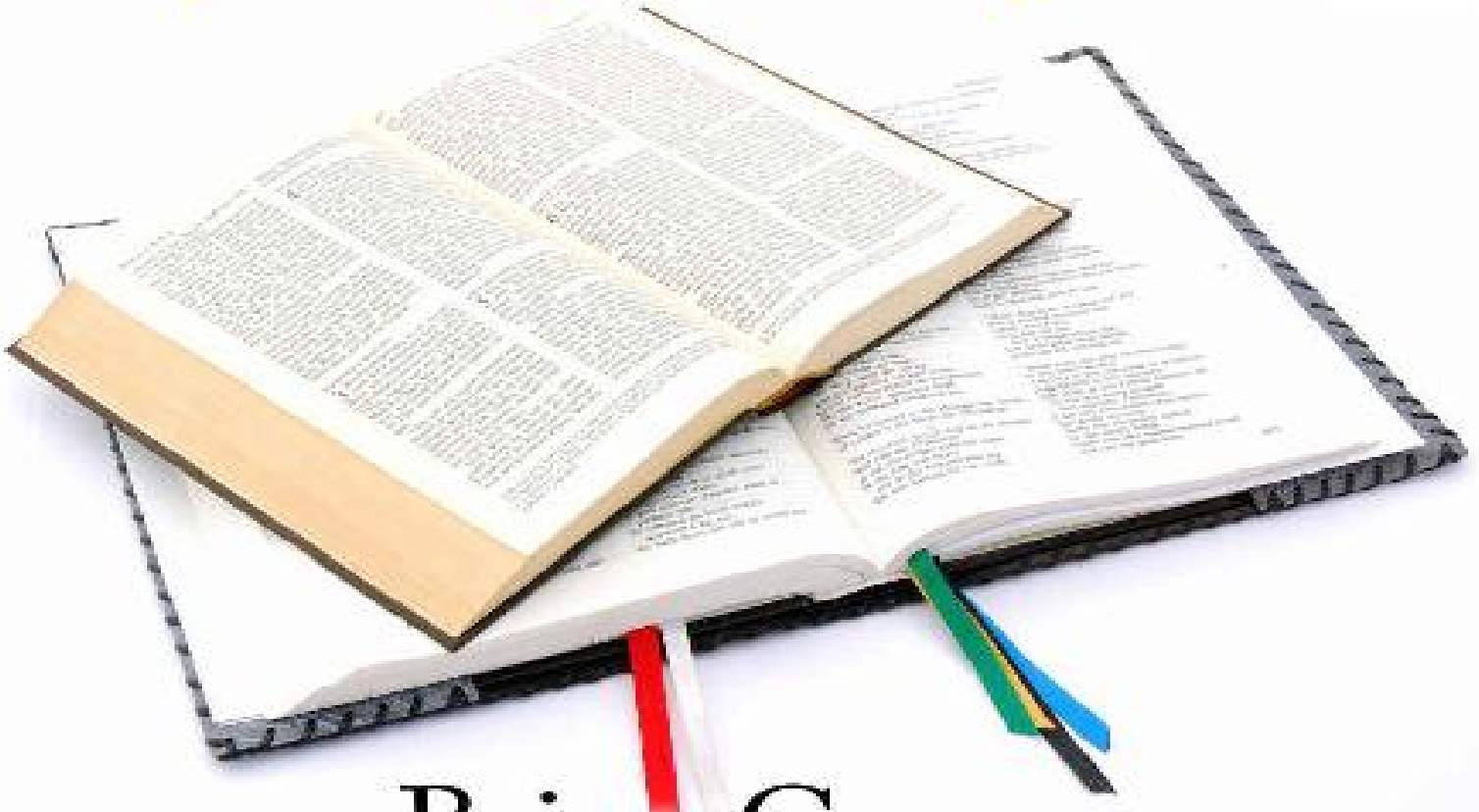
BIBLE STUDY GUIDE FOR BEGINNERS

Each of the 66 Books Explained for Getting Started



Brian Gugas

BIBLE STUDY GUIDE FOR BEGINNERS

Each of the 66 Books Explained for Getting Started



Brian Gugas

Bible for Beginners: A Basic Guide for Beginners

By Brian Gugas (Author)

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Kindle Edition

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66 books explained to get started

By Brian Gugas (Author)

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Dedication:

To my parents

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Also by Brian Gugas

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Foreword

I wrote this book to celebrate my relationship with God.

Like life itself, that relationship has had its ups and downs over the years. As the Bible tells us, God knows we aren't perfect. He knows we will get some things right, but we will also stumble and fall sometimes.

I was raised in a God-fearing, God-loving family. We went to church as a family every Sunday. My parents both sang in the church choir, and my mother taught Sunday school. One of my earliest memories is playing a shepherd in our church Christmas pageant dressed in an old bathrobe of my father's for my costume.

As I grew older, I began to question everything as teenagers like to do. Those questions led me into doubt about God's plan for my life as I graduated from high school and tried to make decisions as an adult.

Throughout those difficult years, God never let me down. My questions always led me back to the Bible, and when I approached this greatest of all books with a spirit of open-mindedness and a willingness to learn, I always came away the wiser for my inquiry.

I didn't always get the answers I was looking for as I turned to the Bible for God's wisdom. But I did get the truth.

In this book, I share what I've learned from studying the Bible with the mind of a beginner. When you clear your mind of all of your preconceptions and go directly to the living Word of God, the way forward will become clear to you if you remain patient.

May you too find the peace and guidance that studying the Bible has given me.

God bless you with abundance.

--Brian Gugas

The Bible

The Bible is a book inspired by God, with many stories, prophecies, and messages. Although the Bible is thousands of years old, it is still the most popular book sold each year. Many people are convinced the Bible is outdated or has not progressed with the changing times; however, the Bible has proven over and over again that it has stood the test of time.

Every day millions of people look to the scriptures for hope, assurance, promises and a guide for how to live their lives. The Bible has never come up empty, and it has been a driving force for many, to keep them grounded and focused. The Bible is a kind of blueprint on how life should be lived, but, as seen in the scriptures, everyone fails, and we are all notorious in falling short of God's desire and plan. But of course, God knew that we would.

The Bible is divided into two parts, the Old Testament, and the New Testament and each are very distinctive. The Old Testament gives an account of the beginning of time, God's creation, and how much he loved mankind. However, the Old Testament also reveals God's anger as a result of sin and our separation from God. God did not want to be separated from his people,; he wanted to bridge the gap, and that is why he sent us a Savior. Although the Savior was prophesized throughout the Old Testament, it isn't until the New Testament that he is born.

The Old Testament is the Law, and the New Testament is the New Covenant, Jesus Christ. Throughout the Old Testament, we see the continual struggles that the Israelites and the Gentiles had with obeying God and his commands. The people wander off and do their own thing, they disobey God, and they worship idols. The struggle obey God's Law is a continual theme throughout the Old Testament. The Law was given by God, knowing that it could not be maintained by the people.

Sin and disobeying God separated us from our Creator, and, God wanted that gap bridged. In the New Testament, we see God's perfect plan unfold, and hope is restored. Christ comes, the Savior of the earth, who will save

the people from their sins. As prophesized, he is born in Bethlehem, is crucified on the cross, and is resurrected so that salvation has been restored.

The Bible is a manual of how Christians should live their lives, but it is also a tool to help us recognize that we cannot do this on our own strength - we need help, hope, and a Savior, and that Savior is Jesus Christ.

As you read through this book, you will see how each Book of the Bible is unique, but also how they all connect together. From the creation, to the imminent end times, the story unfolds through historical books, poetic books, prophetic books and letters to the churches. The Bible is filled with many exciting and scandalous stories, examples of failure and success, falling and rising again, hope and glory.

Through the Bible, we clearly see that God is pursuing all of us, both Jews and Gentiles. He loves us unconditionally and has paved a way to be with us; however, the choice is up to us. In the end, we will all stand before God and give an account for our lives. However, on that day, many of us will enter the gates of heaven, while others will not. The Bible is a roadmap to everlasting life with Jesus Christ.

The Bible is comprised of 66 books: 39 in the Old Testament, and 27 in the New Testament. The books are categorized as follows.

Bible Basics

The Bible was written over a period of nearly 1,500 years by 40 people. The earliest books were written by Moses over a period of about 40 years, spanning from (approx.) 1450 BC to 1410 BC. NOTE: BC means before the birth of Christ (Jesus). The last book of the Bible, which is Revelation, was written around 100 AD. NOTE: AD means after the death and resurrection of Christ.

This is interesting in the fact that not one single word in the Bible contradicts another. In other words, the prophecies and historical accounts in the earliest books of the Bible are spoken of and fulfilled hundreds of years later in the later books of the Bible in detail.

Another piece of proof that points to the Bible's relevancy is the fact that it doesn't try to stand alone; meaning it isn't 'afraid' to be scrutinized or examined. For example, in 1st Kings 14:19, we read: The other events of Jeroboam's reign, his wars and how he ruled, are written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel. This is just one of many examples of what I'm talking about.

The Bible is as true as it gets. It is our guidebook for life. It is the proof of how and why we exist. It is a book of promises that cannot and will not be broken. In short and in the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 32:47, the words of the Bible are not idle words - they are your life.

Bible basics 101

Before we actually get in to what the Bible has to say, let's get familiar with some of the basics of the Bible...

The Bible consists of 66 books and is divided into two main sections:

- Old Testament
- New Testament

The word 'testament' means contract. And what is a contract? It is an agreement between two or more people. This is fitting due to the fact that the Bible contains God's promises to us in return for our faith and obedience to him. God agrees to bless, comfort, protect, provide for us and save us from an eternity in hell in return for our following him faithfully.

But why bother? When you buy a house you enter into the contract because you want to make a particular place your home. Or when you accept employment, you agree to give your best effort to your job because you want to use your skills and earn a paycheck. And from the employer's perspective, he or she enters into the contract because they want someone they can depend on to represent their place of business in an accurate and positive manner.

So what about the Bible? What is the underlying cause or reason God instituted this contract between us and him? Love. Unconditional, unmerited love.

Yes, it really is that simple. God created us out of love, so it is only natural that he would take whatever measures or actions were necessary to protect that love. Think about it--as a parent aren't you committed to doing and saying whatever is necessary for your children to know you love them?

The Old Testament consists of 39 books and contains the history of the world up to the period in which the Persian Empire was the most powerful

in the world. It was during this time that Malachi wrote the last book of the Old Testament.

The books of the Bible are not presented in chronological order of when they were written, but rather they are given to us in a historically chronological order. For example, most theologians believe Job was written before some of the books that come before it in the Bible. But how could that be? How could Job be before Adam, Noah and Abraham?

I'm so glad you asked and I'll be happy to answer your questions...

1: He wasn't before Adam. No one other than God came before Adam. Just because Job may have been written before God directed Moses to write the book of Genesis and those that come immediately after it doesn't mean Job's story took place prior to the events in the first books of the Bible. It's like telling a story and then going back with a "Meanwhile, back at the ranch…."

This is highly plausible and something we see God doing throughout the Bible For example, in Genesis 1:26-31 we read that man and woman were created on the sixth day, that God blessed them, gave them specific jobs, told them what they were to do and what they were to eat. Then God looked at them and proclaimed this final piece of his 'creation puzzle' very good (in comparison to 'just' good after he created everything else).

Immediately following in chapter 2, beginning in verse 4of Genesis we read a more detailed account of that day's events. It even comes after we read that God rested on the seventh day. The fact that this more detailed account comes after we know God rested on the seventh day and after the initial and somewhat abridged version of the event doesn't automatically mean it was a separate event. It just means God chose to go back and give us more details before going on with the rest of the story.

2: We know Job was post-Noah because he, well, because he was. The Bible leaves no room for doubt that Noah and his family (8 people in all) were the ONLY people to survive the flood that covered the entire earth. And since Job was not one of Noah's sons, then we know Job had to come after Noah. In fact, we know it had to be at least three generations after

Noah because Job is not listed as one of Noah's grandsons. Noah's son, Shem, however, is listed as the father of Uz; meaning his sons, grandsons, etc. are where the people group in this country or tribe came from. And since we know Job was from the land of Uz (Job 1), it only makes sense to assume that Job was a descendent of Shem.

3: As for being before or after Abram (later Abraham), it is quite possible or even probable that he lived either prior to Abram/Abraham, or a generation or two after Abraham lived. The reasons for placing Job either one of these periods of time include:

- Uz, where Job was from) is mentioned only in listing the descendants of Shem, in introducing Job to us, in the book of Lamentations where it is referencing Shem's descendants again and finally in the book of Jeremiah where a historical reference is made to all the kings of Uz. The area or land of Uz had ceased to exist (at least by that name) by the time Moses and the Israelites came onto the scene.
- Job is said to be a very Godly and faithful man. In fact, God tells Satan that there is no other man like him. So had he lived during the time of Abraham, it would have been reasonable for God to have chosen Job as the father of the Israelites. As for coming after Abraham, it doesn't make much sense to think that God felt Job was like none other—specifically Jacob. That leaves us with putting Job's lifetime prior to Abraham's. This timeline is most feasible because it would 'allow' God to give Job the honor of being the most faithful of men, but a man who simply didn't fit into God's timeline for bringing about the nation of Israel.
- There are several other evidences throughout the book of Job that place him in this period of time. These evidences include:

    - The names of his so-called friends and comforters are known rulers and dignitaries of prominent people groups during this period of time.
    - The raiders who come to ravage Job's farm and livestock come from areas near the assumed location of Uz.

Other books of the Old Testament including Esther, Psalm, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes were written during different periods of history in the nation of Israel. But rather than inserting them between the chronological history of

Israel and later Israel and Judah, they are simply given to us after we read the historical documentation God provides us with.

The same can be said for the books of the prophets. Take Jeremiah, for example. God first called Jeremiah to be a prophet during the reign of King Josiah in Judah. Daniel began prophesying shortly after Israel was taken captive by the Babylonians under the rule of Nebuchadnezzar and continued into the reign of King Darius. But again, rather than insert these books into the middle of the historical timeline accounts of the kingdoms, God simply led those putting the manuscripts together to put them as a group.

It isn't all that difficult to see the method of organization.

- Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are the books of the Mosaic Law (and history)
- Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, 1st and 2nd Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are books of history
- Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon are the books of wisdom and poetry
- Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel are the major prophets
- Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are the minor prophets

The book of Malachi was written a little more than 400 years before the birth of Jesus. And then nothing. There is a period of silence lasting 400 years from Malachi to the New Testament book of Matthew. This period of silence is one in which God does not talk to his people or communicate with them in any way. We do, however, know what was happening in the world because of other historical documents, archeology, and research.

It was during this 400 year period that the following major world events took place:

NOTE: This list is not in any order of significance or chronology.

Alexander the Great defeated the Persian Empire Aristotle was born and made significant impacts on the world of science, literature, and education in general The city of London was founded Numerous dynasty wars and conflicts took place in China and other parts of Asia The Greek Empire enjoyed decades of prominence and power before falling to the Romans The first Roman road system was built Julius Caesar was murdered The temple was reconstructed in Jerusalem Socrates lived and died; making indelible marks on mankind during his lifetime Paper was invented

It was after this 400 year period that God sent his son, Jesus, to be born to earthly parents. This begins the New Testament.

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament contains the history and accounts of Jesus' life on earth; including his ministry, his miracles, his death, burial, and resurrection, and his return to heaven. This is followed by a history of the early church, books of doctrine (the why and how to be one with Christ), which are essentially letters written by Paul and a few others to the early Christians. The book of Acts and some of Paul's letters also contain accounts of Paul's missionary journeys. The New Testament ends with the book of Revelation, which is a book of prophecy and imagery of the second coming of Christ—the final judgement of mankind.

The New Testament is divided as follows:

- Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the Gospels
- Acts is the book of history of the Church and most of Paul's missionary journeys.
- Romans, 1st & 2nd Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1st & 2nd Thessalonians, 1st & 2nd Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1st & 2nd Peter, 1st , 2nd, & 3rd John, and Jude are letters (epistles) that outline the doctrine of the Church and God's requirements, expectations, and forbiddances to Christians
- Revelation, as stated, is the book of prophecy of things still to come

At this point it is worth mentioning that there are Bibles available that have been arranged in chronological order. NOTHING is changed in the wording of the scriptures. They have only been rearranged and grouped together to be in harmony with what is going on when, where, and with who. For

example, the four books of the Gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) don't all contain the very same accounts of Jesus' ministry or his parables, but many of them are repeated in two, three or all four. In cases like this all four accounts are given together (one following another) rather than each book in its entirety. Another example of how it is put together can be seen in the books of Kings and Chronicles. The account of each king in both books is shown side by side.

For many, a chronological Bible makes understanding the history of the world much easier. They like to see all of the events happening at one time neatly gathered in one place. Whether you read it chronologically or otherwise however, the fact remains that the Bible is the inspired word of God and that its truth will remain until his return.

Book 1

The Book of Genesis

Who wrote the book of Genesis: Moses

When was it written: Between 1446 and 1406 B.C.

Why was it written:

- To give us the history of how the universe was created
- To tell us how sin came into existence
- To give us the account of the flood and why God chose to ‘start over’
- To give us the history of the beginning of the Israelite (Jewish) nation —God’s chosen people

Key events in Genesis:

- The creation of the universe
- The creation of man (Adam and Eve)
- Eve tempted by Satan
- Adam and Eve sin and are removed from the Garden of Eden
- The first murder
- God’s broken-heartedness over the sinfulness of mankind
- The building of the ark by Noah and the flood
- God scatters the people over the earth
- God calls Abraham to be the father of the Israelite nation
- The account of Isaac
- Isaac’s sons, Jacob and Esau
- Jacob becomes the father of the 12 tribes of Israel
- The account of Joseph and why the tribes of Israel end up in Egypt

The creation of the universe

In the first chapter of Genesis we are given a day by day account of how God created the universe. From speaking light into existence on day one to the creation of all the wild animals, livestock, and creatures that move along the ground on day six, God created it all.

It is interesting to note the distinctions God makes between the different kinds of animals he creates—wild, livestock, and creatures that move along the ground. These distinctions are made in this text and again when God instructs Noah as to what he is to take onto the ark with him.

The fact that God takes the time to categorize the animals like this should tell us that he has specific intentions and purposes for them—specific intentions and purposes he wants us to be aware and respectful of.

The fact that he differentiated between wild animals and livestock is interesting—especially because at this point in time humans were vegetarians. That's right—in Genesis 1:29 God told Adam and Eve they could have every seed-bearing plant and every tree that had fruit on it as food. It isn't until after the flood that he told Noah and his family that meat could be a part of their diet (Genesis 9:3). God knew he would change our diet to include meat, so why wait? Was it to give the animal population time to expand and grow? Who knows…except God, of course.

In much the same way as he put humans on a higher level of importance than animals, God feels some animals are more acceptable or important to others. Cattle and sheep, for example are acceptable sacrifices later on when he establishes the Law of Moses whereas pigs are always considered unclean and animals like bears and fish were never considered 'sacrifice worthy'.

As you look at the events of creation; knowing what we now know about things like the water cycle, the food chain, the lunar cycle, etc., how can anyone doubt the all-knowing, holy nature of God and his perfect, infallible ability to create everything to be just as it should be!

The creation of man (Adam and Eve)

Day six was a big day for God. He not only created all the animals, but he created Adam and then Eve, too.

In creating Adam and Eve we are first introduced to the fact that God was not alone—that Jesus was with him: “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule….” (Genesis 1:26a).

Immediately following the announcement of creating man, God tells us that he created them to rule over and to populate the earth. But that is not the only reason God created us. God tells us in Isaiah 43:7 that God created us to praise and glorify him. Revelation 4:11 tells us that God created all things for his pleasure. God wanted us. He needed to share the immeasurable amount of love he has with someone…millions of someones. Including you.

Eve tempted by Satan and Adam and Eve sin and are removed from the Garden of Eden

Chapter 3 of Genesis brings all the wonder and beauty of God's perfect world to a screeching halt when the serpent, which God had created, was invaded by Satan. Satan then tempts Eve to disobey God and sin enters the world forever.

For believers and unbelievers alike, the presence of Satan brings up the following questions:

- Where did Satan come from in the first place?

To understand the answers to these questions it is important that you remember that God didn't give us the full and complete story in Genesis. He gave us the abridged chronological account; filling in more details as he saw fit throughout the rest of the Bible. One of these places being the book of Isaiah. In the fourteenth chapter of Isaiah we learn that while the earth as we know it was formless and empty (Genesis 1:2), the heavens were not—empty, that is.

God, Jesus, and the angels existed in the heavens prior to the creation of the earth. Satan was one of those angels. His name is given to us as Lucifer. Lucifer, however, decided he wanted to be God's equal—or greater.

War (literally) broke out between the angels and Satan and those who were fighting with him were cast out of heaven. The Bible describes him falling like lightening from heaven to the earth (Luke 10:18).

So to sum all of this up, Satan was an angel with authority who decided to over-exert his authority by trying to make himself equal to or greater than God. He failed and was cast out of heaven; being sent to earth to exert his power here.

- Why did God put the tree in the garden if he didn't want Adam and Eve to bother it? ?

When God created Adam he took him to the garden and told him he could have anything he wanted that was there except the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden. He told Adam that if he ate from the tree he would surely die. It is doubtful that God meant Adam would die immediately, but rather that it would make the human body temporary—less in the image of God and Jesus.

But as for why he put it there in the first place, the answer is relatively simple: God needed and wanted Adam to choose to honor God through his obedience. He wanted to know that Adam could be counted on to make responsible decisions about the earth he (God) had just put Adam in charge of. Unfortunately Adam didn't ace the test.

Eve wasn't there at the time. God didn't create Eve until after he had instructed Adam not to bother the tree. So does this mean Eve is less at fault? No, she knew. In fact, she went one further and told Satan they couldn't even touch the tree. But again, it's all about making responsible choices—choosing God over anything else.

- If God didn't want sin, then why did he let Satan into the garden?

Great question, right? If God didn't want Satan in heaven and if he wanted man to praise him, then why allow the option for sin? The answer to this question (or questions) isn't all that complex, but it does require you to look at the Bible as a whole rather than picking it apart piece by piece, account by account. Are you ready?

God knew Adam and Eve would sin. His all-knowing nature didn't allow him not to. But he had to let them choose. He had to let them choose so that Satan would know just how limited his powers are. While Adam and Eve's sin definitely caused a chasm between man and God, it did not keep them from God. God's willingness and ability to bring healing, forgiveness, and restoration makes Satan the loser. And that is what Jesus' death and the final judgement are all about—defeating Satan.

So you see, God allows Satan to exert his powers here on earth so that 1) Our love, faith, and obedience to God is sincere rather than orchestrated by him and 2) Satan will never accomplish what he hopes to accomplish—to be greater than God.

The first murder

Adam and Eve obey God's command to reproduce several times over. Their oldest two sons, Cain and Abel are grown men making their own living in chapter four of Genesis when the trouble breaks out.

Cain is jealous of Abel's sacrifice to God. He is jealous because God is more pleased with Abel's gift. Jealousy leads to resentment. Resentment leads to anger and hatred. Hatred then leads to murder.

Sin, when left unattended, quickly gets out of control.

God's broken-heartedness over the sinfulness of mankind, the building of the ark by Noah, and the flood

Adam and Eve had several other children in addition to Cain and Abel. One of those children was a son named Seth. From Seth's lineage was born Methuselah, the oldest man to ever live. And nine generations later Noah was born to Methuselah's son, Lamech.

We often make the mistake of thinking that these people lived one after the other. We don't really take into consideration that like most of us, Seth's children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren knew their grandparents. But they did. In fact, when you do the math, you will discover that Methuselah died shortly after Noah became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japeth at the age of 500. This means:

- Noah knew his father and grandfather well
- Neither Lamech nor Methuselah had been dead very long before the flood, which began when Noah was 600 years old

Apparently, however, Lamech and his wife didn't do such a great job with all their kids because only Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD. Only Noah was worth saving. But God needed a way to repopulate the earth, so along with Noah and Mrs. Noah, God saved their three sons (the only children they had before or after the flood)—Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

The account of the flood is preceded by telling us that God's heart was broken—filled with great pain over the depravity of the very ones he had created. They had allowed sin to rule their lives. And so simply put, he starts over.

It is important to note, however, that starting over didn't erase sin. Noah and his family weren't perfect or sinless. But he was faithful and obedient —just like God calls us all to be.

Following the flood God instructs Noah's sons and their wives to repopulate the earth. This is something that took place over time. God didn't whoosh more people into existence to help things along, as some believe. We know this for a fact in reading Genesis 9:18-19 which says, "The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem Ham, and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.) These were the three sons of Noah, and from them came the people who were scattered over the earth." (NIV)

The lineage of Noah’s sons

Chapter ten of the book of Genesis gives us a listing or table of nations. In reading through the list you can see the names of the people groups who later stand in opposition to Israel and those from whom the nation of Israel comes.

For example, the sinful people of Nineveh, who Jonah was sent to minister to, come from Ham’s son, Cush. The Babylonians are also descended from him, as are the Canaanites and those who perished in Sodom and Gomorrah.

On the other hand, Shem’s son, Arphaxad had a son who had a son who had a son…. Nine generations after Arphaxad was born, Abram, who later was renamed Abraham, was born to Terah.

God scatters the people over the earth

Just like Satan had aspirations of being God's equal, the people on earth decided they might possibly do the same. To prevent this from happening, God and Jesus (note the word 'us' in Genesis 11:7) came to earth and 'confused' their language (created different languages) and scattered people across the world.

Did they zap them here and there? Possibly, but it is more reasonable to assume that each group of people that spoke and understood each language naturally congregated together and went off to form their own society. It is equally reasonable to assume that they were blessed with God's divine guidance, protection, and provision to get where they were going.

God calls Abraham to be the father of the Israelite nation and the account of Isaac

Prior to God calling Abram to be the beginning—the father—of the Israelite nation, we have no insight into whether or not Abram had a relationship with God. We assume he did because of his willingness to blindly obey—to leave his aging father, the only home he'd ever known, and everything else that was familiar to him. But we don't know for sure.

The story of Abram/Abraham's travels and the events leading up to the birth of Isaac, the son God promised Abraham and his wife Sarah in their very old age, is filled with unusual incidents and experiences. Among these experiences is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their horrendous behavior. Rape, homosexuality, greed, lust, and disrespect for life in general…these are among the things God finds despicable and issued a death sentence for.

One of the two he most relevant experiences to us today, though, is the birth of Ishmael, who is Abraham's son born to him by his wife's maid, Hagar.

Here is the story in a nutshell…

Sarah's lack of faith that God could give her a child in her old age led her to convince Abraham to sleep with her maid, Hagar, in hopes of giving him a son. And Abraham said yes—definitely a moment of weakness in his faith.

Hagar got pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy she named Ishmael. Abraham naturally loved the child because it was his, but Sarah was miserable. Even before the baby was born Hagar started goading Sarah over the fact that she was able to give Abraham something Sarah couldn't.

Time passed and when God was ready, he did indeed allow Sarah to conceive and give Abraham the son they always wanted even though she was nearly 100 years old!

When Isaac was weaned, they had a celebration feast. Hagar and Ishmael were there, but it was during the feast that Sarah decided enough was enough. The two had to go. God assured Abraham it was okay to send them away. Ishmael and his descendants are the people we know as Egyptians and Assyrians, Iraqis, Iranians, and other Middle East nationalities.

The Bible tells us that Ishmael's people will forever be at war with those outside of them or not like them (Genesis 16:12).

The other highly relevant event in Abraham's life is expression of extreme faith on Abraham's part that cemented his place as the father of all Israel. Again, in a nutshell…

God told Abraham to take his young son, Isaac, up on a mountain and sacrifice him. So off he and Isaac went.

You would think Abraham's heart had to be pounding out of his chest with dread and grief because of what God had told him to do, but it wasn't—or at least it doesn't appear to be. When Isaac asks where the sacrifice is, Abraham tells the boy not to worry—that God will provide it for them in due time.

When they arrive at their destination and get everything ready, there is still no lamb, so Abraham binds Isaac to the altar and is just about ready to kill him when God speaks to Abraham. He tells Abraham not to harm Isaac—that he (God) now knows there is nothing Abraham wouldn't do for him. And then God miraculously provides father and son with the lamb Abraham knew in his heart would be there.

Wow! That's faith like none other! It is also the ultimate example of how God withheld nothing from us—not even his only son, Jesus.

In today's society we would be confident that Isaac would be in need of some serious counseling or therapy, but all evidence points to the contrary. Later on in scripture we see that Isaac had nothing but love and respect for his father.

Isaac’s sons, Jacob and Esau

Ever the obedient son, Isaac goes back to the place of his parents’ upbringing so he can marry someone from their own people. He marries Rebekah—his cousin. Their marriage is filled with lies and deceptions of the worst kind. Rebekah has an extreme case of ‘playing favorites’ between her twin sons, Jacob and Esau—to the point of convincing Jacob to carry out a plot to deceive Isaac who is old and sick, into giving him the birthright that rightfully belongs to Esau.

God had told Rebekah prior to giving birth that Jacob would indeed be the one in charge, but Rebekah wasn’t willing to trust God to keep his word. She took matters into her own hands. Her actions are something we are paying for still today.

Because of Rebekah’s mishandling of the situation, Esau became a rebellious malcontent. He married daughters of Ishmael, therefore contributing to the issue of contention between Christians and the Islamic people groups of the Middle East.

Jacob becomes the father of the 12 tribes of Israel

Rebekah took matters into her own hands and tried to do God's work for him, but God is bigger than all the deceit and manipulation in the world. God knew before Jacob and Esau were even conceived that it was Jacob he wanted as the father of the 12 tribes of Israel. So no matter who or what tried to rearrange or reinvent God's plan, God's ultimate plan won out. It always does. It always will.

Jacob also returns to his roots—his mother's family—to find a bride. He falls madly in love with Rachel, but because deception runs in the family, Jacob's uncle Laban tricks Jacob into marrying Rachel's older and matronly sister, Leah.

Multiple wives is not forbidden in God's eyes at this time (why, we will never understand), so a week after marrying Leah, Jacob gets to marry Rachel. In a desperate attempt to try to win Jacob's love, Leah is bent on giving Jacob as many sons as possible. She even gives Jacob her maid as another source of baby-making. Rachel, who has Jacob's complete love and devotion, on the other hand, is barren. But her love for her husband drives her to give her maid to Jacob, too.

In the end the twelve tribes of Israel come from Leah, her maid, Rachel's maid, and even Rachel. God blessed Jacob and Rachel's love by blessing them with two sons—Joseph and Benjamin. Sadly, however, she died giving birth to Benjamin, the last of Jacob's twelve sons.

You would think that after seeing what favoritism does to a family, Jacob would have done anything and everything in his power to make sure that didn't happen to his family. But no—Joseph and Benjamin are clearly Jacob's favorite sons…especially Joseph.

The account of Joseph and why the tribes of Israel end up in Egypt

The last thirteen chapters of Genesis provide for us one of the most beautiful and amazing life stories in the Bible. It is the story of Joseph.

The account of Joseph's life allows us to see Joseph grow from an overly-confident teenager to a slave in a strange and distant land, to a young man in authority, to a wrongly-convicted prisoner, to the ruler of all of Egypt. He was, in all reality, one of the most important and influential people in the world.

His sphere of influence allowed him to save his father, brothers, and their families from starvation because of a major drought and famine in that area of the world. Through a series of events that is both intriguing and heart-wrenching, Joseph is reunited with his father and brothers.

The reunion between Joseph and his brothers was the second-most emotional event recorded in the Bible—the first being the death of Jesus on our behalf. More than the emotion it evokes, however, is the messages God sends to us through the life of Joseph. The messages are this:

- As long as there is breath in our lungs there is hope for forgiveness and restoration between us and God.
- God's methods and means of accomplishing his plan won't always make sense to us, but if we have faith, we will always realize the blessings that come from trusting him.
- God will make something beautiful out of the worst situation if we let him.

Joseph's arrival in Egypt wasn't an accident or even just the result of his older brothers' hateful actions. Joseph's arrival in Egypt was God's plan for him—as was Joseph's rise to power. For without Joseph's rise to power, the rest of the family, which was the nation of Israel to that point, would never

have settled there. And settling there was God's plan for them long before it even happened.

Back when God was telling Abraham he would be blessed by being the father of a great nation of people (Genesis 15:13-16), God told Abraham that before that took place they would be enslaved and mistreated for 400 years, but that when their period of enslavement ended, they would become a people of wealth and would return to the Promised Land—the land in which Abraham was living. And that is exactly what happened.

The reasons God chose to enslave the Israelites are not really revealed. Humility? So they would truly understand the difference between wealth and poverty? So they would be more aware of God's miraculous provision? Why doesn't really matter, though. Not when living by faith.

Key verses in Genesis

Every book of the Bible provides us with words of wisdom, instruction, comfort, encouragement, admonishment, warning, and promise, and hope. Let's look at some of what the book of Genesis has to offer.

"To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." ~Genesis 3:16

"God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it...." ~Genesis 1:28a

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

"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work." ~Genesis 1:31 and Genesis 2:1-2

"Then the LORD said, "My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal; his days will be a hundred and twenty years." ~Genesis 6:3

"The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." ~Genesis 2:18

"So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man." ~Genesis 2:21-22

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." ~Genesis 2:24

“Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.” Genesis 9:1

“These were the three sons of Noah, and from them came the people who were scattered over the earth.” ~Genesis 9:19

“His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.” ~Genesis 37:11

“Judah said to his brothers, “What will we gain if we kill our brother and over up his blood? Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and bleed.” His brothers agreed.” ~Genesis 37:26-27

“Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come close to me.” When they had done so, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not e distressed and do not be angry with ourselves for selling me her, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.” ~Genesis 45:4-5

“Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.” ~Genesis 45:14-15

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the three of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.” ~Genesis 2:15-17

“To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the three about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.” ~Genesis 3:17

“Noah did everything just as God commanded him.” ~Genesis 6:22

“So Abram left, as the LORD had told him…” Genesis 12:4a

“Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” ~Genesis 15:6

“Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you.” ~Genesis 41:39

But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife and your sons’ wives with you.” ~Genesis 6:18

“But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded.” ~Genesis 8:1

“The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.” ~Genesis 8:21-22

“I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth….I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.” Genesis 9:11 and 13

“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” ~Genesis 12:2-3

“… “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” ~Genesis 15:1b

(To Hagar about Ishmael) “He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.” ~Genesis 16:12

(To Rebekah about Jacob and Esau) “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.” ~Geneses 25:23

“Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” ~Genesis 3:13

The LORD saw how great mans’ wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.” ~Genesis 6:5-6

Book 2

The Book of Exodus

Who wrote the book of Exodus: Moses

When was it written: Between 1446 B.C. and 1406 B.C.

Why was it written:

- To give us the account of God calling Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt
- To give us the account of Israel's years of slavery to Egypt
- To give us the history of Israel's exodus from Egypt
- To give us the Ten Commandments
- To give us the account of how God instructed Israel to worship

Key events in Exodus:

- Israelites become slaves to Egypt
- Birth of Moses
- Moses runs away
- God speaks to Moses
- The plagues
- The Passover
- The exodus from Egypt
- The parting of the Red Sea
- God provides food and water for the Israelites
- God speaks to Moses on Mt. Sinai and gives him the Ten Commandments
- The building of the Tabernacle and establishment of the priesthood
- The construction of the Ark of the Covenant
- God leads Israel by a cloud

Israelites become slaves to Egypt

The book of Exodus opens with a recap from Genesis; giving us a brief census of Joseph's family (the Israelites) who came to Egypt to live once they knew he was still alive. Only eight verses later we learn that a new king comes to power after Joseph has died who knows nothing about what Joseph did to save Egypt and other countries from the famine and drought.

