent. It came through the apostles.

It also warns about what will come. "The Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and teachings of demons" (4:1). Paul's own day already saw it, and it will grow worse as the end draws near (2 Timothy 3:1-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:3). The answer is not panic but faithfulness to the Scriptures. Timothy is told to give attention "to the reading, to the exhortation, to the teaching" (4:13), that is, to reading the Scriptures publicly, urging people to obey them, and explaining what they mean.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Many modern scholars doubt that Paul wrote the Pastoral Letters. They point to words and style that differ from his other letters, to the church order they describe, and to the fact that Acts does not record the travels they mention. They suggest a follower of Paul wrote them in his name some years after his death. I take these letters at their word. Each one names Paul as its author (1:1; 2 Timothy 1:1; Titus 1:1). Paul was writing to a close friend about church leadership, not to a whole church about doctrine, so a different style is no surprise, and he may have used a different helper to write them down. The personal details, such as Paul's cloak left at Troas (2 Timothy 4:13), read like a real letter. And Paul expected to be released from Rome, which gives time for travels Acts does not cover. The early church accepted these letters as Paul's.

Good teachers also differ on how to apply 2:11-15, about women teaching and having authority over men in the church, and on what "the husband of one wife" (3:2) means. Sincere believers read these passages in different ways, and a short overview is not the place to settle them. Read them carefully in their setting, with humility.

Read It This Way

Read 1 Timothy as a letter from an older pastor to a younger one. It is personal. Paul calls Timothy his son. He tells him not to let anyone despise his youth (4:12), to take a little wine for his stomach (5:23), and to flee the love of money (6:11). If you serve in any kind of church leadership, read this letter often. It is a training manual. Notice what Paul tells Timothy to watch first: "Give heed to yourself and to the teaching" (4:16). A leader who guards his doctrine but neglects his own soul will not last. A leader who cares for his soul but neglects the truth will lead people astray. Timothy needed both, and so does every pastor, elder, Sunday school teacher and small-group leader today. Paul also told the church to honor those who lead well, "especially those who toil in word and teaching" (5:17), and to protect elders from careless accusations (5:19). Leading God's people is hard work, and the church should treat its faithful leaders that way.

Even if you are not a leader, it is for you. Paul says the church is "the household of God" (3:15). Every member is family. Older men are to be treated as fathers, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, "in all purity" (5:1-2). Widows who have no family are to be cared for, and families are to care for their own (5:3-8). That is what a healthy church looks like.

Pay attention to the "faithful word" sayings. Paul uses that phrase, "Faithful is the word," in all three Pastoral Letters, five times in all (1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Timothy 2:11; Titus 3:8). They seem to be

short sayings the early church knew by heart. The first one is the gospel in a sentence: Christ came to save sinners.

Last, take Paul's charge to Timothy as a charge to you: "Fight the good fight of the faith; lay hold of eternal life, to which you were also called" (6:12). The Christian life is not a stroll. It is a fight. But we fight with eternal life already in our grasp, and with the King of kings on our side. Paul's last word in the letter is a short one: "The grace be with you" (6:21). Every charge in this letter, every qualification and every warning, rests on that grace.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think Paul talks about his own past when he warns about false teachers (1:12-17)?
2. Why does Paul tell believers to pray for kings and rulers, and how could you do that this week (2:1-4)?
3. Why are the qualifications for overseers mostly about character rather than skill (3:1-7)?
4. What does it look like to train yourself for godliness the way an athlete trains his body (4:7-8)?
5. How can you guard your heart against the love of money and learn contentment (6:6-10, 17-19)?

Go deeper: My Timothy and Titus Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study covers 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus verse by verse. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

2 Timothy

At a Glance	
Author	Paul the apostle (1:1)
Date written	About A.D. 66 to 67, from his second imprisonment in Rome, shortly before his death
Written to	Timothy, Paul's "beloved child," most likely still in Ephesus (1:2)
Setting and time covered	Paul's last imprisonment, when he knew his death was near (4:6)
Chapters	4
Key word	Faithful to the end
Key verse	2 Timothy 4:7-8

Background

2 Timothy is the last letter Paul ever wrote. When you read it, you are reading the final words of a man who knew he was about to die. "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come" (4:6). A drink offering was wine poured out on the altar along with a sacrifice (Numbers 15:1-10). Paul saw his coming death as the last part of a life offered to God.

This imprisonment was very different from the first. During the house arrest at the end of Acts, Paul lived in a rented house and welcomed all who came to him (Acts 28:30-31). Now he was chained like a criminal (2:9). Friends had a hard time even finding him. One named Onesiphorus searched for him in Rome until he found him and "was not ashamed of my chain" (1:16-17). Most of Paul's friends had left. "Demas has deserted me, having loved the present age" (4:10). Others had gone to other places to serve. "Luke alone is with me" (4:11). At his first hearing before the court, no one stood with him (4:16).

The early church reported that Paul was put to death in Rome under the emperor Nero, who died in A.D. 68. That fits a date for this letter of about A.D. 66 to 67. Winter was coming, and Paul asked Timothy to come quickly and bring the cloak he had left in Troas, and the books, especially the parchments (4:9, 13, 21). Even at the end, he wanted to keep warm and keep reading. Scripture doesn't tell us whether Timothy reached Rome in time. We do know that Timothy himself was later set free from some kind of arrest (Hebrews 13:23), so he may well have shared in his teacher's sufferings. Either way, the letter he received has strengthened believers facing death and hardship ever since.

Purpose

Paul writes to call Timothy to his side, and he writes to pass the torch. Timothy was going to have to carry on without him. So Paul calls him to be strong, not to be ashamed, to suffer hardship like a good soldier, to hold to the Scriptures, and to preach the word no matter what. He also warns him that hard times are coming, when people will not put up with sound teaching. The letter is Paul's last charge to the next generation of leaders.

Timothy seems to have needed the encouragement. Paul reminds him "to rekindle the gift of God which is in you" (1:6), like someone stirring up a fire that has burned low. He tells him not to be ashamed, not to be afraid, and to flee youthful desires (2:22). Timothy was not a superhero. He was a faithful man who sometimes struggled with fear, and Paul loved him enough to tell him the truth. Many of us are more like Timothy than like Paul, and this letter was written with people like us in mind.

Main Themes

Do not be ashamed. "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner" (1:8). Paul was not ashamed either, "for I know whom I have believed" (1:12). God has not given us "a spirit of cowardice, but of power and of love and of self-control" (1:7).

Pass it on. Paul tells Timothy to commit what he had heard "to faithful men, who will be sufficient to teach others also" (2:2). That verse has four generations in it: Paul, Timothy, faithful men, and others. That is how the gospel moves through history.

Endure hardship. Paul uses three pictures: a soldier who doesn't get tangled in civilian affairs, an athlete who competes by the rules, and a farmer who works hard before he eats (2:3-6). "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (3:12).

Hold to the Scriptures. In the hard last days, Timothy must stay with what he learned. From childhood he had known "the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation" (3:15). "Every Scripture is God-breathed and profitable" (3:16).

Preach the word. Paul's final charge is short: "preach the word; be ready in season, out of season" (4:2). People will want teachers who tell them what they want to hear (4:3-4). Timothy must keep telling them what God says.

Outline

- Chapter 1: Do not be ashamed: guard what was entrusted to you
- Chapter 2: Be strong in grace: soldier, athlete, farmer and worker
- Chapter 3: Hold to the Scriptures in difficult times
- Chapter 4: Preach the word: Paul's final charge and farewell

Key Verses

2 Timothy 1:7 *For God has not given us a spirit of cowardice, but of power and of love and of self-control.*

Fear does not come from God. He gives power, love and a sound mind.

2 Timothy 2:2 *and the things which you heard from me through many witnesses, commit these to faithful men, who will be sufficient to teach others also.*

The plan for passing the faith from one generation to the next.

2 Timothy 2:15 *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker not needing to be ashamed, cutting straight the word of truth.*

Handle the Bible with care. A worker who cuts it straight need not be ashamed.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 *Every Scripture **is** God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training which **is** in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work.*

All Scripture comes from the breath of God, and it equips believers for every good work.

2 Timothy 4:7-8 *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.*

Paul's last testimony. He finished the race, kept the faith, and looked forward to the crown.

Christ in 2 Timothy

Paul tells Timothy, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, of the seed of David" (2:8). Those few words hold the whole story. "Of the seed of David" ties Jesus to God's promise that David's descendant would reign forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16). "Raised from the dead" tells us He is alive and reigning now. When Timothy faced fear and suffering, Paul did not give him a pep talk. He pointed him to Christ.

Christ is also the One "who abolished death and brought life and incorruptibility to light through the gospel" (1:10). Death came into the world through Adam's sin (Genesis 2:17; Romans 5:12). Christ has broken its power. For Paul, waiting on death row, that was not theory.

And Christ is the righteous Judge "who is about to judge the living and the dead, according to His appearing and His kingdom" (4:1). He will give the crown of righteousness "to all who have loved His appearing" (4:8). A man who loves Christ's appearing is a man who lives ready for it.

In chapter 2 Paul quotes one of the early church's "faithful word" sayings, and it ends with one of the most comforting lines in the Bible: "if we are faithless, He remains faithful; He is not able to deny Himself" (2:13). Our salvation does not rest on the strength of our faith on our worst day. It rests on the faithfulness of Christ, who cannot go back on His own word. The same saying also warns that if we deny Him, He will deny us (2:12). Real faith perseveres, but even when it is weak, its object is strong.

How It Fits the Whole Story

2 Timothy stands at the end of the apostolic age. Paul's work was nearly finished. Peter too would soon die (2 Peter 1:14). The men who had seen the risen Christ were passing from the scene. What would hold the church together? Paul's answer is the Scriptures. "Every Scripture is God-breathed" (3:16). God breathed it out. That is why the Bible carries God's authority, and why the church in every age must hold to it. When Paul wrote, he meant first the Old Testament, the sacred writings Timothy had known from childhood. Peter puts Paul's own letters alongside "the other Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:16), so we rightly apply these words to the New Testament too.

Paul also warns about "the last days," when "difficult times will be present" (3:1). He gives a long list of what people will be like: lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, "having a form of godliness" but denying its power (3:2-5). The last days began with Christ's first coming (Hebrews 1:2), and they will grow darker as His return draws near. Our job is not to be surprised, but to stay faithful.

And Paul looks ahead to "that day" (1:12, 18; 4:8), the day Christ appears. Paul was not afraid to die because he knew that the Lord would "save me into His heavenly kingdom" (4:18).

Where Good Teachers Disagree

As with 1 Timothy and Titus, many modern scholars doubt that Paul wrote 2 Timothy. They point to differences in style and vocabulary. I take the letter at its word. It names Paul as its writer (1:1), and it is full of personal details no forger would think to include: a cloak left in Troas, a coppersmith named Alexander who did Paul harm, and greetings to Prisca and Aquila (4:13-15, 19). Of all Paul's letters, this one feels the most personal. The early church received it as Paul's.

Read It This Way

Read 2 Timothy as a last letter, because that is what it is. Think about what you would write if you knew you had only a few weeks to live. You would not waste words. You would say what matters most. That is what Paul does here.

Notice the tenderness. Paul remembers Timothy's tears (1:4). He remembers his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, who taught him the faith (1:5). He longs to see him. And he is honest about how lonely he is. Even great saints get lonely. Even Paul needed his friends. If you are lonely in your service for Christ, you are in good company, and the Lord who stood by Paul will stand by you (4:17).

Notice Mark. Years earlier, Mark had quit on Paul's first journey, and Paul refused to take him on the next one (Acts 13:13; 15:37-39). Now, at the end, Paul writes, "Take Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry" (4:11). The young man who failed had been restored, and the old apostle wanted him near. That is the grace of God in real lives.

Pay close attention to 3:14-17. When the world grows dark, Paul doesn't tell Timothy to find a new method. He tells him to stay with the Scriptures. They are able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ, and they equip us for every good work. If you want to be ready for whatever comes, read your Bible. And read it carefully. Paul tells Timothy to be "a worker not needing to be ashamed, cutting straight the word of truth" (2:15). The picture is of a craftsman making a straight cut, or a road builder laying a straight path. Handling the Bible well takes effort and care. It also takes a gentle spirit. "A slave of the Lord must not quarrel, but be gentle toward all, able to teach, patient when wronged" (2:24). Right doctrine delivered with a nasty attitude does damage.

And finally, read 4:6-8 as a goal for your own life. "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (4:7). Not everyone who starts well finishes well. Demas didn't. But Paul did, by the grace of God. Ask the Lord to help you finish well too. The crown Paul waited for is not only for apostles. It is for all who love His appearing. Do you love His appearing? Then live

today the way you will wish you had lived when you see Him. Paul did, and he was not afraid of the end.

Study Questions

1. Who passed the faith on to you, and who are you passing it on to (1:5; 2:2)?
2. What does it mean to be "ashamed" of the gospel, and how can you stand firm against that temptation (1:8-12)?
3. Which of Paul's three pictures (soldier, athlete, farmer) speaks to you most right now, and why (2:3-7)?
4. Why does Paul point Timothy to the Scriptures as the answer to the difficult last days (3:1-17)?
5. What would it look like for you to finish your race well (4:6-8)?

Go deeper: My Timothy and Titus Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study covers 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus verse by verse. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Titus

At a Glance	
Author	Paul the apostle (1:1)
Date written	About A.D. 62 to 64, between Paul's two Roman imprisonments
Written to	Titus, Paul's "true child," left on the island of Crete to put the churches in order (1:4-5)
Setting and time covered	After Paul and Titus had worked together on Crete; Paul planned to spend the winter at Nicopolis (3:12)
Chapters	3
Key word	Good works
Key verse	Titus 3:5

Background

Titus is a short letter, just three chapters, but it packs in a lot. It is the third of Paul's Pastoral Letters, along with 1 and 2 Timothy. Like 1 Timothy, it was written to a younger leader Paul had left behind to finish a hard job.

Who was Titus? Acts never mentions him by name, but Paul's letters tell us quite a bit. He was a Gentile, a Greek, and Paul took him to Jerusalem as a kind of test case. The leaders there did not require him to be circumcised (Galatians 2:1-3). That was proof that Gentiles did not have to become Jews to be saved. Later, Titus was Paul's troubleshooter in Corinth. He carried Paul's severe letter to that difficult church, brought back the good news that they had repented, and helped organize the collection for Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 7:6-7, 13-15; 8:6, 16-17). Paul calls him "my partner and fellow worker" (2 Corinthians 8:23). Titus seems to have been a strong, steady man, good at handling tough situations. He was going to need it.

Crete is a large island south of Greece in the Mediterranean Sea. Cretans had a bad name in the ancient world. Paul even quotes one of their own poets: "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy bellies" (1:12). There were Cretans in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:11), and Paul's ship stopped briefly at Crete on the way to Rome (Acts 27:7-13). But this letter tells us that, after his release from his first imprisonment in Rome, Paul and Titus worked together on Crete, and churches were started in several towns. Paul had to move on, so he left Titus behind "so that you might set in order the things lacking and appoint elders in every city" (1:5).

The work was not easy. False teachers, "especially those of the circumcision" (1:10), were upsetting whole households and teaching for money. They talked a lot about Jewish myths and rules (1:14). "They profess to know God, but by their works they deny Him" (1:16). Paul wrote to tell Titus how to deal with them and how to build healthy churches. The last time we hear of Titus in Scripture, he has gone to Dalmatia, on the coast across the sea from Italy (2 Timothy 4:10). Paul's troubleshooter was still on the move, still serving, near the end of Paul's life.

Purpose

Paul writes to help Titus finish organizing the churches on Crete. He tells him what kind of men to appoint as elders (1:5-9), how to silence false teachers (1:10-16), what to teach different groups in the church (2:1-15), and how believers should live among their unbelieving neighbors (3:1-11). He closes with travel plans, asking Titus to join him at Nicopolis once a replacement arrives (3:12).

The thread through the whole letter is that right teaching produces right living. Paul uses the phrase "good works" again and again (1:16; 2:7, 14; 3:1, 8, 14). He is not saying we are saved by good works. He says the opposite very plainly (3:5). But he is saying that people who have been saved by grace will show it in the way they live.

Main Themes

Leaders of godly character. An elder must be "blameless" (1:6), faithful in marriage, with believing children who are not wild, not arrogant or quick-tempered, not a drinker or violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, self-controlled, just and holy. He must hold firmly to the faithful word so he can teach sound doctrine and correct those who contradict it (1:5-9).