The king's lack of knowledge combined with the fact that the vast number of Israelites now living there made him uncomfortable. He worried to the point of being paranoid that Israel would rise up against the Egyptians and take over their country. In order to ensure this did not happen, he forced them into slavery.

The fact that the new king was unaware of Joseph's contributions to the world, let alone Egypt, is troubling, but also somewhat ironic. It is troubling in the fact that in such a relatively short amount of time (three or four generations) something so important would not have been recorded or passed down. This is especially surprising with the Egyptians because they were so advanced in recording their history.

Ignorance of Joseph's contributions is ironic in the fact that the Israelites didn't learn anything from Egypt's mistake of not passing down important history to later generations. The Israelites did the very same thing—as you will see later on in the Old Testament—with similarly devastating results.

The Israelites remained enslaved by Egypt for 400 years, which is exactly what God told Abraham would happen.

Birth of Moses

Approximately 350 years after the Egyptians started using the Israelites as slaves, God started preparing for their time of deliverance by way of a baby boy born to Amram and his wife, Jochebed. The baby's name was Moses.

But because Pharaoh was so fearful of the potential of the power in the number of Israelites, he had ordered all baby boys born to the Israelite women to be murdered. The second chapter of Exodus tells us, however, that Jochebed and Amram defied the Pharaoh's orders because the baby was such "…a fine child" (Exodus 2:2).

Because the baby (who is not called by any name to this point) was so fair (and I'm sure love also played a significant role), they hid the child for three months—until it became impossible to keep him quiet and contained. At that point Jochebed prepared a baby-safe 'boat' and sent her young daughter to put the baby in the river at just the right time and place that the Pharaoh's daughter would be at the river bathing.

The princess found the baby and took him into her life and her home; giving him the name Moses and raising him as her own. It didn't matter to her that he was an Israelite (Hebrew) baby. She was a woman with motherly instincts and that surpassed any racial barriers that could have been an issue.

Moses runs away

Moses was raised as an Egyptian but knew this was not his biological heritage. His love for his people led him to commit manslaughter against an Egyptian soldier. As a result of his unintentional crime, he ran away to the land of Midian where he worked as a shepherd, fell in love, got married, and had a son.

While Moses was able to run away from the judicial system of Egypt, he was not able to run away from God. God knew where Moses was the entire time. In fact, it would be fair to say that God orchestrated the events in Moses life as a way to prepare him for the grueling task of leading a huge group of people through the desert.

God speaks to Moses and the plagues

Chapters three through eleven of the book of Exodus provides us with the account of God's initial meeting with Moses by way of a burning bush all the way through the night of the tenth plague God brings down upon Egypt as punishment for Pharaoh's refusal to let the Israelite's leave.

Moses' initial attitude toward God was not what you might expect from someone who had just heard God's voice speaking directly to him. And in spite of the fact that God tells us in the book of Numbers that Moses is the most humble man who has ever lived, Moses tells God "No"…more than once.

After God convinces Moses that he is the man for the job—that rescuing Israel from the bondage of slavery is his purpose in life—Moses returns to the land of his birth to do whatever God tells him to do.

The Pharaoh proudly refuses to meet God's demands. His pride results in misery and suffering for his entire kingdom. Bloody water, infestations of gnats, flies, locusts, and frogs, crops and livestock being destroyed… nothing gets to this evil man. It isn't until God goes straight to Pharaoh's heart that the Israelites are allowed to leave.

The tenth plague, which killed the first-born in every Egyptian household, was enough to put Pharaoh over the edge. Not only did he tell Moses to take the Israelites and get out of his land, he told them to take whatever they wanted to with them. He just wanted them out!

The parallels and ironies between Moses and the Israelites' rescue from slavery and Jesus bringing salvation to all who ask for it are interesting and worth looking at:

- Like Moses, Jesus' life was in danger when he was a baby, so God told Joseph to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt until they could return to their home in safety.

- Moses was raised by non-biological parents. Jesus was raised by a man who was not his biological father.
- Jesus spent his entire ministry wandering around with no place to call home. The purpose of his travels was to take the message of the Gospel to as many as possible; saving them from their sin and giving them the hope of heaven. Moses spent 40 years wandering around the desert leading the Israelites to the Promised Land God had been preparing for them.

The Passover

Two weeks before God sent the death angel to Egypt to kill the firstborn in every household, God gave Moses a very specific set of instructions for a celebratory meal the Israelites were to eat on the evening before they left Egypt. The meal is called the Passover Meal and is still celebrated to this day by those of the Jewish faith.

In addition to the specifics of the meal—what it was to consist of, how it was to be prepared, and how it was to be eaten—God told Moses that the day he gave him these instructions was to be the first day of the first month of the Israelite's year. The Passover was to be their new beginning. A fresh start to a new life in a new home. Starting over.

Each dish of the Passover meal is symbolic of something having to do with the exodus from Egypt and the relationship between God and Israel. From the unleavened bread that symbolizes a pure and untainted relationship with God and the need for expediency to the blood 'painted' on the doorposts as a sign to the death angel to spare the lives of those inside, God had a purpose and message in it all (Exodus 12).

The exodus from Egypt

One of the most telling verses of scripture in the entire Bible is found in Exodus 12:41. It says, “At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the LORD’s divisions left Egypt.”

To the very day of what? To the very day Jacob and his family arrived in Egypt to live. The reason this is so telling is that Moses, the writer of Exodus, would have had no way of knowing this. Not one living soul on earth would have known that. Only God could have known this not-so-trivial piece of information, which is just one more piece of evidence of the authorship of the Bible.

Exodus 12:37 tells us that over 600,000 Israelite men plus women and children, plus many other people of another (or other) nationality(ies) left Egypt in the early morning hours that day. Full of hope, questions, fear mingled with excitement, ands full of faith in Moses and the God they thought had forgotten about them.

The parting of the Red Sea

Everything God does has purpose and everything God does is part of a plan for his creation. And that includes the route the Israelites took when they left Egypt. God directed Moses to take the Israelites on a less-direct route as they headed for the Promised Land of Canaan. This route took them on the desert road straight to the Red Sea.

God's reasoning was this: The Israelites had spent four hundred living as slaves. They were not an aggressive people and were not trained to fight or defend themselves. They were used to a life of submission without question. Had they taken the most direct route they would have encountered the Philistines within a matter of a few days. The Philistines, as we know, were a combative and aggressive people. The Philistines wouldn't have hesitated to attack the Israelites. And what would the Israelites have done? They would have dissolved like snow in the hot, summer sun.

The Israelites lacked fortitude and faith. This was to be expected, given their situation for so long, but God's plan was to use their journey and the experiences he had planned for them to grow their faith and develop their character, stamina, and strength (fortitude).

The Philistines, as it turns out, weren't the only ones the Israelites needed to be worried about. Pharaoh's grief was short-lived in comparison to his desire to keep the Israelites under his control. So within a matter of a day or two, Pharaoh regretted his decision to let them go and sent his army to bring them back.

When the Israelites realized they were being pursued and that the only way they could retain their freedom was to be on the other side of the Red Sea, they panicked, which was exactly what God knew they would have done had they been confronted by the Philistines.

"We were better off as slaves!" they cried. "We are all going to die!" they cried. "This is all your fault, Moses!" they cried.

Moses the humble and faithful wasn't discouraged, though. He knew and kept at the forefront of his mind what the Israelites wouldn't—that God hadn't taken then out of Israel to desert them and leave them at the mercy of whoever or whatever. He also didn't allow the Israelites to wallow in self-pity and faithlessness.

Moses quieted their fearful and angry outbursts and promised that God would continue to deliver them from the hands of Pharaoh. In Exodus 14:14 Moses told the people all they had to do was be still (quiet) and faithful—that God would fight for them. And did he ever!

Using Moses by having him lift his staff out over the water, God parted the Red Sea so that the Israelites could walk across (without even getting their feet wet). All 600,000 men plus women, children, and non-Israelite people with them passed through just as Pharaoh's army was closing in. The army was in the sea and God closed the waters back over them; drowning the entire army and their horses. When t the Israelites saw what God had done for them through Moses, they put their faith and trust in God and Moses… for a while, anyway.

God leads Israel by a cloud

To reassure Israel that he was with them night and day, no matter what, God led his people on their journey by causing a pillar-like cloud to move in front of them by day and a pillar of fire to move in front of them at night. When the cloud or pillar stopped, the people stopped. When it moved, they moved.

God provides food and water for the Israelites

When the Israelites left Egypt they took provisions in the way of food, water, gold, and other things to use for trade, but the food and water they took was not enough to last the entire journey. When their food and water supply was diminished, the Israelites once again started whining and complaining. And once again God came to their rescue.

God didn't just meet their needs, though. He met their needs miraculously. God supplied water from a rock and food called manna from heaven. Even the providing of life's basic needs was an exercise in faith, however.

Water wasn't always in abundance or even naturally accessible. On more than one occasion God supplied water to the Israelites by causing it to miraculously pour out of a rock.

Manna was a nutritionally-complete wafer God provided each and every day. God was adamant, however, that the Israelites gather only enough for one day and one day only. In doing so the people's faith would grow when they discovered that God would not disappoint them or leave them unfed.

Unfortunately the memory of the Red Sea didn't last long. Some of the people couldn't bring themselves to trust God's promise for daily food. Instead, they tried storing away some manna for the following day. When the new day came, however, they found the manna was spoiled and full of maggots—except on the day before the Sabbath. On the day prior to the Sabbath they gathered enough for the following day of rest and it was always fresh and tasty on that day.

God's promises were good then and they are still good today.

God speaks to Moses on Mt. Sinai and gives him the Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments is the basis of God's commands and expectations for us even still today. It is also the basis for our societal law.

In giving Moses the Ten Commandments God was initiating his covenant with Israel. Instead of 'just' promising to provide and protect them, God made it crystal clear that he expected something in return.

Moses' relationship with God was special and unique. Moses spoke to God face to face and was spoken to by God. There are several references in the book of Exodus that tell us of these conversations. In addition to God speaking to Moses via the burning bush, we find multiple references in chapters thirty-two, thirty-three, and thirty-four, as well as others.

One of the most interesting and intriguing conversations that took place between God and Moses was the conversation that took place just after God gave Moses the first stone tablet containing the Ten Commandments. Here is what happened….

Moses had been on the mountain talking to God; receiving vital instructions from God pertaining to worship, daily living, and living obediently to the God who had rescued them and who was their source of provision and protection. But as we will see throughout the entire Old Testament, the Israelites weren't very good at waiting for God or trusting his timing or his divine holiness and power.

In spite of the fact that they had already witnessed and benefitted from God's miraculous works (multiple times over), they grew impatient at Moses' absence of several days. They were 'certain' God had forgotten them and that they were determined to make a god to take his place—an idol made from melting down the gold jewelry they had brought with them out of Egypt. Even more shocking is the fact that Aaron helped them.

God in his ability to see and know all things saw the people worshipping the golden calf they had formed. And to put it bluntly, God lost it. His anger was so intense that he wanted to destroy every single one of them. God told Moses that his (God's) anger against Israel was so great that he was going to destroy them. Their lack of trust and gratitude was too great for him to put up with any longer. Moses listened to what God had to say, but then Moses did something incredible. He reasoned with God and soothed God's anger…

But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. "O LORD," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?' Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on y our people. Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever." Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened. ~Exodus 32:11-14

After this conversation Moses left to return to the people. But when he saw them dancing around the idol and committing all sorts of sinful acts, Moses' anger was more than he could handle. And that is when he hurled the Ten Commandments to the ground; shattering them into countless pieces.

God didn't hold Moses' anger against him. Nor do we have any reason to believe God was angry or displeased with Moses for breaking the stone tablet. But the laws God had written—the Ten Commandments—were (and still are) the foundation of all the other laws God gave the people of Israel, so he called Moses back up on the mountain to meet with him again in chapter thirty-four, where he once again inscribed the laws on a stone tablet Moses chiseled out for him.

The building of the Tabernacle and establishment of the Law and the priesthood

The Ten Commandments weren't the only thing God and Moses talked about. In addition to the Ten Commandments God gave Moses detailed and specific instructions for living. We know these instructions as the Mosaic Law or The Law of Moses.

The Law God gave Israel was highly detailed. Nothing was left to question. And God expected complete obedience and adherence to his laws. Nothing less than complete obedience was acceptable.

In looking at the Law today, we do so with raised eyebrows and scowls. The things God commanded his people to do seem gross, and even senseless. But they are not. Nothing God does or says is senseless or strange. Messy, yes, but never senseless or strange.

As we delve deeper into the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, we will be given more details on the Law of Moses, but in regards to what we read in the later chapters of Exodus concerning the construction of the Tabernacle and the establishment of the priesthood, we need to remember the following:

- God's instructions for worship were meant to teach the people to see God as holy and above all things
- God's blessing of Bezalel and Oholiab in chapter thirty-five was evidence that God blesses each of us with specific talents and gifts we are to use to bring him honor and glory
- God expects to be set apart—he expects our worship to be intentional and deliberate rather than happenstance and casual

The Tabernacle was the first time God had designated a specific place for worship and sacrifice. It was the first 'church building' and it serves as our

introduction to the truth that God demands a special place in our life and that he demands and desire that we set apart time in our life for only him—to worship and to acknowledge our need for him as our Savior.

Assigning priests

God's reasoning for selecting Aaron's family for the establishment of the priesthood was not because Aaron's family was superior or more blessed. God established the priesthood with Aaron and his sons because of Aaron's commitment to God and because he was the closest 'thing' to Moses. God needed Moses to do so many other things that he knew it would be impossible for Moses to live under the guidelines he was about to establish for the priesthood. But Aaron…Aaron could.

Aaron wasn't perfect, though. Remember how easily he caved when the people wanted the golden calf? But Aaron was sincere. He had a genuine heart for the LORD. He was also highly respected and trusted by his fellow Israelites. Aaron had been with them his whole life—unlike Moses. Aaron was one of them, so serving in the role as spiritual leader was one he was well-suited for.

Once again we see God's attention to detail in the construction of the priestly garments. And once again God's detailed instructions are not without sound reasoning—the primary one being to set Aaron and his sons apart. They were men of authority but with the authority came a tremendous amount of responsibility. They were held to a much higher standard than the rest of Israel. They were answerable to God in ways the others were not.

The construction of the Ark of the Covenant

The Ark of the Covenant is a wooden chest or box made according to God's specific and detailed instructions by Bazalel—the man God blessed with exquisite skills in crafting things from wood, gold, silver, bronze, and stone.

The purpose of the Ark of the Covenant was to hold objects representing the covenant (promise) God had made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Israel) and to the people themselves—the promise to bless them abundantly in having the distinction of being God's chosen people and to give them the Promised Land for their own.

The Ark was a highly sacred object—so much so that later on in the Old Testament we read about the time God struck someone dead for merely touching it in order to keep it from falling.

Once the Ark of the Covenant was built, God instructed that the tablet on which he had written the Ten Commandments, along with some manna be placed inside. Aaron's staff—the one that budded—was also placed inside.

Throughout Israel's history, the Ark of the Covenant was kept in the Tabernacle, taken into battle to signify God's presence and protection, and was housed in places designated by God—including the temple constructed by Solomon. At one point in history the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant and took it into their possession, but they soon realized God was punishing them severely for this act, so they returned it to the Israelites.

When the Babylonians took Israel captive and destroyed the temple in 587BC the Ark of the Covenant disappeared and its fate is still not known even to this day. It is safe to say, however, that the Ark of the Covenant, like the twelve tribes of Israel living as God's chosen people, no longer exists. Israel refused to participate in God's covenant so there was no longer a need for the symbolic covenant which was the Ark of the Covenant.

The Glory of the LORD

The book of Exodus ends with the completion of the work of building the Tabernacle and its surroundings as directed by God. Once this was done God caused a cloud to set over the top of the Tabernacle.

God then instructed the people that when the cloud was lifted from over the Tabernacle they were to pack up everything according to the instructions he had given them and set out on the next leg of their journey. When the cloud stopped moving, they would know they had arrived at their next destination.

Key verses in Exodus

Every book of the Bible provides us with words of wisdom, instruction, comfort, encouragement, admonishment, warning, and promise, and hope. Let's look at some of what the book of Exodus has to offer.

"God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you." Exodus 3:14

"But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go." Exodus 4:22

"To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain." Exodus 24:17

"But Moses said, "O LORD, please send someone else to do it. Then the LORD's anger burned against Moses and he said, "What about your brother Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on the way to meet you, and his heart will be glad when she sees you….but take this staff in your hand so you can perform miraculous signs with it." Exodus 4:13-14a, 17

"Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?" then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when struck down the Egyptians.'" Then the people bowed down and worshipped. The Israelites did just what the LORD commanded Moses and Aaron." Exodus 12:24-28

"The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD." Exodus 19:8

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS: Exodus 20:1-17

“Worship the LORD your God, and his blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you, and none will miscarry or be barren in your land. I will give you a full life span. I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run.” Exodus 23:25-27

“So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.” Exodus 1:20-21

“God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.” Exodus 2:24-25

“The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them form the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey….” Exodus 3:7-8

“The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.” Exodus 14:14

“He said, “If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you.” Exodus 15:27

“Moses also said, “You will know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him…” Exodus 16:8

“The magicians said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God.” But Pharaoh’s heart was hard and he would not listen, just and the LORD had said.” Exodus 8:19

“Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead.” Exodus 12:30

“and they believed. And when they heard that the LORD was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped.” Exodus 4:31

“And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses and his servant.” Exodus 14:31

Book 3

The Book of Leviticus

Who wrote the book of Leviticus: Moses

When was it written: Between 1446 B.C. and 1406 B.C.

Why was it written:

- To instruct the people of Israel on what it means to be holy, how to live under the direction and leadership of God, how to live a physically and spiritually clean life, to establish laws of the land, a judicial system, and how to approach God for the purpose of repentance and seeking forgiveness for sins.

Key events in Leviticus:

- God speaks to Moses—giving him ALL the laws pertaining to sacrifices, offerings, treating and preventing sickness and disease, hygiene, sex, food, and legal matters.
- A more detailed description of the priesthood is given
- God strikes Nadab and Abihu dead for disobeying him

The Law of Moses was given to the Israelites for a number of reasons: spiritual guidance, procedures for worship and atonement for sins, personal hygiene, safety, societal law, judiciary procedures, and the general good of the people.

The Mosaic Law, which was given to Moses by God on Mt. Sinai, is still being adhered to by Jews (Israelites) today. The extent to which it is

followed, however, depends upon the sect of Judaism a person is associated with.

- Orthodox Jews follow the Law (called the Torah) to the extent that is humanly possible.
- Conservative Jews follow the Law very closely, but have allowed themselves to let go of those laws that no longer apply to modern society. For example, the laws pertaining to the uncleanliness of a woman following childbirth. A woman is not considered dirty or unclean.
- Reform Jews are much more lenient or liberal in their adherence to the Law. They follow the law with a more philosophical approach; meaning the Law is viewed more as a guide than a rule book. For example, pork and other forbidden foods in the Law are not off-limits with Reform Jews because they can now be eaten safely due to modern processing practices.

To help you understand just how thorough and detailed the Law is, we are going to look at some of the basic laws God gave his people in a number of different 'categories'. We will also look at why God gave the people the laws he gave them. In looking at the Law of Moses it is important to remember that everything God says and does is perfect and in accordance to his perfect plan.

Jesus himself was raised in a home that adhered strictly to Jewish Law. But at the onset of his ministry he made it clear that his purpose was to bring fulfillment to the Law. No longer would the system of sacrifices and burnt offerings be necessary. Jesus would be the ultimate sacrifice for our sins. So while Jesus' death on the cross took away the need for us to follow the Law of Moses, much of the law is repeated in the New Testament; making it relevant and valid for us today. As Jesus said, he didn't come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. Our purpose, therefore, is also to fulfill the Law of Moses by living obediently to the laws and teachings of Jesus.

God speaks to Moses—giving him ALL the laws pertaining to sacrifices, offerings, treating and preventing sickness and disease, hygiene, sex, food, and legal matters.

Rather than discuss the Law, let's look at portions of the Law. As you read through this partial list, think about the relevance and practicality of each one—the physical, moral, and social ramifications of adherence or disobedience to them.

The laws for sacrifice are given first in the book of Leviticus. This is only right since God expected and accepted nothing less than being number one in the lives of his people. The laws of sacrifice were meant to make the people contrite and penitent. The laws of sacrifice were also meant to humble them; causing them to realize how completely inadequate they were without God's divine protection and provision.

The five offerings of sacrifice were:

- Burnt offering: A voluntary act of worship, atonement for unintentional sin, and an expression of commitment and complete surrender to God. A bull, ram, or male dove with no defect were the acceptable burnt offering sacrifices.
- Grain offering: A voluntary act of worship recognizing God's goodness and provision. Grain, fine flour, olive oil, incense, baked breads or wafers were offered. No yeast or honey was allowed to be a part of anything baked that was given as a grain offering. Drink offerings of wine were also included in the grain offerings from time to time.
- Fellowship offering: A voluntary act of worship, thanksgiving, and fellowship. Any animal without defect from a heard or flock or a variety of breads was used in the fellowship offering.
- Sin offering: This was a mandatory offering that served as atonement for specific unintentional sin. It was an offering of confession, forgiveness, and cleansing from being defiled. The animal used for a sin offering sacrifice depended upon who you were. The priests were required to sacrifice a young bull. Leaders of families offered a male goat, the common person offered a female goat, and the poor offered either a dove or a tithe (tenth of a portion) of fine flour.

Sacrificial offerings had to be presented in a very precise and detailed manner. The offerings of sacrifice were also a means of provision of food to the priests and their families. For example, portions of the grain offerings

were burned on the altar as an offering to God and portions were given to the priests and their families to eat. This only makes sense due to the fact that the priests were not allowed to farm or make a living any other way, so this was God's way of providing for them—much like we support missionaries and pay our preachers today.

Clean and unclean foods were a priority with God when giving his people laws to live by. God commanded the people to eat only animals with split hooves AND that chewed their cuds and fish that had fins and scales. Animals the Israelites were allowed to eat include cows, sheep, and most fish. The Israelites could also eat insects with jointed legs that hopped—locusts, grasshoppers, and crickets, for example. The foods God allowed the Israelites to eat were *clean* foods. Anything else was considered *unclean*.

God wasn't 'playing favorites' when selecting the foods suitable for consumption. All of God's creation is precious to him and every single living thing serves useful purposes. The distinctions between clean and unclean animals were given for the safety of the people. Clean animals are animals that don't consume waste or carcasses—both of which harbor bacteria that would be dangerous for human consumption. To eat unclean animals would have been the same as eating meat infected with listeria, e-coli, or other life-threatening bacteria.

Laws about infectious diseases, childbirth, mold and mildew, and discharges from the body were instituted for the health and safety of everyone.

Infectious skin diseases such as ringworm, yeast infections, thrush, scabies, lice, and rashes from toxic plants were a problem for the people of Israel just like they are for us today. The people of Israel, however, didn't have antibiotics, anti-itch creams, or steroids like cortisone to help get rid of these things.

People dealing with any of these things were removed from the general population for a period of time. They also went through a ritual of bathing, shaving their heads (if appropriate), their clothes were washed or burned, and they had to present themselves to the priest for examination in order to be declared clean so they could return to their families.

Once a person was pronounced clean, they had to offer sacrifices to God as a final step to returning to their families.

In Leviticus 13:47 God instructs the people to isolate any garment showing signs of mold. Mold, which is a fungus, causes breathing problems, rashes, headaches, nausea, and sometimes leads to chronic and more serious health issues. Once the item had been isolated the priests were to clean it in a specific manner and set it aside to see if the mold would die. If so, the garment could be returned to the owner after a period of time that served to ensure the mold would not return. If, however, the mold could not be cleaned from the garment, the garment was burned.

The original Hebrew text uses the word 'leprosy' instead of mold. Leprosy, we know, is an incurable disease of the skin that was highly contagious and even more feared. So the fact that the original text refers to mold as leprous is quite telling of the severity of the problem.

Discharges from the body were also considered unclean. The discharges included blood following childbirth and a woman's monthly period, semen, puss from sores, and bleeding from cuts. The uncleanliness attached to these functions was a method God used to instill practices of good hygiene in his people than anything else. And in the instance of childbirth, the required time of removal from normal duties allowed the mother to heal and rest her body—something she would not have done or been allowed to do in Egypt.

Laws about sex are of great importance to God. God went into explicit detail concerning unlawful sexual activities. His attention to detail tells us two very important things:

1: God has clear and definite intentions for sex.

2: The people of Israel had been exposed to a sexually-depraved society in Egypt, and would be exposed to the same when they encountered the people of Canaan (Leviticus 18:3-5).

As you look at some of the laws regarding sex God gave the Israelites, it is obvious that God's intention is that sex be between a husband and wife

(male and female) only.

- Do not have sexual relations with your mother.
- Do not have sexual relations with your son's daughter.
- Do not have sexual relations with your father's sister.
- Do not have sexual relations with your brother's wife.
- Do not have sexual relations with both a woman and her daughter.
- Do not have sexual relations with your neighbor's wife.
- Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.
- Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it.
- A woman must not preset herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it; that is a perversion.

Societal laws are an absolute must in order for people to co-exist. As our creator, God knows this. As you read through some of the societal laws God gave the Israelites, consider how these same laws (or variances of them) keep our society in check still today:

- Do not steal.
- Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him.
- Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight.
- Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.
- Do not hate your brother in your heart.
- Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.
- Do not mate different kinds of animals.
- Do not practice divination or sorcery.
- Do not cut your bodies or put tattoo marks on yourselves.
- Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD your God.

Because God created the universe, he knows that if not treated with care and respect, it will not be able to 'live up to its potential'. In order to guard against this, he commanded that **every seventh year would be a Sabbath year.** During the Sabbath year the land was to lie dormant—no crops were to be planted or harvested, the vineyards were not to be pruned, and so forth. They were to use whatever the land produced on its own during that

year. They were to have faith that God would provide for their needs while giving their land the rest it needed.

In similar fashion, God established **the Year of Jubilee** for the Israelites. The Year of Jubilee also happened every fiftieth year. In that year all debts were cancelled, land was returned to its original owner, and slaves were returned to their families. This ensured that no Israelite would ever be forever enslaved or without their inheritance. The Year of Jubilee was also a Sabbath Year, so the people lived on what was naturally produced by the land.

If you will remember, just prior to leaving Egypt, God commanded the Israelites to prepare and eat the first Passover Meal in preparation for leaving and in commemoration and celebration of being spared from the death angel passing over the houses of the Egyptians. When God gave Moses the instructions for the Passover, he told Moses that the Passover was to be eaten and celebrated every year at that same time—and it is. Jews and Christians around the world celebrate the Exodus from Egypt this way even still today.

Feasts and holidays were also included in the giving of the Mosaic Law. In addition to the Passover, God also instituted other feasts and holidays to be celebrated by the Israelites each year.

- The feast of unleavened bread follows the celebration of the Passover. It is a seven day period in which no bread made with yeast is to be eaten, fire offerings were to be made to the LORD, and the people gathered for a time of worship.
- The Offering of Firstfruits was a feast to celebrate the harvest. The first grain harvested, along with a lamb and fine flour was to be offered to the LORD as a burnt offering.
- The Feast of Weeks followed fifty days after the Offering of Firstfruits. This feast included burnt offerings of rams or bulls as well as grain offerings. This feast also included a time of worship and feasting for the people.
- The Feast of Trumpets was celebrated on the first day of the seventh month. The people gathered together in worship, blasted trumpets, and presented an offering of fire to the LORD.

- The Day of Atonement took place on the tenth day of the seventh month. This was a day of fasting from everything. It was a day of complete denial of all food, water, and activity as a show of complete dependence on God.
- Shortly after the Day of Atonement came a seven day celebration called the Feast of the Tabernacles. Day one of the celebration included a worship service. Burnt offerings were made on all seven days, and the final day was a day of worship much like the first.

God is a loving and just (fair) God. In addition to the sacrifices God required for unintentional sins, there were also promises of reward for keeping the Law as well as punishments for breaking the law.

The most frequent punishments included being cut off from the people, cut off from God, or the death penalty. Restitution in the way of repayment in the value of what was taken was also required when appropriate.

As for the blessings or rewards for their obedience, God promised many things. Let's look at what he said in Leviticus 26:3-13 to see what those promises were…

"If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit. Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land. I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down and no one will make you afraid. I will remove savage beasts from the land, and the sword will not pass through your country. You will pursue your enemies, and they will fall by the sword before you. Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you. I will look on you with favor and make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and I will keep my covenant with you. You will still be eating last year's harvest when you will have to move it out to make room for the new. I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians; I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high."

Those are some amazing promise made by the amazing and almighty God. Isn't it a shame Israel was too stubborn and prideful to submit? Oh what a life they would have had if only….

A more detailed description of the priesthood is given

The eighth and ninth chapters of Leviticus outline details of the priests' duties, the shares of sacrifices they are entitled to, and the need for the priests to be completely devoted to the LORD and to honoring the Law.

The symbolism between the priesthood and their job as mediator between the people and God and that of Jesus as mediator between us and God is obvious for those who know who Jesus is and what he did while here on earth. Jesus is now our 'high priest'.

God strikes Nadab and Abihu dead for disobeying him

Shortly after the establishment of the Law and the priesthood, Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, who were also serving in the priesthood, disobeyed God. And as a result, God killed them. The reason God killed Nadab and Abihu was, in a word, DISOBEDIENCE.

Many people read the account of their death in Leviticus 10 and wonder why God reacted so severely. It was just fire with incense. Right? No, not right.

In the Hebrew text the 'unauthorized fire' is 'strange fire'; meaning it was not offered at the request or command of God. It was not part of any offering God had instituted and was not offered in the way God had commanded the priests to take this sort of action. In breaking so many of the rules God had set into place, Nadab and Abihu demonstrated a severe lack of respect and disregard for God and for the position of leadership they had been placed in.

God could not tolerate their lack of obedience because they were to set the example for everyone else. If God allowed these two to be so blatantly disobedient, the rest of Israel would feel free to bend whatever rules they wanted to bend…or break. And as we know from prior incidents (the

golden calf) and many more to come, the Israelites did not need any encouragement to disobey God. So in some ways, God made an example out of these two wayward priests. The deaths of Nadab and Abihu were God's way of reiterating his holiness and his insistence on complete obedience and faithfulness to him.

The final chapter of Leviticus is subtitled "Redeeming what is the LORD's" in Bibles that have subtitles within each book. This final section of the Law reveals what was to be done when they made commitments to God to dedicate themselves or their children to God or dedicate extra crops or livestock as offerings of thanksgiving, God declares that the monetary value he places on these things must be given as an offering.

This is worth noting because in conclusion to the Law, God gives the people one final reminder that they are his people and all that they have is from him.

Book 4

The Book of Numbers

Who wrote the book of Numbers: Moses

When was it written: Between 1446 B.C. and 1406 B.C.

Numbers also records the events that took place during the Israelite's journey from Mt. Sinai through Moab to the border of Canaan (the Promised Land). The incidents recorded in the book of Numbers gives undeniable proof of God's love, care, and forgiveness in times of disobedience.

Key events in Numbers:

- Census
- Repetition of the explanation for celebrating the Passover, the dedication of the Tabernacle, and the selection of Aaron's family for the priesthood
- Sending the twelve spies to Canaan
- God punishes the people for their rebellion by extending their journey. The trip to Canaan shouldn't have taken more than a few months, but instead of their disobedience, it took 40 years.
- God kills Korah, Dathan, and Abiram for disobeying
- Water from a rock
- The Israelites go to war
- Balaam's donkey talks
- Israel intermingles with Moab; causing God to become angry and punish some by death
- A second census is taken

- A ‘road map’ of the Israelites’ journey from Egypt to Canaan
- Joshua is chosen to replace Moses as the leader of Israel when they enter Canaan

The accounts found throughout the book of Numbers are not only geographical in nature. The accounts of Israelite history are also spiritual and physical in nature.

As you look at some of the main events recorded in the book of Numbers you will not be able to ignore the following:

> God is almighty and holy God has a sense of creativity like none other God accepts nothing less than our best God accepts nothing less than faithful obedience and devotion God’s way is always best

Census

The first four chapters are a census of the Israelite people. The people were counted by tribes (sons of Jacob/Israel). But in addition the actual count, God assigned each tribe certain jobs and responsibilities.

Repetition of the explanation for celebrating the Passover, the dedication of the Tabernacle, and the selection of Aaron’s family for the priesthood

Following the census the book of Numbers we are reminded of the importance of the Passover and the fact that God sets the tribe of Levi apart for the priesthood of Israel. Aaron, who was from the tribe of Levi, was, as we already know, the first high priest and his sons, the first priests.

As you also learned in the previous chapter on the book of Leviticus, Nadab and Abihu, Aaron’s oldest sons, had to be replaced early-on by their younger brothers, Eleazar and Ithamar. The two were replaced after they died as a result of their disrespect for their honorable position and their disobedience toward God in serving in their duties.

We are also reminded of and given more details on the subject of dedicating oneself to God by taking a vow of separation. The vow of separation was a

time in which the man or woman removed themselves from all work and responsibilities for the purpose of prayer, meditation, worship, and ministering to those in need. They were dedicating themselves to temporary ministry—much like we do when we go on short-term mission trips.

God gave the name of "Nazirite" to the man or woman who made such a commitment. These people were to never cut their hair, never eat or drink anything made from grapes, and never drink anything fermented. The Nazirite could not touch anything dead or be around a dead body—even if his or her family members died. The period of separation was usually not more than sixty days long. But when the period of separation was over, the Nazirite went through a ritual of presentation and sacrifices with the priests to ceremonially and officially end their time of separate or dedicated service.

The exception to the Nazirite vow being for only a few days was Samson, who was to be set apart for life. But just like in so many other instances, God has reasons for choosing the people he chooses to do amazing work for his kingdom here on earth.

Sending the twelve spies to Canaan

In the tenth chapter of Numbers, beginning in verse eleven, we learn that the Israelites are finally going to leave Sinai. After spending eleven months and five days there, God led the people by the cloud from Sinai to the Desert of Paran.

Once again we see just how much God cares about even the smallest details of our lives. We see this in the fact that God had a plan for the trip—not only that they were to leave, but how they were to leave. God gave instructions for the order of travel by tribe and the responsibilities of each group during the trip.

One has to wonder how the Israelites felt about leaving. Moses had been promising them for some time that the place they were going was a place with rich, fertile land and abundant resources. In other words, it was everything Sinai wasn't. Nevertheless, they had undoubtedly gotten

comfortable (as comfortable as possible, that is). They had a routine and they were safe.

The length of time the Israelites spent near Mt. Sinai was time God intended for solidifying the Israelites into a unified people group—unified with him through the Law. It was the time in which God established a chain of command and authority, established guidelines and expectations for worship, and it was a time meant to establish a deeply-rooted faith into the hearts and minds of the people he cherished and favored above all others.

Sadly, God's intentions and desires for his chosen people were not embraced by the Israelites. Instead, they continued to whine and complain about their living conditions and their lack of food.

Their penchant for whining and complaining is interesting when you stop and think about it. Here they are, out from under the cruel and relentless tyranny of their Egyptian masters for less than two weeks when they started complaining the first time (at the Red Sea). From there things only got worse. You would think the fact that they were free would have been reason enough to be happy, but these people were free AND experiencing the miraculous power of God first-hand time and time again and it still wasn't enough.

But then again, is it really so interesting or unusual? Aren't we free to live an abundant life? Aren't we free AND living with the option of experiencing the gift of salvation and the power of God in our lives? Yet for all of that we still whine and complain that it isn't enough.

God's patience is far greater than ours, but his patience is not without discipline. We see one example of this in Numbers chapter 11. The people's complaint this time was the lack of variety in their diet. They were already tired of manna being their primary source of food. They wanted meat. God knew the health hazards associated with having raw meat and animal waste around. But even more than that, God was angry with the Israelites' lack of gratitude and appreciation for what was being given to them. The manna was tasty, filling, and lacking in nothing from a nutritional standpoint.

Nevertheless God gave them what they asked for, but not without a dose of discipline to go along with it. God sent so many quail to fall all around the place where they were camped. The Bible tells us they were piled three feet deep! God knew there was no way they could consume or preserve that much meat. So when the greediest among them kept eating even after the meat had spoiled in the hot sun, they got food poisoning and died. Those that died were buried there and then the Israelites moved on.

God punishes the people for their rebellion by extending their journey. The trip to Canaan shouldn't have taken more than a few months, but instead of their disobedience, it took 40 years.

When the Israelites arrived at the Desert of Paran they set up their camp as directed by God through Moses. Shortly after their arrival God instructed Moses to select twelve men (one from every tribe) to sneak into the land of Canaan. Their job was to spend forty days scouting things out. Among the twelve were Joshua and Caleb.

At the end of the forty days the spies came back to Moses and the other Israelites to report on what they had learned. Ten of the spies reported nothing but bad news: the people were tall and fierce-looking. They (the Israelites) didn't stand a chance against them. The crops were good, and it would be a great place to live, but it couldn't happen, so they shouldn't waste their time or the lives of innocent people, trying to take it over.

The people listened to the ten naysayers and once again started grumbling and complaining about their circumstances—how they had left Egypt for nothing. Only Joshua and Caleb looked at the land through eyes of faith and hope—the way God wanted them to.

Joshua and Caleb tried to convince the people that God was indeed with them and would not let them down—that the land was theirs for the taking if they would only have faith. They were unable to convince the others. In fact, the people wanted to stone Joshua and Caleb to silence their 'foolish talk'.

Moses intervened and was able to save their lives, but he also found himself once again in the position of soothing God's intense anger against the

Israelites and intervening on their behalf.

God's anger was so great that he once more wanted to destroy them all—all except Moses and his family, through which God said he would 'build' a new nation. Moses didn't hesitate to tell God he did not think this was the way to go. He countered with the 'argument' that the Egyptians would say God wasn't as powerful and mighty as he claimed to be. Otherwise he would have been able to deliver the Israelites into Canaan like he said he would.

Before we look at God's response, let's take a minute to think about Moses and how he handled this situation. God was essentially handing Moses the opportunity of a lifetime—to be the ancestral father of an entire nation. But Moses didn't take it. He could have, but he didn't. Instead, he humbly reminded God of the promise God had already made to Abraham. Moses truly was a humble man.

Okay, now let's look at God's handling of the Israelites' faithless behavior. As a result of their lack of faith, God said that none of the adults who left Egypt would be allowed to enter Canaan—none but Joshua and Caleb (and at that point, Moses and Aaron, too). All the rest would die before they crossed the Jordan River into the land he had promised Abraham would be theirs forever.

In order to make that promise come to pass, God said he would make them wander the desert for forty years—one year for each day the naysaying spies had spent scouting out the land. During those forty years the children would grow and mature; providing an army of men who would be willing and able to fight the battles that would need to be fought in order to conquer the land of Canaan for their own.

God kills Korah, Dathan, and Abiram for disobeying

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the book of Numbers is filled with historical accounts of Israel's rebellion and faithless disobedience. When we look at it in print it is easy for us to shake our heads and ask why they were so stubborn and prideful. Why didn't they learn? What would it take for them to realize what they had with God and embrace it with thanksgiving?

This is especially true when we read about the deaths of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. These three men were members of the tribe of Levi—part of the priesthood. But even that was not good enough for them. They wanted more authority and challenged Moses' authority in their quest to get it.

To show his anger toward the men and to warn everyone else against rising up against Moses, God opened the ground and swallowed the three men, their families, and their tents and belongings. And then the ground closed over them, burying them alive (Numbers 16).

You would think this would be enough to 'put the fear of God' into the Israelites. But it wasn't. Many of them blamed Moses and Aaron for this frightful event; making God so angry that he sent a plague on the people and in just a few hours, we read that 14,700 people died before God relented.

Water from a rock

God did not allow the people to stay along the borders of Canaan for long because of their disobedience. Their journey through the desert (which was essentially a big circle) wasn't easy. They often found themselves in need of water. This was the case when they arrived at the Desert of Zin and camped at Kadesh.

Moses and Aaron went to God asking for water for the people. God told Moses to take his staff and together with Aaron, *speak* to a certain rock in the presence of the Israelites. God told them that when Moses spoke to the rock, water would pour out of it for the people to drink.

Moses and Aaron went to the rock as they were told. When everyone was gathered around them, however, their negativity got the best of Moses. So instead of speaking to the rock, Moses raised his arm reprimanded the people, and struck the rock with his staff twice.

Water poured out just as God promised it would, but what happened next is undoubtedly one of the most difficult parts of scripture to read and understand….

"But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."

Yes, you've read correctly—God was not going to allow Aaron and Moses to enter the Promised Land. After seeing and conversing with God face to face, Moses would not be allowed to go in. After putting up with near-constant whining and complaining (and 38 more years of it to go), Moses would not be allowed to enter the land flowing with milk and honey. One mistake. One indiscretion and God took from Moses the reward for his entire mission.

It doesn't seem fair, does it? At the very least it seems too harsh, doesn't it? Doesn't Moses deserve a 'pass'? No, from a human perspective it doesn't

seem fair. Yes, from a human perspective it does seem a bit harsh. But no, Moses doesn't *deserve* a 'pass'. None of us does. None of us *deserves* anything good from God.

In spite of the fact that no one other than God, Moses, and Aaron knew Moses had disobeyed God, God couldn't let it go. God had to be able to depend on Moses' complete obedience. Moses could not be allowed to see himself as anything other than God's instrument and beloved child—something Moses momentarily lost sight of when he said, "…must we bring you water out of this rock?".

In thinking about Moses and the price he paid for his act of disobedience, it should make us extremely and humbly grateful for the gift of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross for our sins. It was the sacrifice that made restitution for our sins and allows us to seek forgiveness in repentance and the hope of the eternal promised land of heaven.

After leaving Kadesh the Israelites traveled to Mt. Hor. It was at Mt. Hor that Aaron died and the entire Israelite nation mourned his death for thirty days.

The Israelites go to war

After Aaron's death the Israelites entered into a period of being at war. As they traveled toward their final destination they came into contact with Canaanites, Moabites, and Amorites. God was with them each and every time—giving Israel victory over their opponents.

After the defeat of King Og in Bashan, the Israelites took possession of the land and settled there for a while. When they left Bashan the Israelites camped in the plains of Moab along the Jordan River across from Jericho—near the place they would later camp while preparing to take the city of Jericho.

It was during this time that one of the most amazing (and fun) accounts in history….

Balaam's donkey talks

Balak, who was the king of Moab at the time, was aware of the success the Israelites had wherever they went. He was terrified of what they would do when they reached his territory. In an attempt to stop the Israelites, Balak sent for a man named Balaam, who was obviously a soothsayer or mystic. They sent for him in hopes of getting him to put a curse on the Israelites.

The account of Balaam is recorded in Numbers 22 and in a nutshell is this:

Balaam refused to go with Balak's men unless God wanted him to go. God told Balaam to go, but he was not to do or say anything God didn't instruct him to do or say. Balaam's heart wasn't in the right place, though. As he set off to meet with Balak, God knew Balaam's thoughts were not what they should be, so God sent an angel to block the path so Balaam's donkey could not pass. Balaam gets the donkey to go around the angel, only to have his way blocked again. When the donkey crushes Balaam's foot against a stone wall of a vineyard along the side of the road while trying to get around the angel (which Balaam couldn't see), Balaam gets angry and begins to beat the donkey.

Now we get to the amazing part of this event—God allows the donkey to speak. Audible words just like you and me. The donkey reminds Balaam that he has been a faithful donkey and that his actions could not be helped because there was an angel blocking his way. God then 'opens' Balaam's eyes; allowing him to see the angel, too.

We have no reason to believe Balaam was a follower of God, but in this instance he listened and obeyed. He did not curse the Israelites moved forward into Moab.

Israel intermingles with Moab; causing God to become angry and punish some by death

Moving deeper into Moab was the beginning of the end for the Israelites. It was an end that wouldn't come for 528 and 664 years (the number of years from the exodus from Egypt and the fall of Israel to the Assyrians and the fall of Judah to the Babylonians). But it was, nonetheless, the beginning of the end because it was during this time that the Israelites rejected God as the one true God.

The Israelites rejected God's command to stay away from the Moabites. Instead, the men indulged in sexually immoral acts with the Moabite women and the women of Israel with the men of Moab. These relationships led to idol worship with the Moabites.

In the twenty-fifth chapter of Numbers we read once again that God took severe measures against Israel to punish them for their disobedience and rejection of his being. Once again we see the Israelites falling to the sins of arrogant pride and a severe lack of faith.

More details of battles and a ‘road map’ of the Israelites’ journey from Egypt to Canaan

Following the telling of God’s anger with Israel because of their idol worship, we are given a road map of sorts outlining the forty year journey of the Israelites that would finally take them to the entrance into the Promised Land. We are also given the details of additional battles fought and won by the Israelites along the way and reminders to the people of the feasts and holidays God had put into place when he originally gave Moses the Law to give to the people.

Another census is also taken of the people.

Joshua is chosen to replace Moses as the leader of Israel when they enter Canaan

As the book of Numbers comes to an end we learn that God has chosen Joshua to succeed Moses as the leader of Israel. Joshua will be the one to lead Israel across the Jordan and into the Promised Land of Canaan.

In addition to appointing Joshua as Moses' successor, God also instructs Moses in how to divide the spoils of war among the twelve tribes, lays out the boundaries of Canaan, designates towns that will belong to the Levites for carrying out their priestly duties, and establishes cities of refuge for the Israelites. The cities of refuge (six in all) were strategically placed throughout Canaan and were cities in which anyone who committed a crime could go to and live safely until he could be stand trial for his crime.

The journey was almost over.

Key verses in Numbers:

Every book of the Bible provides us with words of wisdom, instruction, comfort, encouragement, admonishment, warning, and promise, and hope. Let's look at some of what the book of Numbers has to offer.

"The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." Numbers 14:18

"How can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the LORD has not denounced?" Numbers 23:8

"Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth." Numbers 12:3

Book 5

The Book of Deuteronomy

Who wrote the book of Deuteronomy: Moses

When was it written: Between 1446 B.C. and 1406 B.C.

Why was it written:

- Reminds the Israelites of God's goodness
- Reminds the Israelites of the laws God gave them
- Reminds the Israelites of God's love for them and his boundless grace and mercy
- Prepares Israel for crossing over the Jordan into the Promised Land
- Prepares the people for Joshua assuming the role of leader of all Israel

The book of Deuteronomy is one of the most beautifully written books in the Bible. The book of Deuteronomy is basically a recap of Leviticus and Numbers, but the thing that sets Deuteronomy apart from its predecessors is the emotion and heart that practically jumps off the page and into *your* heart.

Deuteronomy is the final book of the Bible written by Moses. It is his last work—written shortly before he died. In reading Moses' words you can feel the intensity of Moses' desire to leave the people he had invested *so very much* of himself in on solid spiritual ground. He knew how quick they were to turn their backs on God. They had done so time and time again and he knew they would do it again. But Moses also knew how very much God loved them and how very much he wanted them to be his wholly devoted people. So as his final act as their leader, Moses penned this book;

reminding them of whose they were and begging them to never forget all God had done for them and wanted to do for them in the future.

- A recount of the battles Israel fought on their way to the Promised Land
- A reminder that Moses would not be allowed to cross over into Canaan
- Moses reminds the people of the Ten Commandments and incidents of their disobedience
- A re-reading of the Law by Moses
- Moses' farewell speech
- Moses' blessing to the Israelites
- The death of Moses

To this point we have approached our overview of the Bible by looking at 'key events' in order to give you a solid historical foundation to build on. From this point on, however, we will be looking at each book more from the perspective of the message it contains. God' message to us. It is a message conveying God's commands, expectations, and desires for us—his people. It is a message that reminds us of his supremacy, holiness, and power. It is a message of prophecy and the fulfillment of prophecy. It is *the* message of the Gospel of salvation through Jesus, the doctrine and purpose of the Church, a warning against living apart from God, and the hope of eternity in heaven for all who accept Jesus as LORD.

Moses wrote Deuteronomy after the Israelites left Horeb. According to the first chapter of Deuteronomy the Israelites were spread out over a larger area of land than they had been since the Exodus. They were no longer living as close together—or as close as several-hundred thousand people can. They were living in the mountains, the Negev (which is the southern desert region of what is now the country of Israel), and along the coast of Canaan and Lebanon as far as the Euphrates River.

The first few two and a half chapters are a recap of the previous months—their defeat of the Amorite kings and the division of the land among *some* of the tribes of Israel. This land was also to serve as a waiting or holding area for the women, children, and livestock while the Israelites took over the land of Canaan in the not-so-distant future.

Near the end of the third chapter, however, Moses stops to share a bit of his heart in regards to not being allowed to enter the Promised Land. We read in 3:23-28 that Moses pleaded with God to let him enter the land if only just to see it—to see the place he had given so much of himself to bring a bunch of ungrateful, whiny people to.

But God says no. In fact, he essentially tells Moses to stop bugging him about it—that 'no' means no. God does, however, consent to let Moses see the land without going in. He instructs Moses to go to the top of Mount Pisgah and look in all directions in order to see the land of Canaan.

This is an interesting part of the text for two reasons:

1: We see once again that Moses wasn't afraid to dispute God's decision. He had done so numerous times, beginning at the burning bush when he tried to convince God he wasn't the right man for the job. Moses had also argued on behalf of the Israelites on more than one occasion when God wanted to wipe them out.

2: God is less willing to give in to Moses for *Moses'* sake than he is for the sake of the Israelites.

In thinking about God's refusal to change his mind, our first thoughts generally tend to go toward the 'side' of God being too harsh. Why forgive the Israelites so many times but not Moses? This mindset, however, is incorrect.

God forgave Moses, but forgiveness isn't a pass to get what you want. Moses still had to be disciplined for his sin—just as the Israelites were disciplined for theirs.

As for why God was unwilling to listen to Moses' request to at least be able to "...go over and see it" (Deut. 3:25), yet was willing to listen to Moses on behalf of the Israelites, Luke 12:48 provides the most reasonable answer: "...From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." Ultimately, however, we need to understand that God has the power and authority to do as he sees fit and it is our responsibility as his children to

respect his demands and his desires and to obey in faith and because of love.

After sharing this part of his heart with us, Moses continues to remind the Israelites (and us) what the Law is about—that it is about developing and maintaining an intimate relationship with God our Creator and Redeemer. But rather than just reciting the Law, Moses expounds on it by telling the people why and how they should obey as well as the blessings and consequences of doing (or not doing) so.

Obedience commanded

Moses instructs the people to obey God’s laws so they can enjoy peace, prosperity, and protection that results from doing so.

Idolatry forbidden

At this point Israel has already defiled itself by adopting the idols of the Amorites as their gods along with worshipping God. Moses warns the people to get back on track. His warnings are severe, but they are out of genuine concern for the people. They are also prophetic.

We see Moses' concern for the people in verses twenty through twenty-four when he reminds them that God's jealousy is all-consuming. He reminds them of some of the disciplines they have already endured as a result of being unfaithful. He even reminds them of the fact that God is disciplining him (Moses) "…because of you….".

Moses' prophetic statements are found in verses twenty-five through thirty-one. He warns them that when they fail to teach their children to faithfully adhere to the Law, God will scatter them to the far ends of the earth and take away their status as God's chosen people. Moses' prophecy is immediately followed by the promise of redemption upon repentance.

From generation to generation

The passing down of the Law from generation to generation is of great importance throughout the book of Deuteronomy. It begins in chapter six, where Moses shares God's command to teach their children the Law. God commands the Israelites to teach their children at home, when they are walking, when they are sitting, and through example.

Fear the LORD

Chapters six through thirteen are warnings against taking God for granted—for not giving him the reverence and awe he demands and is due. Warnings against allowing anything to assume a place of greater importance in their lives (and ours) are also given, as is the warning to fear God's anger.

God's anger is an aspect of his character that often bothers people. How can God be both loving and angry, they want to know. The answer is this: God's anger is *because* of his love for us. God knows what awaits us in our disobedience and what sin brings to our lives, so he becomes angry when we align ourselves with these things. Yes, that anger often results in discipline, but shouldn't it? Shouldn't disobedience result in disciplinary action?

Personal and social responsibilities

Clean and unclean foods, tithing, debt management, the judicial system, the feasts and holidays to be observed, rules of warfare, the handling of family relationships…all of these were covered under the Law and Moses took the time to remind the people of how they were to conduct themselves.

Exclusivity

Chapter twenty-three of the book of Deuteronomy addresses another issue of God's character that some like to take issue with. It is the 'issue' of exclusivity. The first part of the chapter clearly states that there are some people God will not allow into 'the assembly'; meaning they are not welcome into the nation (people group) of Israel. That's right—not welcome.

The reason is both simple and sound. Purity. God was having enough trouble keeping the Israelites on track. *Allowing* them to add to the problem by inviting idol worship into their presence went against everything God is. God cannot be in the presence of sin, so to allow them to bring these practices into the Tabernacle would have completely displaced God from his own house of worship. This could not be. In putting laws of exclusivity into place God was protecting his people.

These laws were also meant as a warning for us today—a warning that has gone unheeded. The results of ignoring God's warnings to not add or subtract from worshipping him and him only can be seen in our society and sadly in many of our churches today. And as a result, we are a society causing considerable displeasure, sadness, and anger in God.

Curses and blessings

According to God's instructions, Moses and the Levites (priestly tribe) warn the Israelites against breaking God's laws by telling they will be cursed by God if they break some specific laws. The laws that come with curses include:

- Dishonoring your parents
- Moving a neighbor's boundary stone
- Having sex with an animal
- Having sex with family members other than your wife
- Murder
- Cheating widows, orphans, and the homeless

In contrast to curses, God also promises blessings galore for faithful obedience. Some of the blessings God instructs Moses and the Levites to announce to the people include:

- Productive crops
- Success and victory over their enemies
- Healthy babies
- Prosperity in all things

A new leader for the people

After reminding the Israelites of God's love and commitment to them and their responsibility to honor that commitment with faithful obedience, Moses announces to all Israel that Joshua would be the one to lead them across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land.

Moses was 120 years olds at this point. His age, along with the fact that God would not permit him to enter the land, were the reasons he gave the people for the change in leadership. In turning over the role of leadership to Joshua, Moses was alerting the people that the time for entering into the Promised Land was drawing near. A new leader for a new life. Moses' humility, patience, and dauntless perseverance were exactly the qualities needed to get the people to this point. But going into the Promised Land was going to require a leader with the stamina, a fighting spirit teamed with the wisdom that comes only from putting God first, and ability to keep everyone focused on the task at hand. And God knew Joshua was the man for the job.

Moses’ farewell address

Moses’ final days were drawing near. God told him his death was imminent, but not before Moses performed a few final tasks as the leader of Israel.

- Moses gave the written Law to the priests and directed them to read the entire Law to an assembly of all of Israel every seven years during the Feast of Tabernacles.
- Moses had a final conversation with God regarding the future of Israel. God told Moses they would reject him (God) and that his patience would come to an end—that the Israelites would be destroyed.
- Moses wrote a ‘song’ telling the story of his life and read it to the entire assembly of the Israelites.
- Moses blesses the people tribe by tribe.
- Moses dies and is buried by God himself. No one knows where Moses is buried, most likely because God did not want Moses’ grave to become a shrine. When Moses died the Bible states that in spite of his age his strength and eyesight were those of a young man. The Bible also states that there was never a man like Moses prior to his birth, nor one like him since.

Key verses in Deuteronomy

Every book of the Bible provides us with words of wisdom, instruction, comfort, encouragement, admonishment, warning, and promise, and hope. Let's look at some of what the book of Deuteronomy has to offer.

"Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you." Deuteronomy 4:2

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about hem when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates." Deuteronomy 6:4-9

"Now what I am command you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach." Deuteronomy 30:11

"Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you—they are your life." Deuteronomy 32:46-47a

"If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth." Deuteronomy 28:1

"The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged." Deuteronomy 31:8

"You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other." Deuteronomy 4:35

“Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; for the LORD your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land.” Deuteronomy 6:14-15

“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.” Deuteronomy 29:29

“Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.” Deuteronomy 4:9

“You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Hereby out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below.” Deuteronomy 4:15-18

Book 6

The Book of Joshua

Who wrote the book of Joshua: Joshua (except the last portion, which was written by Elazar?)

When was it written: Sometime before 1,000 B.C.

Why was it written?

• To provide us with the historical account of Israel's entry into the Promised Land • To provide proof and reminders of God's miraculous power, his love for his people, and the reliability of his promises

The book of Joshua has three main messages: **God will never leave or forsake those who are faithful to him, nothing or no one can thwart God's plans, and God always makes good on his promises.** The delivery of these messages is loud and clear; being heard through God's words to Joshua (and others), through God's miracles, and through the actions of those who live faithful lives.

Be strong and courageous

After Moses died and the people had mourned him for thirty days, God spoke to Joshua, telling him to get ready—to get the people ready—because they were going to cross the Jordan River into the land of Canaan. God's words to Joshua were this: "…I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses." (Joshua 1:4)

God went on to tell Joshua that he would be with him just as he was with Moses—to be strong and courageous. God's assurances and reassurances to Joshua were many. 'Be strong and courageous…be strong and very courageous' are words he repeats several times.

Joshua, like Moses, had tremendous faith in the LORD and he was indeed very strong, courageous, and obedient.

An unlikely assistant

Following God and Joshua's conversation about entering the Promised Land, Joshua sent two spies into the land—telling them to pay special attention to the city of Jericho, because that is where they would first enter their new homeland.

It shouldn't come as any surprise that Joshua sent only two spies. If you will remember, he was one of twelve sent by Moses, but one of only two who reported favorably and with an attitude of faith, that they could indeed take their enemies and conquer the land God had promised to them.

Moses sent twelve—one for each tribe because that is what God had commanded him to do. This gave each tribe 'equal say' (even though God knew what that 'say' would be). But in sending only two, Joshua knew he would get a true and fair assessment of the situation by men who trusted in God's promise to give them the land. Joshua was also dealing with a much shorter time frame because God had told Joshua they had only three days left before crossing the river to begin the siege.

The spies Joshua sent went to Jericho and went to the house of a prostitute named Rahab. Rahab's house was close to one of the city's walls, making it an excellent hiding place/quick getaway.

Rahab, like so many others, knew of the Israelites and the divine protection and provision they enjoyed through the power of God. But unlike so many others, because of what she heard and saw, Rahab believed in God and recognized him as the one true God. So when the spies arrived at her doorstep, Rahab readily took them in and hid them from her own people.

In return for Rahab's kindness the spies promised to spare the lives of Rahab and her family—as long as she hung a scarlet cord in the window of the house as a sign for the Israelites to know not to kill her and her family.

Both Rahab and the Israelites did as they said they would and Rahab and her family were spared when the Israelites took the city of Jericho. The

experience obviously changed Rahab's life because she married a descendant of Judah, the oldest son of Jacob (Israel). Rahab's husband was Salmon and they had a son they named Boaz. Boaz, as you will remember/learn, that married Ruth, the widowed daughter in-law of Naomi. Ruth and Boaz's great-grandson was King David, and many generations later, our Savior, Jesus.

The lesson to be learned and held deep in our hearts, souls, and minds, in the unlikely assistance from the prostitute Rahab is this: God can and does use whoever he wants and whatever situation he chooses to bring his plan into being. No one is beyond God's saving grace—no matter who you are or where you've been in life there is a path that leads to Gods if you choose to take it.

The walls fall down

After the spies returned from Jericho Joshua began preparing the people to cross the Jordan River in order to take the city of Jericho as their own. The account of crossing the river in Joshua, chapters three and four is filled with examples of God's divine nature—proof once more that God can and will do anything necessary for those who put their faith in him and to bring his plans to fruition.

After crossing the Jordan River the Israelite army of 40,000 men celebrated the Passover Feast and on that night the manna stopped coming. Never again would the Israelites eat the manna they had eaten for forty years.

The sixth chapter of Joshua provides the details of bringing down the walls of Jericho. Again, the methods God used were extraordinary and miraculous. In resorting to such amazing tactics, God:

- Removes any cause for doubt from the people of Canaan that he (God) is the one true God
- Reminds the people of Israel that they are nothing without him (God) and that there is nothing they cannot accomplish when they live within the perimeters of the Law he gave them

The walls of Jericho fell under Joshua's leadership, the Israelites took the city; killing everyone but Rahab and her family.

Conquering and dividing the land

Following the victory at Jericho, the Israelites continued taking over the entire land of Canaan. God was with them in every battle; giving them victory over their enemies just as he promised.

All but the final chapter of the book of Joshua is devoted to explaining how Joshua, according to God's instructions, divided the land between the twelve tribes of Israel.

Joshua’s farewell to the people

Joshua’s life was a living, breathing example of what it looks like to be a true and faithful servant of God. He listened and obeyed. He put aside his human doubts and fears in order to allow God to work in and through him. He faithfully and diligently led the Israelites into battle time and time again.

Once the land had been conquered and each tribe had settled into the areas assigned to them, Joshua called the people together for one last assembly with them. In his ‘farewell address’ to the people he instructed them to throw away all foreign gods and yield their hearts wholly and solely to God. And to this, the people replied that they would serve God and only God.

Joshua died at the age of 110 and was buried in the land given to his people by God. No new leader had been appointed; leaving the duties of leadership to the priests and elders of the tribes. During their lifetimes the people of Israel followed God faithfully; remembering all he had done for them in bringing them to the Promised Land of Canaan.

Key verses in Joshua

Every book of the Bible provides us with words of wisdom, instruction, comfort, encouragement, admonishment, warning, and promise, and hope. Let's look at some of what the book of Joshua has to offer.

"Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go." Joshua 1:6-7

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go." Joshua 1:9

"Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful." Joshua 1:8

"Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you." Joshua 3:5

"Far be it from us to rebel against the LORD and turn away from him today by building an altar for burnt offerings, g rain offerings, and sacrifices, other than the altar of the LORD our God that stands before his tabernacle." Joshua 22:29

"If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you." Joshua 24:20

"And the people said to Joshua, "We will serve the LORD our God and obey him."" Joshua 24:24

"So be very careful to love the LORD your God." Joshua 23:12

“But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day that you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” Joshua 24:15

“Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods!”” Joshua 24:16

Book 7

The Book of Judges

Who wrote the book of Judges: It is believed that Samuel wrote the book of Judges

When was it written: Sometime after 1,000 B.C.?

Why was it written: To give an historical account of the years following Israel's entrance into Canaan to the time of the first anointed king of Israel? Judges gives several accounts of s entrance into Canaan to the time of the first anointed king of Israel.

Judges also tells of Israel's disobedience, oppression at the hands of their enemies, their crying out to God for help, and his discipline and rescue.

From a 'message perspective' the book of Judges is a message of salvation because of God's love, mercy, and grace. Containing the elements of sin, confession, and repentance, the book of Judges could be our story.

Following Joshua's death, the Israelites asked God who they were supposed to look to for leadership. This was a people who had known only two leaders in their lifetime—Moses and Joshua. They had the priesthood and the elders of each tribe to guide them through many of the decisions and circumstances they faced, but they honestly didn't know how to function without an intercessor between them and God.

God answered the Israelites by saying the tribe of Judah would take the role of leadership in regards to fighting the battles they still had to fight.

Times of war and peace

While God had given the Israelites victory over their enemies and the Israelites had established the areas of land that they were to call ‘home’, there was still a lot of land to conquer and battles to fight and win. Think about it—when have you known anyone to go down without a fight? The Canaanites certainly didn’t. They were at war against the Israelites for years and years following the fall of the walls of Jericho and the battles immediately following.

Disobedience equals defeat

After Joshua and the rest of that generation were gone, the next generation paid no attention to God and cared nothing about what he had done for their people. Actually, the scripture tells us that they didn't *know* about God and what he had done (Judges 2:10-11). And to that one has to ask why? Why didn't they know?

The Israelites disobeyed God in a number of ways. They worshipped idols, they rejected the Law; following the laws and rituals of their enemies—enemies they married and added to their families and took as slaves.

As a result of their disobedience God allowed their enemies to defeat and plunder the Israelites. The scriptures tell us in Judges 2:15 that the hand of the LORD was against them instead of with them.

God, however, would not and could not break his promise to Abraham to make Israel into a great nation. So rather than allow the Israelites to be completely destroyed, he provided them with judges. The judges were predominantly men who led Israel in similar fashion to Moses and Joshua.

Most of the time the Israelites turned back to God when a new judge was provided to them, but time and time again they returned to their sinful ways of idol worship and depravity. Many of the things Israel did in the name of worship to other gods included human sacrifice and horrific sexual sins. The phrases, "Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD…" and "But when they cried out to the LORD…" are repeated over and over again throughout the book of Judges.

The fact that God is both a firm disciplinarian and merciful forgiver towards Israel should come as no surprise, though, because he does the very same for us each and every day of our lives.

A unique and prophetic purpose

By now you should have no doubts that God has a plan and a purpose for everything he does and that his plan and purpose will always win out. But there is one passage in the book of Judges that is of special importance and relevancy regarding this truth. It is found in Judges 3:1-3:

These are the nations the LORD left to test all those Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan. (He did this only to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience): the five rulers of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonia's, and the Hives living in the Lebanon Mountains from Mount Baal Hermon to Lebo Hamah.

This passage answers several questions people often ask about God's plan for life here on earth as well as this period of time in our history. It tells us:

- Several years had passed since Joshua had died (backing up the claim in Judges 2:10 that no one who fought in the battle for Jericho and those soon after that was still alive).
- Israel's disobedience would continue; making it necessary for them to defend themselves.
- God would not overlook Israel's disobedience, but would instead discipline them by not allowing them to enjoy the peace, protection, and prosperity he had promised in return for their faithful and total obedience.

The judges

Over a period of 500 + years, God sent a number of judges to rule over Israel. As stated earlier, the Israelites almost always enjoyed a time of fellowship with God; worshipping him and following the Law under the leadership of the judges. But after a while they fell away, at which time God would allow them to be treated harshly by the Philistines and others. Israel spent these five centuries jumping in and out of faith and paying for it every time. They just wouldn't learn.

Some of the most renowned judges include:

- Toenail: He was the first judge.
- Ehud: He was the left-handed judge who killed King Eglin (the king of Moab). When Ehud thrust his sword into King Eglin's stomach, it 'disappeared' (even the handle) because King Eglin was so fat. Ehud left the sword in the king and turned and walked away without anyone knowing what he had done.
- Deborah: Deborah was the only female God chose to lead Israel.
- Gideon: Gideon is one of the two most famous or well-known judges. Gideon was neither bold nor overly confident, but God saw in him the makings of a great warrior and leader. Gideon had a few trust issues, but God didn't let those get in the way of Gideon living out God's purpose for his life. Instead, he helped Gideon work through his doubts. And as a result, Gideon led an army of only 300 men to fight and defeat tens of thousands of Midianites and Amalekites.
- Samson: Samson is listed as a judge in Bible commentaries, but God does tell his parents, Manoah and "Mrs. Manoah" that he was going to give them a son who would begin to deliver the Israelites out of the hands of the Philistines. NOTE: The Philistines were in control of the Israelites for a period of 40 years because of Israel's disobedience and turning away from God.
- Eli: Eli was the judge who raised Samuel after Hannah gave Samuel to God to fulfill her promise to him (God) if he would allow her to have a

child. Eli was a good and Godly man who took great care in raising Samuel up to be a man of God.
- Samuel: Samuel was the last judge. He was the judge who (against his wishes) anointed Saul as the first king of Israel.

The Israelites put an end to the ‘system of judges’ when they demanded that Samuel provide them with a king because everyone else around them was ruled by a king. They refused to see and acknowledge that they were under the leadership of the King of kings and LORD of lords.

Samson

Samson was born to a couple who was unable to conceive outside of God's divine intervention. God told them, however, that the child was to be a Nazirite (Numbers 6).

Samson's life was full of ups and downs and it would be safe to say he was a man who often lived life by his rules rather than God's. In the end, however, he honored God and God worked through him to begin restoring Israel as a nation of people who (for a time) worshipped God.

Fighting among themselves

While there were definitely times the Israelites argued and disagreed among themselves, they had never fought against each other—not until the end of the book of Judges.

The Benjamites and the Levites started fighting over a woman. She was the wife of a Levite, but murdered by a Benjamite. The account, which can be found in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first chapters of Judges is ugly and perverse in a number of ways. It ends by saying, “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.” (Judges 21:25)

Living this way didn’t work for the Israelites and it won’t work for us, either.

Key verses in Judges

Every book of the Bible provides us with words of wisdom, instruction, comfort, encouragement, admonishment, warning, and promise, and hope. Let's look at some of what the book of Judges has to offer.

"After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel." Judges 2:10

"But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways." Judges 2:19

Book 8

The Book of Ruth

Who wrote the book of Ruth: The author of Ruth is unknown. It was, however, written by someone with knowledge of the Israelite people and their history.

When was it written: Because King David is mentioned, the book was most likely written during or soon after the reign of King David. Most people believe the book was written around 1,000 B.C.

Why was it written: To illustrate God's plan of redemption and salvation and to demonstrate selfless love.

The book of Ruth reads like a memoir. It tells of a famine that drives an Israelite by the name of Elimelech, his wife, Naomi, and their two sons (Mahlon and Kilion) from their home in Bethlehem, Judah, to the land of Moab. While living there, both sons marry Moabite women, and later Elimelech and both sons die.

Years pass and the famine ends so Naomi decides to return to her homeland to live out the rest of her life with her own people. It is at that point that this family's history takes a turn down a road that ultimately leads to Calvary.

Who was Ruth

Ruth was the widow of one of Elimelech and Naomi's sons. She was also, as you have already read, a Moabite.

Ruth's ethnicity is somewhat interesting due to the fact that in the Mosaic Law God had forbidden the Israelites from marrying anyone who wasn't an Israelite. But we knew even before the book of Ruth that the Israelites had not listened, which is why God said that Moabites who did marry Israelites were not allowed in the assembly to worship God until after the tenth generation.

We also know from previous books in the Old Testament (and some that follow) that the relationship between Israel and Moab was somewhat complicated. At times they were at war with each other, but at other times they were on much friendlier terms. The famine that drove Naomi and her family away from Bethlehem and into Moabite territory must have taken place during a time of peace between the two nations.