Sound teaching for everyone. Paul tells Titus to "speak the things which are fitting for sound teaching" (2:1), then gives a word to older men, older women, younger women, younger men and slaves (2:2-10). Every age and station in life has its own way of honoring God.

Adorn the teaching. Paul wants believing slaves to live so faithfully "that they may adorn the teaching of God our Savior in all things" (2:10). To adorn is to decorate, to make something attractive. How we live can make the gospel look beautiful to people who are watching.

Grace that trains us. "For the grace of God has appeared, which brings salvation to all men, training us" (2:11-12). Grace does not only forgive. It teaches us to say no to ungodliness and to live sensibly and righteously while we wait for Christ.

Saved by mercy, ready for good works. God saved us "not by works which we did in righteousness, but according to His mercy" (3:5). Because of that, believers should be "ready for every good work" (3:1) and devote themselves to doing good (3:8, 14).

Outline

- Chapter 1: Elders for every town, and false teachers silenced
- Chapter 2: Sound teaching for the whole church, and the grace that trains us
- Chapter 3: Good works, God's mercy, and final instructions

Key Verses

Titus 1:5 *For this reason I left you in Crete, so that you might set in order the things lacking and appoint elders in every city, as I directed you:*

Paul's assignment for Titus. Healthy churches need qualified leaders.

Titus 2:11-13 *For the grace of God has appeared, which brings salvation to all men, training us that, having denied ungodliness and worldly desires, we should live sensibly and righteously and godly in the present age, awaiting the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,*

Grace saves, grace trains, and grace points us to the blessed hope of Christ's appearing.

Titus 2:14 *who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all lawlessness and purify for Himself a special people, zealous for good works.*

Christ gave Himself to redeem us and to make us His own people, eager to do good.

Titus 3:5 *not by works which we did in righteousness, but according to His mercy He saved us, through **the** washing of regeneration and renewal of **the** Holy Spirit,*

Salvation is God's mercy, not our record. The Holy Spirit makes us new.

Christ in Titus

Titus has one of the clearest statements in the Bible that Jesus is God. Believers are "awaiting the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (2:13). Paul does not split God and Savior into two different persons here. He calls Jesus Christ "our great God and Savior." The Jesus who is coming is God Himself.

Paul also uses the title Savior for both the Father and the Son, often side by side (1:3-4; 2:10, 13; 3:4, 6). In the Old Testament, the LORD said, "besides Me there is no Savior" (Isaiah 43:11). The New Testament calls Jesus Savior because He is the LORD come in the flesh.

Christ's work is described in Old Testament words. He "gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all lawlessness and purify for Himself a special people" (2:14). That echoes what God said to Israel at Sinai, that they would be His own special treasure among all peoples (Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 14:2). What God did for Israel when He redeemed them from Egypt, Christ has done for all who believe, by redeeming them from sin.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Titus 3:4-7 is a short summary of the whole gospel. "When the kindness and the love for mankind of God our Savior appeared" (3:4), God did what we could not do for ourselves. He saved us "through the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" (3:5). Regeneration means being born again, given new life. God "poured out" the Spirit on us "richly through Jesus Christ our Savior" (3:6), which points back to the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-18, 33) and to the promise in Joel 2:28. And the goal is "so that, having been justified by the grace of that One, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (3:7).

The letter also stretches from eternity past to eternity future. Paul's ministry rests on the hope of eternal life, "which God, who cannot lie, promised before eternal times" (1:2). And believers now wait for "the blessed hope" (2:13), the appearing of Christ in glory. I believe that blessed hope is the Lord's coming for His church, which Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, followed later

by His glorious return to the earth to reign. The church does not wait for the Antichrist or the Tribulation. It waits for Christ.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

As with 1 and 2 Timothy, many modern scholars doubt that Paul wrote Titus, mainly because of differences in style and the church order it describes. I take the letter at its word. It opens with Paul's name (1:1), and it is full of real names and plans that fit Paul's life: Artemas, Tychicus, Zenas the lawyer, Apollos, and a winter at Nicopolis (3:12-13). The early church received it as Paul's. A short letter of instructions to a trusted coworker would naturally sound a little different from a long letter of doctrine to a church.

Teachers also differ on what "the washing of regeneration" (3:5) means. Some connect it to baptism. Many others take it as a picture of the cleansing the Holy Spirit does in the heart when He gives new birth, the same idea Jesus spoke of when He told Nicodemus he must be born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5; Ezekiel 36:25-27). Either way, the verse is clear that we are saved by God's mercy, "not by works which we did in righteousness."

Read It This Way

Titus is short enough to read in ten minutes. Read it once straight through. Then read it again, marking each time Paul mentions good works. You will see how closely he ties what we believe to how we behave.

Read chapter 2 with your own place in life in mind. Are you an older man? Paul wants you sober, dignified, sensible and sound in faith, love and endurance (2:2). An older woman? You are to be reverent and to teach what is good, training the younger women (2:3-4). A younger man? Be sensible (2:6). An employee? Work honestly and well (2:9-10). The church on Crete was not built on a few gifted leaders. It was built on ordinary believers living godly lives in every stage of life. Older believers teaching younger ones was part of God's plan from the start.

Then read 2:11-14 slowly. It is one of the best summaries in the Bible of the Christian life. Grace has appeared in Christ's first coming. Grace trains us now. And grace points us forward to His appearing. We live between those two comings, saying no to ungodliness and yes to what is right.

Read 3:3-7 and remember who you were. "For we also were once foolish, disobedient, being deceived, being slaves to various desires and pleasures" (3:3). Paul includes himself. That memory keeps us humble and gentle with unbelievers (3:2). We were no better than they are. The only difference is the kindness of God our Savior.

Last, notice how Paul ends: "let our people also learn to devote themselves to good works for the necessary needs, so that they may not be unfruitful" (3:14). The gospel does not make believers lazy or useless. It makes them the most useful people in town.

Paul also tells Titus what to do with people who love to argue. "Avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and strifes and fights about the law; for they are unprofitable and futile" (3:9). A factious, divisive man should be warned once and then a second time, and after that the church should have nothing more to do with him (3:10-11). That may sound harsh, but Paul knew how much damage one quarrelsome person can do to a church. Healthy churches do not run from

hard truth, but they do not let pointless fights eat them alive either. There is a difference between a person with honest questions and a person who just wants a fight, and a wise leader learns to tell them apart. Titus had a hard job on a hard island, but he had the gospel, the Scriptures and the grace of God. So do we, and that is enough for any church in any place.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think Paul stresses character so much in his list of qualifications for elders (1:5-9)?
2. What does it mean to "adorn the teaching of God," and how could your life do that this week (2:9-10)?
3. How does God's grace train us to live, and what is it teaching you right now (2:11-14)?
4. Why does Paul remind believers of what they once were before he talks about God's mercy (3:1-7)?
5. What good work is God calling you to devote yourself to (3:8, 14)?

Go deeper: My Timothy and Titus Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study covers 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus verse by verse. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Philemon

At a Glance	
Author	Paul, with Timothy (verse 1)
Date written	About A.D. 60 to 62, from prison in Rome, sent with Colossians
Written to	Philemon, a believer in Colossae, and the church that met in his house (verses 1-2)
Setting and time covered	Paul's house arrest in Rome; Onesimus going home with Tychicus (Colossians 4:7-9)
Chapters	1
Key word	Receive him
Key verse	Philemon 1:16

Background

Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters, only twenty-five verses. It is a personal note about one man, written to another man, and it may seem out of place among letters like Romans and Ephesians. But this little letter shows the gospel at work in a real and messy situation, and it has a lot to say about forgiveness and how believers treat one another.

Here is the story, pieced together from the letter and from Colossians. Philemon was a believer in Colossae, a man of some means, with a house big enough for the church to meet in (verse 2). Paul had led him to Christ, perhaps during his years in Ephesus (verse 19). Apphia, named next, may have been his wife, and Archippus, who had a ministry in the church, may have been his son (verse 2; Colossians 4:17). Philemon was known for his love and for refreshing the hearts of the believers (verses 5, 7).

Philemon owned a slave named Onesimus. At some point Onesimus ran away, and it seems he may have taken money or property with him (verse 18). Somehow he ended up in Rome, where Paul was under house arrest. Scripture doesn't tell us how they met. However it happened, Onesimus came to faith in Christ through Paul (verse 10), and he became a real help to him. Paul would have liked to keep him (verse 13). But he knew the right thing was to send Onesimus back to his master, and he sent him home with Tychicus, who was carrying the letter to the Colossians (Colossians 4:7-9). Paul calls Onesimus "the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you" (Colossians 4:9).

Under Roman law, a runaway slave could be punished severely. Onesimus was taking a real risk in going back. So Paul wrote this letter for Onesimus to carry with him.

Purpose

Paul writes to ask Philemon to forgive Onesimus and receive him back, not just as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. Notice how Paul does it. He says he could order Philemon to do what is right, but he would rather appeal to him in love (verses 8-9). He wants Philemon's kindness to be his

own free choice, not forced (verse 14). And he hints that he expects Philemon to do even more than he asks (verse 21).

Main Themes

A changed man. Paul makes a play on words. The name Onesimus means useful. Paul says Onesimus "once was useless to you, but now is useful to you and to me" (verse 11). Christ had changed him, and now he could live up to his name.

A new relationship. Paul asks Philemon to take Onesimus back "no longer as a slave, but above a slave, a beloved brother" (verse 16). In Christ, master and slave were now brothers. That changed everything about how they would treat each other.

Love that pays the cost. Paul offers to cover whatever Onesimus owes: "charge this to me" (verse 18). He even signs it in his own hand like a promissory note: "I will repay it" (verse 19).

Outline

- Verses 1-7: Greeting, and thanks for Philemon's love and faith
- Verses 8-21: Paul's request for Onesimus
- Verses 22-25: Final words and greetings

Key Verses

Philemon 1:6 *so that the fellowship of your faith may become effective in **the** knowledge of every good **thing** which **is** in you toward Christ Jesus.*

Paul prays that Philemon's faith would be active and effective. The rest of the letter shows him one way to put it to work.

Philemon 1:16 *no longer as a slave, but above a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in **the** flesh and in **the** Lord.*

The heart of the letter. A runaway slave comes home as a beloved brother.

Philemon 1:18 *But if he has wronged you **in** anything, or owes **you**, charge this to me.*

Paul takes another man's debt on himself, a small picture of what Christ did for us.

Christ in Philemon

Philemon has no prophecy and no long passage on Christ, so the link is a picture rather than a direct prediction. But it is a beautiful picture. Onesimus had wronged his master and owed him a debt he could not pay. Paul stepped in between them and said, "If then you consider me a partner, receive him as me" (verse 17), and "charge this to me" (verse 18).

That is what Christ has done for every believer. We wronged God and owed a debt we could never pay. Jesus stepped in as our Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). He took our debt on Himself at the cross, where God blotted out the record of debt that stood against us (Colossians 2:14). And now the

Father receives us as He receives His own Son, because we are in Him (Ephesians 1:6). Martin Luther is often quoted as saying that we are all God's Onesimuses. Whoever first said it, it is true.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Some people ask why Paul did not simply demand that Philemon free Onesimus, or why the New Testament does not openly attack slavery. That is a fair question. Slavery in the Roman world was woven into the whole economy, and it was not always based on race, as it was in later history. A direct attack on it from a tiny, persecuted church would likely have brought down the full force of Rome. Instead, the gospel planted seeds that would grow. Paul says that in Christ "there is not slave nor free" (Galatians 3:28). He tells masters to treat their slaves justly and fairly, knowing they too have a Master in heaven (Colossians 4:1). He lists slave traders among the lawless and ungodly (1 Timothy 1:10). And here he tells a master to receive his slave as a beloved brother, as he would receive the apostle himself. It is hard to keep treating someone as property when you sit beside him at the Lord's Table and call him brother. Over time, the teaching of Scripture helped bring slavery to an end in many lands.

Philemon also shows the reconciling power of the gospel. God's whole plan is to bring people back to Himself and to one another through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18-20; Ephesians 2:14-16). This letter shows that plan working itself out in one household in a small town.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Was Philemon's slave really a runaway? Most teachers think so, and that is the plain way to read verses 15-18. A few have suggested that Onesimus had been sent to Paul by the church, or that he went to Paul looking for help in a quarrel with his master. Scripture doesn't settle it, and the message of the letter is the same either way. We also don't know how Philemon responded. Some early writers mention a bishop named Onesimus in Ephesus some decades later, and some have wondered if he was the same man. We can't know for sure. But the fact that the letter was kept and treasured suggests that Philemon did what Paul asked.

Read It This Way

Philemon takes about two minutes to read aloud. Read it that way, imagining the moment it was first read. Onesimus has just walked back through the door of the house he ran from. The church is gathered there. Philemon unrolls the letter and reads it in front of everyone, perhaps with Onesimus standing nearby. Every eye is on Philemon. What will he do?

Then ask who you are in the story. Some of us are Onesimus. We have run from responsibility or wronged someone, and we need to go back and make it right, trusting God with the outcome. Some of us are Philemon. Someone has wronged us, and God is asking us to forgive and receive them, even when we have the right to demand payment. And some of us are called to be Paul, stepping between two people who are at odds and paying a cost to help them be reconciled.

Watch how Paul speaks. He is warm, respectful and honest. He reminds Philemon of his love, appeals instead of commanding, and offers to pay the debt himself. He even adds a gentle reminder that Philemon owes Paul his very soul (verse 19). There is a lesson here for anyone who has to ask someone to do a hard thing. Kindness and honesty go together.

And notice the hope at the end. Paul asks Philemon to prepare a guest room, because he hopes to be released through their prayers (verse 22). He expected to come and see for himself how things turned out. Forgiveness in a church is not a private matter. It is something the whole family of God gets to see.

Study Questions

1. How had the gospel changed Onesimus, and how does Paul's play on his name show it (verses 10-11)?
2. Why do you think Paul appealed to Philemon instead of simply commanding him (verses 8-14)?
3. What would it mean for you to receive someone who has wronged you as "a beloved brother" (verse 16)?
4. How does Paul's offer to pay Onesimus's debt help you understand what Christ did for you (verses 17-19)?
5. Is there someone you need to go back to and make things right with, or someone you need to help reconcile with another (verses 15-21)?

Go deeper: My Colossians and Philemon Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study covers Colossians and Philemon verse by verse. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Part Nine: The General Letters

After Paul's thirteen letters come eight more: Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John, and Jude. They are often called the General Letters, and some older books call them the Catholic Letters. In that older use, catholic simply means general or universal. It has nothing to do with the Roman Catholic Church. The name comes from the fact that most of these letters were written to believers in general, or to groups of churches spread over a wide area, rather than to one church in one city the way most of Paul's letters were. James writes to "the twelve tribes which are in the dispersion" (James 1:1). Peter writes to believers scattered through five Roman provinces (1 Peter 1:1). Jude writes "to those who are called" (Jude 1).

These letters come from several different writers. James and Jude were half-brothers of Jesus, named among His brothers in Matthew 13:55, who did not believe in Him during His ministry (John 7:5) but came to faith after the resurrection (Acts 1:14; 1 Corinthians 15:7). Peter and John were two of the twelve apostles, part of the inner circle who saw the transfiguration and were closest to Jesus. Hebrews does not name its writer at all. That gives this part of the Bible a wonderful range. You hear the voice of a pastor steeped in the Old Testament, a plain-spoken brother of the Lord, a fisherman who denied Jesus and was restored, and the disciple Jesus loved.

What ties these letters together? For one thing, most of them were written to believers under pressure. Some faced persecution from outside: the readers of Hebrews had their property seized (Hebrews 10:34), and Peter's readers were being slandered and mistreated for their faith (1 Peter 4:12-16). Others faced danger from inside: false teachers who denied the truth about Christ or turned grace into an excuse for sin (2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 2:18-19; Jude 4). The letters answer with the same call in different words: hold fast, keep growing, love one another, and contend for the faith.

They also share a strong focus on the Lord's return. James says "the coming of the Lord has drawn near" (James 5:8). Peter says the day of the Lord will come like a thief (2 Peter 3:10). John says that when He is revealed, "we will be like Him" (1 John 3:2). Hebrews says Christ "will appear a second time" for those who eagerly wait for Him (Hebrews 9:28). Living in light of His coming runs through every one of these books.

How should you read them? Read them as letters to real people who were struggling to stay faithful, because that is what they are. Many of these letters are short, and some can be read in a few minutes. Don't let their size fool you. 2 John, 3 John and Jude are only one chapter each, but they hold warnings and encouragements the church has needed in every age. And read them alongside Paul. Some people have thought James and Paul disagree about faith and works. Read carefully, they don't. Paul shows that we are saved by faith alone. James shows that the faith that saves is never alone. Together they give us the whole picture.