Ruth, the Moabite widow of an Israelite, was also a woman of integrity and as you will soon see, a woman of faith.

Who were the Moabites

The Moabites were the descendants of Lot—Abraham's nephew who along with his daughters, escaped Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Moabites lived in what is now the country of Jordan. In the time of Old Testament, the land of Moab was bordered by the land of Canaan. Moses was refused by the kings of Moab when he asked to pass through their land on the way to the Promised Land. This, combined with a number of other incidents (both good and bad) is the reason the relationship between Israel and Moab had so many ups and downs.

Ruth and Naomi travel to Bethlehem

Once Naomi decided to return to her people in Bethlehem, she told her daughter in-laws, Ruth and Orpha, that they should go back to their own families because she had nothing to offer them in the way of a home and a future. She herself would have to rely on the good graces of extended family members for her survival.

Orpha agreed and bid the other two women a tearful goodbye—giving credence to the likelihood that Naomi and her family shared a close and loving bond. Ruth, on the other hand, refused to go. Did she not have a family to return to or was she simply that devoted? We don't know for sure, but her words to Naomi are proof that devotion definitely played a role in her decision.

We read in Ruth 1:16: "But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.""

And so they left; traveling to Bethlehem with an unknown future waiting for them there.

Ruth and Boaz

Boaz was the son of Salmon, whose mother was Rahab the prostitute whose life was spared because she hid the spies sent by Joshua right before the Israelites took over the city of Jericho.

Boaz was also a relative of Elimelech, Naomi's deceased husband. And it was Boaz who came to Naomi and Ruth's rescue. He took the two women into his care; fell in love with Ruth and she with him.

Their marriage resulted in the birth of a son they named Obed. Obed in turn became the father of Jesse and Jesse the father of David.

The road to Calvary

Do you see how Ruth and Naomi's journey to Bethlehem leads to Calvary? Because of the union of Rahab to Nahshon, Ruth found love with Boaz. And their love resulted in their great-grandson sitting on the throne of Israel and in the direct lineage of Jesus our Savior who gave his life for our sins on the cross at Calvary.

Book 9

The Book of 1st Samuel

When was it written: Sometime after the division of the kingdom of Israel in 930 B.C.

Why was it written: The book of 1st Samuel was written to take us through the end of the period of judges and to introduce us to the establishment of kingship in Israel with the anointing of King Saul. The book of 1st Samuel also tells of the struggles that made up Saul and David's relationship.

The book of 1st Samuel carries several important messages we should all take to heart (in no particular order of chronology or importance):

- God blesses those who are obedient to him
- God uses extreme and implausible measures to accomplish his goals and purposes
- Sin and weakness don't have to define us—we can change
- God sees beyond the surface of our exterior appearance to see our hearts, and that is what he is most concerned about
- Obedience to God results in an abundance of blessings

The book of 1st Samuel is one of intrigue, excitement, drama, acts of compassion, joy, sadness, and miraculous works of God. As we look at several of the events written about in the pages of this book of the Old Testament, remember this: nothing is too big for God and with God all things are possible.

The miracle named Samuel

The book of 1st Samuel begins by introducing us to a couple whose names are Elkanah and Hannah. Elkanah was descended from the tribe of Ephraim, the son of Joseph, who Jacob gave a special blessing to.

Elkanah and Hannah loved one another very much, but Hannah was miserable because she was not been able to have children. She prayed diligently and desperately for a child, but her prayers went unanswered until the priest (who also served as Israel's judge) saw Hannah sobbing and praying at the temple in Shiloh.

When Eli saw Hannah praying from a distance, he thought she was drunk and approached her for the purpose of chastising her for her actions. But when he saw Hannah up close and listened to the sincerity in her voice, he assured her that whatever it was she was praying for, God would give her.

Less than a year later Hannah gave birth to a son and named him Samuel, which means, "Because I asked the LORD for him". Hannah's faithfulness and obedience to God was demonstrated on an even greater level when she took Samuel to the temple while he was still a little boy (probably about 3 years old) and left him there to live with Eli and to be raised up to become Israel's final judge.

Each year Hannah would visit her son and bring him gifts and things he needed. And each year Eli would pronounce a blessing on Hannah and Elkanah for their faithful and selfless deed—pronouncements that resulted in being blessed with three more sons and two daughters.

God calls Samuel

Eli was already an old man by the time Samuel came to him to be raised in the temple. But knowing he didn't have many years left and knowing his own two sons were evil and had no business taking on the role of priest, gave Eli the strength and desire to pour all he could into Samuel. He wanted very much to prepare Samuel to be God's willing servant.

God did indeed have plans for Samuel. That is why we read in 1st Samuel 2:26 that, "…the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with men." NOTE: This is same statement made about Jesus (Luke 2:52) when he was about the same age Samuel was when it was made about him.

God called Samuel directly late one night while Samuel was in bed. Samuel thought it was Eli calling him, but after going to Eli a third time after thinking he heard Eli calling for him, Eli realized it was God's voice Samuel was hearing. Eli told Samuel to answer, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening". Samuel did what Eli told him to do and from that day on the LORD was with Samuel.

Samuel lived the rest of his life leading Israel in the ways of the LORD.

The Ark of the Covenant

The Ark of the Covenant which God had instructed the craftsmen to build had stayed with the Israelites since the day it was placed in the Tabernacle. It had been carried over the Jordan River before the Israelites crossed over to enter the Promised Land and during the time Samuel was living under Eli's tutelage, the Ark of the Covenant resided in the temple at Shiloh.

It was during this time that the Philistines and Israel went to battle and the Philistines defeated Israel. This led to the Israelite's decision to take the Ark of the Covenant into battle with them. This proved to be a grave mistake because the Philistines stole the Ark of the Covenant and killed several Israelites—including Eli's two sons.

When Eli heard of his sons' deaths, he surely felt some sense of grief, but when Eli learned that the Ark of the Covenant had been stolen, he fell out of his chair, broke his neck, and died (at the age of ninety-eight). The forty year leadership of Eli had come to an end and Samuel was now the leader of all of Israel.

Samuel's 'official' role as leader of Israel didn't start out on a very positive note, due to the loss of the Ark of the Covenant, but it didn't stay gone for long. God's anger had been riled and his hand was raised against the Philistines. God destroyed the idols of their gods and caused the people to be afflicted with tumors. The people panicked and were terrified of the God of the Israelites and returned the Ark of the Covenant to the Israelites so that it could be put back in its rightful place.

Israel wants a king

When Samuel got old and realized he didn't have many years left here on earth, he appointed his two sons, Joel and Abijah, to take over his role as judge and leader of the Israelites. But Joel and Abijah were not as resolute or sincere in their faith as their father was and the people were not willing to accept them as their leaders. Instead, they wanted a king.

Samuel was against the idea and felt it would take them even farther away from their faith and dependency on God, but they would settle for nothing other than a king, so after Samuel consulted God on the matter, he appointed Saul, young man from the tribe of Benjamin, to be the first king of Israel.

Saul as king

God chose Saul to be king of Israel with the intention of establishing Saul's family as the royal family of Israel for generations to come. There was nothing especially special about Saul from a human point of view. He wasn't skilled in military leadership. He wasn't exceedingly wealthy. He didn't possess above-average intelligence. He was a Benjamite—the smallest of the tribes of Israel. But God saw potential in Saul. He even sent his Spirit over Saul to change him into a different person; meaning he would be a man after God's own heart. (1st Samuel 10:6-9).

Saul did not remain in God's favor for very long, however, because Saul chose to do things his way instead of God's way. But because God had promised Saul he would be king, he allowed Saul to sit on the throne of Israel for his lifetime (from the age of 30 to the age of 72). Both his reign and his personal life, however, were filled with strife, paranoia, sadness, and general dysfunction.

As you read through the book of 1st Samuel you will see Saul as a man who is insecure, mentally unstable, deceptive, arrogant, and cynical. His actions and attitudes are, in part, due to the fact that the God took his Spirit from Saul and replaced it with an evil one.

This "…evil spirit from the LORD…." (1st Samuel 16:14) is a matter of confusion and great concern to man y. God can't have anything to do with evil, can he? Isn't God supposed to be a loving God? Yes, he is a loving God but he is not a God that turns a blind eye or deaf ear to sin. God doesn't force himself on anyone. When someone rejects him like Saul did, he removes himself from their life; leaving the door wide open for Satan's evil spirit to take over. And this is exactly what happened in Saul's life.

The primary source of Saul's problems was nothing more than Saul's sinful heart and mind. Saul, however, didn't see things that way. In Saul's mind, the primary source of all his problems was David.

After God took the kingdom away from Saul's family, he began his 'search' for a new king—someone who truly would be a man after his (God's) own heart. That 'man' was Jesse's youngest son—an adolescent shepherd boy named David. God selected David as king early-on in Saul's reign and while Samuel was still living. He even gave Samuel the honor of anointing David as the next king of Israel.

Shortly after that David entered the service of King Saul. His job was to soothe Saul's violent behavior by playing the harp. Saul did not know at this point that David was to be his successor, but David did. This didn't affect David's attitude of humility or respect for Saul, though. David never once lorded it over Saul that he would one day be sitting on the throne.

David went back and forth between serving the king and tending his father's sheep. And it was while he was tending sheep that the real trouble between David and Saul started…

David's father sent David to the battlefield where his older brothers were fighting the Philistines with other members of Saul's army. He sent him to take food to his brothers and to bring news of how things were going. This day ended up being a life-changing day for mankind. It was the day David killed Goliath. When he did, the people of Israel unofficially selected David as the most popular guy in the kingdom. This sent Saul into a jealous rage that resulted in a lifelong grudge against his successor.

Knowing these facts is essential in understanding the reasons behind Saul's actions and his legacy of kingship—a kingship that was spent:

- Trying to kill David
- Resorting to witchcraft to try to discern God's will

It was also a kingship that ended when Saul took his own life rather than die at the hands of the Philistines.

The early life of David

Following David's miraculous victory over Goliath, he spent the next years of his life either running from Saul or trying to convince Saul he had no intention of trying to take the throne form him. David was perfectly willing to wait for God's timing.

In reading 1st Samuel we read about:

- David's marriage to Saul's daughter, Michal
- David's deep and genuine friendship with his best friend, Jonathan… the son of King Saul
- David's humility and respect when he spared Saul's life (on more than one occasion)
- David's wise and strategic abilities on the battlefield and in leadership capacities

While it is fair to say the book of 1st Samuel is highly historical in nature with strong elements of adventure and drama, one should not read the book without taking away the undeniable spiritual lessons God wants us to learn:

- We are to obey God without exception
- God blesses those who obey him
- God's timing is perfect and when we wait on God's timing we will never be disappointed
- God expects and accepts nothing less than our whole heart and our best
- If we reject God we have to right to expect his protection and provision
- If we reject God evil will take up residence in our hearts and minds

Key verses in 1st Samuel

Every book of the Bible provides us with words of wisdom, instruction, comfort, encouragement, admonishment, warning, and promise, and hope. Let's look at some of what the book of 1st Samuel has to offer.

"There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God." 1st Samuel 2:2

"Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a God who know, and by him deeds are weighed." 1st Samuel 2:3

"those who oppose the LORD will be shattered. He will thunder against them from heaven; the LORD will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed." 1st Samuel 2:10

"But be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you." 1st Samuel 12:25

"Does the LORD delight n burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams." 1st Samuel 15:22

"But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."" 1st Samuel 16:7

"David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with the sword and the spear and the javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied."" 1st Samuel 17:45

Book 10

The Book of 2nd Samuel

The books of 1st and 2nd Samuel were originally one manuscript. Therefore, the author and date of writing of 2nd Samuel is the same as it is for 1st Samuel.

Why was it written: Records the events of the reign of King David

The book of 2nd Samuel is a historical account of the reign of King David following King Saul's death. It is a book filled with action, adventure, family drama, victories and defeats. The book also gives us an uncensored look into the life of the man who was described by God himself as being "A man after God's own heart"—even when the heart of David was marred with sins most of us never deal with in our own lives. So beyond the historical value of the book of 2nd Samuel, the book overflows with the truth of God's redemptive love.

The fact that God is ready, willing, and able to forgive and redeem us back into his loving arms cannot be missed in 2nd Samuel. Time and time again we see David falling victim to temptation followed by remorse, regret, repentance, and thanksgiving for God's forgiving nature.

One of the most valuable lessons we should take from the life of David in regards to sin is this: David sinned on more than one occasion and his sins were not 'trivial' (no sin is). But David did not live a sinful lifestyle. He learned from his mistakes and did not allow himself to fall into a pattern of repeating the same sins over again. He was by no means perfect, but he truly desired to be God's servant and do God's will in his life.

To try to cover all the details of David's reign over Israel in one chapter of a book is unrealistic. I simply could not do it justice. Instead, I will simply provide you with a list of the highlights and a few major details and let you read the rest for yourself.

David's reign over Israel

- David grieved the deaths of Saul and Saul's son, Jonathan (his best friend)
- David didn't automatically assume the role of king, but rather waited for God to tell him when to go, where to go, and who to appoint as his advisors

- David's humility and obedience are clearly seen in these events.
    - David encounters animosity and conflict with Saul's loyal advisors, but God's will wins out and David takes the throne
    - Battles are fought and won; giving Israel justifiable reasons to honor and respect their new king
        - David establishes his home in Jerusalem, "The City of David" and brings the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem
        - David very much wanted to build a Temple for God in Jerusalem, but God said no. Through the prophet, Nathan, God told David that because he was a man of war (had taken human lives) he could not build the temple. God did promise, however, that David's son who would come after him, would build a Temple worthy of being a dwelling place for the LORD
        - God promises David his family will sit on the throne of Israel as long as Israel is a kingdom (NOTE: this is somewhat prophetic in nature since God knew Israel would not 'live' to be the kingdom he desired it to be)
        - David commits the sins of adultery, fornication, conspiracy, and even murder
            - David committed adultery and fornication with Bathsheba; resulting in a pregnancy
            - To try to cover up or hide his sins, David brings Bathsheba's husband, a trusted army officer, home to

spend time with his wife so that she could simply say the child is his. Things don't go according to plan (because of Uriah's loyalty to David and the men he is leading) so David has him killed, but makes it look as if it was an act of war.

- Nathan is once again is called upon by God to guide and reprimand David. David doesn't try to deny anything, shift the blame, or justify his actions. He admitted his sins, asked forgiveness, repented by never doing those things again, and most poignantly portrayed in the book of 2nd Samuel is David's acceptance of his discipline by God for his actions.
- The disciplinary action taken by God for David and Bathsheba's sins was to take the life of the child they conceived during their act of adultery. David prayed that God would spare the child's life, but when God did not do so, David did not become angry at or resentful toward God. He accepted God's will and moved on.
- As a result of David and Bathsheba's repentance and faith, God granted them other children born because of their love in marriage. One of them was Solomon—the successor to the throne of Israel.

- David struggles against his son, Absalom. It is a struggle that eventually leads to Absalom's death, which causes deep agony and grief in David's heart.
- David once again disobeys God by counting the members of his army.

- God had expressly told David not to count the members of his army. God wanted David to know and believe that their success was not the result of numbers but of God's divine intervention.
- David's sin of disobedience had far-reaching effects—just like ours often does. Because of his sin, God brought a plague on Israel for a period of three days, killing seventy thousand people died. God's heart was heavy with grief (2nd Samuel 24:16). In fact, he was so grief-stricken that he ordered the angel of death to stop

before the people in the city of Jerusalem were stricken by the death plague.
    - After God stopped the plague, he instructed David to build an altar at the place the death angel had been when God ordered the plague to end.
- The final event to take place in the book of 2nd Samuel is David's altar-building and sacrifice as an act of repentance for his disobedience. It isn't the act itself that shows the true heart of the man whose lineage is that of our Savior. It is the heart with which he makes the sacrifice that reveals to us why David was 'labeled' by God to be a man after his (God's) own heart.

David's words to the owner of the wine press where God has instructed David to make his sacrifice are an excellent summation of what our constant mindset and attitude toward God should be: "But the king replied to Araunah, **"No, I insist on paying you for it, I will not sacrifice to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing."….** 2nd Samuel 24:24a

Book 11-12

The Book of 1st Kings & 2nd Kings

Who wrote the books of 1st King and 2nd Kings: Author is unknown

When was it written: Between 562 and 538 B.C.

Why was it written: These two begin by providing us with the spiritual and physical history of the kingdom of Israel during the reign of Solomon—the son of David and Bathsheba. Following Solomon's death, the kingdom of Israel becomes divided into two separate kingdoms—Israel and Judah. Beginning in the twelfth chapter of 1st Kings all the way through the end of 2nd Kings we are provided with a listing of sorts of the kings, but more importantly, we are given a glimpse into the hearts of the Israelite people during these tumultuous years. 2nd Kings ends with the fall of both kingdoms—both being taken captive by great empires in history. But it wasn't the strength of the Babylonians or Assyrians that ultimately caused the kingdoms to fall. It was God's plan of discipline and yes, even punishment for Israel's unrelenting faithless disobedience that ultimately led to their fall.

As we look deeper into these two books of the Old Testament, our primary focus will not be on the kings themselves, but rather the people of Israel under their leadership.

Solomon as king

Solomon did not come into power without a struggle. A half-brother, Adonijah, tried to put himself on the throne. But this was not God's plan, so after a series of events Adonijah's plans were thwarted and Solomon took the throne.

Early into his reign as king, the LORD appeared to Solomon; telling Solomon he could have whatever he asked for. Solomon, who was obviously already somewhat astute, asked for wisdom. With wisdom, he told God, he would be able to lead Israel victoriously, attain wealth, and establish himself as a man of honor. God was so pleased with Solomon's request that he gave Solomon an abundance of everything.

Solomon's early years were truly blessed by God. According to 1st Kings 4:29, Solomon's wisdom and breadth of understanding was as measureless as the sand on the seashore. He was faithful to God and worked to do his will.

It was also during the early years of Solomon's reign—the 4th year, to be exact—Solomon began construction of The Temple. The details given about the building of The Temple are interesting and humbling. They are interesting in the fact that it is fascinating to read and think about the degree of skill and manual labor that went into such a massive undertaking. The details are humbling because it serves as a reminder that if God is that concerned about the details of a building, how much more is his interest in each of us—the children created in his image?

The pomp and circumstance and the assembly of worship that took place in dedicating The Temple included bringing the Ark of the Covenant to its place of honor in this building consecrated to the LORD.

Unfortunately, Solomon's wealth, wisdom, and fame took on a more worldly tone. Solomon had 700 wives of royal birth and 300 concubines (mistresses) (1st Kings 11:3). These foreign wives, who worshipped idols and false gods, turned Solomon's heart away from God. Solomon began worshipping their gods. Because of Solomon's sin, God came to Solomon and told him the kingdom would not remain in the hands of his family—that it would be ripped from the hands of his son.

True to his promise, near the end of Solomon's life, one of Solomon's officials, whose name was Jeroboam, rebelled against Solomon. Following Solomon's death Jeroboam led the revolt against Israel's new king, Rehoboam (Solomon's son).

The revolt resulted in the division of Israel. Ten tribes followed Jeroboam to form the kingdom of Israel, while two remained with Rehoboam to form the kingdom of Judah.

ISRAEL: Asher, Dan, Gad, Issachar, Naphtali,
Ephriam/Manesseh, Reuben, Simeon, Zebulun

JUDAH: Judah, Benjamin

You might be wondering why the tribe of Levi is not mentioned. Because the tribe of Levi was not part of Israel's fighting forces or labor forces, they are not mentioned. From all indications, the loyalties of the Levites—the priestly tribe—were split. Some went with the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and some with the Southern Kingdom (Judah).

Elijah

Elijah was a prophet and faithful man of God who lived in Israel. God used Elijah in some extraordinary and miraculous ways—primarily during the reign of King Ahab, the most evil king to ever lead Israel. Elijah's primary purpose was to bring God's message of hope and redemption to Israel.

God prepared Elijah for ministry by putting him in a situation that required Elijah to put his complete trust in God. Elijah had to trust God to provide for him during severe famine by using Ravens to bring him food and to supply water from an otherwise dry creek bed. Elijah 'passed the test' and went on to serve God in mighty ways that included:

- ringing the blessing of God's miraculous blessings into the home of a poor widow and her son, and later bringing the son back to life
- Humiliating the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel by allowing God to show himself in mighty, mighty ways in order to prove he is the One True God
- Acting as a mentor to Elisha, who would serve as God's prophet and spiritual leader after Elijah
- Elijah was taken up to heaven by God while he was still living. He and Enoch are the only two people in the history of mankind to enter eternity in this way.

Elisha

Elijah's life and ministry was similar to that of Elijah's in the fact that God used Elisha to display his (God's) power in miraculous ways.

- Elisha also brought a widow's son back to life
- Elisha saved men from eating stew containing poisonous plants by adding flour to the pot
- Elisha healed a man named Naaman from leprosy
- Elisha was able to make an axe head made of metal float on top of the water

2nd Kings

The 'tales' of the kings in 1st and 2nd Kings generally reads like a 'who's who' of horrendous leadership. Of the nineteen kings Israel had from the time the kingdom split until the Assyrians took them into captivity, none of them were good. All of them did evil in the eyes of the LORD. Only one, Jehu, was said to be somewhat decent. Judah had twenty kings during from the time of the split until they were taken into captivity by the Babylonian empire. Out of twenty, six were Godly men that led the people in the ways of the LORD, two started out on a positive note but like Solomon, were led astray. The other twelve were evil and cared nothing about God.

Three kings that are deserving of special mention are Hezekiah, Manasseh, and Josiah. All three were kings of Judah. Two were Godly kings and one was so evil that his actions took God's anger at Judah to the breaking point. Because of this king God decided to wipe Judah out and turn them over to the hands of their enemies.

The first of the three was Hezekiah. King Hezekiah's life is interesting in the fact that he begged God for more time on earth

and got it. It happened like this…

Hezekiah became very ill and the prophet Isaiah was sent by God to tell Hezekiah that the illness he was suffering from was one he wouldn't recover from. Hezekiah was going to die. King Hezekiah wasn't ready to die, though. We aren't really told why, but in reading 2nd Kings 20:1-11we are told that Hezekiah prayed and cried out to God; asking God to heal him and give him more time on earth. Hezekiah's plea takes on a bargaining tone: "…O LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes…." (Hezekiah 20:3)

God granted Hezekiah the desire of his heart by telling him he will add fifteen years to his life. At the end of the fifteen years Hezekiah died and his son Manasseh became king.

Manasseh was the most evil of all the kings of Judah. He rebuilt all the idols his father had ordered torn down. He placed an Asherah pole (an idol to the fertility goddess) in The Temple. He 'filled' Jerusalem with the blood of innocent people and his depraved heart, soul, and mind committed all sorts of terrible sins against himself and others (and of course, against God).

Manasseh's sins were so great that God's anger could no longer be contained and his patience with Judah was gone. Because of Manasseh's sin, God decided that when the time was right he would destroy them by handing them over to the Babylonians.

The third Judean king we want to look at is Josiah. Josiah was the grandson of Manasseh and came to power a little more than two years after Manasseh's death and his own father's death (who ruled after Manasseh did). Josiah was just an eight year-old little boy when he took the throne. He was the youngest king to lead Judah and one of the longest serving kings (thirty-one years). King Josiah did what was right in the eyes of the LORD all the days of his life. He was faithfully obedient in all things. How Josiah came to know and love the LORD so intently is mind-

boggling since he had no positive spiritual fraternal influence. But God had a plan and a purpose for the small king—a plan and a purpose stronger than all the sin and evil in the world.

During the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign he ordered and oversaw some major repairs of The Temple. In the process of getting the work done, the Book of the Law (the Mosaic Law) was found and read by Josiah's secretary, Shaphan, to King Josiah.

When Josiah heard the Law being read, he was even more committed than ever to bring the people's hearts back to God… where they belonged. Josiah's actions and heart did not go unnoticed or unappreciated by the LORD. Because of Josiah's faithfulness, God allowed Judah to remain intact until after Josiah died.

The fall of Israel and the fall of Judah

Israel was the first of the two kingdoms to fall. While King Hoshea was king of Israel, Assyria captured the capitol city of Israel, which was Samaria, and took the people captive. From there the exile took in the entire kingdom. This took place around 721-722 BC. The ten tribes were scattered throughout the land and to this day have not been ‘found’. While there are undoubtedly scores of descendants from these ten tribes, they are not recognized

In 605 BC Judah fell to the Babylonian Empire which was under the leadership of King Nebuchadnezzar. The exile lasted seventy years—just as God said it would. Unlike the ten tribes of Israel, the tribes of Judah and Benjamin would survive, because from them would eventually come our LORD and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Book 13-14

The Book of 1st Chronicles & 2nd Chronicles

Who wrote the books of 1st Chronicles and 2nd Chronicles: Ezra is the assumed writer of Chronicles.

When was it written: Between 400 and 500 B.C.

Why was it written: Chronicles is a historical record written for the exiles who returned after their exile to Babylon. Their captivity ended with the fall of the Babylonian Empire and the rise of the Persian Empire. Upon their 'release' the Israelites, which now consisted of only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, are wondering whether or not God's promises and covenant still hold true since they have no king—no Davidic king, that is.

The events recorded in 1st and 2nd Chronicles are in many ways repetitious of what is found in 2nd Samuel and 1st and 2nd Kings.

The book of 1st Chronicles differs however, by opening with a 'family tree' of sorts. The first eight chapters list the names of the son of Jacob for which each of the twelve tribes is named, followed by their descendants and the location of the land given to them when they entered the Promised Land. This is followed by a reprisal of the events of David's reign as king, the death of

King David, and the events that led to Solomon being recognized as the new king of Israel.

2nd Chronicles

The book of 2nd Chronicles begins with the re-telling of Solomon's reign; beginning with him choosing wisdom when God tells him he can have whatever he asks for and ending with his death.

The remainder of 2nd Chronicles does just that—chronicles the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah and the events that led to each kingdom's fall from God's grace and its demise from power and existence.

The primary difference between 2nd Chronicles and books of 1st and 2nd Kings is the fact that the events recorded are from a more spiritual point of view rather than a factual one. The reason for this is likely due to the writer's (Ezra's) mindset. Ezra was a Godly man—one of the few who had not turned his back on God. Ezra was mindful of all God had done for his people from the time they had left Egypt and lived to honor God by obeying The Law of Moses.

Ezra wrote to let us know not only what happened governmentally to the people of Israel and Judah, but also what happened to them spiritually and emotionally. He lived it—or at least part of it. His words are to serve as a warning to us all. They warn us of what happens when we take God out of the equation of anything and everything we do. Ezra's warning can best be summed up by remembering (and taking to heart) the words he recorded that were spoken by God to Solomon shortly after the completion and dedication of The Temple Solomon built:

"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." (2nd Chronicles 7:14)

Book 15

The Book of Ezra

Who wrote the book of Ezra: Ezra

When was it written: 440 B.C.

Why was it written: The book of Ezra is a history of Judah's return from Babylonian exile. The Persian Empire had become the dominant world power, but King Cyrus has no problem letting the Jewish people return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. It is during this time that Ezra reminds the Judean people (Israelites) of the law, brings religious reform to them, and reminds the Jewish people that they are God's chosen people.

After opening the book by telling us how God moved in the heart of the Persian king, King Cyrus, to allow the people to return to Jerusalem to live AND to rebuild their temple, we discover that Ezra is quite fond of lists. In ten short chapters Ezra includes three rather lengthy lists:

- A list of exiles who returned to Jerusalem
- A list of the heads of each family who returned to Jerusalem with Ezra
- A list of members of the priests who had sinned by marrying foreign women
- These lists may seem irrelevant to most people, but they are proof God's promise to not completely wipe out those he called his children. It is also proof that at least some of the

Levites were part of the kingdom of Judah and had survived the exile.

Other historical events recorded in the book of Ezra include:

- The delay of the rebuilding of The Temple due to a decree by King Artaxerxes, followed by a decree by King Darius to allow the reconstruction to resume.
- The completion and rededication of The Temple
- The celebration of the Passover
- Ezra's return to Jerusalem with all those who had not been part of the rebuilding process.
- Ezra's 'sermon' to the people that prompts them to confess their sins and turn back to God.

We also learn from reading the book of Ezra that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah were contemporaries of Ezra's—part of the group of people that returned to Jerusalem following the 70-year exile of Judah.

The overall message or theme of the book of Ezra, however, is that as God's chosen people, the Judean people were to worship only God and to keep themselves pure by living according to The Law.

Book 16

The Book of Nehemiah

Who wrote the book of Nehemiah: Nehemiah

When was it written: 430 B.C.

Why was it written: Regardless of who wrote the book of Nehemiah, the undeniable truth is that the Nehemiah is conveying the message God gave him about the importance of prayer. The book also continues the history of the Judean people during and after the rebuilding of the temple.

Given Nehemiah's devotion to the spiritual discipline of prayer, it is only fitting that the book opens with Nehemiah's prayer on behalf of the exiles returning to Jerusalem. In his prayer, Nehemiah asks God to remember his promises to Moses. He asks God to have an open heart and open ears to the people as they recommit themselves to him, to forgive their sinful ways, and to restore them to their 'place of honor' as being called God's children.

Nehemiah went to Jerusalem in 445BC to take charge of re building the walls of the city. The primary message in the book of Nehemiah is to remind us of the importance of prayer.

Following Nehemiah's prayer we find that Nehemiah, who was serving as King Artaxerxes' cupbearer, asked the king if he could return to Jerusalem to oversee the rebuilding of The Temple. Nehemiah was allowed to go on the condition he provided a set

time for his return. The king also provided Nehemiah with letters to other kings stating that he should be allowed to purchase materials to be used for the reconstruction.

Beginning in the second half of the second chapter of Nehemiah and continuing through the twelfth chapter we read about some of the events surrounding The Temple's reconstruction. Many of the same events we read in Ezra are also recorded in Nehemiah, including Ezra's reading of the Law, the people's confession of their sins, and the lists of the people who returned to Jerusalem, a list of the Levites serving as priests, and a list of those who signed an agreement to follow the Law.

Things we see in this book that aren't in the book of Ezra, but are still part of the account of the people's return to Jerusalem include:

- The people are now called Jews instead of Israelites
- Nehemiah's going to the defense and assistance of the poor. He chastised those who had money for their practicing usury. He reminded them that they were a family—and that family should stick together and treat each other with love and respect.

The book of Nehemiah closes with his personal account of the reforms Nehemiah brought about in the lives of the Jewish people upon his second return to Jerusalem (he had returned to King Artaxerxes as promised after his first trip).

Nehemiah's sense of responsibility in being a spiritual leader to his people is admirable and one we should seek to develop in our own selves today.

Book 17

The Book of Esther

Who wrote the book of Esther: The author is unknown, but most definitely a Jewish person living during the time of the Persian Empire.

When was it written: 460BC to 331 B.C.

Why was it written: The purpose of this book is to record the history surrounding the institution of the Jewish Feast of Purim and the account of the Jewish race being saved from massacre and total annihilation by an unassuming Jewish girl who rose to a position of power and prestige because it was her God-given purpose in life.

Who was Esther

Esther was a Jewish orphan being raised by her cousin, Mordecai and his family. We learn early-on that Esther was a very beautiful young lady, but that her physical beauty was only a compliment to her inner-beauty.

Through a course of events that were completely beyond her control, Esther was chosen as the winner of a ‘beauty contest’ with the grand prize being made the Queen of the Persian Empire —the wife of King Xerxes.

Events leading to the near-massacre of the entire Jewish race

During the course of events that led to Esther becoming Queen of the Persian Empire, she had no idea why everything was happening the way it was. What possible reason could there be for her—a Jewish girl—to become the wife of the most influential and powerful man in the world?

God, however, knew exactly why and we see his plan unfolding in the second chapter of Esther. Esther's cousin/adopted father Mordecai loved Esther as a daughter. His love for her caused him to go to the palace courtyard each day to check on her and often times he was able to visit with her. It was during one of these visits that Mordecai overheard two of the king's officers planning to assassinate the king.

Mordecai naturally told Esther, who promptly told the king—giving credit to Mordecai for saving the king's life. Mordecai's regular presence around the palace, however, became a source of contention for King Xerxes' number-one man, Haman. So when Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman, Haman went to the king and tricked him into signing a declaration that all Jews would be killed on a certain day because of their insubordination and disrespect for the king (a total lie).

When Mordecai heard about the law that Haman had tricked the king into making, he went to Esther and convinced her that she was the only one who could save their people from annihilation.

Esther's brave actions saved an entire race

Esther's immediate response was one of hesitancy for the following reasons:

- Her husband, the king, did not know she was Jewish
- Approaching the king when not invited to do so could result in being sentenced to death

Mordecai, however, wasn't going to let Esther get off that easy. Being the Godly man he was, he convinced Esther that this time was quite possibly the reason she had become queen in the first place. Mordecai's words to his adopted daughter when she initially refused his request to go to the king on behalf of the Jewish people are among the most quoted in the Old Testament: "…Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this." (Esther 4:13-14)

Esther musters the courage to go to her husband uninvited and after a series of events, Haman's deception and prejudices are uncovered, he is put to death for his actions, and Mordecai becomes the king's right-hand man. But more importantly, King Xerxes gave the Jews permission to defend themselves against anyone who attacked them—even to the death. This was to counteract the previous decree allowing the Jews to be killed.

The Jews were victorious over all who attacked them and in order to celebrate their victories, the Feast of Purim was instituted and is still being celebrated today.

The value and validity of Esther

The book of Esther has been the subject of much discussion and even controversy by some in the theological community. There are several reasons behind these discussions. The most prevalent are:

- The fact that God is not mentioned once in the entire book
- The name Esther is not mentioned in history books as being one of Xerxes' wives, therefore making the account fictional

Both arguments can easily be put to rest, though.

- While God's name is not mentioned in the book of Esther, his presence in the hearts and minds of the people is definitely not missing. Additionally, his protection and influence over the Jewish people in giving them victory over their enemies is obvious considering the fact that they were militarily inferior to just about anyone and everyone at that time in history. Also worth noting is the fact that the book of Song of Songs does not mention God's name, either.
- The dates, archeological references, cultural references, and other historical data found outside the Bible are consistent with the account given to us in the book of Esther. While the name Esther is not listed as one of Xerxes' wives, this is not proof that she did not exist. Why?
  - Not everything is recorded in the ancient records we have available to us. And an incident that showed painted an unfavorable picture of the king's ability to select sound leadership would definitely be something secular history would not record.
  - Kings had multiple wives. Not mentioning some of them is completely normal. The mother of the heir to the throne is usually the only one mentioned.

- The significance of the account of Esther is spiritual and pertinent to the Jewish race. It was not relevant to the success or failure of the Persian Empire.
- As more research has been done and documents unearthed, more tangible evidence of Esther's existence and role in history.

The book of Esther is historical, yes, but it is also a reminder that:

- God's plans and purposes for each of us might not be blatantly obvious to us or even what we think they should be, but that doesn't mean they don't exist. It simply means we need to ask God to reveal them to us and then be ready to listen and act.
- We have nothing to fear when God is with us.
- God's heart is always ready and his arms are always open and waiting to welcome us back to him.

Aside for the evidence or what some consider the lack of evidence that the book of Esther is an actual historical account of Jewish history, this fact remains and should be the foremost in our minds:

ALL scripture is God-breathed…

(2nd Timothy 3:16-17). In other words, if Esther was not real and if the events did not take place as they are recorded, it would not be part of God's Holy Word.

Book 18

The Book of Job

Who wrote the book of Job: No one knows for sure, other than the writer being an Israelite with access to the discourses of Job and his friends and between Job and God. This is not unusual in the fact that a) God spoke to his people regularly at this point in history; telling them what took place and b) writing of events was commonplace for the purpose of historical documentation.

When was it written: Most likely between 1,000 and 2,000 B.C. —again God using a messenger to record the events in Job's life.

Why was it written: To show the holiness of God, the power of God, and the fact that God is just. No one is undeserving of anything we encounter due to the fact that we are not God—we are sinful. But God's infinite love and wisdom can bring us up and out of those times when we allow him to.

Who was Job

The first verses of the book of Job tell us that Job was a very wealthy man and a man who was humble and obedient to God in all things. We also read early-on that God and Satan had a couple of conversations about Job. God was expressing his pride and pleasure with Job, while Satan insisted that Job's faith was blessing-based. Satan said that if Job lost his wealth, health, and loved ones, he wouldn't be so eager to please God.

God gave Satan permission to take everything Job had except his life. Satan was told he could do whatever he wanted to Job as long as Job didn't die.

So to many, the short answer to the question, "Who was Job?" is this: Job was the object or prize to be gained in a challenge between God and Satan.

God and Satan's relationship

If you will remember from the chapter on the book of Genesis, Satan was one of God's angels prior to being banished from heaven. Satan and a few other angels under his influence tried to oust God from his place of holy oneness. To punish Satan for his rebellion, God banished him to earth with the promise to punish Satan for all eternity in hell—a place of unfathomable torment. But until that time, Satan has the power to tempt us to sin and to wreak havoc in our lives.

All of this took place prior to the creation of the earth as recorded in Genesis, which explains why Satan tempted Adam and Eve. Satan's goal is to lure anyone and everyone he can away from God.

While these facts explain who Satan is and what he does, it doesn't explain why God allowed Satan to live. Why didn't God just do away with the rebellious being?

Job’s choice is our choice too

The book of Job answers the question of why God allowed Satan to live and work his evil cunning in our lives. The answers can be found in Job’s circumstances, Job’s attitude and handling of his circumstances and the end-result brought about by God. The answers are:

- Satan exists to show us the difference between good and evil
- Satan exists to give us the option to choose God over sin
- Satan exists to show us just how dark life without the presence of God is
- Satan exists to show the enormity of Jesus’ power over death and the victory that will be eternity with God in heaven

Job had to choose God over riches. God over self. God over anger. God over self-pity. Job had to choose to trust that God’s ways are always perfect, always good, and always right. Job’s choices were the same as the ones we have to make.

Job’s test of faith

Satan was allowed to destroy all of Job’s wealth, kill his children and children in-law, and to inflict Job with a severe case of boils. These calamities came in rapid succession; leaving Job to deal with more grief than most of us can imagine, knowing his fortune and livelihood had been yanked out from under him, and suffering a tremendous amount of physical anguish. All Job had left was a wife (who was also grieving and trying to deal with everything) and friends who tried to help but didn’t know how.

Job questioned God’s reasoning in all of it. Job cried out in pain and frustration. Job had a bit of a pity-party for himself. Job became discouraged and depressed; saying he wished he’d never even been born. But Job never questioned God’s right to take everything from him. Job never thought himself too righteous to be ‘messed with’. And these attributes of his character are what make Job such a great example of how we should look at life.

The ultimate message of truth in the book of Job

Job's story is heart-wrenching, to say the least, but more than that, Job's story is one that should serve to remind us that God is the all-knowing creator and master of the universe. In reading Job we should realize that we have no reason to doubt his methods, his timing, and his will, because they are always perfect. Even when we don't understand or agree with them, they are perfect and right.

Key verses in Job

Every book of the Bible provides us with words of wisdom, instruction, comfort, encouragement, admonishment, warning, and promise, and hope. Let's look at some of what the book of Job has to offer.

"He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" Job 2:10

"Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty, for he wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal." Job 5:17-18

"What is man that you make so much of him, that you give him so much attention, that you examine him every morning and test him every moment?" Job 7:17-18

"Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?" Job 11:7

"To God belong wisdom and power, counsel and understanding are his." Job 12:13

"I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth." Job 19:25

"It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice." Job 34:12

Job chapters 38 through 42

Book 19

The Book of Psalms

Who wrote the book of Psalms: The Psalms were written by several different people as follows: David (73), Asaph (12), the sons of Korah (10), Moses (1), Solomon (2), unknown (50), Herman the Ezrahite and Ethan the Ezrahite (1 each).

When was it written: Obviously the writers of the Psalms were not all living at the same time, but their writings were put together in a collection by a psalter. A psalter is one who compiles a collection of songs or poems. The compilation of the Psalms was probably written around 300 B.C.

Why was it written: It is a book or prayer and praise; recognizing God's holiness, awesomeness, power, and glory.

To try to put the Psalms in some sort of order of relevance would be both impossible and wrong. The Psalms speak to our hearts and minds depending upon the circumstances we are facing or the situations we are in. The words that bring special meaning today may not be as comforting or empowering as others next month or next year. So rather than try to tell influence your reading of the Psalms, I am simply going to give you a mini-list of those that encompass a variety of emotions and feelings.

Don't let this list be the extent of your exposure to the Psalms, though. Read the entire book; circling, underlining, and making notes. Let them sing to your heart, soul, and mind.

“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD and on his law he meditates day and night.” Psalm 1:1-2

“I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.” Psalm 3:5

“In the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.” Psalm 5:3

“O LORD, our LORD, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.” Psalm 8:1

“When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” Psalm 8:3

Psalm 15: A psalm reminding us of the blessings that come from being a faithful and obedient child of God.

“LORD, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.” Psalm 16:5-6

Psalm 18: A psalm of praise and thanksgiving for God’s protection and love

Psalm 22: A psalm that is prophetic in nature; foretelling the pain and suffering of Jesus’ death on the cross.

Psalm 23: A psalm of comfort

Psalm 32: A psalm reminding us of God’s forgiving nature when we come to him in true repentance and confession.

“A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all.” Psalm 34:19

“Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.” Psalm 37:4

“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” Psalm 51:10

“My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him.” Psalm 62:1

“In the day of my trouble I will call to you, for you will answer me.” Palm 86:7

“LORD, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” Psalm 90:1-2

Psalm 95: A psalm of praise and worship to God.

Psalm 100: A psalm of thanksgiving for God’s love and faithfulness to us.

“He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from u s.” Psalm 103:10-12

Psalm 112: A psalm of assurance and hope for those who put their trust in God.

Psalm 119: This is the longest of all the psalms, but it is also one of wise instruction, encouragement, and spiritual mentorship.

“If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O LORD, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are

feared.” Psalm 130:3-4

“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!” Psalm 133:1

Psalm 139: A psalm that reminds us of just how personally interested God is in each detail of our lives. He longs to have a genuine and intimate relationship with each and every one of us.

“Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground.” Psalm 143:10

Psalm 145: A psalm to remind us of God’s faithfulness and his desire to be the LORD of our life. It is also a psalm that reminds us of the blessings we receive in having such a relationship with him.

Book 20

The Book of Proverbs

Who wrote the book of Proverbs: Most of the proverbs were written by Solomon. Other, however, were written by ‘the wise’ and a man named Agur. The final chapter of the book of Proverbs is attributed to King Lemuel, who is most likely Solomon (but more on that later).

hen was it written: Most, if not all, were written during the reign of Solomon (10th century BC)—before the division of the Kingdom of Israel.

Why was it written: To give knowledge, wisdom, and advice to everyone.

Like the Psalms, Proverbs is not a book of events or doctrine, per se. The psalms are a mix of praise, petition, worship, teaching, and warning. Proverbs, on the other hand, focuses on teaching, admonishment, warning, and encouragement (pleas) to grab hold of wisdom and practical knowledge and hang on to it.

Proverbs could easily have been written by anyone who has ‘been there, done that’ or an older person who has experienced life from all directions. Proverbs is filled with:

- Warnings against making some of the same mistakes the writer has made
- Truths of the results of choosing worldliness (sin) over righteousness (God)

- Instruction on how to acquire real knowledge
- Moral guidance—including how, what, why
- Truths about the rewards that naturally result from making prudent and wise choices
- Plain old common sense

Like the book of Psalm, Proverbs contains far too much to try to squeeze into a chapter of a book. So once again I will provide you with a mini-list of some of my favorite verses, but I also strongly encourage you to read the entire book. Circle and underline the verses that speak to your heart and address your personal situation and life. Write notes in the margins of your Bible or prayer journal. Impress these words on your heart, soul, and mind. Live by them to be more of the person God made you to be.

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline." Proverbs 1:7

"My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God." Proverbs 2:1-5

"Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart." Proverbs 3:3

"Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones. Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine." Proverbs 3:7-10

"My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in." Proverbs 3:11-12

Proverbs 4: A collection of verses teaching us the benefits and blessings of seeking wisdom and using it to make life choices.

“There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies, and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.” Proverbs 6:16-19

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” Proverbs 8:10

“The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.” Proverbs 10:9

Proverbs 11: This chapter is filled with Godly and sound advice on living a life of integrity. The world would be a much better place if we followed this advice.

“Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” Proverbs 12:18

Proverbs chapters 13, 15, and 16: These three chapters are must-reads for any Christian or anyone seeking to know how to live an upright life of honor and integrity. People whose character reflects these qualities will be respected, successful, and spiritually sound.

“Many are the plans of a man’s heart, but it is the LORD’s purpose that prevails.” Proverbs 19:21

“Wine is a mocker and beer is a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.” Proverbs 20:1

“A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.” Proverbs 22:1

Proverbs 26: This chapter is filled with teachings and advice on the value of humility and faith in God.

“Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.” Proverbs 30:8-9

Proverbs 31: The second half of this chapter is arguably the most popular and most-often quoted from the book. The heading at the beginning of the chapter is this: “Saying of King Lemuel”, which leads us to the comment at the beginning of this chapter regarding the belief that King Lemuel and King Solomon are one in the same.

While there is no hard evidence that King Lemuel is in fact, King Solomon, the probabilities are strong. The reasons for this include:

- There is no other reference to King Lemuel in the Bible other than in Proverbs 31.
- The only historical record of a King Lemuel is one who was descended from Ishmael. This fact would remove him from the likelihood of being a contributor to the Bible.
- Solomon’s mother, Queen Bathsheba, would have had every reason to advise her son in this manner (considering the lifestyle choices he made later in life)
- Solomon’s life and other writings is in line with the message of Proverbs 31—the ‘learn from my mistakes’ mentality

Regardless of who Lemuel is, the wisdom of the words is timeless and priceless. And for women it is an encouragement and reminder that God honors women for using their intellect, heart, and physical strength to be the people he created them to be.

Book 21

The Book of Ecclesiastes

Who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes: Solomon

When was it written: Around the 10th century B.C.

Why was it written: This book is an impassioned reminder that life without God as number one is completely meaningless. Life on earth and life after death is only fully complete with God.

Many see the book of Ecclesiastes as negative and depressing. They feel it is full of ‘woe is me’ and self-pity. But the truth of the matter is that nothing could be farther from the truth. Instead, the book of Ecclesiastes has several valuable life-lessons we all need to hear and follow.

The message that material and monetary wealth are only temporary

Solomon was the wealthiest person in the known-world. Few, if any, have surpassed the degree of wealth enjoyed by Solomon, even today. But by the time Solomon was nearing the end of his lie, he realized just how temporary and unimportant monetary and material wealth are. Solomon realized (and wants us to) that:

- We really cannot take it with us when we die.
- Our life will eventually become of no importance to those who come generations after us.
- Spending life in a quest to accumulate and amass monetary and material wealth is a life wasted in comparison to amassing a ‘fortune’ of close, loving relationships.

The message of balancing work and play

Solomon tells us that while work and play should be a part of life, they should be kept in check—that we need to keep them in the proper perspective. Without the proper perspective, he warns, we will live frustrated, unhappy lives.

Solomon also emphasizes that we should work at something we can find joy and take pride in rather than spend our lives working in a career we aren’t suited for or find fulfilling.

The message of time

Ecclesiastes chapter three teaches and reminds us that there is a time and place for everything. From living and dying to keeping and throwing things away, there is a time for it all. There are even times when we should hate and times we should go to war.

The message of the value of relationships

Solomon had no trouble surrounding himself with people—especially women. But someone in Solomon's position would have trouble—lots of trouble-knowing whether the people claiming to be his friends and confidants were sincere. Were they? Or were they after his money, a position in his court, or simply the status of being in the king's inner-circle?

Solomon undoubtedly experienced more than a few fake-friend incidents. And underneath all that wealth and wisdom was a human heart that felt the pain of betrayal and insincerity. Solomon's words, when taken to heart, can spare us of some of these experiences.

The message of God's sovereignty

This is the ultimate message of Solomon's book of Ecclesiastes. By this point in Solomon's life he had come full-circle. He had experienced life in a state of total obedience and faith, and by living a worldly life on his own terms. He knew what worked and what didn't and he wants us to know the same.

The book of Ecclesiastes ends with his entire message being summed up briefly and adequately:

"Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

Key verses in Ecclesiastes

Every book of the Bible provides us with words of wisdom, instruction, comfort, encouragement, admonishment, warning, and promise, and hope. Let's look at some of what the book of Ecclesiastes has to offer.

"There is a time for everything, and a season under heaven:" Ecclesiastes 3:1

"I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him." Ecclesiastes 3:14

"Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind." Ecclesiastes 4:6

"If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!" Ecclesiastes 4:10

"A good name is better than fine perfume and the day of death better than the day of birth." Ecclesiastes 7:1

"Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment." Ecclesiastes 11:9

"Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil." Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

Book 22

The Book of Song of Songs

Who wrote book of Song of Songs: Solomon

When was it written: 10th century B.C.

Why was it written: This book (also called the Song of Solomon) is a love story. The book was written to give insight as to the Israelite customs and attitudes on male-female relationships.

The book of Song of Songs is one of two books of the Bible that makes no mention of God—the other being Esther. The book has no doctrinal message, but it is a book of value to Christians nonetheless.

The value to be found in the book of Song of Songs is that God created us to be sexual beings—sexual beings with a pure heart and mind. God clearly created the institute of marriage when he created the earth and mankind. He does, however, want us to enjoy our marital state and the joys that come from the romantic and sexual aspects of marriage. Song of Songs helps us free ourselves of Puritan-like mindset; giving us ‘permission’ to delight in our sexual experiences as long as they are monogamous and within the bounds of marriage.

Book 23

The Book of Isaiah

Who wrote the book of Isaiah: Isaiah

When was it written: Most of the book was written around 700 B.C., but many things point to the last several chapters being written in the later part of Isaiah's life—some thirty years after the first part of the book.

Why was it written: The overall message of the book can be summed up in the words **judgement, salvation, restoration, and love.**

Isaiah is the most 'popular' of the Old Testament prophets for a number of reasons including:

- His years of serving as God's prophet spanned four Judean kings (Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah).
- A great many of his prophecies were about the coming of Jesus and their fulfillment is obviously present in the New Testament as well as in more current history.
- Several passages of scripture in the book of Isaiah are parallel to those in the New Testament. One excellent example of this is Isaiah 59:17, which is a parallel to the Armor of God in Ephesians 6.

Isaiah’s prophecies regarding Israel

In spite of the fact that Isaiah lived in Judah, many of his prophecies were about the kingdom of Israel and their fall to Assyria. He did, however, also prophecy about Judah’s exile to Babylon as well as the fall of Babylon that would come years later. Isaiah’s heart for all God’s children (Israel and Judah) was sincere. He had weathered the battles between the two nations who should have been one. He knew their separation from one another and from God caused God great sorrow and he (Isaiah) wanted very much for the people to listen to the messages God gave him to share with the people. But they would not.

The demise of the two nations of Israelites is tempered by his prophecies of God’s promise to restore them to the land he gave them through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The restoration, however, is only for the kingdom of Judah because they found their way back to God, whereas Israel did not. Judah’s return and the rebuilding of The Temple had to have been a tremendous source of joy to Isaiah.

Isaiah’s prophecies regarding judgement and hope

While Isaiah’s warnings are definitely literal in nature, they can also be seen in a somewhat figurative, as well. The figurative nature of Isaiah’s prophecies refer to God’s kingdom here on earth—a kingdom that is spiritual in nature rather than physical.

Isaiah's prophecies about Jesus

Isaiah was spot-on in his prophecies regarding Jesus—his ancestry, birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and as we will one day see, his second coming.

While secular history undeniably backs up the events of Israel, Judah, Babylon, and Assyria, the fact that a man who lived hundreds of years prior to Jesus' birth could tell us in such detail what was going to take place, well, that could only come from the Almighty God.

> Let's take a look at what Isaiah had to say about Jesus long before he was ever born:
>
> - Isaiah 7:14-Virgin birth of Jesus
> - Isaiah 9:6-7-He would be the son of God (he lists some of the names given to Jesus)
> - Isaiah 11:1-10-The Messiah would be a descendant of Jesse (King David)
> - Isaiah 40:1-5,9-Jesus the Messiah would be preceded by a messenger (John the Baptist)
> - Isaiah 35:4-6-Jesus would perform many miracles
> - Isaiah 61:1-2-Isaiah foretells of Jesus' ministry
> - Isaiah 53:1-3-The Messiah would be rejected by the people
> - Isaiah 42:1-9-The Messiah's coming would pave the way for Gentiles to become God's children
> - Isaiah 53:4-6-Jesus the Messiah would die for our sins
> - Isaiah 53:7-The Messiah would be silent before his accusers
> - Isaiah 50:6-Jesus would be spit on and beaten
> - Isaiah 53:12-The Messiah would be 'numbered with the transgressors' (die with criminals)
> - Isaiah 53:9-Jesus would be buried in a rich man's tomb

- Isaiah 49:6-The message of salvation through Jesus would reach the far corners of the earth

Some feel the book of Isaiah is depressing and somewhat difficult to understand. In some ways it is depressing—to think that we cause God that much sorrow should make us feel ashamed. And while the language or terminology can be a bit old-fashioned, it isn't impossible to understand. It simply takes a heart and mind open to what God has to say. Besides, in reading the book of Isaiah, one cannot help but see the hope that comes from God's love—a love that is shown so clearly through his gift of restoration and salvation through Jesus.

Book 24-25

The Book of Jeremiah and Lamentations

Who wrote the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations: Jeremiah

When was it written: The book of Jeremiah was written sometime between 626 and 586 B.C. and Lamentations was written around 587 B.C. or shortly after that. Jeremiah prophesied during the reigns of the following kings: Josiah, Jehoahaz Jehoiakin, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah—right up to the time of Judah's captivity by the Babylonians.

The book of Jeremiah consists of prophecy or messages from God to Jeremiah (which he as to share with the people) as well as Jeremiah's own thoughts. Jeremiah writes to remind us of God's holiness, the need for God to be number one in our lives, and the necessity of sincere repentance. Jeremiah's message is also one of accountability—our accountability to God for our thoughts, words, and deeds.

Jeremiah did not preach and prophecy without risk to his own life. At one point he was thrown into a cistern where he sank in the mud, but was rescued before he died.

The book of Lamentations is Jeremiah's expression of his grief over his fellow Israelites (Judah). It was written in the first year or so after Judah was taken captive by Babylon. The book focuses on the results of Judah turning way from God and reminds us of the importance of clinging to God and of being sincerely repentant when we sin.

Jeremiah’s prophecies and preaching

Jeremiah’s prophecies and the theme of his preaching focus primarily on the following:

- Warning the people of the consequences of their disobedience and faithlessness
- Prophecy of God’s rejection of his children
- The message of salvation and the coming of a Messiah —the ultimate King of Israel
- Prophecy of Babylon’s dominance over Judah
- Messages that encourage obedience to Babylon
- Prophecy of Babylon’s demise to the Persian Empire
- Deliverance of God’s people
- Judgement and deliverance for all who believe and obey God

Jeremiah—a man who uses object lessons

Jeremiah ‘spoke my language’; meaning he liked to use ordinary situations and objects to teach spiritual truths. Among the things Jeremiah uses to teach the people the truth of God’s holiness, love, and expectations for us include:

- A yoke around his neck to demonstrate to Judah how they should submit to the rulers of Babylon: Jeremiah 27:1-12
- A messed up clay jar; noting how the potter was able to reshape it into a perfect vessel—just like God would reshape an obedient Judah (and you and me): Jeremiah 18:1
- Jeremiah purchased a piece of land immediately just prior to the siege of Judah by Babylon. His point was to show his hope for the future because of his faith in God: Jeremiah 32:7-15

Lamentations

The message of Lamentations

Jeremiah's songs and poems he shares in the book of Lamentations are what garnered him the nickname "the weeping prophet". In this book he pours out his heart over the plight of the Judah because of their faithless acts of evil and disobedience. He is heartbroken over the destruction of Jerusalem and The Temple.

In the book of Lamentations we also see the severity of God's punishment. In chapter four Jeremiah describes the misery and suffering of the people of Jerusalem during Babylon's siege of the city. Starvation was so severe that they resorted to cannibalism!

But we also see Jeremiah's unquenchable spirit of hope and faith. For example, in Lamentations 2:19 Jeremiah tells the people, "Arise, cry out in the night, as the watches of the night begin; pour out your heart like water in the presence of the LORD. Lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children who faint from hunger at the head of every street." Jeremiah knows that all that is necessary to put an end to their suffering is true repentance.

We read Jeremiah's reminders to the people that they are not cut off from him forever—or at least they don't have to be (Lamentations 3:31).

Jeremiah was a great preacher or evangelist. His words go straight to the heart of the matter, but are also encouraging and hopeful. He doesn't let us forget about our responsibility to be faithful and obedient to God, but he also doesn't let us forget the bounty of blessings that come when we are.

Key verses in Jeremiah and Lamentations

Every book of the Bible provides us with words of wisdom, instruction, comfort, encouragement, admonishment, warning, and promise, and hope. Let's look at some of what the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations have to offer.

"Your wickedness will punish you; your backsliding will rebuke you. Consider then and realize how evil and bitter it is for you when you forsake the Lord your God and have no awe of me,"declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty." Jeremiah 2:19

"Discipline me, Lord, but only in due measure— not in your anger, or you will reduce me to nothing." Jeremiah 10:24

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." Jeremiah 29:11-13

"The fierce anger of the LORD will not turn back until he fully accomplishes the purposes of his heart. In the days to come you will understand this." Jeremiah 30:24

"Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." Lamentations 3:22-23

"The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him." Lamentations 3:25

“Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.” Lamentations 3:32-33

“You, O LORD, reign forever; your throne endures from generation to generation.” Lamentations 5:19

Book 26

The Book of Ezekiel

Who wrote the book of Ezekiel: Ezekiel—during the Jewish exile to Babylon.

When was it written: Between 593 and 571 B.C.

Why was it written: God's complete sovereignty is the primary and unmistakable message of this book.

Ezekiel was a prophet during the Babylonian exile—a contemporary of Jeremiah. But what really makes Ezekiel stand out from the rest of the prophets is the way in which God used Ezekiel to get his message across.

A most unusual method

The account of Ezekiel in chapters four and five is fascinating and humbling. It is fascinating in the fact that we see just how creative God can get when it comes to getting his message across. It is fascinating in the fact that we see God going to extreme and unusual measures; expecting Ezekiel to obey without question. The account of Ezekiel's primary prophecy of judgement against Judah and the takeover of Jerusalem recounted is also very humbling. Think about it: how many of us would be willing to do what Ezekiel did?

Other highlights of the book of Ezekiel

While Ezekiel's reenactment of the siege of Jerusalem is definitely the highlight of this book, it is not the only thing we should take away from the third major prophet in the Old Testament (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel). Ezekiel also speaks to the people about the hope of restoration to God, the proprieties of worship, judgement on the leaders of Israel for their lack of Godly leadership, the promise of restoration, the condemnation of false prophets (then and now), and prophecies against other nations who reject God and his chosen people.

The rebuilding of The Temple and distribution of the land

The book of Ezekiel ends with the description of the rebuilt Temple, reminders of how to worship according to the Mosaic Law, and the division of land between the tribes of Israel.

It is interesting to note that while Israel was no longer a whole nation consisting of the original twelve tribes, God divided the land among all the tribes—including the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim (Joseph's two sons). But why? Why did God allot land to the tribes of Israel and Judah—especially since the tribes of Israel were scattered?

God allotted land to each of the Israelite tribes for the same reason Jeremiah purchased land just prior to the siege of Jerusalem…hope for the future. The ten tribes of Israel under Assyrian rule had been scattered and were no longer a nation. They were lost to men, but they were not and are still not lost from God. God is man of his word. He cannot break a promise. His holiness doesn't 'allow' that to happen. One day Israel will be gathered together once again. One day (according to the book of Revelation) all the tribes of Israel will be recognized again by men. Israel will always hold that special place in God's heart, but because of their refusal to embrace their inheritance, God opened up salvation and adoption into his family to the Gentiles (that's us).

Ezekiel's prophecies have not all come to pass yet. God has not yet gathered Israel together again. But he will. Someday he will.

The book ends with the instructions on where to situate the gates of the rebuilt Jerusalem, their size, and what names

they are to be given. Again, this is something that is yet to come. But the most significant words of this final portion of the book are found in the last sentence—the name of the city from that time on. THE LORD IS HERE. The LORD is here. Yesterday, today, and forever he is here.

Book 27

The Book of Daniel

Who wrote the book of Daniel: Daniel

When was it written: The book was written somewhere in the 5th century B.C. after Cyrus (Persian Empire) had toppled the Babylonian Empire.

Why was it written: Daniel is a history of the early years of Babylon's siege of Jerusalem and the exile that follows—all the way through part of the Persian Empire's rule over Judah. The message Daniel conveys throughout the book is that there is only one God and we are to worship only him.

Daniel is the fourth of the four major prophets in the Old Testament. The book of Daniel does contain a considerable amount of prophecy, which you is explained in a bit more detail below. But the book of Daniel also contains miraculous and historical accounts of his life and the lives of his three fellow-Hebrews while in the service of the kings of Babylon and the Persian Empire.

Simply put, the book of Daniel is 'famous' for five things among Christians (and even non-Christians).

- Daniel surviving the night in a den of lions
- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego surviving the fiery furnace
- Daniel interpreting the handwriting on the wall

- Prophecies of the end times
- The “Daniel Fast”

One God and one God only

The account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego being tossed into a furnace hotter than we can imagine and that of Daniel being thrown into a den of lions, are both the result of their refusal to bow down or pray to anyone other than God.

Both times the young men were ordered by the authorities that had taken their people captive to worship the reigning king—once while in Babylonian captivity and once under the rule of the Persian Empire. Both times they refused; saying they would pray to and worship no one but the one true God. Both times God honored their faithfulness and used their lives as a testimony of his love and protection.

Interpretations, visions, and dreams

Daniel receives his messages from God in the form of dreams and visions. We read throughout the book about Daniel having dreams or visions and then angels interpreting them for him; revealing the meaning of what he has seen.

One of Daniel's visions foretold the fall of the Babylonian Empire to the Persian Empire, followed by its fall and the rise and fall of Alexander the Great and the Greek Empire and the Roman Empire. Each of these things happened just as Daniel said they would.

Daniel's other dreams and visions are about the end times—the second coming of Jesus and the final judgement of man. These, of course, have not occurred yet, but we can be sure they will.

The Daniel Fast

In chapters one and ten we read that Daniel fasted from rich foods (fatty, sweet, and cream/gravy-laden), wine, meat, and anything else that was not naturally produced. In chapter one his purpose was to prove that our bodies operate best when we eat according to the plan God designed for us when he created man. In chapter ten he did so as an act of submission and complete dependency on God for clarity and sustenance while he was receiving a vision and its meaning.

Daniel is by no means the first person in the Old Testament to fast his fasting experiences are the only ones that specifically state what he did and did not eat. It is for this reason that over the past few years the Daniel Fast has become popular among churches—almost ‘faddish’. Many see it as the Christian’s diet. But that isn’t what Daniel’s fast was about. It wasn’t about losing weight or even getting healthy. Daniel’s periods of fast were to recognize God’s power in his life and to submit his body, soul, and mind to God.

Daniel…a man who made a difference

You cannot read the book of Daniel without being both challenged and encouraged. In reading Daniel's prophecies, his commitment to the LORD, and his faith that God would do what was best for him no matter when and no matter what, we see a man and his contemporaries who weren't afraid to put their faith to the test. They knew (and we should, tool) that faith without works truly is dead.

Book 28-31

The Book of Hosea, Joel, Amos, and Obadiah

Who wrote these books: Each was written by the man whose name is the title of the book—Hosea, Joel, Amos, and Obadiah.

When were they written:

- Hosea was written at the end of the kingdom of Israel (720 to 730 B.C) Hosea's prophecy comes at the end (disappearance) of the Northern Kingdom.
- Joel was written during the reign of King Joash, King of Judah—most likely around 830-840 B.C.
- Amos was written between 760 and 750 B.C. during the reigns of Judah's King Uzziah and Israel's King Jeroboam II.
- The date of Obadiah's writing is uncertain. Experts believe it was either during the invasion of Jerusalem by the Philistines and Arabians in the 840-850 B.C. period of time or sometime during the siege of Jerusalem by Babylon.

Hosea

Hosea is a book of prophecy calling God's people to repent. God doesn't just give Hosea words to say, though. He makes Hosea's life one big object lesson—and a most unusual one, at that.

God paired Hosea with a wife named Gomer. Gomer was a terrible wife. She was unfaithful and promiscuous. Yet when God told Hosea to take her back and to do so without resentment and anger, he did. God likened Gomer's treatment of her marriage to Israel's relationship with God. They were unfaithful and promiscuous. They 'prostituted' themselves out to false gods and idols, yet God welcomed them back (during the reign of King David) and will welcome them back again when they humble themselves to him.

Hosea also warns us to worship God only, to get rid of all idols in their life and that the cost of not doing so is God's wrath with no holds barred. Hosea doesn't hold anything back. His messages from God are blunt. But God, in his ever-loving way, also gives Hosea the tender words in Hosea 6:6 which say, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings."

Joel

Why was it written: To warn the people that they are facing God's judgement for their harsh disobedience but to assure them of God's forgiveness if they repent of their sins and return to him.

Like Hosea, God uses something tangible to get his message across through Joel. But with Joel God uses locusts. Locust 'invasions' were not uncommon in the land; destroying crops and livestock. But only for a while. A new season meant new growth. God wanted the people of Judah to know that he would destroy their position in the world because of their disobedience and sinful ways. But only for a while. Joel relates God's message that :

"Then you will know that I, the LORD your God, dwell in Zion, my holy hill. Jerusalem will be holy; never again will foreigners invade her….But Egypt will be desolate, Edom a desert waste, because of violence done to the people of Judah, in whose land they shed innocent blood. Judah will be in habited forever…Their bloodguilt, which I have not pardoned, I will pardon." ~Joel 3:17, 19, 20a, 21

Amos

Amos, a shepherd from the tiny town or village of Tekoa, lived and prophesied during the same time Isaiah did. Both were from Judah and both men were completely devoted to the LORD. But that is where the similarities end. While Isaiah lived among the royal court of the Judean kings and was well acquainted with the kings (especially King Hezekiah). Amos, on the other hand, was sent by God to the people of Israel (they had not yet been taken into Assyrian captivity).

Amos's message was no different than the messages of the other prophets in these days:

- God is angry and brokenhearted
- God is calling on Israel and Judah to confess, repent, and turn back to him
- God's patience is wearing thin and punishment is not far away

Amos' prophecies are different, however, in the fact that they address the issue of social justice vs. injustice. He issues stern warnings to anyone whose feelings of superiority because of their wealth, leads them to exploit others, or who exploits others in order to become wealthier and more powerful.

Obadiah

Obadiah's prophecies take a different tone. Rather than focus on the shortcomings of Israel and Judah, Obadiah's prophecies are against Edom—the descendants of Esau.

The Edomites were (and still are) in contention with anyone descended from Jacob because of Jacob's deception against Esau which led to Esau losing his birthright. They proudly gloated over Israel and Judah's demise and their role in luring them away from God. Obadiah warned them, however, that when all is said and done they (the Edomites) will be completely destroyed, but Israel will be restored to their place of honor as God's chosen ones.

The prophecies of Obadiah mirror what Joel said (even though they lived in different centuries). The prophecies of Obadiah have not all come to pass, yet. But they will. You can be sure of it because God is a man of his word.

Book 32

The Book of Jonah

Who wrote the book of Jonah: Jonah

When was it written: Most likely between 825 and 800 B.C. during the time the Assyrians asserting themselves as a dominating world power, but before they had taken the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Why was it written: It was written to give us an example of the extent of God's mercy on those who repent—even those who are gentiles. Jonah, like most of us, needed to understand that God loves each and every person he creates and that he will not turn anyone away who wants to come to him.

Jonah’s mission

Jonah was chosen by God to go to the city of Nineveh to preach a message of repentance. But Jonah didn’t want to go and from what we know from world history, his reasons were most likely a mix of fear and prejudices.

Instead of going, Jonah tried to run away and hide from God in the process. God knew Jonah was the man for the job, though, so he wasn’t going to take no for an answer. Instead, God stopped Jonah from going in the opposite direction by sending a storm that resulted in Jonah being tossed the side of the ship he was on. Once in the water a great fish swallowed Jonah. Jonah remained inside the fish for three days, during which time he asked God to forgive his disobedience and promised he would go wherever God wanted him to go and do whatever God wanted him to do. The fish then spewed Jonah out onto the shore and Jonah did as he promised God he would do.

Nineveh

Before we continue with the message and teachings of Jonah, let's take a little closer look at why Jonah was so opposed to going to Nineveh.

Nineveh was an Assyrian stronghold. It was also a HUGE city (even by today's standards) and the people there were about as far from being godly as you could get. The Assyrians and Israelites had been adversaries since the Exodus. They were known for their strength, ingenuity, and ruthless tactics. In Jonah's mind, saving Nineveh was a waste of time.

Jonah’s message

The message God wanted Jonah to take to the people of Nineveh was simply this: Repent or else. God gave the people of Nineveh forty days to repent. If they did not, he said he would destroy them and their city.

Jonah’s message was well-received. From the lowliest citizen of Nineveh clear up to the king, Jonah tells us that the people repented. They repented (in the words of the king) in hopes that God would have mercy on them and allow them to live.

Their quick acceptance of Jonah’s message/warning indicates they were familiar with God’s hand against Israel’s adversaries—that it was quick, sure, and devastating. It also indicates a belief in God. Granted, they weren’t convinced God was the one and only true God, but they recognized his existence and power.

The rest of the story…

The final chapter of Jonah gives us even more insight into Jonah's attitude and his relationship with God. We see that Jonah's obedience was somewhat self-serving and that he was still dealing with some prejudices against the people of Nineveh. He was sorry they had repented. He would rather have seen them destroyed.

None are worthy all are loved

God was quick to remind Jonah that it wasn't his place to decide who God should save and who he shouldn't. But God's sparing the people of Nineveh from the destruction he sent Jonah to warn them about was about a lot more than 'just' the people of Nineveh. Remember—Jonah was a prophet.

Recording the events of Jonah's life as a prophet is meant to remind us that:

- None of us are worthy of God's mercy but none are excluded from receiving it if they repent
- Obedience to God should always be our first priority
- Prejudices have no place in the hearts of God's children

Sadly the people of Nineveh did not stand by their change of heart. Instead they returned their sinful lifestyle—a lifestyle God eventually punished them for. Nineveh no longer exists today, but archeologists have found some remains of the once-opulent city in the present-day area of Mosul, Iraq.