Hebrews

At a Glance	
Author	Not named; Paul, Barnabas, Luke, Apollos and others have been suggested (the writer knew Timothy, 13:23)
Date written	Before A.D. 70, while the temple sacrifices were still going on (10:1-2)
Written to	Jewish believers under pressure, tempted to go back to the old system of the Law and the temple
Setting and time covered	A sermon in letter form, written to a church that had suffered and was growing weary (10:32-36; 13:22)
Chapters	13
Key word	Better
Key verse	Hebrews 1:3

Background

Hebrews begins like no other letter in the New Testament. There is no greeting, no name, no "grace and peace." It starts like a sermon, with a sweeping statement about God: "In many portions and in many ways God, having spoken long ago to the fathers in the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us in a Son" (1:1-2). And it really is a sermon in many ways. The writer calls it "the word of exhortation" (13:22). Only at the end does it turn into a letter, with personal news and greetings.

Who wrote it? The honest answer is that we don't know. The writer never gives his name. He knew Timothy, who had just been released from some kind of arrest (13:23). He says he heard the gospel from those who had heard the Lord, so he was not one of the twelve (2:3). He knew the Old Testament deeply, and his Greek is some of the finest in the New Testament. Over the centuries, many names have been suggested. Some in the early church believed Paul wrote it, and older English Bibles often put Paul's name in the title. Others have suggested Barnabas, a Levite who would have known the temple system well (Acts 4:36); Luke; Apollos, who was "mighty in the Scriptures" (Acts 18:24); and others. One early church teacher is reported to have said that only God knows who wrote Hebrews. I think that is still the wisest answer. The letter's place in Scripture has never depended on knowing his name. The church received it because it carries the marks of God's word and it exalts Christ.

When was it written? The writer speaks of the priests and their sacrifices as still going on (8:4; 10:1-2, 11). If the temple had already been destroyed, as it was by the Romans in A.D. 70, it is hard to believe he would not have mentioned it, since it would have proved his point that the old system was passing away (8:13). So most date the letter before A.D. 70.

Who were the readers? The title To the Hebrews was added early, and the letter itself fits Jewish believers. Everything turns on the Old Testament: angels, Moses, Joshua, Melchizedek, the priests, the tabernacle, the sacrifices, the covenant. The readers had believed for some time (5:12). In earlier days they had stood firm under persecution, been publicly mocked, and accepted the seizing of their property with joy (10:32-34). But now they were growing tired. Some had stopped

meeting with the church (10:25). And they seem to have been tempted to slip back into the old Jewish system, where they would be safe from persecution and could keep the familiar temple and sacrifices.

Purpose

The writer has one big message: Jesus is better. He is better than the prophets, better than the angels, better than Moses, better than Joshua, and better than the high priests of Israel. He brings a better covenant, built on better promises, with a better sacrifice, in a better sanctuary. The word "better" shows up again and again (1:4; 7:19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24).

So the writer's warning is simple. If Jesus is better than everything that came before, then going back to the old way is not a step to safety. It is walking away from the only real Savior. "How will we escape, having neglected so great a salvation?" (2:3). And his encouragement is just as simple. Hold fast. Draw near. Run with endurance. Look to Jesus.

Main Themes

God has spoken in His Son. God spoke through the prophets in many ways. Now He has spoken His final word in His Son, "the radiance of the glory and the exact representation of His substance" (1:3). The Son made the ages and upholds all things.

Jesus is our great High Priest. A priest stands between God and people and offers sacrifices for sin. Jesus is the perfect High Priest, "tempted in all things according to likeness, without sin" (4:15). He is a priest forever "according to the order of Melchizedek" (5:6; 7:17), and He "is also able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, always living to intercede for them" (7:25).

One sacrifice, once for all. The old priests offered the same sacrifices over and over, because "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and of goats to take away sins" (10:4). Christ "offered one sacrifice for sins for all time" and "sat down at the right hand of God" (10:12). He sat down because His work was finished.

A better covenant. God promised through Jeremiah to make a new covenant and to write His law on His people's hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Hebrews quotes that whole passage (8:8-12) and says Jesus is "the mediator of a better covenant" (8:6).

Faith that endures. Chapter 11 is the great chapter on faith. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). The writer walks through the heroes of the Old Testament, then calls us to run our own race "looking to the founder and perfecter of the faith, Jesus" (12:2).

Outline

- Chapters 1-2: Christ better than the prophets and the angels
- Chapters 3-4: Christ better than Moses and Joshua, and the rest God gives
- Chapters 5-7: Christ our better High Priest, after the order of Melchizedek
- Chapters 8-10: A better covenant and a better sacrifice

- Chapter 11: The life of faith
- Chapters 12-13: Endurance, discipline and holy living

Key Verses

Hebrews 1:3 *who, being **the** radiance of the glory and **the** exact representation of His substance, and upholding all things by the word of His power, having made purification of our sins through Himself, sat down at **the** right hand of the Majesty on high,*

Who the Son is and what He did. He shows us God perfectly, holds the universe together, made purification for sins, and sat down in honor.

Hebrews 4:12 *For the word of God **is** living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and penetrating as far as **the** division of both soul and spirit, of both joints and marrows, and able to judge **the** thoughts and intentions of **the** heart.*

God's word is alive. It cuts through excuses and shows us our hearts.

Hebrews 4:15-16 *For we do not have a high priest who is not able to sympathize with our weaknesses, but **one** who has been tempted in all things according to likeness, without sin. Let us therefore come with boldness to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace for timely help.*

Because our High Priest understands our weakness, we can come boldly to God's throne and find grace when we need it.

Hebrews 11:1 *Now faith is **the** assurance of **things** hoped for, **the** conviction of things not seen.*

Faith trusts what God has promised before it can see it.

Hebrews 12:2 *looking to the founder and perfecter of the faith, Jesus, who for the joy lying before Him endured **the** cross, having despised **the** shame, and sat down at **the** right hand of the throne of God.*

Keep your eyes on Jesus. He began our faith and He will finish it.

Christ in Hebrews

No book in the Bible shows more plainly how the Old Testament points to Christ, and the New Testament itself makes the connections, so we are on solid ground. The writer quotes Psalm 2, 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 45 to show that the Son is above the angels (1:5-9). He quotes Psalm 8 to show that Jesus is the true Man who will rule over all things (2:6-9). He quotes Psalm 110:4, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek," and spends three chapters explaining it (5:6; 7:1-28). Melchizedek was a priest-king who blessed Abraham long before the Law (Genesis 14:18-20). His priesthood did not come from the tribe of Levi, and Scripture records no beginning or end of his life. That makes him a picture of Christ, the eternal Priest-King.

The tabernacle itself was a picture. Hebrews says it was "a copy and shadow of the heavenly things" (8:5). The Day of Atonement, when the high priest entered the Most Holy Place once a year with blood (Leviticus 16), pointed ahead to Christ, who "through His own blood, entered once

for all into the holy places, having obtained eternal redemption" (9:12). Atonement means covering sin and bringing sinners back to God. The veil that kept people out of the Most Holy Place pictured His flesh, torn open to make "a new and living way" into God's presence (10:19-20).

How It Fits the Whole Story

Hebrews may be the best book in the New Testament for seeing how the whole Bible fits together. It shows that the Law, the priesthood, the tabernacle and the sacrifices were never God's final plan. The Law had only "a shadow of the coming good things" (10:1). Now the reality has come in Christ, and the shadows have done their job. The first covenant is "growing obsolete and aging" and "near vanishing" (8:13).

Hebrews also shows that God's people have always been saved by faith. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Rahab and many others "all died in faith, not having received the promises," but having seen them from far away (11:13). They were stretching out "for a better one, that is, a heavenly one" (11:16), a better country than any on earth. That is where the story is headed: the city God has prepared (11:16; 13:14), which John sees coming down out of heaven in Revelation 21.

And Hebrews points to Christ's return. "So the Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, apart from sin, to those who eagerly await Him for salvation" (9:28). He came the first time to deal with sin. He will come again to bring His people home.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

The biggest debate in Hebrews is over its warning passages (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:26-39; 12:14-29). The hardest is 6:4-6, which says it is "impossible" to renew to repentance those who were enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, became partakers of the Holy Spirit, and then fell away. What does that mean for a believer?

Good teachers read it in different ways. Some believe these passages describe people who heard the gospel, came close, and even seemed to believe, but never truly trusted Christ. When they fall away, they show they were never really His (compare 1 John 2:19). Others believe the warnings are real warnings to true believers, and that God uses them as one of the means by which He keeps His people from falling away, so that those who are truly saved heed them and persevere. Others believe a true believer can turn away and lose his salvation. The first two views are held by those who believe in eternal security, the teaching that a person who is truly saved will never be lost (John 10:28-29). The third is held by those who do not.

I will not settle the question here, but notice how the writer himself handles it. Right after the hardest warning he says, "But concerning you, beloved, we have been persuaded of the better things and things accompanying salvation, even if we speak in this way" (6:9). He warns because he loves them, and he expects them to listen. Whatever view you hold, the warnings are meant to be taken seriously, and the comfort is meant to be taken to heart. Jesus "is also able to save to the uttermost" (7:25).

The other open question is who wrote the letter, and I have given the main suggestions above without choosing one.

Read It This Way

Hebrews is not an easy book, especially if you don't know the Old Testament well. Keep your Bible open to the passages it quotes. When the writer quotes a psalm, go read the whole psalm. When he talks about the tabernacle, read Exodus 25-27 and Leviticus 16. You will understand Hebrews much better, and you will understand the Old Testament better too.

Notice how the book moves back and forth between teaching and exhortation. A section of teaching about Christ is usually followed by a "therefore" and a call to action: "let us hold firmly to the confession" (4:14); "let us therefore come with boldness to the throne of grace" (4:16); "let us consider one another for stirring up of love and of good works, not forsaking the assembling together of ourselves" (10:24-25). Watch for the phrase "let us." It appears again and again. Doctrine is always meant to move us.

Read chapter 11 as a family album. These are your spiritual ancestors. Not one of them was perfect. Noah got drunk, Abraham lied, Moses lost his temper, Rahab had been a harlot. But they trusted God, and "God is not ashamed of them, to be called their God" (11:16). Then read 12:1-2. They are "so great a cloud of witnesses," and their lives testify that faith is worth it. Now it is your turn to run.

And when you are tired, read chapter 12 again. God disciplines His children because He loves them, "for whom the Lord loves He disciplines" (12:6). Hard times are not a sign that God has given up on you. They are a sign that He is training you as a son. And He has promised, "I will certainly not leave you, nor will I ever forsake you" (13:5). "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (13:8).

Study Questions

1. What does Hebrews 1:1-3 teach about who Jesus is, and why does that matter for the rest of the book (1:1-3)?
2. How does knowing that Jesus was tempted in every way, yet without sin, help you when you are tempted (2:17-18; 4:14-16)?
3. Why did Christ's one sacrifice accomplish what the many Old Testament sacrifices could not (10:1-14)?
4. Which person in the faith chapter encourages you most, and why (11:1-40)?
5. What weight or sin do you need to lay aside so you can run with endurance (12:1-3)?

Go deeper: My Hebrews Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

James

At a Glance	
Author	James, the half-brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem (1:1; Galatians 1:19; Acts 15:13)
Date written	About A.D. 45 to 49; it may be the earliest New Testament book
Written to	Jewish believers "in the dispersion," scattered outside the land of Israel (1:1)
Setting and time covered	The early years of the church, when most believers were Jewish and many were poor and suffering
Chapters	5
Key word	Faith that works
Key verse	James 2:17

Background

James is the most practical book in the New Testament. It reads a lot like the book of Proverbs: short, punchy sayings about everyday life. In just five chapters, James gives about fifty commands. He talks about trials, temptation, anger, the poor and the rich, favoritism, the tongue, quarrels, pride, planning, money, patience and prayer. If you want to know what real faith looks like on a Monday morning, read James.

Who was this James? Several men in the New Testament had that name. James the son of Zebedee, the brother of John, was one of the twelve apostles, but Herod put him to death early, about A.D. 44 (Acts 12:1-2). James the son of Alphaeus was also one of the Twelve (Matthew 10:3), but we know almost nothing else about him. The James who wrote this letter is almost surely the half-brother of Jesus, the one Paul calls "the brother of the Lord" (Galatians 1:19; Matthew 13:55). During Jesus' ministry, His brothers did not believe in Him (John 7:5). But after the resurrection, the risen Lord appeared to James (1 Corinthians 15:7), and James believed. He became the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13-21; 21:18; Galatians 2:9). Think of that. He grew up in the same house as Jesus, and yet in this letter he never mentions it. He simply calls himself "a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). That tells you something about James.

The letter does not tell us its date, but many Bible teachers believe it was written early, about A.D. 45 to 49. If so, it may be the very first book of the New Testament to be written. James never mentions the big debate over whether Gentile believers had to be circumcised, which was settled at the Jerusalem council about A.D. 49 (Acts 15). He calls the meeting place of believers a "synagogue" (2:2), the word for a Jewish gathering. The letter reads like the early days of the church, when nearly all believers were Jews. Others date it later, closer to A.D. 60 to 62, near the end of James's life, and think he may be answering people who had twisted Paul's teaching on faith.

James writes to "the twelve tribes which are in the dispersion" (1:1). The dispersion means the Jews scattered outside the land of Israel. After Stephen was killed, believers in Jerusalem were scattered (Acts 8:1; 11:19), and some of James's readers may have been among them. Many were

poor. Some were being treated unfairly by rich landowners who held back their wages and dragged them into court (2:6; 5:4). James writes as their pastor from a distance.

What kind of man was James? Early church writers remembered him as a man of prayer, and some called him James the Just because of his righteous life. We can't confirm every detail they passed down, but the letter itself fits that picture. It is the writing of a man who prayed, who cared deeply for the poor, and who could not stand religious talk without real obedience behind it. Acts shows his wisdom too. At the Jerusalem council, after Peter and Paul had spoken, it was James who brought the matter to a close by pointing to Scripture and proposing a way forward that kept the gospel pure and kept Jewish and Gentile believers together (Acts 15:13-21).

Purpose

James writes to show what genuine faith looks like. He does not write a long argument about doctrine. He assumes his readers know the gospel. What concerns him is people who say they have faith but whose lives show no change. He wants them to be "doers of the word and not hearers only" (1:22). He also wants to encourage believers who are suffering to endure, to pray, and to wait patiently for the Lord's coming (5:7-8).

Main Themes

Trials produce endurance. "Consider it all joy, my brothers, whenever you fall into various trials" (1:2). Not because trials feel good, but because "the testing of your faith produces endurance" (1:3). The one who endures "will receive the crown of life" (1:12).

Hear and do. Listening to God's word without obeying it is like looking in a mirror and forgetting what you saw (1:23-24). "Religion pure and undefiled" shows itself in caring for orphans and widows and keeping oneself unstained from the world (1:27).

No favoritism. Believers must not treat the rich better than the poor in church (2:1-9). God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith (2:5).

Faith without works is dead. "So also the faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself" (2:17). Even the demons believe that God is one, "and shudder" (2:19). Real faith shows itself in what it does.

Tame the tongue, humble the heart. The tongue is small but powerful, "a fire" (3:6). James calls for wisdom from above that is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle" (3:17). God "opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (4:6).

Outline

- Chapter 1: Trials, temptation, and hearing and doing the word
- Chapter 2: Favoritism, and faith that works
- Chapter 3: The tongue and true wisdom
- Chapter 4: Quarrels, pride and humility, and planning without God
- Chapter 5: Warning to the rich, patience until the Lord comes, and prayer

Key Verses

James 1:2-3 *Consider **it** all joy, my brothers, whenever you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.*

Trials are not wasted. God uses them to build endurance.

James 1:22 *But be doers of **the** word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*

Hearing the Bible is not the goal. Doing it is.

James 2:17 *So also the faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself.*

The key verse. Faith that never acts is not living faith.

James 4:7-8 *Be subject therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Cleanse **your** hands, **you** sinners, and purify **your** hearts, **you** double-minded.*

Submit to God, resist the devil, draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.

James 5:16 *Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous **man**, being at work, prevails much.*

Prayer is powerful. A righteous person's prayer accomplishes much.

Christ in James

James mentions Jesus by name only twice (1:1; 2:1), and that makes some people think the book has little to say about Him. Look closer. James calls Him "our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory" (2:1). For a Jewish man to call his own half-brother "the Lord of glory," a title fit only for God, is remarkable. James believed his brother was God.