Book 33-36

The Book of Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah

Who wrote the books of Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: Each of the books was written by the man the book is named for.

When was it written: Micha was written prior to 685 B.C., Nahum was written in the last half of 600th century B.C., Habakkuk was most likely written around 600 B.C., and Zephaniah was written around 630 B.C..

Micha

Little is known about Micah other than what we read in the book he authored. The fact that we know so little about Micah is just one more piece of evidence that popularity, power, and prestige are not necessary in order to do something great for God. All it takes is a genuine and sincere heart of faithful obedience.

The book Micah wrote reflects his simple life of genuine faith. Micah's prophecies are a balance of hope and doom/destruction. He stresses that God has no tolerance for idolatry, rebellion, and empty rituals. Instead, God demands his children to love and serve him with their entire being.

Micha's prophecies take place during a time of prosperity and relative peace in Judah and near the end of the kingdom of Israel. The prosperity Judah was enjoying, however, was not very evenly distributed among the population. The social injustices resulting from the disposition of Judah's wealth was also a matter of great concern to Micah. He stresses that true wealth comes from a repentant heart and relationship with the LORD.

Nahum

Nahum isn't one of the most 'popular' books of the Bible but it is most definitely a book that should be used to show unbelievers the powerful truth and validity of the Bible. And here's why…

Nahum tells of the coming destruction of Nineveh (in 612 BC) due to their wickedness. His writings speak of Nineveh's enemies waiting for just the right time to take their city, about the waters around them bringing about their demise, and how they would cease to exist. And each of these things happened exactly as Nahum said they would.

The Babylonians along with the Medes and other smaller armies joined forces in taking the northern portion of the Assyrian Empire and reducing it to nothing. This was quickly followed by record floodwaters practically swallowing Nineveh (which was a coastal city) whole. What was left of it and the Assyrian Empire was ravaged and burned by the Babylonians and their allies. When it was all said and done nothing but a few piles of charred ruins remained of what had been (for a while) the most powerful government and army in the world.

Why? Because, Nahum tells us in chapter one, that God will not leave the guilty unpunished. He is the creator and master of the universe and ultimately his plan for his creation will prevail. The destruction of Nineveh was merely a step in the direction toward God's plan to someday restore the house of Jacob and to bring each and every one of us to judgement for pronouncement of our home for eternity.

One cannot read the three short chapters that make up the book of Nahum without gaining a greater respect for the

power and truth of God’s existence and the truth of his Word.

Habakkuk

The book of Habakkuk is a book of prophecy, but it is a bit different from some of the other books of prophecy in the fact that Habakkuk not only tells us what God said to him, but also what he said to God. It is their conversation about the people of Israel.

Habakkuk's prophecies took place at the same time Jeremiah and Nahum were prophesying. From his writings we learn that Habakkuk was a man deeply committed to and concerned with the traditions and keeping of the Law of Moses. He was also a man of great faith and compassion toward the oppressed. It was his compassion for those who were mistreated by those who were power-hungry and self-serving that led to the conversations between him and God that are the book of Habakkuk.

The book of Habakkuk is a beautiful book to read—full of promise, hope, and reminders that God isn't offended by our questions. He does, however, expect us to trust him to know and do what is best in his time, and to follow him faithfully no matter what.

NOTE: Part of the book of Habakkuk is repeated in a Psalm.

Zehaniah

Zephaniah was a descendant of King Hezekiah and a man with clout and social standing in Judah. He was well-versed in political issues and the social issues of the day. It is his knowledge of these things that gives the book of Zephaniah a heart, so to speak. He knows how far off-course the people have gotten from who and what God intended them to be, and his messages from God to the people are messages that:

- Warn the people of the terror of the destruction they are headed for
- Offer hope for God's unfailing mercy for those who repent

The events of Zephaniah can be summed up by saying that there is a day of judgement coming; both on Judah for their disobedience, and on all mankind. Zephaniah does make it clear, however, that God will be merciful to those who seek to do God's will in their lives.

Key verses in Micha, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah

Every book of the Bible provides us with words of wisdom, instruction, comfort, encouragement, admonishment, warning, and promise, and hope. Let's look at some of what these books have to offer.

"…Do not my words do good to him whose ways are upright?" Micah 2:7b

"He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Micah 6:8

"But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me." Micah 7:7

"The LORD is slow to anger and great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished." Nahum 1:3

"The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him." Nahum 1:7

"LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy." Habakkuk 3:2

"The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." Zephaniah 3:17

Book 37-39

The Book of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

Who wrote Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi: Each of these books was written by the man it is named for.

Haggai was written around 520 B.C., Zechariah was written sometime around 500 to 480 B.C., and Malachi was written in the early 430s B.C.

Haggai

Haggai and Zechariah lived and prophesied at the same time. Haggai was most likely the older of the two men and from what we read in chapter two, he witnessed the destruction of The Temple by the Babylonians. This, combined with his deep faith and intimate relationship with God, was what drove Haggai to preach his message of determination and commitment to God and to the rebuilding of The Temple after King Darius allowed the rebuilding to continue after the job had been stopped due to opposition from neighboring kingdoms.

Haggai's message is this: That with disobedience comes punishment and with obedience comes great blessing.

Zechariah

Zechariah was both a priest and a prophet. His preaching/prophecies begin shortly after those of Haggai, but because he was so much younger, they continue long after Haggai is dead.

Zechariah's main concerns were for the rebuilding of The Temple and the spiritual renewal of the Hebrew nation. They had been given a golden opportunity following their release from Babylonian captivity after Babylon fell to the Persian Empire. While the Persian Empire was definitely the power-force in the world, they were not opposed to the Hebrew people (Israelites) worshipping God as they saw fit nor to them having a city (Jerusalem) or a building (The Temple) for worshipping their God. Because of this, Zechariah's messages to the people are strong and forthright:

- Listen and learn from the prophets before him
- Turn back to God with a heart of repentance and obedience

Zechariah's prophecies are Messianic. He predicts Christ's coming to earth humbly and of being a man of 'lowly means'. He predicts his rejection by the religious leaders, his betrayal for thirty pieces of silver, his second coming, and the establishment of an eternal peace and prosperity for those who are saved through him.

Every prophecy made by Zechariah (and the rest of the prophets) that has already taken place has done so with precise accuracy, so there is no reason to doubt the things that have not yet happened will happen in the very same way —with precise accuracy.

Malachi

Malachi was written after the rebuilding of The Temple. During that time many of the people had experienced a time of spiritual revival. The hands-on experience of rebuilding The Temple and restoring their city had been a tangible reminder of who God is and what they meant to him. But it didn't last long.

After The Temple was rebuilt the people experienced hardships due to famine and drought that ruined their crops. Instead of turning to God for help, however, the people blamed God for their troubles and once again treated him with disrespect. They turned to foreign gods and idolatry.

Micah's message is a message of warning against such actions. Micha reminds the people of God's holiness and how his holiness is capable of extreme wrath AND extreme mercy—but that it was up to the people as to which one they experienced.

Micha also prophecies about the second coming of Christ. He proclaims it the day when everyone on earth will give an account for their actions and receive the pronouncement of their eternal destiny.

From Malachi to Jesus Christ

As previously stated, Malachi's prophecies take place after the rebuilding of The Temple during the reign of King Darius the Great of Persia. It is at this point that God ceases to audibly speak. No more conversations in a garden. No more burning bushes. No more parting of the waters. No more manna. No more coming to people in dreams and visions. No more "Thus sayeth the LORD"'s.

Instead, the Jews live under the rule of Persian Empire until 330 B.C., followed by the 160 + period known as the Hellenistic Period—the time in which the Greeks and their culture and philosophies ruled and forever changed the world. During the years of the Grecian influence, the Jews were allowed to worship and observe their culture practices without any interference or opposition. In fact, Alexander the Great even granted them exclusion from paying taxes during the Sabbath Years. It was also during this time that some of the Old Testament was translated into the Greek language.

But just like every other truly great empire, the Greek Empire imploded on itself. The switch in power led to a short period in history (just a few years) called the Hasmonean Period in which Jews were severely persecuted and copies of the scripture were destroyed.

Many theologians have questioned whether or not some of the original scriptures were destroyed in their entirety (no copies left) during this time. While it is possible that letters, manuscripts, and other documents of a Biblical nature were permanently erased from existence during this period of

time, it is important to remember that everything God wants us to know is contained in the Holy Scriptures.

The brief period of persecution ended with the revolt of Jews led by Judas the Maccabee and the entry into Jerusalem by Pompey, the Roman general. Pompey's march into Jerusalem and the surrounding areas officially began the period of time in which the Jews were under the leadership and rule of the Roman Empire (as was most of the rest of the known world at that point in time).

The Roman government was not particularly opposed to the Jews worshipping God or observing their laws (the Mosaic Law) in regards to holidays, festivals, etc., but the Emperor made it very clear that everyone's first allegiance was to Rome.

The Roman government appointed procurators to rule over the provinces of their vast empire. And it was the procurator over the entire land of Palestine, Herod the Great, who was in control in the year 30 A.D.—the year Jesus was born and the year we once again begin hearing from God.

Why the centuries of silence? Simply put…God's timing is perfect.

Book 40

The Book of Matthew

Who wrote the book of Matthew: Matthew

When was it written: 70 A.D.—almost forty years after Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

Who was Matthew

Matthew was a tax collector in Capernaum. His given name was Levi and he was the son of Alphaeus. This is a different Alphaeus than the father of James the lesser and Thaddeus (two of the other twelve disciples).

Jews considered tax collectors to be traitors and enemies because they were most often Jewish people working for the Roman government against their fellow Jews. They were known for their dishonesty and stealing from the Jews by demanding more taxes than were actually owed. For Jesus to call Matthew to be a disciple—one of his closest friends and confidants—was a slap in the face to the lowly but very Jewish fishermen (Peter, Andrew, James, and John) and Bartholomew, who was a direct descendant of King David. But Jesus saw beyond the obvious into Matthew's true heart. He saw the desire for truth and the spirit of conviction and strength to take that truth to masses.

Matthew's account of the life and ministry of Jesus is detailed and verbatim (Jesus' own words) throughout much of the book. Some might wonder how this can be since a) some of the incidents in Matthew took place prior to Matthew's being called and b) Matthew didn't write the book until long after the incidents had taken place. Given Matthew's social status (well-educated and prominent), his attention to detail and his 'target audience' in writing, it is only reasonable to assume he would have spent a considerable amount of time talking to Jesus; asking him what he said. And because Jesus is Jesus, he would have had no trouble recalling his own words.

We must also remember that the Bible is the inspired words of God. Everything thing in its pages is just as God needs

and wants it to be.

Matthew's purpose in writing

While all four gospels that record the ministry, miracles, and messages of Jesus are in harmony with one another and none of them contradict the others in any way, they are written by different men, so they each have a different perspective or emphasis. Matthew's target audience was the general Jewish population.

Matthew's primary objective was to prove to his Jewish peers and readers that Jesus is the Messiah prophesied about by Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah, and all the other prophets of the Old Testament. Matthew's use of Old Testament prophesies, references to the Law of Moses, and repeated use of phrases like "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" are his way of relating the Gospel to the Jewish community in a way that coincides with their teachings and history rather than contradicting or opposing it.

What does Matthew tell us about Jesus

Matthew's recordation of the Gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus—something that would definitely speak to the Jewish community he was writing for. In reading through the genealogy we should understand that it is more than 'just' a bunch of names. From this record we should come to understand:

- The significance of numbers to God. Fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the exile of Judah to Babylon, and fourteen generations from the exile to the birth of Jesus. (Matthew 1:17) The fourteenth day of the first month was the day to celebrate Passover and it was on the day of Passover that Jesus was crucified.
- God doesn't use perfect people to bring about his perfect plan. In the lineage of Jesus we have:
- Tamar, whose father in-law, Judah, slept with her thinking she was a prostitute.
- Rahab, another prostitute who saved the spies sent to check out the Promised Land. Rahab was the great-great grandmother of King David.
- Ruth, a Moabite widow of an Israelite whose love and devotion to her mother in-law resulted in love and marriage a second time around.
- David, the man after God's own heart, who also committed adultery, murder, and blatantly disobeyed God…but was always repentant and learned from his mistakes.
- King Manasseh, the son of King Hezekiah, and said to be the most wicked of Judah's kings.
- Josiah, the youngest and most Godly king of Judah.

- Several generations of lowly tradesmen all the way down to Jacob and Joseph—Jesus' earthly grandfather and father.

I am also certain that it is no mistake that Jesus' earthly grandfather and father shared the names of two of God's most faithful servants. Jacob was the father of the sons from which the twelve tribes of Israel came. Joseph was the second to the youngest of Jacob's sons. He was the young man God used in mighty ways after his brothers sold him into slavery and the man who saved his family from starvation by bringing them to Egypt.

Following the record of Jesus' lineage Matthew gives the basic, but most important details of Jesus' birth, the visit by the Magi, the family's escape to Egypt, and their return to Nazareth some three years later. These events are given to prove they are fulfillment of prophecy—something the Jewish people put great stock in. But again, Matthew's goal in writing was to prove Jesus is who he claimed to be while here on earth.

Matthew then jumps from Jesus' 'toddlerhood' into his ministry; beginning with his baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. Jesus' baptism is significant for the following reasons:

- His baptism was by immersion to set an example for those who choose to follow him in faith and obedience. While our baptism is for the forgiveness of our sins and receipt of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38), Jesus was sinless and he is part of the trinity. He didn't need those things. But Jesus doesn't ask us to do anything he has not done himself.
- Following Jesus' baptism, God is audibly heard for the first time in centuries when he says, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

What follows is a list of the remaining highlights from the book of Matthew. Many of these are recorded in at least one of the other gospels, but some are not. And when they are recorded they are not in the same 'order' as they are in Matthew. But again, the gospels never contradict each other. They are simply written from different perspectives to different types of audiences. In other words, what Matthew's targeted audience would need in order to be convicted and convinced is not what Mark's intended audience would need. In all four gospels (and throughout the entire Bible), however, it is the same Jesus who did the same things for the same unselfish reason—to save us from our sins.

- Jesus' baptism and temptation by Satan: Jesus was brought to the lowest levels this side of death humans can experience—starvation, dehydration, extreme exhaustion and fatigue, exposure to the elements. In spite of all of these, however, Jesus was able to refuse Satan's temptations, which is proof you and I can, too.
- The Sermon on the Mount: The most famous of all of Jesus' sermons, the Sermon on the Mount is a lesson in morality and integrity all Christians should pattern their lives after.
- Miracles of Jesus: The book of Matthew is filled with accounts of Jesus' miracles. Healing those who were blind, deaf, mute, crippled, racked with seizures, demonic possession, and even raising people from the dead, were some of the ways Jesus validated his identity. But the miracles he performed weren't just about proving his identity. Jesus' miracles came from his heart—a heart aching for his people. Jesus' compassion and love come from the fact that he had his hand in our creation. He cannot help but love us that deeply—just like a parent cannot help loving their child.
- Jesus' ministry: Besides the miracles Jesus did, his ministry involved a significant amount of teaching.

Often times his teaching was in the form of parables, which are earthly stories with heavenly or spiritual meanings. Matthew and the other gospels record a good number of Jesus' parables—all of which are relevant still today.

- How Jesus dealt with opposition: Jesus was well-received by the general public in the early stages of his ministry. His popularity ebbed and flowed, however, depending on where he was at and how much he 'stepped on the toes' of the people he was preaching to. The religious leaders, however, never welcomed Jesus. They saw him as a threat to their position of power and sway over the people. Sadly the religious leaders of the day had gotten off track from where they were supposed to be according to the Mosaic Law. They were more about ritual and ceremony than faith and obedience. They refused to see the truth of Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy because they didn't want to. Jesus dealt with this opposition in a number of ways depending on the particular circumstance. He:
- Ignored it and went on about his business
- He put the religious leaders in their place by exposing their piety and ignorance to the true law
- He avoided them
- Woes and signs: Matthew 23 begins Jesus' no-nonsense message to the religious leaders, his disciples, and the general public. He begins by recognizing the fact that the Pharisees and teachers of the Law were in positions of authority. But he immediately followed this up by telling the people not to listen to them. He called them out for not practicing what they preached, so to speak, for distorting the Law, and for being men who were prideful, arrogant, and full of false religion. Following this 'opening statement' Jesus listed seven (another significant number) woes or warnings to them. He doesn't hold anything back—calling them vipers and snakes (an obvious reference to Satan disguising

himself as a snake when he tempted Eve and Adam). He ends this message by referencing his second coming. Afterwards he and his disciples left the crowds and went off to be by themselves. Once they were alone with Jesus the disciples asked him when all of those things (the seven woes) would take place. What would be the signs of their coming, they asked. Jesus answered by telling them what they wanted to know. Matthew 24:4-51 records Jesus' description of the end times and his second coming. Many of the things Jesus speaks of have been happening for years—generations, even. The fact that this is so only backs up the words of the Bible that tell us how patient God is and that he wants as many as possible to have time to choose him. But just like God's patience ran out with Israel and Judah, it will run out with us, too. Jesus' words are simply a reminder that we shouldn't take that chance.

- The plot to kill Jesus put into action and Judas betrays Jesus: Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests and arranged to set Jesus up—revealing when and where he would be so that he could be arrested. Arrested for what? For being Jesus.
- The Last Supper: The Last Supper was the name given to the Feast of the Unleavened Bread—the Passover meal. It is called the Last Supper because it is Jesus' last meal. Prior to this day/evening Jesus had entered Jerusalem amid shouts of praise. But in just a matter of those few days the tide had shifted. In a few short hours many of the same people who had welcomed him to Jerusalem would be shouting, "Crucify him!" It was also during the Last Supper that Jesus instituted the practice of communion, where he washed the disciples' feet, where he told Peter he (Peter) would deny him three times before the next day, and where he revealed that one of their own (Judas) would betray him that very night.

- Jesus arrested, ‘tried’ and crucified: After finishing the meal in the upper room, Jesus took his core group (Peter, James, and John) with him to the garden to pray. Following his time of prayer Judas, along with a group of armed men sent by the high priests came to the garden and arrested Jesus. Jesus knew the events that were unfolding and those yet to come had to be, so he simply told the men to do what they had to do. The rest of the night happened just as Jesus said it would. Peter denied knowing Jesus three times prior to the rooster’s crowing to signal the start of a new day. Judas hung himself in shame and remorse for what he had done. Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin was a farce and nothing more than a means by which to humiliate and try to discredit the Savior. Following this mock trial Jesus is handed over to Pilot, the governor for Rome. Pilot finds no fault in Jesus but bending under the ‘weight’ of pressure from the Jewish leaders and people, he sentences Jesus to death on the cross. Even if Pilot would have stood his ground, ultimately Jesus would have received the same sentence. He had to die.
- Jesus crucified and buried and resurrected: The details of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection recorded in Matthew are agonizingly real. Little is left to the imagination. Matthew very much wanted the Jewish community he was writing to and to know…to feel what on the surface appeared to be what they had done to the Messiah, but was in truth, what the Messiah had done for them (and us).
- Jesus gives the great commission and returns to heaven: Matthew gives fewer details following Jesus’ resurrection than the other three gospels. His only detailed account of what happened after Jesus spoke with the women who had come to the tomb, was one that put the religious leaders to shame. He revealed the fact that they tried to buy the silence of the soldiers guarding the tomb. They were willing to do anything to

save face rather than accept the truth of Jesus' holiness. From the other gospels, however, we know that Jesus remained on earth for forty days following his resurrection. His last act on earth was to gather his disciples around him so that they could give them one last final set of instructions and so that they could witness his return to heaven. That last 'set of instructions' is what is known as the Great Commission. It was not only given to them, however. It is to be the goal of everyone who accepts Jesus as Savior.

Key verses in Matthew

Every book of the Bible provides us with words of wisdom, instruction, comfort, encouragement, admonishment, warning, and promise, and hope. Let's look at some of what the book of Matthew has to offer.

"Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented." Matthew 3:13-15

Matthew chapters 5-7, The Sermon on the Mount

"On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Matthew 9:12-13

"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." Matthew 10:28

"When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Matthew 16:13-16

"Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus

looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” Matthew 19:24-26

“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father.” Matthew 24:36

Matthew 27, The account of Jesus’ death and burial

“The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.” Matthew 28:5-6

“Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:18-20

Book 41

The Book of Mark

Who wrote the book of Mark: Mark, who is justifiably assumed to be the son of Peter

When was it written: Around 55 A.D.

Mark is the shortest of the gospels and focuses on the facts surrounding Jesus' ministry and miracles.

Like Matthew and the other gospels, Mark also has a target audience—Roman and other Gentile readers. Because these people groups were not familiar with Jewish laws and customs, Mark takes the time to explain these things in detail and why/how they relate to Jesus' ministry as the fulfillment of the Law. Mark is committed to convincing readers of Jesus' deity as the Son of the one true and living God. Mark's explanations of Jewish laws and customs are interwoven within the accounts of Jesus' miracles and messages so that readers will see the purposefulness of everything Jesus did.

And finally, it is worth noting that Mark devotes one-third of his writing to one week in Jesus' life—his last week on earth. This makes a powerful statement as to the depth of Mark's gratitude for the gift of salvation through Jesus' death on the cross. It also demonstrates Mark's desire to live out the Great Commission (Matthew 28)—to take the message of the gospel to all nations.

Who was Mark

Mark was a devoted follower of Jesus even though can safely assume from various scriptures throughout the New Testament that Mark was considerably younger than Jesus and the disciples. His close association with Jesus combined with his young age is one more piece of evidence (in addition to those given below) that the belief that Mark was the son of Peter is correct. While there is no indisputable proof that Peter and Mark were father and son, there are several strong indicators pointing in that direction:

- Mark's style of writing and his 'voice' are very similar in nature to Peter's.
- We know from scripture (Matthew 8:14 and Mark 1:30) that Peter was married, so it is likely he also had at least one child.
- Peter refers to Mark (also known as John Mark) as his son. Scholars are not sure whether this is in a biological sense of spiritual sense, so that is why this statement is not considered indisputable.
- Mark's mother is Mary—not Jesus' mother, but another woman named Mary (Acts 12:12). Her house was the first place Peter went after the angels miraculously removed him from prison. It would make sense that he would go to his wife's house, which was, of course, his house, as well.
- Mark was active in the ministry—both with Barnabas, his cousin, and Paul. This fact, coupled with the fact that we know he was considerably younger than Paul and Peter also makes it a logical assumption.

What does Mark tell us about Jesus

Rather than begin with the miracle of Jesus' birth like Matthew and Luke do, Mark begins his account of Jesus' life here on earth by telling readers about John the Baptist and his role in bringing Jesus onto the scene. The account of Jesus' baptism, God's audible voice being heard, and a greatly condensed mention of Jesus' time of fasting and being tempted by Satan immediately follow.

Mark's intent was not to make light of what happened to Jesus in the desert. But quite frankly, the people Mark was reaching out to didn't understand the concept or reasoning behind fasting and they certainly didn't comprehend the power of Satan and sin in our lives. They didn't even see sin as sin. In other words, expounding on these events wouldn't have promoted Mark's efforts to convince the non-Jews he was writing for that Jesus is the Messiah. But the need to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins and that God literally spoke to express his pleasure and approval of what had taken place...those things needed to be shared.

From here Mark, like the other gospel accounts, informs readers of the calling/selection of the first disciples and the fact that Jesus wasted no time in preaching, teaching, and healing.

With that being said, I want to list for you what Mark felt it was most important for his targeted audience to know about Jesus and his ministry:

- Mark is the only one to mention the fact that some of Jesus' earliest miracles took place in the home of Simon Peter's mother in-law. If indeed Mark is Peter's son,

this would definitely have made a lasting impression upon young Mark, because the probability of him being an eye witness to these events was quite high.

- Jesus wasn't content to stay in one place. Verse 1:38 expresses Jesus' desire and commitment to reach as many people as possible.
- Mark wasn't shy about letting readers know the Jewish religious leaders were highly opposed to Jesus. From the very beginning they were looking for ways to trick Jesus, catch him in a lie, or some other offense. But they couldn't so they resorted to name-calling and threats. His purpose in exposing their thoughts and feelings wasn't to come to their defense, though. It was to discredit them even more, because no matter what they said or did, Jesus had an appropriate answer that exposed their pride and ignorance to the truth.
- In the later part of chapter 2 and the first part of chapter 3, Mark gives us two different accounts of Jesus breaking the Sabbath by allowing his disciples to pick up heads of grain to eat as they passed by some fields and by healing a man on the Sabbath. Both were considered work, which was strictly forbidden according to the Law of Moses. Jesus countered their accusations by asking questions that would only serve to expose their true motives for calling him out. Jesus wasn't antagonizing them solely for the purpose of 'picking a fight'. He wanted…he needed to expose them for who and what they really were. These men were the religious leaders of their day. They were highly respected (and feared) by the Jewish community —and had been for hundreds of years. Jesus wasn't there to win a popularity contest between him and them. He was there to seek and save the lost, to be the fulfillment of the Law (thus ending the old Law), and to establish the Church as God intended it. He had to help the people see and understand that the old ways were no longer necessary.

- Mark tells us that the Pharisees and other religious leaders hated Jesus so much that they conspired with the Herodians (who were extremely corrupt and pro-Roman government) to kill Jesus.
- Mark is the only writer to mention the fact that people came from Idumea to see and listen to Jesus. This is especially relevant due to the fact that Idumea is the Greek name for Edom, the land of Esau's descendants.
- In addition to the miracles Mark records, he records a number of Jesus' parables including the Parable of the Sower that explains why some people will reject the truth even though they know it as truth.
- Mark, like the other gospels, records the account of Jesus sending out the twelve disciples to teach, preach, and heal.
- Chapter 6 gives us the account of the beheading of John the Baptist.
- We are given detailed accounts of Jesus' feeding of 5,000 men (plus women and children) using only five little loaves of bread and two fish. This miracle is one that had literally thousands of witnesses and benefactors and could not be explained away on any level.
- Mark 7:1-23 is an especially important passage of scripture. It reveals yet another example of the dangers of allowing doctrine (or in this case, the Law) to become ritualistic and twisted to suit personal preferences and needs instead of a matter of the heart. Jesus summed it up best in verse 8 when he said, "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."
- In addition to mentioning the fact that at least a few Edomites came to investigate Jesus, a Syrophoenician woman boldly approached Jesus requesting he drive the demons out of her daughter. The term 'syrophoenician' could have denoted a) she was Phoenician but living in the Roman province of Syria instead of Africa, or b) she was biracial—part Syrian and part Phoenician. Either

way she was a Gentile who was unafraid to approach Jesus and unashamed to admit her faith. And that was exactly the point Mark wanted to make—that Jesus is the Savior of all mankind.

- Like Matthew, Mark gives us the account of Peter's confession of faith, but adds the not-so-little detail that after praising Peter for his acknowledgement of truth, he warns the disciples not to tell anyone about him. This statement is extremely troubling and contradictory to many. Why shouldn't they tell people? Hadn't Jesus been preaching and doing miracles in order to get people to believe he was God's Son, their Savior? Hadn't he sent the disciples out to do the very same? Hadn't Jesus said he was there to seek and save the lost? Yes, to all of those. But Jesus knew things were about to change. He was in the final months of his ministry and life here on earth. He still had lots to do and little time left to do it, so he needed as little opposition as possible. So instead of focusing on large crowds, he focused his attention on small groups of people and individuals—among those where he would have the greatest impact.
- Mark provides insight into the conversations Jesus has with his disciples—conversations about how they are to present themselves and conduct themselves while going about the business of ministry. He reminds them that the kingdom of God is not an earthly one and that they shouldn't be concerned with power and popularity, but with speaking and holding to the truth in bold humility no matter what.
- The remainder of the book of Mark contains the accounts of many of the same incidents the other gospels give us including Jesus' message about the signs of the end of the age, what faith really is, the cost of following Jesus, and what it means to be truly great in the eyes of God.

- The final chapters of Mark give us the account of the Last Supper, Jesus' arrest and trial before the high priests and Pilot, his death on the cross, his burial and resurrection, and a couple of references to his post-resurrection appearances to the disciples.

The book of Mark ends with:

- A description of Jesus' return to heaven after he has given the disciples the Great Commission (Mark 16:15). In these last verses he tells us that Jesus was taken up to heaven where he sat down at the right hand of God (Mark 16:19).
- The statement that after seeing Jesus return to heaven the disciples went out and preached just as they had been told to do and that the LORD confirmed his word by allowing them (the disciples) to do mighty works in his name.

The controversy surrounding the book of Mark

Some scholars say that the last few verses of Mark (Mark 16:9-20) are not found in the earliest manuscripts of Mark; causing questions as to whether or not they should actually be part of the Bible. In fact, footnotes in the Bible make note of this. However, when you look at the whole picture, you see that these statements are not completely accurate.

Yes, the verses are missing from some of the early manuscripts, but not all—not by any means. While verses 9-20 are not present in less than a half-dozen early manuscripts (fourth to twelfth century), they are present in several hundred others dated from the second to thirteenth century; including the old Latin (second century), Armenian (fifth century), Ethiopian (seventh century), and the Byzantine (450 A.D.) just to name a few.

It should also be noted that the history and doctrine contained in these verses is repeated without any hint of contradiction in multiple other places in the Bible, and that ALL scripture is God-breathed. It is all there because God wants it to be.

Key verses in Mark:

Every book of the Bible provides us with words of wisdom, instruction, comfort, encouragement, admonishment, warning, and promise, and hope. Let's look at some of what the book of Mark has to offer.

"These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder); Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him." Mark 3:16-19

"I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of eternal sin." Mark 3:28-29

Mark 4:1-20, the Parable of the Sower

"If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.: Mark 8:38

"The even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Mark 10:45

"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." Mark 11:24-25

Mark 13, the Signs of the End of the Age

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.” Mark 16:6

“He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” Mark 16:15-16

Book 42

The Book of Luke

Who wrote the book of Luke: Luke

When was it written: Sometime between 59 and 63 A.D.

The gospel of Luke is the most orderly and complete telling of Jesus life and ministry. This is interesting in the fact that Luke was not one of the twelve disciples. He was also a Gentile by birth—the only Gentile to author books in the Bible (he also wrote Luke). He was, however, a highly-educated individual, a doctor by trade, and a devoted follower of Christ and assistant to Paul on his missionary journeys and in the early churches. Luke was also a keen historian and stickler for details. Many call him the first apologist, which is a person who makes reasonable 'arguments' and justifications for religious teachings.

Luke's target audience was his fellow Gentiles. He wanted them to embrace the truth and experience the love and grace of salvation as he had. Luke's joy in Christ is almost tangible and his hope for eternity in heaven is contagious.

So how did Luke gain such intimate and detailed insight into the life and ministry of Jesus?

Luke's introduction to his book of the gospel answers this question:

“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” Luke 1:1-4

The name Theophilus means ‘loved of God’. This fact has caused some theologians to wonder if the Theophilus Luke was writing to was not actually a person, but rather a title for all Christians and would-be Christians because we are loved of God. The words ‘most excellent’ preceding his name, however, strongly indicates that the Theophilus Luke addresses in the opening verses of his book of the gospel is a real person—most likely a Roman official.

What does Luke tell us about Jesus

The book of Luke is very thorough and it is the only one of the four gospels to give us several different accounts of events and teaching of Jesus' ministry. For example, Luke is the only one of the four gospels that tells us the parable of the Good Samaritan, the prodigal son, and the post-resurrection encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

Because of Luke's most thorough account of Jesus' life and ministry, I am simply going to go through the book; listing the major sections of the book and provide you with interesting or noteworthy information to go with them.

- Birth of John the Baptist: Luke is also the only one of the gospels that gives us the account of the miraculous birth of John the Baptist. John, who was Jesus' cousin, was born to Zechariah, the priest and his wife, Elizabeth —devoted Jews descended from Aaron. They were also very old and had not been able to have children. So when an angel told Zechariah he was going to be a father, the old man questioned the angel Gabriel who had been sent to give him the message. Because of his doubt, Zechariah was struck dumb. He and Elizabeth, however, did conceive a child and named him John as the angel had instructed Zechariah to do—at which time he was again able to speak. John was then raised up to know and honor God in all things and as prophesied, became the man who prepared the way for Jesus' ministry.
- Birth of Jesus: The second chapter of Luke provides us with the most-often recited/read account of Jesus' birth because it is the most complete and most beautifully told. Not only does it capture the facts, but the feelings

of those involved. The details encompassed in Luke's account of Jesus' birth are an excellent example of the extent of Luke's interviews and research. Even secular scholars agree that Luke was a historian among historians—the best of the best.

- Jesus as a boy: Once again Luke stands alone in revealing to us the only details we have about Jesus' boyhood beyond their return from Egypt as recorded in Matthew. From Luke we are able to discern that Mary and Joseph were devoted to God and took their job as parents of this miraculous baby seriously. By presenting Jesus at The Temple to be circumcised and blessed by Simeon and Anna, they were unwittingly fulfilling prophecy while keeping the Law as they had been raised to do. We also see in the second chapter that even from an early age Jesus knew he had a one-of-a-kind purpose. He knew he was different, yet he was also a child who needed to be cared for and treated as any child should.

NOTE: One particularly interesting verse is Luke 2:50: "But they did not understand what he was saying to them." This verse is in reference to Jesus' reply to Mary's question of why Jesus had run off from her and Joseph. Why had he worried them so? Jesus' reply was that they should know he needed to be in his Father's house.

Why didn't they understand?

Their lack of understanding could have been a number of things:

- To that point, on the outside, Jesus was just like every other kid—including his siblings. It is quite possible that Mary and Joseph were so focused on just getting by that they had allowed the passage of time to dull their senses in regards to who Jesus really was.

- They may have been focusing more on the fact that Jesus had been missing for a few days—something any conscious parent would do. Their misunderstanding may have been more about what he had done rather than why he had done it.
- Following the accounts of Jesus' pre-ministry life, Luke also gives us the account of Jesus' baptism, the period of fasting, and the temptations from Satan. Included in the fact that Jesus was about thirty years old when he started his formal ministry and a genealogy of Jesus from the side of his earthly father, Joseph.
- Following his baptism and time in the desert, we read in Luke 4 that Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth, but it was not the homecoming one would expect the Messiah to receive. Or was it? When Jesus first read from the scroll of Isaiah, everyone was proud of their 'hometown boy'. They were also amazed because as far as they knew, he was nothing more than the son of Joseph, a poor, but respected carpenter. When they questioned how he, the son of Joseph, could be so knowledgeable, Jesus warned them about the dangers of not accepting him for who he was. This angered them and they drove him out of town. In all honesty one would have to admit that the confusion in the minds of the people was somewhat justified. They'd known Jesus most of his life (since the family had returned from Egypt when Jesus was approximately three years old). They had watched him grow up. Their children had played with him. They had celebrated the Passover with him and his family. He was just another member of their community as far as they were concerned, so who was he to all of a sudden be telling them… He was Jesus, that's who.
- The last half of chapter 4 and chapter 5 give us the same accounts as Matthew and Mark do—the calling of the first disciples and some of Jesus' early miracles.

- Chapter six begins with Luke's account of Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees over picking up heads of grain to eat and healing a man on the Sabbath. This is immediately followed by a listing of the twelve disciples and Luke's condensed version of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In parts of chapters ten, eleven, and twelve, Luke again records sections of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. From this we see that Luke's account of Jesus' ministry is not solely chronological, but also topical; meaning he inserted sections of the Sermon on the Mount where they fit with some of the other things he was writing. This doesn't make the Bible any less accurate, though. It is simply telling the story from a different perspective to a different audience. The facts always have and always will remain the same.
- Ministry, parables and miracles of Jesus make chapters seven through nine.
- Chapter ten begins with Jesus sending out seventy-two followers in pairs. Their job was to go into towns and villages ahead of him to prepare the people for his coming. These men were given explicit instructions as to how to present themselves, what to do, and what not to do. They were also given authority from God to heal people and cast out demons. The time in which they were to do these things was obviously limited, as we read that they returned to him with a report of what had taken place (verse 17). Another verse that is of particular interest in this passage is verse 20: "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Jesus' words were words of warning against pride and arrogance—of falsely believing that what they were able to accomplish was of their doing rather than God's. It is a warning we need to heed today, as well.
- Chapter ten ends with the parable of the Good Samaritan and our introduction to Jesus' close friends

and followers, Mary and her sister, Martha (their brother was Lazarus).

- The next several chapters primarily consist of Jesus' parables. Again, a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly or spiritual meaning. The parables Luke records for us teach us about God's forgiving and merciful character, the fact that God is personally interested in each of us, the importance of us forgiving others and treating them as we want to be treated, the power of persistent prayer, and the importance of standing firm in the truth.
- The account of Zacchaeus the tax collector surrendering his life to Jesus is recorded only in the gospel of Luke, yet it is one of the most often-told accounts in the Bible. Zacchaeus' conversion is a positive reminder of the fact that none of us are beyond saving or unloved by God.
- Chapters twenty-two through twenty-four are devoted to the end of Jesus' life here on earth. Luke begins his account with Judas' agreement to betray Jesus and ends with the ascension to heaven. Luke's account is completely in line with those of the other three gospels, but as is the case with the other three, he includes somethings the others do not and vice versa. Some of the things Luke includes that the others do not are:
- The fact that an angel from heaven comforted Jesus while he was praying in the garden just prior to his arrest
- The fact that Jesus put the soldier's ear back on his head after Peter cut it off with a sword (while Jesus was being arrested)
- That Peter and Jesus made eye contact right after Peter denied Jesus the third time
- The friendship that was formed between Herod and Pilot as a result of Jesus' arrest and death sentence
- More of the words Jesus spoke while on the way to Golgotha

- The account of Jesus speaking with Cleopas and someone else on the road to Emmaus. We don't know for certain who Cleopas was or who was with him. We know it wasn't one of the eleven chosen disciples (242:33), but we know whoever the two men were, they were faithful followers Jesus trusted enough to share his resurrected presence with.
- Luke does not, however, share with readers the Great Commission. He simply says that Jesus blessed the disciples before leaving them and that they worshipped him and praised God in The Temple for all they had seen, heard, and experienced.

Key verses in Luke

Every book of the Bible provides us with words of wisdom, instruction, comfort, encouragement, admonishment, warning, and promise, and hope. Let's look at some of what the book of Luke has to offer.

Luke 2, the account of Jesus' birth and early life

"The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks." Luke 6:45

"He replied, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." Luke 8:21

"I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God." Luke 12:8-9

"Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Luke 12:15

"Jesus said to his disciples, "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves." Luke 17:1-2

"Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." Luke 18:1

“

While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faced to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in galilee: “The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified, and on the third day be raised again.”” Luke 24:4-7

Book 43

The Book of John

Who wrote the book of John: John

When was it written: Based on what we know of John's post-resurrection ministry, it was most likely written around 85 A.D.

The gospel of John is an eyewitness account of the events in the life and ministry of Jesus. John was one of the first four disciples Jesus called into full-time ministry; making him privy just about every moment of Jesus' three year evangelistic crusade.

John is also known as the disciple that Jesus loved. Among the twelve disciples Jesus chose as his core group of confidants and assistants, he had an even more select group of three—Peter, James, and John. And from those three we see numerous times when it was John Jesus relied on. It was John Jesus entrusted his mom to right before he (Jesus) breathed his last breath on the cross. Yes, in spite of the fact that Jesus had several brothers (the writer of James and the writer of Jude being two of them), he entrusted him mother to John. But why? What made John so special?

The answer is simple: Family. John was family…Jesus' first cousin, to be exact. The fact that Jesus, James, and John were first cousins is not specifically stated in scripture like that, i.e. "Jesus, James, and John were cousins". But the fact

presents itself in all four of the gospels when you put them together to see what they say.

Fact #1: We learn early-on that James and John are the sons of Zebedee.

Fact #2: The Gospel writers tell us that among the women standing with Mary (Jesus' mother) at the cross was Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the lessor, and the mother of Zebedee's children (Matthew). The book of Mark tells us the same thing, only he calls the mother of Zebedee's children by name—Salome.

Fact #3: Salome and Mary (Jesus' mother) were sisters. John tells us in recording who was with Mary at the cross that the group of women consisted of Mary, Mary Magdalene, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary's sister, Salome.

Understanding the relationship between Jesus and James sheds a lot of light on some of the incidents in the Bible surrounding James and his brother, John. For example, knowing that they were related makes it easier to understand how James and John's mother would have had the 'audacity' to approach Jesus to ask a special favor of him for her sons. She was his aunt. She'd been in his life from the very beginning. She'd watched him grow up—possibly even helped care for him at times.

It also explains why Jesus asked John to watch over Mary after he was gone. He knew Mary and Salome would be together—that Mary would continue to lean on her sister for love and support. It wasn't anything against his siblings. He just knew John would be seeing after Salome's well-being, so….

John's gospel was written for the non-Jewish community—especially the Greeks. His purpose for writing is evangelism

plain and simple. John doesn't focus on presenting evidence of the truth, but rather the spiritual necessity of believing.

John begins his writing by establishing the fact that Jesus is part of the Trinity and that he has always been. This would have been especially important for witnessing to the Greeks due to their attention to and extreme interest in philosophy. They would have wanted answers not only to who Jesus was and why he came, but also where Jesus came from and who sent him. Following John's introduction of Jesus and his statement of why he is writing, John delves into the ministry of Jesus in the same way the other three gospels do—with the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist.

While there are several of Jesus' miracles and parables mentioned by one or two of the writers of the four gospel but not the others, Jesus' baptism is at the forefront of all of them—and for good reason. It was essential for Jesus to set the example for what he was commanding us to do. And it was equally important that he begin his ministry with his baptism because our baptism is the beginning of our salvation…our entry into God's family.

Following Jesus' baptism John recorded the calling of Jesus' first six disciples—Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, and Bartholomew (Nathanael)—in the same way the other gospel writers did.

Chapter two of the book of John opens with the account of Jesus' first miracle—changing the water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana. John is the only one to record this miracle, but we know it is Jesus' first miracle (in contrast to the miracles the other disciples recorded in conjunction with the calling of the first disciples) because John states that it is Jesus' first miracle. And John's credibility in being the only one to record Jesus' first miracle is valid due to the fact that because he was one of the first called, he was there from the onset.

The last sentence in this passage of scripture says, “He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.” Sometimes this statement leaves people wondering how this is different from them leaving everything behind to follow Jesus. Why had they started following Jesus if they hadn’t yet put their faith in him?

The best way to explain this is to share something from the blog, “A Bit of Salty Grace” https://abitofsaltygrace.blogspot.com/2016/06/faith-is-like-chocolate.html . The writer compares faith with eating chocolate by saying that the first time a child eats chocolate they do so on the advisement of someone they trust. In other words, their faith is in the person. But after they taste the chocolate, their faith is transferred to the chocolate—to always taste as sweet and yummy as it did the time before.

The disciples initially went with Jesus because they were willing to take him up on his offer when he told them to come and see for themselves who he was and what he was about. But when they saw what he had done at the wedding feast, as well as the signs they had seen and heard about prior to that (God speaking after his baptism and the unexpected catch of fish, for example), their desire to follow Jesus was the result of faith not curiosity.

Now that we’ve established the flow of their spiritual growth, let’s keep moving through the book of John by listing the highlights of Jesus’ ministry as recorded in each chapter.

- Chapter 3: Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee and leader of the Jewish council, came to Jesus in the night because he believed, but feared the repercussions he would face from the other Jewish leaders. Jesus explains rebirth through immersion to Nicodemus, followed by some of the most beloved and ‘famous’ words Jesus ever spoke: John 3:16 “For God so loved

the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Nicodemus' 'secret faith' saved Jesus from the Pharisees a couple of times prior to his arrest and crucifixion (God's timing rather than man's) and it was Nicodemus that worked with Joseph of Arimathea to properly care for Jesus' body rather than allow it to be mauled and broken. While this doesn't excuse us from hiding our faith or not sharing it, we should learn from Nicodemus that that there are times when a quiet but resolute faith is more effective and appropriate.

- Chapter 4: Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well solidifies the truth that Jesus' gift of salvation is for everyone.
- Chapters 5-6: John records several of Jesus' miracles—acts of compassion and mercy, as well as miracles meant to validate his identity in order to help his disciples understand him more fully.
- Chapters 7 through 10 contain several of Jesus' sermons and John's recollections of how adamant the Jewish leaders were in getting rid of Jesus. We also gain insight to Jesus' earthly personality. Yes, he was still the perfect, flawless, sinless Son of God, but he didn't hesitate to put the Pharisees on the spot by putting their false accusations back on them. Jesus was at times sarcastic and he showed no patience for those who were bent on trying to malign him or his father, God.
- Chapter 11 opens with the death and resurrection of Jesus' friend, Lazarus. Jesus used Lazarus' death to display God's power and glory. Jesus allowed Lazarus to die for the purpose of being able to resurrect him so that those present would know there was nothing he and God cannot do. NOTE: It is important to note the difference between Lazarus being raised from the dead and Jesus being raised from the dead. The difference is this: Lazarus' resurrection was temporary. He died again. Jesus, however, was resurrected for all eternity.

The subject of death ends the eleventh chapter, as well, by telling us that after hearing about the miracle of Lazarus being brought back to life, the Jewish leaders joined forces with their enemies, the Roman government, to take Jesus down. They would stop at nothing to kill Jesus. Jesus knew what was happening, so at this point he withdrew from the ministry and the general public. Instead, he spent most of his final days with the disciples; preparing them for the time he would no longer be with them.

- Chapters 12 through 16: Jesus was preparing to die, but before he did, he would share one last Passover meal with his disciples in Jerusalem. Entering the city was a joyous occasion for Jesus. He was greeted by songs and shouts of joy and praise by the people. Sadly, however, many of these same people would be shouting "Crucify him!" a few short days later. Following Jesus' return to Jerusalem, we read his instructions and encouragements to his disciples. He tells them he is going to die soon and that one of their group will betray him. He humbly washes the disciples' feet, predicts Peter's denial, comforts them in their sadness over their grief of losing him, promises them the Holy Spirit, gives them a sermon on remaining faithful, and explains to them that their grief will turn to joy when they see and understand all that is about to take place. The one thing noticeably missing from John's account of the last evening he spent with Jesus before the cross is the institution of communion. He is the only one of the writers of the four gospels to leave it out. Why? No one knows, but all the other details of the evening are there and in perfect harmony with the other three gospel writers.
- Chapters 17 and 18: Jesus' time of prayer in the garden, his arrest, his so-called trial before the high priest and Peter's denial of knowing Jesus three times—just as Jesus said it would happen.

- Chapter 19: Jesus was handed over to Pilate, an official of the Roman government. Pilate found no reason to convict Jesus. He'd done nothing wrong in the eyes of the Roman government. But not wanting to appear weak in the eyes of the people, Pilate caved to them and sentenced Jesus to death on the cross. Pilate only thought he was ultimately responsible. We know that whether it was Pilate or Caesar himself who sentenced Jesus, it was only because God said it was to be so, that Jesus died on the cross. The events leading up to the cross and the actual time Jesus spent on the cross is recorded by John in a way that only Jesus' closet friend could tell it. John's account of those final hours is filled with emotion. John speaks of fulfilled prophecy (vs. 23-24). He reveals that some of Jesus' last thoughts are about his mother, whom he asks John to watch out for. Jesus' burial by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who were both religious leaders who had quietly followed and believed in Jesus, now stepped forward to claim Jesus' body for burial to fulfil yet another prophecy.
- Chapter 20: Jesus is alive!
- Chapter 21: John is the only one of the gospel writers to record this particular miracle Jesus gave to seven of his disciples following his resurrection. Jesus once again provided fish after no fish had been caught. They were overjoyed to see Jesus, as it was only the third time they had seen him since his resurrection (vs. 14). But it is the situation immediately following the catch of fish and breakfast on the seashore that is most important. Bible with subheadings title it "Peter's reinstatement". Following Peter's denial of Jesus three times, he was deeply grieved and ashamed. How could he do that to Jesus? To the Son of the living God?! You know his excitement over seeing Jesus had to be coupled with embarrassment and anxiety over what Jesus would say or do. But Jesus didn't say a word about it—not

directly, anyway. Instead, in verses 15 through 19, Jesus askes Peter three times if he (Peter) loves him (Jesus), to which Peter always responds by saying, “Yes”. Jesus then counters by telling Peter to feed his sheep; meaning to take the message of the gospel of salvation to anyone and everyone who will listen. What a beautiful testimony of God’s mercy and forgiving nature!

The book of John ends with one of the most important verses within the pages of the Bible. I say this not because it is some great command or ‘secret’ to great faith. No, I say this because the words of John 21:25 sum up the magnitude of who Jesus was while he was living here on earth. Let these words soak into your heart and mind so that you can try to grasp the truth of just how amazing, big, and wonderful our Savior, Jesus, is: “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.”

Key verses in John

Every book of the Bible provides us with words of wisdom, instruction, comfort, encouragement, admonishment, warning, and promise, and hope. Let's look at some of what the book of John has to offer.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. : John 1:1

"The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" John 1:29

"Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit." John 3:5-6

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Joh 3:16

John 5:16-30, Jesus' message about eternal life through him.

"I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his mater nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." John 13:16-17

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so much you love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." John 13:25

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” John 14:1-3

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” John 14:6

Book 44

The Book of Acts

Who wrote the book of Acts: Luke

When was it written: Around 63 A.D.

The book of Acts is the historical account of the beginning of the Church and the spread of Christianity following Christ's death, resurrection, and return to heaven. The book of Acts also provides the foundation of doctrine for the Church as God and Jesus intend it to be.

In the first chapter of Acts Luke briefly sums up Jesus' post-resurrection time here on earth; specifically focusing on how the disciples received the Holy Spirit, the selection of a twelfth disciple to replace Judas Iscariot, and the information that after betraying Jesus, Judas killed himself out of remorse and shame. The selection of someone to replace Judas fulfills a prophecy of sorts in the book of Psalm, which says, "May another take his place of leadership." (Psalm 109:8)

In reading the book of Acts we learn that the Holy Spirit enabled the disciples and others chosen by God to do great and miraculous things as they disbursed themselves around the world to take the message of the gospel to any and all who would listen. But none of these actions takes place solely for the purpose of wowing the crowd or to make a point. The miracles done or experienced by early leaders of

the Church are done in conjunction with the teaching and acceptance of Jesus as Savior.

The most important chapter of the book of Acts is chapter two. In chapter two we see the establishment of the Church and the foundation of the doctrinal beliefs and essentials of salvation. The sermon preached by Peter on the Day of Pentecost, which took place forty days after Jesus rose from the grave and seven days following his return to heaven.

The crowd Peter is addressing is the same crowd who had flocked to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. These were also the same people (man of them, anyway) who had taken up the 'battle cry' for Jesus to be killed. Peter, knowing that the majority of the people there were staunchly entrenched in the Law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets, began by reading the message from the prophet, Joel. He then followed up with words penned by Kind David. Let's take a look at what Peter had to say, so that you, too, will be able to experience the full impact of what he had to say afterwards:

"'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. ~Joel 2:28-32 in Acts 2:17-23

And…

You have made know to me the paths of life' you will fill me with joy in your presence. ~Psalm 16:11in Acts 2:28

Following this message Peter testified that he had seen, heard, and experienced Jesus; meaning he could say beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Jesus was indeed the one Joel, David, and all the other prophets of the Old Testament had spoken of.

Thousands in the crowd were convinced and ashamed of what they had done. Desperately wanting to rectify the situation, they asked Peter what they could do. And Peter replied with the words that are the source of salvation according to the teachings of Jesus:

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ~Acts 2:38

The remainder of chapter two through the end of chapter eight is filled with historical accounts of how the early Church started growing. They faced opposition, hardships, and uncertainties, but they faced them with hope, faith, and a spirit of perseverance. The people shared what they had with one another, fellowshipped together regularly, and formed close family-like bonds with one another out of their desire to worship God and develop a deeper relationship with him.

The spread of the Church brought with it the need for additional leadership. This resulted in some of Jesus' faithful followers stepping up into the roles of evangelists and leaders. Among them was Stephen. Stephen's commitment to the spread of Christianity cost him his life at the hands of Sanhedrin (the Jewish court system).

While some might look at Stephen's death as a blow to the Church, it was actually a blessing. Why? Because following Stephen's death, the Sanhedrin went on a 'witch hunt' to try to shut the Church down; sending scores of new Christians to other cities and towns far and wide. They left Jerusalem, but they were not silent, and the Church began to grow even

more—to Samaria, Gaza, Judea, Damascus, and many other areas.

Chapter nine is another extremely important chapter in the book of Acts. It is here we read of the conversion of Saul. Saul was a Pharisee of Pharisees (his words). He hated Christians and all they stood for. His hatred was so great that he devoted his time to hunting them down and killing them. But God had other plans for Saul. God saw in him a passion so great that he (God) knew that he was capable of doing amazing things for the cause of Christ and the growth of the Church.

Saul's conversion and name change to Paul, resulted in giving us the greatest missionary of all time and thirteen New Testament books (which are letters to churches and individuals).

Chapter ten of the book of Acts is significant in the fact that Peter is sent by God to begin making salvation available to the Gentiles. To this point the gospel had been preached primarily to those who were Jewish or Samaritans. Yes, there are some Gentiles who had accepted Christ as their Savior prior to Peter's visit to Cornelius, but by and large Gentiles had been excluded.

Opening up their hearts and minds to accepting Gentiles into the Church was not an easy thing for some of the apostles to do. It went against everything they had been taught for generations. But God loves each of us and wants each and every one of us to have the opportunity to know him and spend eternity with him in heaven.

The remainder of the book of Acts tells of Paul's missionary journeys and the continued spread of the Church under the leadership of Peter, John, Barnabas, Silas, and a few others. It is a book not only of history, though, but of doctrine that

we must hold to today if we are to be the Church God called us to be.

In reading through the book of Acts you cannot help but learn that it isn't easy to be a Christian in a sinful world and society. There are going to be times of ridicule and persecution. You faith is going to be tested. But you will also experience the joys and blessings that come from standing firmly on the truth and holding tight to the loving hands of God who will never leave your side.

Key verses in Acts

Every book of the Bible provides us with words of wisdom, instruction, comfort, encouragement, admonishment, warning, and promise, and hope. Let's look at some of what the book of Acts has to offer.

Acts 2:14-41, Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost and the establishment of the Church

"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." Acts 4:12

Acts 5:1-1, the account of Ananias and Sapphira; reminding us of the importance of being truthful and transparent with God

"Therefore in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin it will fail. But if it is from God you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." Acts 5:38-3

Acts chapters 9 and 10, the conversion of Saul and opening the gospel to the Gentiles

"…The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch." Acts 11:26b

"And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name." Acts 22:16

Book 45

The Book of Romans

Who wrote the book of Romans: Paul

When was it written: Approx. 57 A.D.

From what we know historically, Paul most likely wrote this letter to the church in Rome during one of his missionary journeys to Corinth. The purpose of this letter is to outline God's plan of salvation and how it relates to living our daily lives. The book of Romans emphasizes a personal relationship with God.

Paul makes a point in addressing the letter to Jews and Gentiles alike who believe in Jesus and who want to accept him as Savior, as well as to those who already have.

Being justified (made right with God) through faith is definitely part of Paul's message in Romans, but he also addresses the issues of guilt, being set apart by and for God, and the security that comes from making Jesus the Savior and LORD of your life.

Because the book of Romans (like most of the other books of the New Testament) are more doctrinal than eventful in nature, we will look at each of them from the perspective of what they have to say in regards to being a Christian—one who lives in faithful obedience for Christ and in Christ, according to the word he has given us, which is the Bible.

What we learn from the book of Romans:

- The message of the gospel, which is salvation, is the one promised by the prophets (1:2)
- Our salvation is the result of God's grace and our obedience (1:5)
- We are to encourage and build each other up by loving as Jesus loved and by using the message of the gospel (1:12)
- We should never be ashamed of the gospel because it is the reason we can be saved—the reason Jews and Gentiles alike can be saved (1:16)
- God does not tolerate sin and when he is ready he will punish people for their sins (1:18-25)
- God clearly told us what he considers sinful; greed, envy, homosexuality, murder, deceit, malice, gossip, slander, God-haters, arrogance, and depravity (1:26-31)
- God will reward us on the day of judgement according to our persistence in doing his will (2:6-7)
- No one is righteous; meaning no one deserves to be saved—it is only because of God's loving grace and mercy and our obedience to his commands (out of faith and a respectful awe of his loving grace and mercy) that we are able to spend eternity with him in heaven
- We are to view our suffering and times of trial and hardship as positives because through those things we are able to see God at work in our life (5:3)
- We are to allow the hardships and difficulties we encounter to build our character, make us more persevering, and fill us with hope (5:5)
- Salvation and grace are not a 'ticket' to keep on sinning —salvation is a gift to be honored and treated with respect (6:1-4)

- We are to run from sin and its desires because as Romans 6:23 says, “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our LORD.”
- Sin is real and we are powerless against it without the Holy Spirit in our lives working to protect us from Satan (chapter 8)
- If God is for us (if we put our faith in him), nothing can win against us (8:31)
- We must confess Jesus as LORD and put our trust fully in him (10:9-11)
- God’s explanation of the remnant of Israel and their ultimate destiny (chapter 11)
- We are to be living sacrifices to God (12:1)
- As Christians we are all members of one body (12:4-8)
- God’s expectations for us in regards to loving others and ourselves (12:9-13)
- We are to submit to authorities here on earth (13:1-3)
- We are to encourage one another and try to live in peace with each other (14:19)

Book 46

The Book of 1st Corinthians

Who wrote the book of 1st Corinthians: Paul

When was it written: 55 A.D.

The focus of 1st Corinthians is Christian living. In this first letter to the church of Corinth, Paul addresses several issues that can distance us from Christ and keep us from developing our character to be more like him.

Paul's warnings and encouragements come from a heart that truly cares for the people he is writing to. Paul wasn't trying to sound superior or holier than the people he was writing to (or to us, for that matter). Paul sincerely cared about their spiritual well-being and genuinely wanted to see them grow in their faith. He knew what it meant to be 'holy because God is holy' (Leviticus 19:2) and he wanted the same for the Christians in Corinth.

Paul also knew the obstacles they were facing. He knew what a sinful, corrupt, and evil place Corinth was. But Paul also knew that God was bigger and mightier than all of it and if the people would stay focused on God, they would be victorious over sin.

The other primary message in the book of 1st Corinthians is love. Paul reminds us that at the root of everything—including God's gift of salvation through Jesus—is love.

God's love for us, Jesus' love for us, and the fact that we are to share that love back both with them and with others—it all comes down to love. But love as the world knows it is often very different than God's definition (which is the only one that should matter to us) of love. As we look at God's definition of love toward the end of this chapter, I encourage you to prayerfully consider how well your definition and exhibition of love line up with God's.

What we learn from the book of 1st Corinthians

- God has called us into fellowship with Jesus (1:9)
- We are to be united with our brothers and sisters in Christ (1:10)
- Our faith is to be in Jesus—not men (1:121-17)
- Wisdom that comes from God is far greater than earthly or worldly wisdom (2:6-8)
- We cannot even begin to comprehend the amazing things God has prepared for us when we love him faithfully and obediently (2:9)
- We aren't to give up or consider our witness useless if we don't see immediate results (3:6-9)
- Those who call themselves Christians cannot be allowed to live sinful lifestyles and remain a part of the church (if they refuse to repent) (5:1-5)
- We can't expect non-Christians to have Christ-like behavior, but we are to set an example for them (5:12-13)
- God says those who do the following cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven: sexually immoral, idolaters, those who commit adultery, homosexuals, prostitutes, thieves, drunkards, slanderers, those who are greedy, and those who cheat and swindle (6:9-10)
- Our bodies are not our own if we have accepted Christ as Savior—they are the temple of the Holy Spirit and we should treat them as such (6:15-20)
- Marriage is between one man and one woman and should last as long as both are alive (chapter 7)
- We should live in such a way that we do not dishonor God nor cause others to stumble in their faith or be able to call us hypocrites (8:9-11)

- We will never be tempted to do anything God does not supply a way out from—even if that ‘way out’ is turning around and running as fast as you can (10:13)
- Instructions regarding worship and the LORD’s Supper (chapter 11 and chapter 14)
- We are all members of one body—the Church and body of Christ, and we have all been given gifts, talents, and abilities for the purpose of serving, praising and worshipping him, and to use for serving others and sharing the Good News of the Gospel
- The definition of love (chapter 13)
- The second coming of Christ and the victory we have over death and eternity in hell because of Jesus (chapter 15)

Book 47

The Book of 2nd Corinthians

Who wrote the book of 2nd Corinthians: Paul

When was it written: Late 55 A.D.

The focus of 2nd Corinthians is to encourage and to remind the Christians in Corinth to be disciplined in Christian character and to remain faithful.

As stated in the previous chapter, Corinth was not an easy place to be a Christian—especially a new Christian. Paul knew the struggles the people faced were real. Paul was also writing to address the issue of false teachers in the church at Corinth—people who were trying to convince the congregation that Paul was not genuine and sincere in his love for the people or his work for the LORD.

In writing this second letter, Paul offers assurance that he is the man of God he says he is and that when he able to come to them, they will be able to see for themselves and they will enjoy a time of growing together in the LORD.

What we learn from the book of 2nd Corinthians

- God comforts us in times of trouble (1:4 and 2:14)
- Our confidence should be because of Christ and what he did for us (3:4)
- Our purpose is to fearlessly and boldly share the message of the Gospel by being the unique person God created us to be (4:7-9)
- We will all stand before God to be judged (5:10)
- We should not be joined (date/marry) unbelievers (6:14-15)
- We are to keep ourselves pure (7:1)
- We are to be generous with our money, time, and talents (chapters 8 and 9)
- God doesn't expect us to be perfect, but rather to let him be perfect in us and through us (12:7-9)

Book 48

The Book of Galatians

Who wrote Galatians the book of Galatians: Paul

When was it written: 50 A.D.

The book of Galatians is a letter to the church in Galatia. The converts in Galatia were Judaizers. Judaizers were Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah, but who also firmly believed that the ceremonial practices of the Mosaic Law were still necessary acts of worship. Paul's letter to them is his defense to the Galatian Christians—the defense that we are justified (declared righteous) by placing our faith in Jesus and sanctified (our salvation is made legitimate) through our obedience because of that same faith. Nothing more. Nothing less. It was also necessary for Paul to counter the Galatians' belief that the salvation of the Gentiles was not real because they did not observe circumcision and other old Law rituals and ceremonies. Making these clarifications was essential to the health of the Church and for the unity of the people.

What we learn from the book of Galatians

- There is no other gospel than the one taught by Jesus and shared through the teachings of Paul, the apostles, and early leaders of the Church (1:6-9)
- Paul shares his past life for the purpose of explaining that he knows the difference between lies and truth because he had been on both ‘sides of the fence’ (1:13-24)
- Jesus was the fulfillment of the Law; making the ultimate sacrifice for us (3:10-14)
- Anyone baptized into Christ is a son or daughter of God (3:26)
- Your faith and acts of praise, worship, service, and giving need come from a genuine and sincere heart (4:18)
- Let the Holy Spirit guide you in all things so that you live by faith and do not fall into a sinful lifestyle (5:16-18)
- The acts of a sinful nature are: sexual immorality, impurity, idolatry, drunkenness, witchcraft, hatred, jealousy, rage, discord, selfish ambition, dissension, envy debauchery, and orgies (5:19-21)
- Rather than let our sinful nature rule, we are to live fruitful lives—lives the produce the fruit of the Spirit, which is: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (5:22-23)
- Instructions on restoring a brother or sister in Christ caught in sin (6:1-2)
- We reap what we sow (6:7-9)

Book 49

The Book of Ephesians

Who wrote the book of Ephesians: Paul

When was it written: 60 A.D.—most likely during Paul's imprisonment in Rome.

The book of Ephesians is different than most of Paul's other letters, as it does not address specific issues or problems. Instead, the book of Ephesians focuses on the unity of Christians. It is a book that looks at the different 'elements' of the family. Paul explains the responsibilities of each, how they relate to the Church, and the joys that come from being in a Christ-centered marriage, parent/child relationship, and a member of a church family.

Ephesians also explains God's goals for his children and the tools he provides to reach these goals and fulfill our purposes—the ones he created us to do.

What we learn from the book of Ephesians

- We were created in the image of God and chosen even before the creation of the earth to be his children (1:4)
- Predestination is explained: Predestination is NOT that only certain people have been preselected to be saved, but rather the human race was preselected from the very beginning to be God's children and live with him…(1:5 and 1:11)
- Sin messed up God's plan, requiring him to put into place a plan for salvation (1:7)
- Our hope for eternity is found only in Jesus (1:15-23)
- We are save by the grace of God because of the blood of Jesus through our obedience that comes from faith (2:8-9)
- We were created for specific purposes (2:10)
- We can approach God through Jesus with confidence (3:12)
- We are to be humble, gentle, patient, and treat each other with love so that as the body of Christ (the church) can be unified (4:2)
- There is one LORD, one faith, one baptism, one God and one Father who is over all, through all and in all (4:5-6)
- Becoming a Christian is not something we do, but rather someone we become (4:22-23)
- It is not necessarily a sin to be angry, but we cannot allow our anger to lead us into sin (4:26)
- We are to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving (4:32)
- We are to be imitators of God (5:1)
- We are to live in such a way that honors and respects the sacrifice Jesus made for us on the cross (5:2)

- The character traits and moral virtues of a Christian do not include sexual immorality, impurity, greed, obscene, foolish, or crude language, greed, idolatry, or any other form of sin (5:3-5) We must be careful to not be misled by empty words; testing what we hear and are taught by comparing it to the Word of God, which is the Bible (5:6-7)
- We are to live wisely and seek God's will for our life (5:15-17)
- Give thanks in any and all situations and circumstances (5:20)

God’s instructions and intentions for the family

Beginning in verse twenty-two of chapter five, Paul begins writing about the core relationships in our lives—the relationship between a husband and wife, between parents and children, and slaves and their masters, which today translates into employers and employees.

Because he has so much to say on the subject that is pertinent to the actual relationships themselves AND to our relationship with Christ, we need to examine these passages closely.

Husbands and wives

Paul begins by issuing the command that wives are to be submissive to their husbands IN THE SAME WAY they are submissive to the LORD.

First of all you need to understand that these are not Paul's commands, but God's. Remember, nothing is written in the Bible that God did not determine to be there. The writers' words are inspired by God.

Secondly, you need to understand what it means to submit to a husband in the same way one submits to the LORD. A wife who submits to her husband in the same way she submits to the LORD is to willingly commit to her husband as a faithful wife and a wife that trusts her husband to know and do what is best for their marriage and their family. And yes, the husband is to be the ultimate 'buck stops here' authority in the home. Someone has to be and God has declared that someone to be the husband. But this is not a bad thing. For a wife it means not having to shoulder the burden of responsibility of negative consequences, of financial worries, and for standing against those who try to tear down your home, cheat you, lie to you, or disarm you in any other way. Submission is not meant to make a woman feel inferior. It is actually a form of protection and nurturing. And whether you like it or not, men and women are different. They have different strengths and weaknesses. And because God, as our creator, knows what these things are, he knows how we need to live in order to function at optimal levels.

Besides, the responsibility that falls on the husband so that he can be worthy of his wife's submission is tremendous. A husband's love for his wife is to be the same as that of Christ's for the Church! That's not something a husband can

or should take lightly. In loving their wife as Christ loves the Church, a husband must:

- Love her as he loves himself.
- Present himself as spotless and pure like Jesus is. No, husbands won't be perfect, but they are to be perfectly committed to the marriage and sexually pure (virgins when married and faithful throughout).
- Respect his wife's body, her intellect, her emotions, and her talents/abilities.
- Be willing to lead the marriage and the family according to God's commands.
- Be a spiritual leader by setting an example at home, at work, in the community, and in the local church.
- Be a spiritual leader by treating their marriage as a holy union—just like the holy union between himself and the LORD.
- Be a spiritual leader by raising any children they have to know and love the LORD.
- Be willing to die for his wife if necessary, just as Christ died for us; making the Church possible.

So you see, the act of submission is nothing a wife should fear or find off-putting. It is a blessing that only serves to enhance a marriage and the individuals in the relationship. It brings out the best of each other's God-given character traits.

But, you are asking, what about marriages between people who aren't Christians—or marriages in which the wife is a Christian but a husband is not. Does she need to submit in these situations?

First of all, these instructions are for Christian marriages and families. You cannot expect non-Christians to have Christ-like behavior or to pattern their lives after Christ's life. But as for a marriage in which the wife is a Christian and a husband is not? Or vice versa; a Christian husband married to a non-Christian wife?

As you saw in looking at the book of 2nd Corinthians, we are warned against being unequally yoked; meaning marrying someone who is not a Christian. And this (meaning these verses in Ephesians) is the reason why. When a Christian is married to a non-Christian, it is like trying to start a car that has no gas. You've got everything you need to travel in safety and comfort, except the thing you need the most. You should not, however, end the marriage because of this. Simply love your spouse as you are called to love them in Ephesians 5 and pray God's blessing on your marriage and for the unbelieving spouse to come to know Christ as their Savior, too.

Children and parents

Simply stated, children are to obey their parents. It is one of the Ten Commandments—the only one that comes with a promise. The promise is this: children who obey their parents will enjoy a good and long life.

Before we delve into the actual meaning of this promise, let's take a minute to understand the importance of obedience and the impact it has on the home, on the individual, and on society in general.

Obedience is essential in order for children to grow and mature properly. Children are not born knowing the finer points of right from wrong. Children have to be taught how to respond rather than react. They have to be taught to make choices and decisions based on facts and by weighing the outcome of their choices and decisions versus making them based on feelings and emotions. And the only way parents can teach these things to their children is to expect and insist on obedience.

Obedience in the home allows the home to run smoothly and for relationships between the people in the home to grow in a positive direction. Obedience in the home trains children to be obedient outside the home, as well. And we all know the value of obedience outside the home—school, rules of the road, societal law, in the workplace, etc.. Without obedience in the home we have schools in which teachers can't actually teach because they are too busy trying to maintain order and respect in a classroom filled with disrespectful, disobedient, selfish students. Without obedience in the home we have people in the workplace who believe that respect, their salary, and benefits are owed to them just because they bother to show up. Without obedience in the home we have

people who think nothing of taking things that don't belong to them, driving recklessly because they have to get someone and shouldn't be bothered by others on the road, bullying others who are smaller, weaker, or just different than they are, and who think nothing of taking another person's life.