James also echoes Jesus' teaching more than any other New Testament letter. Many of his sayings sound like the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3), and James says God chose the poor to be rich in faith (2:5). Jesus said not to swear oaths but to let your yes be yes and your no be no (Matthew 5:34-37), and James says almost the same thing (5:12). Jesus taught about hearing and doing (Matthew 7:24-27), and James builds his whole first chapter on it. James had heard his brother teach, and the words stayed with him.

And James points to the Lord's return. "Be patient therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord" (5:7). "The Judge stands before the doors" (5:9). The One who taught on the hillsides of Galilee is coming back.

How It Fits the Whole Story

James sounds like the Old Testament. He uses Abraham, Rahab, Job and Elijah as examples (2:21-25; 5:11, 17-18). He quotes the Law, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (2:8; Leviticus 19:18), and calls it "the royal law." His concern for the poor and his warnings to the rich sound like the prophets Amos and Isaiah. James shows that the God of the Old Testament and the

God of the New are the same God, and that He has always cared about how His people treat the weak.

James also helps us see how the New Testament fits together on faith and works. Paul says, "a man is not justified by works of law except through faith of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16). James says, "a man is justified by works and not by faith only" (2:24). Do they disagree? No. They are answering different questions. Paul is asking how a sinner is made right with God, and the answer is by faith alone, apart from works. James is asking what real saving faith looks like, and the answer is that it always produces works. Paul uses Abraham's faith in Genesis 15:6, when God first counted him righteous. James uses Abraham's obedience in Genesis 22, decades later, when he offered Isaac, which showed that his faith was real. Paul is fighting people who wanted to add works to faith. James is fighting people who wanted faith without any works at all. We need both letters.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Some, especially in the past, have struggled with James because it seems to clash with Paul. That problem goes away when you read each in context, as I explained above. The bigger debate today is over the date. Many teachers hold the early date, about A.D. 45 to 49, for the reasons given. Others hold a later date, about A.D. 60 to 62, and see James correcting a misunderstanding of Paul. Both views hold that James the brother of the Lord wrote it. The SLB introduction gives the early date, about A.D. 45 to 49, and that is the date used in this book, but the message is the same either way.

Teachers also differ on how to apply 5:14-15, where James tells the sick to call the elders to pray over them and anoint them with oil. Some see the oil as medicine, some as a symbol of the Spirit's work, and some as both. All agree that the prayer of faith matters and that God hears His people when they pray.

Read It This Way

Read James with a pencil in hand, and mark every command. There are a lot of them. Then pick one and ask God to help you obey it this week. James would not want you just to study his letter. He would want you to do it.

Read it slowly, too, because James can sting. "If anyone seems to be religious among you, not bridling his tongue but deceiving his heart, the religion of this one is worthless" (1:26). "Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that the friendship of the world is hostility with God?" (4:4). James does not soften things. He loves his readers too much to let them fool themselves.

When you read 4:13-17, think about how you plan. James is not against making plans. He is against making plans as if God did not exist. "For what is your life? For it is a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (4:14). The right attitude is, "If the Lord wills, we will both live and do this or that" (4:15).

And take heart from chapter 5. James ends with prayer. Pray when you suffer. Sing when you are cheerful. Call the elders when you are sick. Confess your sins to one another and pray for one

another (5:13-16). Then he points to Elijah, who "was a man of like nature to us" (5:17). Elijah was not a superhero. He was an ordinary man who prayed, and God answered. You can pray like that too.

Last, notice how James ends, with no greeting and no farewell. His final word is about caring for a brother who has wandered from the truth: "the one who turns back a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins" (5:20). For James, faith that works always ends up reaching out to someone else. That is a fitting end to the letter. The brother of the Lord, who once did not believe in Him, spent his life helping others turn back to the truth. Real faith does not keep to itself.

Study Questions

1. What trial are you facing right now, and how might God be using it to build endurance in you (1:2-4)?
2. In what area of life are you a hearer of the word but not yet a doer (1:22-25)?
3. How do James and Paul fit together on faith and works (2:14-26; Galatians 2:16)?
4. What is one way you could better control your tongue this week (3:1-12)?
5. How do your plans for the future show whether you are depending on God (4:13-17)?

Go deeper: My James Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

1 Peter

At a Glance	
Author	Peter the apostle (1:1), with Silvanus helping him write (5:12)
Date written	About A.D. 64, from Rome, which he calls "Babylon" (5:13), just before Nero's persecution
Written to	Believers scattered through Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, in what is now Turkey (1:1)
Setting and time covered	A time of growing hostility toward Christians, as believers were slandered and mistreated for their faith (4:12-16)
Chapters	5
Key word	Hope in suffering
Key verse	1 Peter 1:3

Background

1 Peter is a letter of hope written to people who were hurting. Its readers were believers spread across five Roman provinces in what is now Turkey. Peter calls them "elect exiles of the dispersion" (1:1). They were not refugees in the usual sense. They were exiles because they belonged to God, and that made them strangers in their own towns. Their neighbors spoke against them as evildoers (2:12). They were surprised by the "burning" trial that had come on them (4:12). Some were slaves with harsh masters (2:18-20). Some were wives with unbelieving husbands (3:1). All of them needed to know how to live for Christ when the world was turning against them.

The man who wrote to them knew something about failure and restoration. Simon Peter was a fisherman from Galilee, the brother of Andrew, and one of the first disciples Jesus called. Jesus gave him the name Peter, which means rock (John 1:42). He was bold and quick to speak. He was the first to confess, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16), and he was the one who denied Jesus three times on the night of His arrest (Luke 22:54-62). After the resurrection, Jesus restored him and told him to feed His sheep (John 21:15-17). On the day of Pentecost he preached, and three thousand were saved (Acts 2:41). Now, years later, an older Peter writes as "the fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ" (5:1), shepherding the flock as Jesus had told him to.

Peter wrote "through Silvanus" (5:12), the same man called Silas who traveled with Paul (Acts 15:40). Silvanus may have helped write the letter or may have carried it, or both. Peter sends greetings from "she who is in Babylon" and from "Mark my son" (5:13). Most believe "Babylon" is a code name for Rome, the great capital of the world, which John also calls Babylon in Revelation 17-18. Early church writers say Peter was in Rome near the end of his life and died there under Nero. The letter fits a date of about A.D. 64, as hostility toward Christians was growing, just before or as Nero's persecution began.

Purpose

Peter writes to encourage suffering believers to stand firm in God's grace (5:12). He reminds them of their living hope, tells them who they are in Christ, and shows them how to live well among people who misunderstand and mistreat them. He wants them to expect suffering, to endure it with good conduct, to follow Christ's example, and to keep their eyes on the glory that is coming.

Main Themes

A living hope. God "begot us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1:3). Their inheritance is "imperishable and undefiled and unfading, reserved in the heavens" (1:4). No persecutor could touch it.

Faith refined like gold. Trials test faith the way fire tests gold. The testing of your faith is "much more precious than gold that perishes" (1:7), and it will bring praise and glory when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Who you are in Christ. Believers are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His possession" (2:9). Those words were first spoken to Israel at Sinai (Exodus 19:5-6). Peter's readers may have been outcasts in their towns, but they were God's own people.

Good conduct among unbelievers. Peter calls believers to live so well that even those who slander them will see their good works and glorify God (2:12). He speaks to citizens, servants, wives and husbands (2:13-3:7). "Be ready always for a defense to everyone who asks you an account concerning the hope in you, with gentleness and fear" (3:15).

Suffering, then glory. "Do not think it strange at the burning among you" (4:12). Suffering for Christ is to be expected. "If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed" (4:16). The pattern of Christ's life, suffering first and then glory, is the pattern for His people too (1:11; 5:10).

Outline

- Chapters 1:1-2:10: Our living hope and our new identity as God's people
- Chapters 2:11-3:12: Living well among unbelievers: citizens, servants, wives and husbands
- Chapters 3:13-4:19: Suffering for doing right, following Christ's example
- Chapter 5: Shepherds and the flock, and standing firm against the devil

Key Verses

1 Peter 1:3 *Blessed **be** the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy begot us again to a living hope through **the** resurrection of Jesus Christ from **the** dead,*

New birth to a living hope, all because Jesus rose from the dead.

1 Peter 1:18-19 *knowing that you were redeemed not with perishable things, silver or gold, from your futile conduct handed down from **your** fathers, but with **the** precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot,*

We were bought back, not with money, but with the precious blood of Christ, the spotless Lamb.

1 Peter 2:9 *But you **are** a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for **His** possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;*

God's people have a new identity and a purpose: to proclaim His excellencies.

1 Peter 2:24 *who Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that, having died to sins, we might live to righteousness; by whose wound you were healed.*

Jesus carried our sins in His own body on the cross so that we could live to righteousness.

1 Peter 5:7 *having cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares about you.*

You can throw all your worries on the Lord, because He cares about you.

Christ in 1 Peter

Peter shows Christ again and again as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. "Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth" (2:22) comes from Isaiah 53:9. "Who Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree" (2:24) echoes Isaiah 53:4, 11-12. "By whose wound you were healed" (2:24) is from Isaiah 53:5. "For you were like sheep going astray" (2:25) is from Isaiah 53:6. Peter, the man who once tried to talk Jesus out of going to the cross (Matthew 16:21-23), now sees it as the center of everything.

Christ is also the Lamb. We were redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1:19). The Passover lamb had to be without defect (Exodus 12:5). Christ is the perfect Lamb that lamb pointed to.

And Christ is the cornerstone. Peter quotes Isaiah 28:16 and Psalm 118:22 about the stone God laid in Zion, the stone the builders rejected (2:6-7). Peter had used the same psalm before the council in Jerusalem (Acts 4:11). Jesus Himself had applied it to Himself (Matthew 21:42). Peter also says that the Old Testament prophets searched to understand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow, and that "the Spirit of Christ in them" was pointing ahead to Him (1:10-11). The Old Testament was about Christ all along.

Peter also holds Christ up as our example. "Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, so that you may follow His steps" (2:21). The word for example was used of the letters a child traced over when learning to write. Christ's response to suffering is the pattern we trace with our own lives. He did not answer insult with insult. He kept entrusting Himself to the Father, who judges justly (2:23). That is how a believer can suffer without growing bitter.

How It Fits the Whole Story

1 Peter takes words God spoke to Israel and applies them to the church. "A royal priesthood, a holy nation" (2:9) comes from Exodus 19:6. "Be holy, because I am holy" (1:16) comes from Leviticus 11:44. That does not mean the church has replaced Israel. God's promises to the nation still stand (Romans 11:25-29). It means that believers in Christ, Jew and Gentile alike, now share in the privilege of belonging to God and serving Him as priests, offering "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (2:5).

Peter also connects the flood to salvation. In the days of Noah, God waited patiently while the ark was built, and eight people were brought safely through the water (3:20). Peter says baptism now corresponds to that (3:21). It is not the washing of dirt from the body that saves, but the pledge of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The water is a picture. The power is in the risen Christ.

And Peter keeps pointing forward to "the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:7, 13; 4:13). "The end of all things has drawn near" (4:7). When the Chief Shepherd appears, His faithful shepherds will receive "the unfading crown of glory" (5:4). The suffering is "for a little while" (1:6; 5:10). The glory is forever.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

1 Peter 3:18-20 is one of the hardest passages in the New Testament. Christ was "put to death indeed in the flesh, but having been made alive in the spirit, in which also, having gone, He preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly disobeyed" in the days of Noah. What does that mean? Good teachers hold several views. Some believe Christ, through the Spirit, preached through Noah to the people of Noah's day, who are now in prison awaiting judgment. Others believe that between His death and resurrection, or at His ascension, Christ announced His victory to fallen angels who had sinned in Noah's time and are now held in prison (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). Others hold other views. What all agree on is that the passage does not teach a second chance for salvation after death (Hebrews 9:27). Peter's main point is clear: Christ suffered once for sins, "the righteous for the unrighteous, so that He might bring us to God" (3:18), and He is now at God's right hand, with angels and powers subject to Him (3:22).

Most teachers also take "Babylon" in 5:13 as Rome, though a few think Peter meant the city of Babylon in Mesopotamia. The early reports that Peter ended his life in Rome fit the first view.

Read It This Way

Read 1 Peter when you are suffering, or when you know someone who is. It was written for exactly that. Peter's readers were not facing an empire-wide war on Christians yet. Their suffering was mostly the daily kind: whispers, insults, being left out, losing work, being treated as strange for not joining in the old sins (4:3-4). Many believers today know exactly what that feels like. Peter's counsel fits. Notice that Peter does not promise his readers that their troubles will go away. He promises something better: that their trials have a purpose, that God is with them, and that glory is coming.

Notice how often Peter uses the word "hope," and how often he speaks of grace. He begins with a living hope (1:3) and ends with "the true grace of God, in which you stand" (5:12). Everything in between is about standing in that grace when life is hard.

Read 2:11-3:12 carefully. Some of what Peter says about submission is hard for modern readers. Remember that he is writing to people with very little power, slaves and wives in pagan households, and he is showing them how to live as free people in Christ even in hard places. He does not tell them to deny their faith. He tells them to win others by their conduct. And he grounds it all in Christ, who, "being reviled, did not revile in return; suffering, He did not threaten" (2:23).

And read chapter 5 as an old pastor's last words. Shepherd the flock willingly. Be humble. Cast your anxiety on God. Be sober and watchful, because "your adversary, the devil, walks around as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (5:8). Resist him, firm in the faith. And after you have suffered a little, the God of all grace will Himself "perfect, establish, strengthen, settle you" (5:10). Peter knew. He had been restored. The man who once denied his Lord by a fire ended his life as a faithful shepherd, and the same grace that restored Peter is offered to every believer who has failed.

Study Questions

1. What makes the believer's hope "living," and how does it help you face hard times (1:3-9)?
2. How does it change your view of yourself to know you are part of "a chosen race, a royal priesthood" (2:9-10)?
3. How can believers live in a way that makes unbelievers take notice of God (2:11-17)?
4. Are you ready to give an answer for the hope that is in you, and how could you prepare (3:15-16)?
5. What worry do you need to cast on the Lord today (5:6-7)?

Go deeper: My 1 and 2 Peter Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study covers both letters verse by verse. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

2 Peter

At a Glance	
Author	Simon Peter (1:1), who saw the transfiguration (1:16-18)
Date written	About A.D. 67 to 68, shortly before Peter's death (1:14)
Written to	The same believers as 1 Peter, it seems (3:1), and all who share the same faith (1:1)
Setting and time covered	Peter's last days, as false teachers spread lies and mocked the promise of Christ's return
Chapters	3
Key word	Remember
Key verse	2 Peter 1:20-21

Background

2 Peter is a last letter, like Paul's 2 Timothy. Peter knows he is about to die. "Knowing that the putting off of my tent is soon, as also our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me" (1:14). Years earlier, on the shore of Galilee, Jesus had told Peter that when he was old, someone would lead him where he did not want to go, "signifying by what death he would glorify God" (John 21:18-19). Now that time had come. Early church writers report that Peter died in Rome under the emperor Nero, who died in A.D. 68. That gives this letter a date of about A.D. 67 to 68.

What do you write when you know you have only a short time left? Peter writes to remind. The word remind or remember comes up again and again (1:12, 13, 15; 3:1, 2). He is not giving new teaching. He wants his readers to hold on to what they already know, so that after he is gone they will still remember (1:15).

He calls this "a second letter" (3:1), which most take to mean it was sent to the same readers as 1 Peter, believers scattered through what is now Turkey. But the problem this time was different. In 1 Peter, the danger came from outside, from persecution. In 2 Peter, the danger came from inside, from false teachers in the church. They were secretly bringing in destructive teaching, "even denying the Master who bought them" (2:1). They lived immoral, greedy lives and promised others freedom while they were slaves of corruption themselves (2:19). And they mocked the promise of Christ's return: "Where is the promise of His coming?" (3:4).

Purpose

Peter writes to help believers grow strong enough that false teaching won't carry them away. He calls them to keep growing in the faith (chapter 1), warns them about the false teachers and their judgment (chapter 2), and answers the mockers who said Jesus was never coming back (chapter 3). He ends where he wants them to live: "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (3:18).

Main Themes

Everything we need. God's "divine power has given to us all things pertaining to life and godliness" (1:3). Through His promises, believers share in His nature and escape the world's corruption (1:4). We don't need a new teaching or secret knowledge. We have what we need in Christ.

Keep growing. Peter gives a ladder of growth: add to your faith virtue, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love (1:5-7). A believer who keeps growing will not stumble, and his calling will be confirmed (1:10).

The Bible is from God. Peter saw Christ's glory on the mountain (1:16-18). But he says we have something even more sure: "the prophetic word" (1:19). Scripture did not come from human ideas, "but being borne by the Holy Spirit, holy men of God spoke" (1:21).

False teachers will be judged. God did not spare the angels who sinned, the ancient world in Noah's day, or Sodom and Gomorrah (2:4-6). But He rescued Noah and Lot. "the Lord knows how to rescue the godly out of trials, and to keep the unrighteous for the day of judgment" (2:9).

The Lord is not slow. The scoffers say nothing has changed since creation. Peter answers that God has judged the world before, by the flood, and He will again (3:5-7). "One day with the Lord is like a thousand years" (3:8). He delays because He is patient, "not wishing any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (3:9).

Outline

- Chapter 1: Growing in faith, and the sure word of prophecy
- Chapter 2: False teachers: their ways and their judgment
- Chapter 3: The day of the Lord, and how to live while we wait

Key Verses

2 Peter 1:3 *as His divine power has given to us all things pertaining to life and godliness, through the full knowledge of Him who called us through glory and virtue,*

God has already given believers everything needed for life and godliness through knowing Him.

2 Peter 1:20-21 *knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from private interpretation; for prophecy was never borne by **the** will of man, but being borne by **the** Holy Spirit, holy men of God spoke.*

How the Bible came to be. The Holy Spirit carried the writers along, so their words are God's words.

2 Peter 3:9 *The Lord is not slow concerning the promise, as some consider slowness, but is patient toward us, not wishing any to perish, but all to come to repentance.*

What looks like delay is mercy. God is giving people time to repent.

2 Peter 3:18 *but grow in grace and in **the** knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him **be** the glory both now and to **the** day of eternity. Amen.*

Peter's last recorded words in Scripture: keep growing in grace and in the knowledge of Christ.

Christ in 2 Peter

Peter begins by writing of "the righteousness of our God and our Savior Jesus Christ" (1:1). In the Greek, one article stands over both titles, God and Savior, so many teachers read this, like Titus 2:13, as a plain statement that Jesus is God. The fisherman who walked beside Jesus for three years called Him God.

Peter also tells us what he saw on the mount of transfiguration. He did not follow "cleverly devised myths," he says, but had "become eyewitnesses of His majesty" (1:16). He heard the Father's voice say, "This is My Son, the beloved, in whom I was well pleased" (1:17; Matthew 17:5). The transfiguration was a preview of the glory Christ will show when He comes again (Matthew 16:28-17:2). That is why Peter brings it up. The false teachers mocked Christ's coming. Peter answers that he has already seen a glimpse of it.

And Christ is "the morning star" who will rise in our hearts (1:19). In Revelation 22:16, Jesus calls Himself "the bright and morning star." Until He comes, God's prophetic word is like a lamp in a dark place.

How It Fits the Whole Story

2 Peter takes us from creation to the new creation in one chapter. The scoffers said, "all things continue in this way from the beginning of creation" (3:4). Peter reminds them that the world was made by God's word and was once destroyed by water in the flood (3:5-6; Genesis 6-8). The same word is holding the present heavens and earth for judgment by fire (3:7). "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night," and the heavens will pass away and the elements will be dissolved with heat (3:10). Then comes the promise: "according to His promise we look for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells" (3:13). That promise goes back to Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22 and forward to Revelation 21:1.

How does that fit with the rapture, the Tribulation and the thousand-year kingdom? Peter is giving the big picture, not the detailed order. In the Bible, "the day of the Lord" is a period of time, not a single twenty-four-hour day. It includes God's judgments in the Tribulation, Christ's return, and His reign. Peter's "one day with the Lord is like a thousand years" (3:8) reminds us that God's timetable is not ours. I believe the burning up of the present heavens and earth comes at the end of that long day, after the thousand-year kingdom, when God makes all things new (Revelation 20:11; 21:1).

Peter also gives us one of the clearest statements in the Bible about how Scripture came to be. "No prophecy of Scripture comes from private interpretation; for prophecy was never borne by the will of man, but being borne by the Holy Spirit, holy men of God spoke" (1:20-21). The picture is of a ship carried along by the wind. The writers used their own minds and words, but the Spirit carried them, so that what they wrote is what God meant to say. And Peter puts Paul's letters right

alongside "the other Scriptures" (3:16). Even in the first century, the apostles knew the New Testament was being written.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

2 Peter is one of the most doubted books in the New Testament. Many modern scholars believe someone wrote it in Peter's name after his death. They point to Greek that is different from 1 Peter, to the close likeness between 2 Peter 2 and the letter of Jude, and to the fact that it was slower than some books to be accepted everywhere in the early church. I take the letter at its word. It names "Simon Peter" as its author (1:1). The Greek text spells Simon as Symeon here, the old Hebrew form of his name. It claims the writer was on the mountain at the transfiguration (1:16-18). It speaks of Jesus' prophecy about his death (1:14). It calls itself his second letter (3:1), and calls Paul "our beloved brother" (3:15). If it were not by Peter, the writer would be claiming things that were not true, and a book that lies about its own author would not belong in Scripture. A different style is easily explained if Peter used a different helper this time, since 1 Peter says plainly that Silvanus helped with that letter (1 Peter 5:12). In the end, the early church did receive it.

How 2 Peter and Jude relate is another question. They share many words and examples. Some think Peter used Jude, some think Jude used Peter, and some think both drew on a common source. Scripture does not tell us, and the answer does not change the message.

Read It This Way

Read 2 Peter as an old man's last warning. Picture Peter, the impulsive fisherman, now near the end, thinking about the flock he would leave behind. He knows false teachers will come, as they always have. He doesn't want his friends to be caught off guard. That is why he keeps saying he will remind them, "though you know them and have been established in the present truth" (1:12). Even mature believers need reminders. Most of us don't need new truth as much as we need to remember the old truth and live it. Peter's last gift to the church was a reminder.

Read chapter 1 as a call to growth. Peter's list in 1:5-7 is not a ladder to earn salvation. It starts with faith. But faith that is real will grow. If you are not growing, Peter says, you have become "blind, being short-sighted, having taken forgetfulness of the purification of his former sins" (1:9). Don't forget what God has done for you. Notice too that Peter says a growing believer will "by no means ever stumble" (1:10) and will be richly welcomed "into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (1:11). Growth is not how we get in. It is the evidence that we belong, and it gives us a settled confidence as we wait for that day.

Read chapter 2 carefully but not fearfully. It is one of the strongest warnings about false teachers in the Bible. Notice the marks Peter gives: they deny the Lord, they live for pleasure and money, they despise authority, and they promise freedom while being slaves themselves. Those are still good tests today. But notice too that "the Lord knows how to rescue the godly" (2:9). God kept Noah through the flood and rescued Lot from Sodom. He can keep you.

And read chapter 3 when you wonder why Jesus hasn't come back yet. People have mocked His return for two thousand years. Peter's answer still holds. God is not slow. He is patient. Every day He waits is another day for someone to repent. Then Peter asks the question that matters most:

"what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness" (3:11)? If this world is going to be burned up, don't build your life on it. Live for the new heavens and new earth, where righteousness dwells. And keep growing while you wait. Peter's very last word is not a warning but a call to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and to give Him the glory both now and forever (3:18).

Study Questions

1. What has God already given you for life and godliness, and how are you using it (1:3-4)?
2. Which quality in Peter's list of growth do you most need to add right now (1:5-11)?
3. Why does Peter say the prophetic word is even more sure than what he saw on the mountain (1:16-21)?
4. How can you recognize false teaching, using the marks Peter gives (2:1-3, 17-19)?
5. Since the Lord is patient and wants people to repent, who could you pray for or share the gospel with this week (3:9-15)?

Go deeper: My 1 and 2 Peter Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study covers both letters verse by verse. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

1 John

At a Glance	
Author	John the apostle, an eyewitness who heard, saw and touched the Word of life (1:1-3)
Date written	About A.D. 85 to 95, from Ephesus
Written to	Believers John calls his "little children," most likely churches in and around Ephesus (2:1, 12)
Setting and time covered	After false teachers had left the church denying that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh (2:19; 4:2-3)
Chapters	5
Key word	Know
Key verse	1 John 5:13

Background

1 John doesn't start like a letter. There is no greeting and no name. It starts with a man who could hardly wait to tell you what he saw: "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" (1:1). The writer is an old man now, but he still remembers the sound of Jesus' voice and the feel of His hands. He is writing about Someone he knew.

The letter never names its writer, but from the earliest days the church received it as the work of John the apostle, the same man who wrote the Gospel of John. The style and words match closely. Both talk about light and darkness, truth and lies, love, life, abiding, and being born of God. Both open with "the beginning" and "the Word" (John 1:1; 1 John 1:1). John was the son of Zebedee, a fisherman from Galilee, one of the inner circle of Jesus' disciples. Early church writers say he spent his later years in Ephesus, and the SLB introduction dates this letter about A.D. 85 to 95.

Why did he write? Something painful had happened in the churches. A group of people had left. "They went out from us, but they were not of us" (2:19). These people claimed special knowledge of God, but they denied that Jesus is the Christ (2:22) and that Jesus Christ had "come in the flesh" (4:2-3). Some of them seem to have said that the eternal Christ could not really have become a human being with a real body. They also seem to have said that sin didn't matter for those who knew God (1:6, 8, 10). After they left, the believers who stayed were shaken. Were they the ones who had it wrong? Did they really know God? John writes to give them assurance.

Purpose

John tells us his purpose plainly: "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life" (5:13). His Gospel was written so that people would believe (John 20:31). His first letter was written so that those who believe would know they have life.

To help them know, John gives them tests. Throughout the letter he says, "by this we know" (2:3, 5; 3:19, 24; 4:2, 13; 5:2). The tests come back to three things. Do you believe the truth about Jesus Christ? Do you obey His commands? Do you love your brothers and sisters in Christ? The false teachers failed all three. They denied Christ, they excused sin, and they had walked out on the church. True believers, though not perfect, show the marks of new life.

Main Themes

God is light. "God is light, and darkness is not in Him at all" (1:5). Walking with God means walking in the light, honest about our sin. "If we say that we do not have sin, we deceive ourselves" (1:8). But "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous so that He may forgive us" (1:9).

God is love. "The one who does not love has not known God, because God is love" (4:8). God showed His love by sending His Son "as a propitiation for our sins" (4:10). "We love Him because He first loved us" (4:19). Real love shows "in deed and in truth" (3:18).

Jesus Christ came in the flesh. John insists that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who came as a real human being. "Every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ having come in the flesh is of God" (4:2). Denying this is the spirit of antichrist (4:3).

Children of God. "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we may be called children of God!" (3:1). Those who are born of God do not keep living in sin as a way of life (3:9), and they love one another (4:7).

You can know. John uses the word know dozens of times. He wants believers to have confidence, not because of how they feel, but because of what God has said: "The one who has the Son has life" (5:12).

Outline

- Chapters 1-2: Walking in the light: fellowship, confession, obedience, and warning about antichrists
- Chapter 3: Living as children of God: purity and love
- Chapter 4: Testing the spirits and loving one another
- Chapter 5: Faith that overcomes and the assurance of eternal life

Key Verses

1 John 1:9 *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous so that He may forgive us the sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

God's promise to believers who sin. When we confess, He forgives and cleanses.

1 John 3:1 *See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we may be called children of God! Because of this the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.*

The wonder of being called God's children.

1 John 4:8 *The one who does not love has not known God, because God is love.*

Love is not just something God does. It is who He is.

1 John 4:19 *We love Him because He first loved us.*

Our love for God is always a response to His love for us.

1 John 5:13 *These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life, and so that you may believe in the name of the Son of God.*

The purpose of the letter. Believers can know that they have eternal life.

Christ in 1 John

John shows Christ as our Advocate and our propitiation. "If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous One; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins" (2:1-2). An advocate is someone who speaks on your behalf, like a defense lawyer. Propitiation is the sacrifice that satisfies God's justice and turns away His wrath. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest sprinkled blood on the mercy seat, the cover of the ark, to make atonement for Israel (Leviticus 16:14-16). Christ is the reality that pointed to. He is both the sacrifice and the One who pleads for us.

John also shows Christ as the One who came to undo the devil's work. "For this purpose the Son of God was revealed, so that He might destroy the works of the devil" (3:8). That reaches back to Genesis 3:15, where God promised that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head. The devil "sins from the beginning" (3:8), and Christ came to end his reign.

And Christ is the Son sent from the Father. "We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world" (4:14). John was there. He saw.

Notice how much John's whole letter depends on the real humanity of Jesus. If Jesus did not truly come in the flesh, then He did not truly die, His blood does not cleanse, and there is no propitiation. That is why John is so firm. The false teachers thought they were offering a higher, more spiritual faith. John says they were cutting the heart out of the gospel. "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1:7) only because the Son of God took on real flesh and blood.

How It Fits the Whole Story

1 John speaks of "the last hour" (2:18). The last days began when Christ came the first time (Hebrews 1:2), and John says the spirit of antichrist was already at work in his day. "As you heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen" (2:18). The word antichrist means one who is against Christ or who puts himself in Christ's place. John is the only Bible writer to use the word. He tells us that a final antichrist is coming, the one Paul calls the man of sin (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4) and Revelation calls the beast (Revelation 13). But many smaller antichrists, false teachers who deny the Son, come before him.

John also points to Christ's return. "When He is revealed, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is" (3:2). That is the hope of the church: the Lord's coming for His people, when our

bodies are changed in an instant (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). And John says that hope should change us now. "And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (3:3). "Abide in Him, so that when He is manifested we may have boldness and not be ashamed before Him at His coming" (2:28).

Where Good Teachers Disagree

1 John 3:6 and 3:9 say that the one born of God "does not practice sin" and "is not able to sin." But 1:8 says that if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. How do those fit together? Most teachers believe John is speaking of a settled way of life. A believer still sins and must confess it (1:9; 2:1). But he does not go on living in sin as a pattern, happy and unbothered, the way the false teachers did. The new nature God has given him will not let him rest in it.

Teachers also discuss 5:7-8. The SLB, following the older Greek text it is based on, reads, "there are three who testify in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one." Most of the oldest Greek copies do not include the words about the three in heaven, and most modern Bibles leave them out or put them in a note. The truth of the Trinity does not depend on this verse. It is taught all through the New Testament (Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14).

Read It This Way

1 John can feel like it goes in circles, and in a way it does. John comes back to the same few themes again and again: light, love, truth, obedience, believing in the Son. Rather than a straight line, think of it as a spiral staircase. Each time around, you climb a little higher.

Read it as a letter from a grandfather. John calls his readers "little children" over and over. He is tender with them, but he does not soften the truth. He tells them plainly that a person who says he loves God and hates his brother is a liar (4:20). That is love too. "For the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how is he able to love God whom he has not seen?" (4:20). John had learned that lesson the hard way. As a young man he had wanted to call fire down on a Samaritan village (Luke 9:54). Jesus changed him. The Son of Thunder became the apostle of love, and he wants the same change for us.

If you struggle with doubt about your salvation, read 1 John slowly. Don't look at your feelings. Look at the tests John gives. Do you believe Jesus is the Son of God who came in the flesh, died for your sins and rose again? Do you want to obey Him, and are you sorry when you don't? Do you love God's people? Those are the marks of new life. And then hold on to the promise: "The one who has the Son has life" (5:12). If you have Jesus, you have eternal life, not because you are strong, but because God has said so.

And if you are walking in sin, read 1:9 and do what it says. Don't hide it. Confess it. "He is faithful and righteous so that He may forgive us the sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Then remember that you have an Advocate with the Father (2:1).

Last, notice how John ends: "Little children, guard yourselves from idols" (5:21). After five chapters on knowing the true God, that is his last word. Anything that takes God's place in our hearts is an idol, and John wants nothing to come between his children and the Lord.

Study Questions

1. What does it mean to walk in the light, and why is confessing sin part of it (1:5-10)?
2. What does John say about loving the world, and what pulls at your heart most (2:15-17)?
3. How does the hope of Christ's return motivate you to live a pure life (3:1-3)?
4. What are John's tests for false teaching, and how can you use them today (4:1-6)?
5. How can you know that you have eternal life, according to John (5:11-13)?

Go deeper: My 1, 2, 3 John and Jude Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study covers all four letters verse by verse. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

2 John

At a Glance	
Author	John the apostle, who calls himself "the elder" (verse 1)
Date written	About A.D. 85 to 95, from Ephesus
Written to	"The elect lady" and "her children," either a Christian woman and her family or a local church (verse 1)
Setting and time covered	The same years as 1 John, when traveling false teachers were going from church to church (verses 7, 10)
Chapters	1
Key word	Truth and love
Key verse	2 John 1:9

Background

2 John is the second shortest book in the Bible, only thirteen verses. It would have fit on a single sheet of papyrus, the paper of John's day. But this little letter deals with a big question every church has to answer: how do we hold together love and truth?

The writer calls himself simply "the elder" (verse 1). An elder could mean an older man, or it could mean a leader in the church. John was both. By this time he was likely the last of the twelve apostles still living, an old man who had cared for the churches of Asia for many years. He did not need to give his name. Everyone knew who "the elder" was. The style and themes of 2 John match 1 John and the Gospel of John so closely, with the same words about truth, love, abiding, commandments, and Jesus Christ coming in the flesh, that the church has always received it as John's.

He writes "to the elect lady and to her children" (verse 1). Who is she? Scripture doesn't say, and good teachers read it two ways. Some believe she was a real Christian woman, perhaps a widow, who led her household in the faith and opened her home to traveling believers. Others believe "the elect lady" is a picture of a local church, and "her children" are its members. They point out that John speaks of "her children" whom "all those who have known the truth" love (verse 1), and that he sends greetings from "the children of your elect sister" (verse 13), which sounds like one church greeting another. The New Testament does sometimes speak of the church as a woman, the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25-32; Revelation 19:7). Either reading works, and the message is the same.

Why did John write? In those days, Christian teachers and missionaries traveled from town to town, and they depended on believers to give them a place to stay and food for the road. There were no hotels like ours, and inns had a bad name. Hospitality was a real way to support the gospel. But false teachers traveled too. The same people John warned about in 1 John, who denied that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh, were going from church to church looking for a welcome. John writes to warn this lady, or this church, not to open her door to them.

Purpose

John writes to encourage his readers to keep walking in truth and love, and to warn them not to support those who deny the truth about Christ. He is glad that some of her children are "walking in truth" (verse 4). He reminds her of the command they had from the beginning, to love one another (verse 5). Then he warns that "many deceivers have entered into the world" (verse 7). Love does not mean welcoming anyone who claims to be a teacher. Love that has no regard for truth is not real love.

Main Themes

Truth. The word truth appears five times in the first four verses. John loves them "in truth" (verse 1). The truth "abides in us and will be with us forever" (verse 2). Truth is not just an idea. It is the gospel about Jesus Christ, and ultimately Jesus Himself, who called Himself the truth (John 14:6).

Love. John's command is the old one: "that we love one another" (verse 5). And he defines love: "this is love, that we walk according to His commandments" (verse 6). Love and obedience go together, and love and truth go together.

Guard the teaching about Christ. "Everyone who transgresses and does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God" (verse 9). The test is what someone believes about Jesus. Those who deny that Jesus Christ came in the flesh are "the deceiver and the antichrist" (verse 7).

Outline

- Verses 1-6: Walk in truth and love
- Verses 7-13: Guard against deceivers, and closing words

Key Verses

2 John 1:6 *And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, just as you heard from **the** beginning, that you should walk in it.*

Love is not only a feeling. It is walking in obedience to God's commands.

2 John 1:9 *Everyone who transgresses and does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching of Christ, this **one** has both the Father and the Son.*

The dividing line. Whoever abides in the teaching of Christ has both the Father and the Son.

Christ in 2 John

2 John is about the truth concerning Christ. John calls Jesus "the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father" (verse 3). Grace, mercy and peace come from both the Father and the Son together. The deceivers did "not confess Jesus Christ coming in flesh" (verse 7). John says that is the line that cannot be crossed. To deny that the eternal Son of God became a real man is to deny the gospel itself, because if He did not come in the flesh, He did not die in the flesh, and He did not rise in the flesh.

John's warning shows how tightly the Father and the Son are bound together. "The one who abides in the teaching of Christ, this one has both the Father and the Son" (verse 9). No one can have the Father while rejecting the Son. Jesus said the same thing: "No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). This is a book about a doctrine, but it is a doctrine about a Person.

How It Fits the Whole Story

From the very beginning, God's people have had to deal with false prophets. Moses warned Israel that if a prophet came with signs and wonders but led them after other gods, they must not listen to him (Deuteronomy 13:1-5). Jesus warned that false christs and false prophets would come (Matthew 24:24). Paul warned the Ephesian elders that savage wolves would come in among them (Acts 20:29-30). 2 John shows the church in John's day facing exactly that.

It also shows us the church in the period John calls "the last hour" (1 John 2:18), when many antichrists come before the final one. The final antichrist will deceive the world during the Tribulation (2 Thessalonians 2:3-12; Revelation 13). Until then, every generation of believers has to test what it hears by the teaching of Christ. 2 John reminds us to do that at our own front door.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Besides the question of who the elect lady was, teachers discuss how to apply verses 10-11. John says, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not say to him, Greetings." Does that mean a believer should never invite an unbeliever into his home, or never speak to someone from a false religion? Most teachers say no. John is talking about false teachers who traveled as missionaries for their false gospel, and who depended on believers for food and lodging. To house them and send them on their way would be to help spread their teaching. "The one who says to him, Greetings, shares in his evil works" (verse 11). John is not telling us to be rude to our neighbors. He is telling us not to support or endorse those who deny Christ. We can be kind to anyone, and we should be. But we must not become partners in spreading a false gospel.

Read It This Way

2 John takes about a minute to read. Read it, then read 1 John 4:1-6 next to it. The short letter puts the longer letter's teaching into practice. 1 John says to test the spirits. 2 John says what to do when you find one that fails the test.

Notice the balance. Some churches are strong on truth and weak on love. They know their doctrine, but they are cold and harsh. Other churches are strong on love and weak on truth. They are warm and welcoming, but they will accept almost any teaching. John won't let us choose one over the other. He loves "in truth" (verse 1), and he says grace, mercy and peace come "in truth and love" (verse 3). We need both.

Notice too John's warning in verse 8: "Watch yourselves, so that we do not lose the things we have worked for, but receive a full reward." False teaching can undo years of faithful work in a church. John is not saying believers can lose their salvation here, but that they can lose what they have built and the reward that faithful service brings.

And notice how John ends. He has much more to say, but he doesn't want to say it "with paper and ink." He hopes to come and "speak mouth to mouth, so that our joy may be made full" (verse 12). Letters are good, but there is no substitute for being together. That is still true. A text or an email can say a lot, but some things are best said face to face.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think John ties love and truth so closely together (verses 1-6)?
2. What does it mean to "walk according to His commandments," and how is that an act of love (verse 6)?
3. Why is the truth that Jesus Christ came in the flesh so important to the gospel (verses 7-9)?
4. How can believers be kind to everyone without supporting false teaching (verses 10-11)?
5. Is there someone you need to see face to face rather than just write to, for the sake of your shared joy in Christ (verse 12)?

Go deeper: My 1, 2, 3 John and Jude Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study covers all four letters verse by verse. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

3 John

At a Glance	
Author	John the apostle, "the elder" (verse 1)
Date written	About A.D. 85 to 95
Written to	Gaius, a beloved friend and faithful believer (verse 1)
Setting and time covered	The same years as 1 and 2 John, when traveling teachers depended on the hospitality of local churches (verses 5-8)
Chapters	1
Key word	Walking in truth
Key verse	3 John 1:11

Background

3 John is the shortest book in the Bible by word count. It is a personal note from John, "the elder," to a friend named Gaius. It is the one book of the New Testament that never uses the name Jesus or the title Christ, though His name is at the center of it (verse 7). And yet in a few short lines it gives us one of the clearest pictures in the Bible of what goes right and what goes wrong in a local church.

Gaius was a common name in the Roman world, and several men named Gaius appear in the New Testament (Acts 19:29; 20:4; Romans 16:23; 1 Corinthians 1:14). We don't know if this Gaius was any of them. What we do know is that John loved him (verse 1), that he may have come to faith through John, since John calls him one of "my children" (verse 4), and that he was known for his faithfulness and generosity (verses 3, 5-6).

2 John and 3 John are like two sides of a coin. In 2 John, the elder warns a church not to welcome traveling teachers who deny Christ. In 3 John, he praises a man for welcoming traveling teachers who preach Christ, and he rebukes a man who would not. In both letters the question is the same: whom should a church support?

The letter names three men. Gaius was doing what was right. Diotrephes was doing what was wrong. And Demetrius, who may have carried the letter, was a good man John wanted Gaius to trust.

Purpose

John writes to thank Gaius for his hospitality to traveling Christian workers and to encourage him to keep helping them. These men had gone out "on behalf of His name," and they took nothing from the Gentiles, meaning they did not ask unbelievers to pay for their ministry (verse 7). Believers should support them, "so that we may become fellow workers for the truth" (verse 8).

He also writes to deal with Diotrephes, a leader in the church who "loves to be first among them" (verse 9). Diotrephes refused to accept a letter John had written to the church. He spread evil talk

about John. He refused to welcome the traveling brothers, and he even threw out of the church those who did (verse 10). John says that when he comes, he will deal with it.

Main Themes

Walk in truth. John's greatest joy is to hear that his spiritual children are "walking in truth" (verse 4). Truth is not just something to believe. It is a way to walk.

Fellow workers for the truth. When believers support those who carry the gospel, they become partners in their work (verse 8). You don't have to be a missionary to be part of missions.

Imitate the good. "Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good" (verse 11). Gaius and Demetrius are examples to follow. Diotrephes is an example to avoid.

Outline

- Verses 1-8: Gaius praised for walking in truth and welcoming the brothers
- Verses 9-11: Diotrephes rebuked for his pride
- Verses 12-14: Demetrius commended, and closing words

Key Verses

3 John 1:4 *I have no greater joy than these things, that I hear of my children walking in truth.*

A spiritual father's greatest joy. Nothing makes a pastor happier than seeing those he has taught walking with the Lord.

3 John 1:11 *Beloved, do not imitate what **is** evil, but what **is** good. The one who does good is of God; but the one who does evil has not seen God.*

A simple rule for life. Follow good examples, not bad ones, because how we live shows whether we know God.

Christ in 3 John

3 John never says "Jesus" or "Christ." Its link to Christ is not a prophecy or a picture but a name and a pattern. The traveling workers went out "on behalf of His name" (verse 7). In the Bible, the name stands for the person. These men were serving Jesus, and when Gaius welcomed them, he was serving Jesus too. Jesus said, "The one who receives you receives Me" (Matthew 10:40).

Diotrephes is the opposite of Christ. He "loves to be first" (verse 9). Jesus said, "whoever wishes to be first among you, let him be your slave," just as He Himself "did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matthew 20:27-28). Diotrephes wanted the place of honor. Jesus took the place of a servant. Every church leader has to choose which way he will go.

How It Fits the Whole Story

From Abraham's day, God's people have been known for welcoming strangers. Abraham ran to welcome three travelers, not knowing at first that one of them was the LORD (Genesis 18:1-8). The Law told Israel to love the stranger, because they had been strangers in Egypt

(Deuteronomy 10:19). Jesus said that when we welcome a stranger in His name, we welcome Him (Matthew 25:35, 40). Hebrews says, "Do not forget hospitality, for through this some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). Gaius was walking in that long line.

The letter also shows how the gospel spread in the first century. It did not go out through big organizations. It went out through ordinary believers who traveled and preached, and through ordinary believers who opened their homes and paid for the trip. That is still how the gospel goes to the ends of the earth. Some go. Others send. Both are "fellow workers for the truth."

Where Good Teachers Disagree

3 John is short and clear, and there is little real debate about its meaning. Teachers do differ on how to use verse 2: "concerning all things I pray that you prosper and be in health, just as your soul prospers." Some have used this verse to teach that God promises wealth and health to every believer who has enough faith. Most teachers point out that this was a common, friendly greeting in letters of that day, much like a friend today saying he hopes you are doing well. John is praying for his friend's health, not giving a promise for all believers. Notice too that John measures Gaius's health by the health of his soul. Many of us would be in bad shape if our bodies were only as healthy as our souls. The Bible does not promise believers an easy life (2 Timothy 3:12). It does promise that God hears our prayers and cares for us.

Teachers also wonder what was behind Diotrephes's behavior. Was it false teaching, or just pride? John doesn't accuse him of false doctrine, only of loving to be first and refusing to welcome others. Sometimes the greatest damage in a church is done not by heresy but by a proud heart.

Read It This Way

3 John takes less than a minute to read. Read it as a short window into a real church. You will probably recognize the people. Most churches have a Gaius, someone faithful and generous who quietly helps. Many have a Diotrephes, someone who likes to be in charge and pushes others out. And most have a Demetrius, someone with a good name that others can trust.

Ask yourself which one you are most like. It's an uncomfortable question, but a useful one. Do you love to welcome others, or to be first? Do you build up those who serve, or speak against them?

Then think about how you can be one of the "fellow workers for the truth" (verse 8). You may never travel as a missionary. But you can pray for those who do. You can give to support them. You can open your home to them when they come through. John says that when you do that, you share in their work.

And notice the ending. Like 2 John, it closes with a hope to see Gaius soon and "speak mouth to mouth" (verse 14). Then a simple blessing: "Peace to you." In the middle of a church conflict, John's last word to his friend is peace. That is a good word to end on when things are hard. And notice what John says about Demetrius: he "has been testified to by all, and by the truth itself" (verse 12). A good name is not built in a day. It comes from years of quiet faithfulness. Gaius and Demetrius were not famous, and we know almost nothing else about them. But their names are in the Bible because they walked in truth.

One more thing. John does not deal with Diotrephes from a distance by letter alone. He plans to come and bring Diotrephes's deeds into the open (verse 10). Church problems are not solved by gossip or by ignoring them. They are solved by loving, honest leaders who are willing to face them in person. John was an old man by now, but he was still willing to make the trip. That is what a shepherd does.

Study Questions

1. What did Gaius do that brought John so much joy, and how could your life bring that kind of joy to someone who taught you (verses 3-4)?
2. How can you be one of the "fellow workers for the truth" along with missionaries and Christian workers (verses 5-8)?
3. What was wrong with Diotrephes's attitude, and where do you see that same attitude in your own heart (verses 9-10)?
4. Who has been a good example for you to imitate, and who might be watching your example (verse 11)?
5. How does John's prayer for Gaius's health show what matters most (verse 2)?

Go deeper: My 1, 2, 3 John and Jude Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study covers all four letters verse by verse. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Jude

At a Glance	
Author	Jude, "a slave of Jesus Christ, and brother of James" (verse 1), and so a half-brother of Jesus
Date written	About A.D. 68 to 80
Written to	"Those who are called, sanctified in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ" (verse 1)
Setting and time covered	A time when false teachers had slipped into the churches, turning grace into an excuse for sin (verse 4)
Chapters	1
Key word	Contend
Key verse	Jude 1:3

Background

Jude is the last letter in the New Testament before Revelation, and it is a short, urgent one. Jude tells us he had planned to write a different letter. "While making all diligence to write to you concerning our common salvation, I had necessity to write to you, exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (verse 3). He wanted to write about the joy of salvation. Instead, he had to sound an alarm.

Who was Jude? He calls himself "a slave of Jesus Christ, and brother of James" (verse 1). The James everyone would have known was James the leader of the Jerusalem church, the half-brother of Jesus. That makes Jude another of the Lord's half-brothers. The Gospels list Jesus' brothers as James, Joseph, Simon and Judas (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). Jude is a short form of Judas. Like James, he did not believe in Jesus during His ministry (John 7:5), but after the resurrection the brothers were with the disciples praying (Acts 1:14). Notice how humble Jude is. He could have called himself the brother of the Lord. Instead he calls himself His slave and only mentions that he is the brother of James.

The letter does not say where its readers lived. It was likely written to Jewish believers, since Jude assumes they know the Old Testament stories and some Jewish writings well. The SLB introduction dates it about A.D. 68 to 80. It shares many words and pictures with 2 Peter chapter 2, so the two letters were written around the same time to deal with a similar danger.

What was the danger? "Certain men have crept in unnoticed" (verse 4). These were not outsiders attacking the church. They were inside it, sitting at the love feasts, the fellowship meals the early church shared with the Lord's Supper (verse 12). They were "changing the grace of our God into sensuality," treating God's forgiveness as permission to sin, and "denying the only Master, God, and our Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 4). They grumbled, flattered people to get what they wanted, and caused divisions (verses 16, 19).

Purpose

Jude writes to call believers to fight for the truth. He describes the false teachers in strong pictures so his readers can recognize them, reminds them that God has always judged those who rebel against Him, and tells them how to stay safe. He ends with one of the most beautiful blessings in the Bible.

Main Themes

Contend for the faith. "The faith once for all delivered to the saints" (verse 3) is the body of truth God has given. It was delivered once for all. Nothing needs to be added to it. Believers must fight to keep it pure.

God judges the ungodly. Jude gives examples: Israel in the wilderness, who were saved from Egypt and then destroyed for unbelief; the angels who left their proper place; and Sodom and Gomorrah (verses 5-7). Then he names three men: Cain, Balaam and Korah (verse 11). God has always judged rebellion, and He will judge these false teachers.

Keep yourselves in God's love. Jude does not just warn. He tells believers what to do: build yourselves up in your most holy faith, pray in the Holy Spirit, "keep yourselves in the love of God," wait for Christ's mercy, and show mercy to others (verses 20-23).

Outline

- Verses 1-4: Greeting, and the call to contend for the faith
- Verses 5-16: Judgment on the ungodly: examples from the past and pictures of the false teachers
- Verses 17-25: Keep yourselves in God's love, and the closing blessing

Key Verses

Jude 1:3 *Beloved, while making all diligence to write to you concerning our common salvation, I had necessity to write to you, exhorting **you** to contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints.*

The faith has been delivered once for all. Our job is to guard it, not change it.

Jude 1:21 *keep yourselves in **the** love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life.*

While we wait for Christ, we keep ourselves where God's love can be enjoyed.

Jude 1:24-25 *Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present **you** blameless before the presence of His glory with exultation, to **the** only wise God our Savior, **be** glory and majesty, dominion and authority, both now and to all the ages. Amen.*

God is able to keep His people from stumbling and present them blameless and full of joy.

Christ in Jude

Jude calls Jesus "the only Master" and "our Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 4). The false teachers denied Him, not always with their words, but with their lives. Jude also says it was "the Lord" who saved a people out of Egypt (verse 5). Some old Greek copies read "Jesus" there, which would mean that Jude saw the Son at work in the exodus. Paul says something like that when he calls Christ the Rock that followed Israel in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:4).

Most of all, Jude shows Christ as the One who keeps His people. He writes to those "kept for Jesus Christ" (verse 1). He tells them to wait for "the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life" (verse 21). And he praises God "who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory with exultation" (verse 24). The One who keeps us is "the only wise God our Savior" (verse 25), the same God who sent His Son to save us. The false teachers would be judged. But those who belong to Christ are held by Him.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Jude walks us through the Old Testament in a few verses: the angels who sinned, Cain who killed his brother (Genesis 4), Enoch who walked with God (Genesis 5:21-24), Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), the exodus and the wilderness (Numbers 14), Balaam who led Israel into sin for money (Numbers 22-25; 31:16), and Korah who rebelled against Moses (Numbers 16). Jude's point is that history repeats itself. The same kinds of rebellion God judged in the past are showing up in the church, and God will judge them again.

Jude also looks ahead to Christ's return. He quotes Enoch: "Look, the Lord came with His holy myriads, to execute judgment against all" (verses 14-15). The Lord coming with His holy ones points to Christ's visible return to the earth at the end of the Tribulation, when the armies of heaven follow Him (Revelation 19:11-16; Zechariah 14:5). And he reminds believers that the apostles had warned "in the last time there will be scoffers" (verse 18; 2 Peter 3:3). Until the Lord comes, the church must stay alert.

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Jude quotes or refers to two stories that are not found in the Old Testament. In verse 9 he says Michael the archangel disputed with the devil about the body of Moses. In verses 14-15 he quotes a prophecy of Enoch. Both stories also appear in Jewish writings from the time between the testaments, the book called 1 Enoch and a work about the end of Moses' life. Does that mean those books are Scripture? No. Paul once quoted pagan poets (Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12) without saying their whole works were inspired. Jude, guided by the Holy Spirit, says that these particular words are true. Some teachers believe Jude was quoting the book; others believe he and the book both drew on an older, true tradition. Either way, what Jude includes is true because God's Spirit led him to include it.

Teachers also differ on the angels in verse 6, who "did not keep their own domain, but left their own dwelling." Some connect them with "the sons of God" in Genesis 6:1-4 and believe they were fallen angels who sinned with human women before the flood. Jude 7 says Sodom sinned "in the same manner as these," which some take to support that view. Others believe the sons of God in Genesis 6 were men of the godly line of Seth, or powerful rulers, and that Jude 6 refers to the

original fall of the angels. Both views are held by faithful teachers. Scripture's main point is clear either way: God keeps rebels for judgment.

Read It This Way

Read Jude out loud. It is full of vivid pictures, and they hit harder when you hear them. The false teachers are "hidden reefs in your love feasts," like rocks under the surface that can sink a ship. They are "clouds without water," promising rain and giving none; "autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, uprooted"; "wild waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame"; "wandering stars" (verses 12-13). Jude is a master of word pictures.

But don't stop at the warnings. Look at verses 20-23, where Jude tells believers what to do. Build yourselves up. Pray. Keep yourselves in God's love. Wait for Christ. And have mercy. "And on some have mercy, making a distinction; but others save with fear, snatching them out of the fire" (verses 22-23). Contending for the faith does not mean being harsh with everyone who is confused. Some people need patience. Some need urgent rescue. All need mercy.

Notice how Jude's letter begins and ends with God's keeping. He writes to those "kept for Jesus Christ" (verse 1), tells them to keep themselves in God's love (verse 21), and praises God who is able to keep them from stumbling (verse 24). We keep ourselves in His love, but it is He who keeps us. That is the balance of the Christian life.

And learn the closing blessing by heart. "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory with exultation, to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and authority, both now and to all the ages. Amen" (verses 24-25). Churches have used it for centuries to close their worship. In a letter full of dark warnings, Jude ends in the light.

Study Questions

1. What does it mean to contend for "the faith once for all delivered to the saints," and why does it need to be defended (verse 3)?
2. How do the false teachers change God's grace into an excuse for sin, and where do you see that today (verse 4)?
3. What lessons do the examples of Cain, Balaam and Korah teach about the danger of rebellion (verse 11)?
4. What does it look like for you to keep yourself in the love of God (verses 20-21)?
5. How does Jude's closing blessing give you confidence when you are tempted or discouraged (verses 24-25)?

Go deeper: My 1, 2, 3 John and Jude Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study covers all four letters verse by verse. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Part Ten: Revelation

The Bible ends with a book unlike any other in the New Testament. The Gospels tell us what Jesus did. Acts tells us what the church did. The letters tell us what to believe and how to live. Revelation tells us how it all ends. It is the only New Testament book that is mainly prophecy, and it is the last chapter of the story that began in Genesis 1:1.

Revelation belongs to a kind of writing called apocalyptic. The word comes from the Greek word that opens the book, apokalupsis, which means an uncovering or unveiling. Apocalyptic writing uses visions, symbols, numbers and dramatic pictures to show what God is doing behind the scenes of history and what He will do at the end. You find this kind of writing in parts of Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah too, and Revelation borrows many of its pictures from them. A beast rising out of the sea, a woman clothed with the sun, a Lamb with seven horns: these are pictures, and the book often tells us what they mean. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches (Revelation 1:20). The dragon is the devil (Revelation 12:9).

Many people are afraid of Revelation. They think it is too hard to understand, so they never read it. That is a shame, because it is the only book in the Bible that promises a blessing to the one who reads it: "Blessed is the one who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy and keep the things written in it" (Revelation 1:3). God did not give us this book to confuse us. The word revelation means something has been revealed, not hidden.

How should you read it? I read it the way I read the rest of the Bible, taking it in its plain sense unless the text itself tells us something is a symbol. When John sees a lampstand, he tells us it stands for a church. When he says a thousand years, I take it to mean a thousand years. Revelation 1:19 gives us the outline of the book: what John saw (chapter 1), the things which are (the seven churches of chapters 2-3), and the things that will take place after these (chapters 4-22). I believe most of the book, from chapter 4 on, describes events still in the future: the seven-year Tribulation, Christ's visible return, His thousand-year kingdom, the final judgment, and the new heavens and new earth. Good teachers have read the book in other ways, and I explain those in the chapter on Revelation.

Above all, remember that Revelation is "The revelation of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:1). It is about Him more than it is about the beast, the mark, or the timeline. It shows Jesus as the risen Lord walking among His churches, the Lamb who was slain and is worthy, and the King of kings who comes to set the world right. If you finish reading Revelation and you are more excited about Jesus than about charts, you have read it well. And it ends with the prayer every believer can pray: "Yes, come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20).

Revelation

At a Glance	
Author	John the apostle (1:1, 4, 9)
Date written	About A.D. 95, during the reign of the emperor Domitian
Written to	The seven churches of the Roman province of Asia, and through them to the whole church (1:4, 11)
Setting and time covered	Written on the island of Patmos (1:9); it looks from John's day to the new heavens and new earth
Chapters	22
Key word	The return of the King
Key verse	Revelation 1:19

Background

Revelation was written by a prisoner on a rocky island. John tells us, "I, John, who am also your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and in the kingdom and endurance of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos because of the word of God and because of the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). Patmos is a small island in the Aegean Sea, off the west coast of what is now Turkey. The Romans used islands like it as places of exile. John had been sent there for preaching Christ.

The writer calls himself simply John (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). He did not need to say more. The early church agreed that he was John the apostle, the son of Zebedee, who also wrote the Gospel of John and the three letters of John. By now he was an old man, likely the last living apostle, and he had cared for the churches of Asia from Ephesus for many years.

When was it written? Early church writers said John saw this vision near the end of the reign of the emperor Domitian, who ruled A.D. 81 to 96. That gives a date of about A.D. 95. I hold that date. The churches in chapters 2-3 seem to have been around long enough to drift. Ephesus had left its first love (2:4), and Laodicea had grown rich and lukewarm (3:15-17). That fits a later date better than an earlier one. Some teachers date the book earlier, before A.D. 70, during or just after Nero's persecution, and they think much of the book describes the fall of Jerusalem. I explain that view below.

The churches were under pressure. In some cities believers were being pushed to take part in emperor worship, offering incense and calling Caesar lord. Those who refused could lose their jobs or their lives. One believer in Pergamum, Antipas, had already been killed (2:13). Some churches were also being led astray by false teaching and compromise (2:14-15, 20). Into that situation, the risen Christ spoke.

Purpose

Revelation was written to show God's servants "what things must take place quickly" (1:1). It pulls back the curtain so we can see what is really going on. Rome looked like it was in charge. The

beast will look like it is in charge. But the throne in heaven is not empty (4:2). God rules, the Lamb has won, and history is heading toward His victory.

The book also has a pastoral purpose. It calls the churches to repent where they have drifted, to hold fast where they are faithful, and to overcome. Each of the seven letters ends with a promise "to the one who overcomes" (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). And it gives the suffering church hope. The day is coming when God will wipe away every tear (21:4).

Main Themes

Jesus Christ is Lord of all. He is "the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:5). He holds the keys of death and Hades (1:18). He walks among His churches and knows their works.

The Lamb is worthy. In chapter 5, no one in heaven or on earth is worthy to open the scroll of God's plan, until John sees a Lamb "as having been slain" (5:6). Heaven sings, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain" (5:12). The Lion of Judah won by dying.

God judges evil. The seals, trumpets and bowls (6-16) pour out God's wrath on a world that refuses to repent. People cry out to the mountains to hide them "from the wrath of the Lamb" (6:16). God is patient, but He is also just.

Christ returns and reigns. Heaven opens, and the rider on the white horse comes, "Faithful and True" (19:11), with the name "King of kings and Lord of lords" (19:16). Satan is bound, and the saints reign with Christ a thousand years (20:1-6).

All things made new. "Look, I make all things new" (21:5). John sees a new heaven and a new earth, the holy city coming down from God, and God dwelling with His people forever. There is no more death, mourning, crying or pain (21:1-4).

Outline

- Chapter 1: The things John saw: the risen Christ among the lampstands
- Chapters 2-3: The things that are: letters to seven churches
- Chapters 4-5: The throne in heaven and the Lamb who is worthy
- Chapters 6-18: The seals, trumpets and bowls: the Tribulation and the fall of Babylon
- Chapter 19: The marriage supper of the Lamb and the return of Christ
- Chapter 20: The thousand-year reign and the final judgment
- Chapters 21-22: The new heaven and new earth

Key Verses

Revelation 1:7 *Look, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, and those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will wail because of Him. Yes, amen.*

Christ's return will be public. Every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him.

Revelation 1:19 *Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which are about to take place after these.*

The outline of the book: what John saw, the things which are, and the things which will take place after these.

Revelation 3:20 *Look, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.*

Christ speaks to a lukewarm church and stands knocking. He still invites anyone to open the door to Him.

Revelation 19:16 *And He has on the robe and on His thigh a name written: "King of kings and Lord of lords."*

The King's name, written where every eye can see it.

Revelation 21:4 *And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death will not be any longer, nor mourning nor crying nor pain will be any longer, because the first things passed away.*

The end of every sorrow. God Himself will wipe away the tears.

Christ in Revelation

Revelation is "The revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:1), and He fills every part of it. In chapter 1 John sees Him as the glorified Son of Man, with eyes like a flame of fire and a voice like many waters (1:13-16). That picture comes from Daniel 7:9-14 and 10:5-6. John falls at His feet as dead, and Jesus says, "Do not fear; I am the First and the Last, and the Living One; and I was dead, and look, I am living to the ages of the ages" (1:17-18). In Isaiah the LORD Himself says, "I am first and I am last" (Isaiah 44:6; see 48:12). Jesus takes that title as His own.

In chapter 5 He is both the Lion and the Lamb. The elder says, "look, the Lion who is of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome" (5:5). That reaches back to Jacob's blessing on Judah (Genesis 49:9-10) and to the promised Branch from Jesse's root (Isaiah 11:1, 10). But when John turns to look, he sees a Lamb that looks as if it had been slain (5:6). That is the Passover lamb (Exodus 12) and the Servant led like a lamb to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:7). The Lamb is named over twenty-five times in the book.

In chapter 19 He is the conquering King, fulfilling Psalm 2, ruling the nations "with a rod of iron" (19:15; Psalm 2:9). And at the very end He says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End" (22:13). Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. Jesus is the A to Z of everything.

How It Fits the Whole Story

Revelation ties up the whole Bible. Many of the threads that began in Genesis come together here. In Genesis, God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1). In Revelation, He makes a new heaven and a new earth (21:1). In Genesis, the serpent deceived Eve (Genesis 3:1-6). In Revelation, "the ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan" is thrown down and finally cast into the lake of fire (12:9; 20:10). In Genesis, sin brought the curse, and people were driven from the tree of

life (Genesis 3:17-24). In Revelation, "there will no longer be any curse" (22:3), and the tree of life stands by the river of the water of life (22:2). In Genesis, God walked with Adam in the garden. In Revelation, "the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will tabernacle with them" (21:3). What was lost in Eden is restored, and more.

Here is how I understand the order of events, taking the book in its plain sense. Chapters 2-3 describe the church age, the time we are in now. In 4:1, John hears a voice say, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things." Many who hold the pre-Tribulation view see that as a picture of the rapture of the church, when Christ catches His people up to meet Him (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). The church is mentioned nineteen times in chapters 1-3, and the word church does not appear again on earth until the end of the book (22:16). Christ promised the faithful church in Philadelphia, "I also will keep you from the hour of testing which is about to come upon the whole inhabited world" (3:10).

Chapters 6-18 then describe the seven-year Tribulation, the seventieth seven of Daniel 9:27. God pours out His judgments on the earth in three series of seven: the seals, the trumpets and the bowls. The beast rises to power, demands worship and forces the world to take his mark (13:1-18). Even in those dark days, God saves a great multitude from every nation (7:9-14) and seals 144,000 from the tribes of Israel (7:1-8). God has not forgotten Israel (Romans 11:25-29). Babylon, the great world system of rebellion, falls (17-18).

Then, in chapter 19, Christ returns visibly to the earth with the armies of heaven (19:11-16). The beast and the false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire (19:20). Satan is bound for a thousand years, and Christ reigns on the earth with His saints (20:1-6). At the end of the thousand years, Satan is released for a short time, leads one last rebellion, and is defeated and cast into the lake of fire forever (20:7-10). Then comes the great white throne, where the dead are judged (20:11-15). "And if anyone was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (20:15). Finally, God makes all things new (21-22).

Where Good Teachers Disagree

Christians have read Revelation in four main ways. The futurist view, which I hold, sees most of the book from chapter 4 on as describing events still to come. The preterist view sees most of it as already fulfilled, mainly in the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 or in the fall of Rome. Many who hold this view date the book before A.D. 70. The historicist view sees the book as a picture of the whole history of the church from John's day to the end. The idealist view sees it as a timeless picture of the battle between good and evil, without tying it to specific events. Each view sees some truth: the book did speak to John's first readers, and it does show the spiritual battle behind all of history. But I believe the futurist view fits best with the book's own outline in 1:19, with its many details that have not yet happened, and with the Old Testament prophecies it draws on.

Teachers also differ on the thousand years in chapter 20. Premillennial teachers, as I am, believe Christ returns before (pre) a literal thousand-year kingdom on earth. Amillennial teachers believe the thousand years is a symbol of the present church age. Postmillennial teachers believe the gospel will gradually bring a golden age before Christ returns. Among premillennial teachers, there are also different views on when the rapture happens. I hold the pre-Tribulation view for the reasons given above.

Read It This Way

Start by reading Revelation straight through, maybe in two or three sittings. Don't stop at every symbol. Let the big picture hit you first: Christ among His churches, the throne in heaven, judgment on the earth, the return of the King, and the new creation. You will find yourself worshiping.

Then go back and read it with your Old Testament open. Revelation alludes to the Old Testament hundreds of times, though it hardly ever quotes it directly. When you see a beast with ten horns, read Daniel 7. When you see the new Jerusalem, read Isaiah 65 and Ezekiel 40-48. When you see the plagues, read Exodus 7-12. Revelation explains itself through the rest of the Bible.

Read the seven letters in chapters 2-3 as if they were written to your church, because in a sense they were. Each letter says, "The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Some churches have left their first love. Some are tolerating sin. Some are dead though they look alive. Some are lukewarm. Christ's words to them are words for us.

And let the book give you hope. Revelation was written to people who were being persecuted, and it told them that Jesus wins. Whatever you are facing, it is not the end of the story. The end of the story is a city where God dwells with His people, where "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death will not be any longer" (21:4). The last prayer of the Bible is a good prayer for every believer: "Yes, come, Lord Jesus!" (22:20).

Study Questions

1. What does John's vision of the risen Christ teach you about who Jesus is today (1:12-18)?
2. Which of the seven churches is most like your church, or your own heart, and what does Christ say to it (2:1-3:22)?
3. Why is the Lamb the only one worthy to open the scroll, and what does heaven's song teach about Him (5:1-14)?
4. How does the return of Christ in chapter 19 give you hope when evil seems to be winning (19:11-16)?
5. What part of the new heavens and new earth do you most look forward to, and why (21:1-7; 22:1-5)?

Go deeper: My Revelation Bible Study: A Verse-by-Verse Study walks through the book chapter by chapter. It is free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Bible Timeline

The dates below are the ones used throughout this book. Dates before about 1000 B.C. are approximate, and Scripture does not give a date for creation or the flood, so none is given here. The early dates follow the Bible's own numbers, such as the 480 years from the exodus to the building of the temple (1 Kings 6:1).

Date	Event	Books
Not dated	Creation, the fall, the flood, the tower of Babel	Genesis 1-11
About 2091 B.C.	God calls Abraham to go to Canaan	Genesis 12
About 2000 B.C.	Likely time of Job	Job
About 1876 B.C.	Jacob's family moves to Egypt	Genesis 46
About 1805 B.C.	Death of Joseph	Genesis 50
About 1446 B.C.	The exodus from Egypt; the Law given at Mount Sinai	Exodus, Leviticus
About 1446-1405 B.C.	Forty years in the wilderness	Numbers, Deuteronomy
About 1405-1385 B.C.	Israel enters and takes the land of Canaan	Joshua
About 1375-1050 B.C.	The judges; Ruth	Judges, Ruth
About 1050-1010 B.C.	Samuel and King Saul	1 Samuel
About 1010-970 B.C.	King David	2 Samuel, 1 Chronicles, many Psalms
About 970-930 B.C.	King Solomon; the temple built (begun about 966 B.C.)	1 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs
About 930 B.C.	The kingdom divides: Israel in the north, Judah in the south	1 Kings 12
About 860-790 B.C.	Elijah and Elisha in the north	1 Kings 17 to 2 Kings 13
About 785-700 B.C.	Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah	Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah
722 B.C.	Assyria destroys Samaria; the northern kingdom ends	2 Kings 17
About 640-605 B.C.	Josiah's reforms; Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk; Jeremiah begins	Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Jeremiah
605 B.C.	Babylon takes the first captives, including Daniel	Daniel 1
597 B.C.	Second deportation, including Ezekiel	2 Kings 24, Ezekiel
586 B.C.	Babylon destroys Jerusalem and the temple	2 Kings 25, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Obadiah
539-538 B.C.	Persia conquers Babylon; Cyrus lets the Jews go home	Daniel 5, Ezra 1
520-515 B.C.	Haggai and Zechariah; the temple rebuilt	Ezra 5-6, Haggai, Zechariah
About 483-473 B.C.	Esther in the Persian court	Esther
About 458 B.C.	Ezra returns to teach the Law	Ezra 7-10
445 B.C.	Nehemiah rebuilds the walls of Jerusalem	Nehemiah

Date	Event	Books
About 433-420 B.C.	Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet	Malachi
About 430-5 B.C.	The 400 silent years: Persia, Greece, the Maccabees, Rome	Between the Testaments chapter
About 6-4 B.C.	Birth of Jesus, before the death of Herod the Great	Matthew 2, Luke 2
About A.D. 26-33	Ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
About A.D. 30-33	Pentecost; the church begins in Jerusalem	Acts 2
About A.D. 45-49	James written; Paul's first missionary journey	James, Acts 13-14
About A.D. 49	The Jerusalem council	Acts 15, Galatians
About A.D. 50-57	Paul's second and third journeys	Acts 15-21, Thessalonians, Corinthians, Romans
About A.D. 60-62	Paul under house arrest in Rome	Acts 28, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon
About A.D. 62-68	Paul's last letters; Peter's letters; Paul and Peter die in Rome	1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, 1 and 2 Peter
A.D. 70	Rome destroys Jerusalem and the temple	Foretold in Matthew 24:2 and Luke 21:20-24
About A.D. 85-95	John's Gospel, letters and Revelation	John, 1-3 John, Revelation
Still to come	The rapture of the church, the seven-year Tribulation, Christ's return, the thousand-year kingdom, the new heavens and new earth	1 Thessalonians 4, Daniel 9, Revelation 19-22

The 66 Books at a Glance

This table gathers the At a Glance facts for every book in one place. Dates are approximate. Where the author is not named in the book, the table says so.

Book	Author	Date written	Ch.	Key word
Genesis	Moses	About 1445-1405 B.C.	50	Beginnings
Exodus	Moses	About 1445-1405 B.C.	40	Redemption
Leviticus	Moses	About 1445 B.C.	27	Holy
Numbers	Moses	About 1405 B.C.	36	Wandering
Deuteronomy	Moses	About 1405 B.C.	34	Remember
Joshua	Joshua	About 1405-1385 B.C.	24	Possession
Judges	Not named (tradition: Samuel)	About 1050-1000 B.C.	21	Cycle
Ruth	Not named	After David became known	4	Redeemer
1 Samuel	Not named	After about 930 B.C.	31	Heart
2 Samuel	Not named	After David died, about 970 B.C.	24	Covenant
1 Kings	Not named	About 560-540 B.C.	22	Divided
2 Kings	Not named	About 560-540 B.C., in the exile	25	Exile
1 Chronicles	Not named	About 450-430 B.C.	29	Worship
2 Chronicles	Not named	About 450-430 B.C.	36	Seek
Ezra	Ezra	About 450 B.C.	10	Restoration
Nehemiah	Nehemiah	About 430 B.C.	13	Rebuild
Esther	Not named	After about 473 B.C.	10	Providence
Job	Not named	Unknown; events about 2000 B.C.	42	Trusting God in suffering
Psalms	David and others	About 1410-500 B.C.	150	Praise
Proverbs	Mainly Solomon	About 970-700 B.C.	31	Wisdom
Ecclesiastes	Solomon	About 935 B.C.	12	Futility
Song of Songs	Solomon	About 965 B.C.	8	Love
Isaiah	Isaiah	About 739-681 B.C.	66	Salvation
Jeremiah	Jeremiah	About 627-580 B.C.	52	The new covenant
Lamentations	Not named (tradition: Jeremiah)	Soon after 586 B.C.	5	Grief and hope
Ezekiel	Ezekiel	About 593-571 B.C.	48	The glory of the LORD
Daniel	Daniel	About 530 B.C.	12	God rules
Hosea	Hosea	About 755-710 B.C.	14	Steadfast love
Joel	Joel	Uncertain	3	The day of the LORD
Amos	Amos	About 760-750 B.C.	9	Justice

Book	Author	Date written	Ch.	Key word
Obadiah	Obadiah	Soon after 586 B.C.	1	Pride brings a fall
Jonah	Jonah	About 785-760 B.C.	4	God's mercy
Micah	Micah	About 735-700 B.C.	7	What the LORD requires
Nahum	Nahum	About 650 B.C.	3	Comfort through justice
Habakkuk	Habakkuk	About 609-605 B.C.	3	Living by faith
Zephaniah	Zephaniah	About 640-625 B.C.	3	The day of the LORD
Haggai	Haggai	520 B.C.	2	Put God first
Zechariah	Zechariah	About 520-480 B.C.	14	The coming King
Malachi	Malachi	About 433-420 B.C.	4	I have loved you
Matthew	Matthew	About A.D. 50-60	28	The King and His kingdom
Mark	John Mark	About A.D. 50-65	16	The Servant
Luke	Luke	About A.D. 60-62	24	The Savior of all
John	John the apostle	About A.D. 80-90	21	Believe
Acts	Luke	About A.D. 62	28	Witnesses
Romans	Paul	About A.D. 57	16	The righteousness of God
1 Corinthians	Paul	About A.D. 55	16	Correction
2 Corinthians	Paul	About A.D. 56	13	Strength in weakness
Galatians	Paul	About A.D. 49 (or 53-57)	6	Freedom in Christ
Ephesians	Paul	About A.D. 60-62	6	In Christ
Philippians	Paul	About A.D. 61-62	4	Joy
Colossians	Paul	About A.D. 60-62	4	Christ is supreme
1 Thessalonians	Paul	About A.D. 51	5	The Lord's coming
2 Thessalonians	Paul	About A.D. 51-52	3	Stand firm
1 Timothy	Paul	About A.D. 62-64	6	Conduct in God's household
2 Timothy	Paul	About A.D. 66-67	4	Faithful to the end

Book	Author	Date written	Ch.	Key word
Titus	Paul	About A.D. 62-64	3	Good works
Philemon	Paul	About A.D. 60-62	1	Receive him
Hebrews	Not named	Before A.D. 70	13	Better
James	James, brother of Jesus	About A.D. 45-49	5	Faith that works
1 Peter	Peter	About A.D. 64	5	Hope in suffering
2 Peter	Peter	About A.D. 67-68	3	Remember
1 John	John the apostle	About A.D. 85-95	5	Know
2 John	John the apostle	About A.D. 85-95	1	Truth and love
3 John	John the apostle	About A.D. 85-95	1	Walking in truth
Jude	Jude, brother of James	About A.D. 68-80	1	Contend
Revelation	John the apostle	About A.D. 95	22	The return of the King

Glossary

Apocalyptic: a kind of prophecy that uses visions and symbols to show how God will bring history to its end, as in Daniel and Revelation.

Apostle: one sent by Jesus with His authority to found and teach the church, such as the Twelve and Paul.

Ark of the covenant: the gold-covered chest in the Most Holy Place that held the tablets of the Law; the place where God met with Israel.

Atonement: covering or removing sin so that a sinner can be made right with God. In the Law it came through sacrifices; in full it came through the death of Christ.

Canon: the list of books God's people received as Scripture. This book covers the 66 books of the Protestant canon.

Covenant: a binding promise or agreement. God made covenants with Noah, Abraham, Israel at Sinai, and David, and promised a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Day of the Lord: the time when God steps into history to judge His enemies and save His people, above all the coming Tribulation and Christ's return.

Dispensational premillennialism: the view that God works with Israel and the church in distinct ways, and that Christ will return before (pre) His thousand-year (millennial) reign on earth.

Exile: the time when Israel and Judah were carried away from the land, to Assyria (722 B.C.) and Babylon (605 to 586 B.C.).

Exodus: Israel's going out from slavery in Egypt under Moses, about 1446 B.C.

Gentile: anyone who is not Jewish.

Gospel: the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again (1 Corinthians 15:1-4); also the name for the four books about His life.

Grace: God's favor given to people who have not earned it and cannot earn it.

Justification: God declaring a sinner righteous because of Christ, received through faith.

Messiah: Hebrew for "anointed one"; in Greek, Christ. The promised King and Savior.

Millennium: the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth after His return (Revelation 20:1-6).

Patriarchs: the fathers of Israel: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Pharisees: a Jewish party that kept the Law and the traditions of the elders very strictly.

Prophet: someone God sent to speak His word, to call His people back to Him, and at times to tell the future.

Rapture: the moment Christ comes for His church, raising believers who have died and catching up living believers to meet Him in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). I believe it comes before the Tribulation.

Redemption: buying back or setting free by paying a price. Christ redeemed us by His blood.

Remnant: the faithful part of God's people whom He keeps through judgment.

Sadducees: a Jewish party of priestly families that ran the temple and denied the resurrection.

Sanctification: being set apart for God and made holy, a work God does in the believer over a lifetime.

Sanhedrin: the Jewish ruling council in Jerusalem in the time of Jesus.

Septuagint: the Greek translation of the Old Testament made in the centuries before Christ.

Synagogue: a Jewish meeting place for prayer and reading the Scriptures.

Tabernacle: the portable tent where God dwelt among Israel in the wilderness, built to the pattern God gave Moses (Exodus 25-40).

Tribulation: the coming seven years of judgment on the earth before Christ returns (Daniel 9:27; Revelation 6-19).

Type: a real person, event or thing in the Old Testament that God used as a picture of something to come in Christ, such as the Passover lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Wisdom literature: books such as Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes that teach how to live in God's world in the fear of the Lord.

Conclusion

We have walked through all sixty-six books, from "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1) to the promise in the last chapter of the Bible, "Yes, I am coming quickly" (Revelation 22:20). Along the way we have met kings and shepherds, prophets and fishermen, and people who failed God and were restored. But the main character of the whole story has been God Himself, and the center of the story has been His Son.

The story began in a garden where God walked with man, and it ends in a city where "the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will tabernacle with them" (Revelation 21:3). Everything between those two points is God at work to bring us back to Himself. The Law showed us our sin. The history books showed us that God keeps His promises even when His people do not. The poets taught us to pray and to live wisely. The prophets warned and comforted, and they pointed ahead to a King. The Gospels showed us that King. Acts and the letters showed us His church, and Revelation showed us how the story ends.

I hope this book has done what I set out to do: help you see the whole story, and help you love the One it is about. Now go read the Bible itself. Read it plainly, read it in context, and let Scripture explain Scripture. The Word of God will outlast everything else, because "the word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

The whole story comes down to one question for each of us: what will we do with Jesus? "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). The only thing required of us to spend eternity with God is to receive His Son, Jesus, as our Lord and Savior.

If you haven't yet entered into a relationship with Jesus, or if you want to deepen the one you already have with Him, I invite you to pray this prayer with me:

Lord Jesus, You are the Savior of the world, and You forgive all who come to You. I come before You to confess that I have sinned against You. I have rebelled against You and put myself first above You and all others. I want to have a deep, meaningful relationship with You where I can show others by my demeanor and character that You are first in my life. I am asking for Your forgiveness for all my sins. You died for me on the cross so that I could be forgiven and made right with God. Please help me not forget that You gave Your very life for me. I am asking that You take control of my life and make a new creature out of me and into the person You want me to be. I thank You, Lord, and I love You. Amen.

If you prayed this prayer, tell another believer, ask a pastor about being baptized, find a church where you can grow and serve, and start reading the Bible for yourself. The Gospel of John is a good place to begin, because it was written "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).

Bibliography

The following sources were consulted throughout this book. Any other source is named in the text where it is used. The commentary reflects my own study and convictions, and any direct quotation from an outside source is identified and cited at the point where it appears.

Dominguez, Andrew. The Steadfast Literal Bible. Trinfinity Enterprises, 2026. trinfinityenterprises.com/slb.

Green, Jay P., Sr. (ed.). The Interlinear Bible: Hebrew-Greek-English. Hendrickson Publishers, 1986 (2nd ed.; printing used 2005). ISBN 1-56563-977-4.