Without obedience, society fails. And that's what God's promise is all about. God's promise says that when we are obedient, we can expect good things because good things result from obedience. We are respected. We are lawful. We are healthy in the fact that we don't purposefully abuse our bodies. We are people of integrity and sound morals. What God's promise doesn't mean is that when a little child dies his/her death is because they weren't obedient. Disease, the careless acts of others, and tragic accidents happen that result in death because we live in a fallen and sinful world.

But the parent/child relationship isn't solely dependent upon the child's obedience or even the parent's attention to teaching and insisting on it. The parent/child relationship as intended by God is also dependent upon how the parent teaches and insists upon the obedience God commands.

The best way to explain what God means when he tells Paul to write, "Fathers, do not exasperate you children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the LORD." (Ephesians 6:4) is to say this:

- Parents are to love their children with the same unconditional love God showers upon us. It's the unconditional love that says "I love you just because you are mine—not because of what you look like, how smart you are, how athletic you are, how musically talented you are, or because you want to follow in my footsteps, but just because you are mine."
- Parents are to let their children know up-front what is expected of them. God laid it all out there for us. He

didn’t change the rules in the middle of the game, so to speak. We should do the same.

- Parents are to be firm and unyielding in their expectations, yet slow to anger and willing to extend mercy. God is direct and unyielding in his commands. Follow his commands and receive the reward of eternal life in heaven with him. Don’t follow his commands and spend eternity in hell. It’s that simple. But, God doesn’t expect us to be perfect. He created us so he knows that isn’t possible. So as long as we are trying he is patient and merciful. He guides and directs, administers discipline instead of punishment, and loves us along the path to getting it right. We should do the same.

Workplace relationships

The best way to sum up God's intentions for us in these types of relationships is to quote Ephesians 6:7-8, which says, "Serve whole-heartedly, as if you were serving the LORD, not men, because you know that the LORD will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free."

In other words, approach every job, volunteer task, ministry within the church…everything as if you are doing it for the LORD. When you do, you will be able to rest assured that no matter what anyone says or does, you will be okay. God will make sure you are blessed.

The armor of God

The book of Ephesians concludes by talking about the armor of God—the spiritual tools and weapons we have available to us that enables us to be the people we've just been called to be in the preceding verses (and elsewhere throughout the Bible, for that matter).

The armor of God is something we cannot live without if we truly want to grow and mature into the person God created us to be. It is what makes our Christian faith who we are instead of just something we do.

Paul introduces us to the armor of God by reminding us that we are at war against Satan and the trophy or spoils of the war we are fighting is our soul. So if you think the obstacles standing between you and God are your boss, your financial disasters, the unfaithful spouse who trampled your heart, the cancer that took your twelve year-old, or the abusive father you couldn't get away from, think again. These people and situations are nothing more than Satan's puppets. Satan is the real enemy and it is only when you understand this truth (Ephesians 6:10-12) and put on the armor necessary to fight him off and defend yourself against him, that you can truly be free in Christ.

The armor of God consists of:

- Belt of truth: you cannot have a relationship with God or experience his love and the blessings he has to offer without first acknowledging the truth that he is the one true God and that Jesus is his Son and the source of our salvation. You also need to live with the truth of the scriptures firmly around your to uphold the decisions

and choices you make in your life—just like a physical belt holds your clothing in place.

- Breastplate of righteousness: A breastplate's purpose was to protect a soldier from being hit in the heart, lungs, and other vital organs by the arrows and spears of the enemy. The breastplate of righteousness protects our heart from being attacked by the lies Satan tells—lies that have become the world's accepted philosophies and ways of life. In wearing the breastplate of righteousness we are able to refute these lies and not let them invade our hearts and minds and become our way of thinking and living.
- Shoes of the gospel of peace: The shoes we wear on our feet help us stand steady, straight, and tall. They keep us upright. Likewise, the gospel keeps us upright. Its truth provides peace and assurance that God is in control and that he truly will work all things for our good.
- Shield of faith: A soldier's shield deflects the arrows and spears thrown by the enemy; hopefully knocking them out of the way so that the breastplate doesn't have to stop them. (But isn't it great to know that that breastplate is there just in case and to stop the ones that come from behind?) Satan is relentless in throwing arrows at us—doubt, sickness, grief, fear, job loss, broken trusts, and all sorts of other things. But when we keep our shield of faith in front of us and hold to the faith that God is real, that he loves us unfailingly, that he will never leave us, and that he will always bless and reward us for our faithfulness, Satan doesn't stand a chance.
- Helmet of salvation: God gave us a heart with which to love, extend compassion and mercy, and to experience the emotions he created within our being. But God also gave us a mind. And it is from that mind that our conviction of who Jesus is and what his sacrifice on the cross means for us needs to come. Living a life for Christ isn't an emotion. It is a purposeful decision made

in our mind. The helmet of salvation, then, should be worn to protect that decision of truth from being attacked and slaughtered. Our hope for eternity in heaven depends on it.

- Sword of the Spirit: The Bible is the sword of the Spirit. It is the weapon we use to defend our beliefs, our actions, our moral integrity, our choices, and our message. But without first-hand knowledge of what it says, we cannot truly defend ourselves. So read. Study. Know. Defend.

While I would never insinuate that one book of the Bible is more valuable than another, you can see that the book of Ephesians is an extremely important book for the Christian who are seeking to gain insight and wisdom into God's expectations for our conduct, attitude, and spiritual maturity.

Book 50

The Book of Philippians

Who wrote the book of Philippians: Paul

When was it written: 61 A.D.

The focus of Philippians is joy. Over and over again Paul tells readers to find joy in the LORD rather than to search for it in worldly places and pleasures. Paul also cautions us against being prideful, independent, and self-seeking.

Philippians is also known as one of Paul's prison letters; meaning he wrote it to the church in Philippi while he was in prison in Rome. He wrote the letter as a way of saying thank-you for the encouragement and gifts he had received from them. The gifts they had sent were their way of encouraging Paul while he was recuperating from an illness —something that had to be even more difficult while in prison than it would have been otherwise.

In the first chapter of the book of Philippians Paul praises his Christian brothers and sisters in Philippi for their faithfulness to God, their expressions of brotherly love toward him. Additionally, he shares his joy in the fact that "…most of the brothers in the LORD have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly…." because he (Paul) is in prison. The implication being that his fellow evangelists aren't going to let Paul's imprisonment be for nothing.

Intertwined with and following these comments, Paul gets down to the business of encouraging these faithful followers of Christ.

What we learn from the book of Philippians

- We are to continually grow in wisdom and knowledge of God's Word. (1:9)
- Our knowledge of God's Word should be used to discern what God's will for our life is, the difference between truth and lies, and right from wrong. (1:10)
- We should never be ashamed of our faith. (1:20)
- Our life here on earth should be lived for the glory of God and with the attitude of joyful expectation for what comes afterwards—meaning heaven. (1:21-26)
- We are to conduct ourselves as representatives of Jesus Christ at all times and in all situations because that is exactly what we are. (1:27)
- We are to be united with our brothers and sisters in Christ because of our mutual love for him. (2:1-2)
- We are to consider others better than ourselves; meaning we should possess the qualities of humility and selflessness. We should also resist the temptation to be self-serving by looking for ways to serve and help others who are in need. (2:3-4)
- We learn that equality with God is not possible. (2:6)
- We are reminded that Jesus humbled himself to human out of obedience to God in order to save us from our sins through his death on the cross. (2:7-8)
- We are told that because of Jesus' obedience to the Father, God exalted him (Jesus) to the highest place—that someday every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is LORD. (2:9-11)
- The verse that tells us we are to "…work out our salvation with fear and trembling…." does not mean our salvation is based on works, but rather that our faith

spurs us into action to do God's will for our life. (2:12-13)

- We are to do everything without complaining or arguing. (2:14)
- We need close brothers and sisters in Christ that we can depend on to encourage us, hold us accountable, and serve side by side with. (2:19-30)
- Rejoice in the LORD! (3:1)
- We are to watch out for evil men and false teachers. (3:2)
- Nothing we can accomplish or attain here on earth is nothing compared to the reward of heaven. (3:7-8)
- We are to persevere and not give up on God and in serving him. (3:12)
- Those who live contrary to God's commands will suffer a destiny of destruction and suffering in hell. (3:18-19)
- Rejoice in the LORD always! (4:4)
- Be gentle. (4:5)
- We don't have to be anxious or worry about anything as long as we give it over to God in prayer. Why? Because when we do that we have the promise that God will guard our hearts and minds with unspeakable peace. (4:6-7)
- We are to fix our thoughts on anything that is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and/or praiseworthy. (4:5)
- The secret to contentment is knowing that no matter what God is on our side and that we can do any and all things through him. (4:11-13)
- God will meet and exceed all our needs with his glorious riches. (4:19)

Book 51

The Book of Colossians

Who wrote the book of Colossians: Paul

When was it written: 60 A.D.

The book of Colossians is Paul's letter to the Christians in Colossae. Colossae was a city in the ancient land of Phrygia, which was part of the Roman Empire's territory in Asia Minor. The city no longer exists, but was located near the current-day town of Honaz, Turkey.

Paul wrote the book to encourage the new Christians there who were struggling to combat a group of people who were trying to steer them away from the truth. While we don't know exactly what false teaching was being touted as truth, we know from Pauls' writing that it revolved around the supposed need for something other than and/or in addition to Jesus in order to obtain salvation. Therefore, the focus of Colossians is to reiterate that Christ is enough—that he is the only way to salvation and all we need to experience life at its best here on earth. Paull also reiterates to readers that without Christ as the center of our life, we are nothing.

What we learn from the book of Colossians

- The only real hope is found in Jesus. (1:5)
- The message of the Gospel is meant to be shared with the world. (1:6)
- We are to seek knowledge, spiritual wisdom, and understanding in order to do God's will for our lives. (1:9)
- Our life's goal should be to live a life that honors and pleases God. (1:10)
- When we depend on God and seek to do his will for our lives, we are assured of receiving strength, power, endurance, patience, and joy, and an abundance of other blessings he has to offer. (1:11)
- Our inheritance for living a life of faithful obedience is heaven—an inheritance made possible through the blood of Jesus. (1:12-13 and 1:22-23)
- Jesus is God's son and is the creator and master of all. Nothing was made that he did not make and everything was made for his pleasure. (1:16)
- Christ is the head of the Church. (1:18)
- We are to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world and to encourage them to remain in the truth in whatever ways we can. (2:1-5)
- We are to guard our hearts and minds against false and deceptive teachers. (2:8)
- We are to be buried with Christ in baptism and raised with him (immersion) to symbolize our death to sin and resurrection from sin. (2:12)
- Sin is spiritual death. (2:13)
- We are to set our hearts and minds on the things of Christ rather than on earthly things and worldly wealth and possessions. (3:1-2)

- We are to get rid of the things God has deemed sin so that we can appear before him in judgement with the calm assurance of spending eternity with him. These things are: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, idolatry, anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, and lying. (3:1-9)
- We are to 'clothe ourselves' with the character of Christ; meaning we are to be compassionate, kind, humble, patient, gentle, forgiving, helpful and supportive of our brothers and sisters in Christ (and others), and treating one another with Christ-like love. (3:12-14)
- We are to be thankful. (3:15)
- We are to soak up the wisdom of the Word of God, praise and worship him through songs, and prayers. (3:16-19-17)
- We are to follow God's instructions for our personal relationships: wives are to be submissive to their husbands, husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the church and as they love themselves, children are to obey their parents, parents are to raise their children in a loving, Christ-like manner, employees are to do their job as if they are doing it for the LORD, and employers are to treat their employees fairly and justly. (3:18-4:1)
- We are to devote ourselves to prayer (4:2)
- We are to be tactful but truthful when talking to non-Christians by making the most of every opportunity to 'season our conversations with salt'. In other words what we say (or don't say) and how we say it should reflect our faith and relationship with Jesus. (4:5-6)

Book 52

The Book of 1st Thessalonians

Who wrote the book of 1st Thessalonians: Paul

When was it written: Approximately 51 A.D.

Paul wrote his first letter to the Christians of Thessalonica following his short stay there during his second missionary journey. The congregation in Thessalonica was young. They had turned their backs on paganism to follow Christ. But their new-found faith came at a price—the persecution and ridicule of their families and friends.

What's more, the conversion from paganism, which worships many gods, to Christianity, which recognizes only the one true God, meant that these people changed their entire way of thinking and their entire way of life. They were upending generations of indoctrination for something many would not accept. They went from believing…

- The gods and goddesses had to be appeased and sacrificed to in order to gain their favor
- Reincarnation and/or varying forms of spirit worlds upon physical death

- Human sacrifices were often necessary (in many cases, but not all)
- Sexual acts with temple prostitutes or even animals was acceptable as a form of worship to believing…
- That there was only one God and that his son, Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for our sins
- That our acceptances of those beliefs should be reflected by our willing obedience to God as an expression of gratitude for that sacrifice
- That there is life after death, but that our eternal destination is decided by God based on our faithful obedience to him rather than reincarnation or earning eternal rewards based upon sacrifices and good works

We know from Paul's accounts of his missionary journeys that he was not able to spend nearly as much time with the Christians in Thessalonica as he wanted to. His inability to devote more time to one on one discipleship made him somewhat anxious. He did not want to see their faith choked out by the pressures of their family and friends who didn't accept their coming to the truth. So in order to help the church in Thessalonica hold on to and grow in their faith, Paul wrote this letter and the letter of 2nd Thessalonians.

The main focus in this first letter to the Thessalonians is the second coming of Jesus Christ. I believe Paul takes this approach because of the importance placed on the spirit world in paganism. He wants to reassure them that the reward they will receive for their faithfulness is far greater than anything they could have believed possible in their former way of thinking.

What we learn from 1st Thessalonians

- We are to continually pray for, encourage, teach, and mentor one another—especially those who are new in the faith. (1:3 and 2:11-12)
- We are to be a living example to others—Christians and non-Christians/ (1:7-8)
- We aren't meant to be people-pleasers. We are meant to be God-pleasers. (2:4-6)
- God has provided the Holy Spirit to enable us to live faithful, obedient lives. ((3:12-13)
- We are to honor God with our bodies. (4:3-8)
- We are to be humble, self-sufficient vs. depending on others to support us, and be people of integrity so that our lives will be an example of who Christ is. (4:11)
- We learn that those who have died a physical death will be raised back to life and be judged before those who are alive at the second coming of Christ. (4:13-18)
- No one but God knows when the day of judgement will be, but that's okay—it's nothing we need to worry about as long as we are in Christ. (5:2-11)
- We are to have a strong work ethic, treat people with respect, live peacefully, be an encourager, and help those in need. (5:13-15)
- We are to be joyful, pray continually, and give thanks in ALL circumstances because we know God will make everything good in his time. (5:16-18)
- We are to test all teaching against the Word of God and run away from anything evil. (5:21-22)

Book 53

The Book of 2nd Thessalonians

Who wrote the book of 2nd Thessalonians: Paul

When was it written: Approximately 52 A.D.

The book of 2nd Thessalonians is one of the shortest books in the Bible—only forty-seven verses total. The book is Paul's second letter to the Christians at Thessalonica and is a follow-up to the first.

If you will remember, other than reminding the people to be prayerful and obedient, Paul's main focus in the first letter was to relate to them what we know about the second coming of Jesus. He basically repeated Jesus' message (as written in the gospels) about the 'procedures' of the final judgement. He told them that:

- No one but God knows the day or time it will take place
- That the dead will be raised back to life and be judged first, followed by those who are alive at the time of his return
- That those who are declared saved before God will spend eternity in heaven and that those who are not saved will spend eternity in hell

In reading this letter, however, the people in Thessalonica misunderstood Paul. Or rather they assumed that the second coming of Jesus was imminent. In fact, we know from what Paul writes in this second letter that many of them had stopped working and going about their daily lives just to wait for Jesus. And so the purpose of this second letter is to clear up that misunderstanding.

What we learn from 2nd Thessalonians

- God is a just God. He will reward those who are faithful and righteous in him and will pay back trouble to those who are not. (1:6-10)
- We aren't to be deceived or become unsettled or worried by those who say they know when the day of judgement will be. (2:1-4)
- We are to be on guard against Satan and constantly depending on God to protect us from Satan's schemes. (3:3)
- We are to work hard and honor God by serving him and others. (3:10-13)
- We are to hold one another accountable for obeying God. (3:14-15)

Book 54

The Book of 1st Timothy

Who wrote the book of 1st Timothy: Paul

When was it written: Approximately 64 A.D.

Paul wrote this letter to Timothy while on his third missionary journey. Timothy was ministering to the church in Ephesus at the time and Paul is writing the letter in order to instruct Timothy in matters of church leadership and discipleship.

Paul had spent approximately three years in Ephesus preaching the message of the Gospel, baptizing people into Christ, and teaching the new converts so that they could grow and mature in their relationship with the LORD. Paul had invested a lot in these people and it is evident he cares deeply for them.

As noted in the previous chapter on the book of Ephesus, the city of Ephesus was ridden with sin and evil. It was a mecca for people from all over the known world, which meant there were a variety of religions being practiced. Some of these false and idolatrous sects of people were trying to infiltrate the church in Ephesus. Naturally this was of great concern to both Paul and Timothy, so Paul wrote this letter to advise Timothy on how to combat these people and protect the people of the church in Ephesus from falling away from their faith.

Before we look at what we can learn from the book of Ephesus, I want to take a minute to look at and explain the different religious sects that were trying to impose their beliefs on the Ephesian Christians. The reason I want to do this is to help you become more aware and conscious of the fact that these things are still happening in the Church today. Possibly in your local church.

No, they probably aren't the same specific groups the Ephesians encountered, but they are false teachers just the same and something we must be constantly on guard against. Remember…Satan is the master of deception and what better way to deceive someone away from Christ than to pretend to be for him?

The Gnostics:

- Believe Jesus was nothing more than a good man whose life is worthy to be emulated.
- Believe we live more than one mortal life so there is no resurrection of the physical body.
- God came from humans and is a glorified human. To say that God has always been is to say he is not real because everything has to have a beginning.
- We have the capacity to be equal with God.
- The body and all things made of matter are evil, but the spirit is entirely good.
- Faith is a choice, but there is no condemnation in walking away from God.

The Judaizers:

- Believe the prophets of the Old Testament
- Follow the Law of Moses
- Recognize Jesus as the Messiah
- Believe that the ceremonial practices of the Law of Moses still applied to the New Testament Church
- Refused to accept that Gentiles could attain salvation through Jesus unless they adhered to the Jewish ceremonies and customs of the Law of Moses

The Ascetics:

- Lived a simplistic, frugal lifestyle; denying themselves any sort of worldly pleasure or convenience
- Fasted to the point of malnutrition and dehydration in the name of spirituality
- Treated their bodies harshly
- Abstained from all physical pleasures in an attempt to attain holiness

Like I said, we probably won't find people who call themselves Gnostics, Judaizers, or Ascetics in our churches today, as we read through these partial lists of their belief system, we can see similarities between them and some of the religious sects of today. So just like Paul warns Timothy and the Ephesian Christians to be on guard, we should do the same.

What we learn from the book of 1st Timothy

- We must not allow people to teach false doctrines in the church. (1:3-4)
- We are warned against being murderers, adulterers, perverts, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and liars. (1:9-10)
- We should consider it an honor and privilege to be able to minister to others. (1:12-14)
- Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. (1:15)
- All honor, praise, and glory is to go to God. (1:17)
- Some people will fall away from the faith and there is nothing we can do about it because faith and obedience have to come from within a person's heart, soul, and mind. (1:19-20)
- We are to pray for others and on behalf of others. (2:1)
- God wants all men/women to be saved by coming to the knowledge of the truth of who he is, who Jesus is, and how salvation comes through Jesus. (2:4-6)
- Women are to dress modestly, with decency and propriety. (2:9)
- A woman's true beauty is found in her good deeds and worshipful heart. (2:10)
- Paul defines the role of women in the church. (2:11-12)
- The requirements and qualifications for elders (overseers) and deacons. (3:1-13)
- Indicators of false teachers (4:1-7)
- Our physical bodies are important and we should treat them with respect and proper care, but godliness is far more important. (4:8)
- Age has nothing to do with spiritual maturity or our ability to minister effectively to and for God's kingdom here on earth. (4:12)

- We are to use the abilities and talents God gave us to minister to others and to promote the spreading of the Gospel. (4:14-15)
- We are to persevere in living according to Christian doctrine taught to the disciples by Jesus and shared with everyone. (4:15)
- Instructions for how we are to treat and care for the elderly, the orphans in our family and in the church, and other members of our family. (Chapter 5)
- Paul gives another warning against false teachers—those who thrive on controversy and quarrels, who spreads gossip, are envious, slanderous, and who are often involved in or stir up conflicts between others. (61-5)
- We are to be content with what God gives us and rest in the promise that we will always have what we need. (6:6-9)
- We are reminded that the love of money is the root of all evil (6:11)
- We are to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, gentleness, and endurance in the faith. (6:11)
- We should not lose sight of the promise of heaven. We should use this promise to keep us grounded in our faith. (6:12-16)
- Those who are blessed with monetary wealth are to share it with others, use it for the furtherance of God's kingdom here on earth, and not try to put their identity in their wealth. (6:17-19)

Book 55

The Book of 2nd Timothy

Who wrote the book of 2nd Timothy: Paul

When was it written: 66 A.D.

When Paul wrote 1st Timothy and Titus (the book that follows 2nd Timothy), Paul was a free man; traveling throughout Asia Minor spreading the message of salvation to any and all who would listen. At that time he had only been a free man for approximately two years (having been imprisoned in Rome. But by the time he wrote this letter, Paul had once again been arrested—this time by Nero, Rome's most notoriously insane (psychotic) emperor.

The first time Paul had been imprisoned in Rome he had been treated humanely. This was largely due to the fact that he was a Roman citizen. During that time he had been allowed visitors, was fed properly, given proper medical attention when he needed it, was allowed to receive gifts from his brothers and sisters in Christ, and he was permitted to continue spreading the message of the Gospel through the writing of his letters to several of the churches that were the result of his evangelistic work and the evangelist work of others.

This time, however, because Nero was the kind of man he was, Paul was chained in a cold, dark, dungeon. He was mistreated, malnourished, and sick. In short, he was dying.

Paul knew these were his last days and that his work here on earth was coming to an end. He could not, however, be at peace until he had written Timothy one last letter. This second letter to Timothy had two main purposes:

- Paul was lonely and wanted to see Timothy one last time before he died. Paul's loneliness stemmed from the fact that the persecution of Christians was so severe under Nero's reign that many Christians went into hiding. To have associated themselves with Paul by coming to see him would have resulted in an instantaneous death sentence. It is doubtful that Paul resented the lack of visitors, but his understanding didn't make him any less lonely.
- Paul wanted to give Timothy some final words of encouragement to remain steadfast and not be afraid. The persecution of the Church wasn't limited just to the city of Rome. It was going on throughout the entire Roman Empire. This meant that the churches Paul, Timothy, Titus, Barnabas, Peter, Silas, Mark, and all the others had worked so hard to establish throughout the known world were under attack.

Paul knew what it was to suffer for the cause of Christ. He also knew what it was to be abundantly blessed for sharing the truth of the Gospel. But either way Paul was content in his circumstances and truly glad to do whatever God called him to do.

What about you? Can you say you are content and truly glad in all things knowing God is in control?

What we learn from the book of 2nd Timothy

- We need close personal relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ. (1:3-4)
- God didn't give us a spirit of timidity. In other words God expects us to be bold for him. (1:7)
- We should never be ashamed or embarrassed to live our faith, share our faith, or even to suffer for our faith. (1:6)
- The gift of salvation is not because of anything we've done, but it is God's gift to us because of his unconditional love and amazing grace. (1:9)
- Upon acceptance of Jesus as Savior, we receive the Holy Spirit to guide us. (1:14)
- We have to 'play by the rules', i.e., if we want to receive God's blessings we have to obedient to him. (2:4-7)
- *Paul gives us a "…trustworthy saying…": If we died with him we will also live with him; if we endure we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself. (2:11-13)*
- The LORD knows those who are his. (2:19)
- We are to keep ourselves away from all kinds of evil. (2:23-26)
- Paul warns against false teachers and those that will try to persuade us to turn away from God. (3:1-9)
- We are to always be prepared to defend God's Word and the reason for our faith. (4:2-5)

Book 56

The Book of Titus

Who wrote the book of Titus: Paul

When was it written: Approximately 64 A. D.

As stated earlier, Paul wrote this letter to Titus shortly before his last imprisonment in Rome. Prior to this time Paul and Titus had spent about three years together in Ephesus. After leaving Ephesus, Paul sent Titus to work with the church in Corinth for a while before taking him to Crete. Paul left Titus in Crete to continue their work and it was during this period of time that Paul wrote the letter that is the book of Titus.

Paul's purpose in writing Titus was to:

- Give Titus guidance and instruction for meeting opposition from unbelievers
- Give Titus authorization for addressing these issues
- Define the guidelines for Christian conduct
- Warn Titus about false teachers
- Commission (encourage) Titus to continue his evangelistic work

What we learn from the book of Titus

- God does not lie. (1:2)
- Instructions for the qualifications of an elder in the church. (1:6-9)
- The church cannot permit false and divisive teachers. (1:10-11)
- We must only teach and live according to the doctrine taught by Jesus. (2:1)
- Christian conduct. (2:2-9)
- We are to say ‘no’ to worldly passions; living godly, upright lives. (2:12)
- Those who live in faithful obedience have the hope of heaven. (2:13-14)
- We are to be respectful and subject to the authorities and rulers of our government. (3:1)
- We are to live humbly, peacefully, and show respect to everyone. (3:2)
- We are saved because of God’s love and grace through baptism—not because of anything we’ve done or our own righteousness. (3:5-7)
- Instructions for how to deal with divisive people in the congregation. (3:10-11)
- We are to live productive lives in order to provide for our own necessities. (3:14)

Book 57

The Book of Philemon

Who wrote Philemon: Paul

When was it written: 60 A.D.

The book of Philemon consists of one chapter that contains only twenty-five verses. Don't let the fact that it is so short, however, trick you into believing it has nothing to offer. The book of Philemon contains a powerful and important message we all need to hear. The message is this:

God can change anyone's heart that allows him to do so. None of us are above needing salvation and none of us are below or too far gone to receive it.

Paul wrote this letter to Philemon during the time he spent on the island of Melita, Sicily, as a prisoner of the Roman government on his way to Rome. The purpose of this letter was to persuade Philemon to accept his former slave, Onesimus as a brother in Christ rather than to see him only as a slave.

The request/instruction from Paul to Philemon was more than just a request to accept someone as an equal, though. Much more.

Onesiumus, who had been Philemon's slave, had run away after stealing from Philemon. While on the run, however,

Onesimus met Paul and was introduced to the truth of the Gospel. We don't know under what conditions Paul and Onesimus met, because as stated above, Paul was being escorted to Rome as a prisoner when he wrote this letter to Philemon. What we do know is that he spent the fall and winter of 60 A. D. in Sicily due to the fact that they had been shipwrecked on the island. This could mean that Onesiumus had been on the same ship as Paul working as part of the crew, or as a stowaway or prisoner also on his way to Rome (for a crime he had been apprehended for). It might also mean that Onesimus had made his way to Melita and was living as a free man. How they met is purely speculation and doesn't really matter. The fact that they met and that Onesiumus accepted Christ as his Savior…that's what matters.

It is, however, interesting to think about Paul's living conditions at the time, though, because in spite of the fact that he was a prisoner in transport, Paul was a bit of a hero in the eyes and minds of the residents of Melita as well as those who had been onboard the ship with him. Paul's hero status stemmed from the fact that he had survived being bitten by a highly poisonous snake. This incident, along with the fact that Paul's arrest wasn't for crimes committed against the government, but rather they were trumped up by the Jewish leaders, made it possible for Paul to enjoy a few more liberties—liberties such as preaching the message of the Gospel.

FYI: The account of Paul's miraculous recovery is found in Acts 28.

Wherever they met or whatever the circumstances, Onesimus became a Christian and was changed from the inside out. Proof that the changes in Onesimus were genuine can be seen in the fact that he was willing to return to Philemon and face the consequences of his actions. This is

quite admirable considering the fact that technically his crime was punishable by death.

Another unknown variable in the story is whether or not Paul knew Philemon prior to befriending Onesimus. What we do know, however, is that Philemon was a Christian and part of the church in Colossae. So Paul's letter to Philemon was an appeal from the standpoint of extending the same grace to Onesimus as Christ had extended to Philemon (and the rest of us, too). Paul

The last important piece of information you need to know before looking at the letter itself, is that Onesimus hand-delivered the letter to Philemon. This speaks highly of the genuine nature of Onesimus' conversion. It also tells us that by the time they were able to leave the island that Onesimus was a free man.

What we learn from the book of Philemon

- We need to be aware of and in fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ beyond our local congregation. (1:4-5)
- We are to actively share our faith. (1:6)
- We are to accept anyone and everyone into our church family who is sincere in their faith and acceptance of Jesus as Savior. (1:10)
- People can and do change. (1:11)
- God often uses negative or even bad situations and circumstances for his glory. (1:15-16)
- As Christians we are to uphold the civil laws of our land, pay our debts and taxes, etc.. (1:18)
- We are to show compassion toward others and help those in need of assistance. (1:18)

Book 58

The Book of Hebrews

Who wrote the book of Hebrews: We are unsure of the authorship of Hebrews, but many theologians believe Barnabas or Luke may have written it.

When was it written: 70 A.D., which was just prior to the fall of Jerusalem

History tells us that at the time the book of Hebrews was written, the Church was undergoing severe persecution. Those who claimed to be or were suspected of being Christians were beaten, imprisoned, or at the very least, shunned by those who weren't.

The pressure of persecution had two very different effects on the people. For some, the persecution only served to strengthen their determination and resilience to live out their faith. Others, however, were scared and confused. Was this new faith really something to go to prison for? To possibly even die for? Was it worth losing your friends and extended family over?

The book of Hebrews is the answer to those questions. And the answers are always a resounding YES! Following Christ and giving him your whole life always has been, always is, and always will be absolutely, positively worth it. No matter what the cost of Christianity here on earth, the reward of heaven will be greater than we can imagine.

The goal of the writer of Hebrews was to instill courage into the hearts and minds of those who were considering abandoning their faith. It was for those who tempted to return to Judaism in order to avoid persecution. And in order to do that, the writer emphasized over and over again that bigger and better things were waiting for them. All they had to do was remain faithful.

The fact that Jesus Christ has been given ultimate authority by God, that he is the mediator between us and God, and that he is the all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins, is clearly the book's theme. Faith in these things is the other resounding theme of Hebrews. The faith of those who came long before the Church

What we learn from the book of Hebrews

- God changed his method of communication. Prior to Jesus' life here on earth God communicated with us through the prophets. Jesus' ministry, however, changed all of that. With the coming of Jesus there was no more need for prophets because Jesus was (and is) the fulfillment of everything God said through the prophets. Therefore, the inspired Word of God, which is the Bible, is all we need. Messages/sermons based on anything other than the scripture is false teaching. Furthermore, anyone coming after Jesus who said they were or who says they are a prophet is also a false teacher. (1:1-2)
- Jesus is an "exact representation" of God's being. After Jesus returned to the Father in heaven, he sat down at God's right hand to wait for the day God deems right for his return. (1:3 and 1:5-9))
- Jesus is higher than the angels. (1:4)
- God is the creator of the world and is all-powerful, supreme and eternal. (1:10-12)
- Angels are ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit eternal salvation. (1:14)
- We are to be mindful of what we hear and listen to so that we are not led astray. (2:1)
- The proof of salvation through Jesus has been offered through miraculous signs and wonders and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit for those who have been saved. (2:4)
- Everything is subject to Jesus' authority. (2:8-9)
- Jesus' death was a sacrifice for our sins; saving us from eternal suffering in hell. (2:9)

- Jesus' human existence made it possible for him to literally understand our temptations and help us overcome them. (2:18)
- We are to fix our thoughts on Jesus, the faithful one. (3:1)
- We are to be vigilant against having a sinful heart that turns us away from God. (3:12)
- We are to encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ to remain faithful and to keep looking upward and forward toward our eternal reward in heaven. (3:13-14)
- God does not and will not withhold his anger against the rebellious and unbelieving. (3:16-19)
- We are to observe a day of rest. (4:9-11)
- God's Word is living, breathing, and active. It judges our thoughts and attitudes. It looks at and knows the heart of each and every one of us. (4:12-3)
- We will all stand before God and give an account for our lives. (4:13)
- In living a faithful, obedient life, we can have confidence that we will receive God's grace and mercy. (4:16)
- everyone is meant to be a preacher/evangelist of a congregation. It is a calling from God. (5:4)
- Jesus also had to submit in obedience to God. His death proved that he was. (5:8-9)
- We are to consistently strive to mature in our relationship with God through studying and understanding God's Word and by growing our faith. (5:12 to 6:3)
- There is a danger of rejecting the truth and distancing ourselves so far from God that it is impossible to come back to God in repentance. It is impossible because their hearts are so hardened and Satan has such a firm grip on them that they no longer have it in them to turn back to the truth. (6:4-8)
- God is patient but we should not test his patience. (6:10-12)

- The ultimate sacrifice of Jesus, the perfect and sinless son of God, was necessary because we are powerless to attain perfection on our own or in the keeping of the Mosaic Law. (7:11)
- An explanation of the Old Law priesthood being replaced by Jesus, the ultimate priest. (chapters 7, 8, and 9) NOTE: This was especially important due to the fact that those the letter was addressed to were contemplating returning to Judaism and the Old Law.
- We are to come to God with a sincere heart and full acceptance of him in faith. (10:22-23)
- If we deliberately keep on sinning after accepting Christ as Savior, our salvation is not real. And as a result of our lack of commitment, we have only the judgement and raging fires of hell to look forward to. (10:26-27). NOTE: This is NOT the same as sinning (losing our temper on occasion, ignoring the opportunity to witness to the young couple in the store, or things like that. The deliberate sinning spoken of here is repetitive and intentional.
- Those who hear the truth and reject it are worse than those who never accept for lack of hearing. (10:29)
- The definition of faith. (11:1-3)
- A faith “hall of fame”. (11:4-39)
- We are to get rid of anything and everything in our lives standing between us and God. (12:1-2)
- We are to persevere and not give up. (11:3)
- Hard
- hips and difficult circumstances should be viewed and served as discipline by God. (12:8) NOTE: This does not mean God causes everything bad that happens to us to happen. It simply means he often uses it to discipline us.
- Discipline isn’t pleasant, but it is necessary in order for us to learn and grow. (12:11-13)
- We are to make every possible effort to get along with everyone. In doing so we are setting an example of

holiness. (12:14)

- We are to love everyone and help those in need. In doing so we might actually entertain/help one of God's angels. (13:2)
- We are to be sexually pure and completely faithful to our spouse. (13:4)
- We are to be content with what we have and not fall into the sin of loving money and the things it can buy. (13:5)
- We are to remember those who have spoken God's Word to us and set an example of how we are to live. We are to imitate their faith. (13:7)
- Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He will never change. (13:8)
- Don't let false teachers get in your head or your heart. (13:9)
- Submit to your congregation's leadership as far as it is in exact teaching of God's Word so that you can serve and minister as we are called to do. (13:15-17)

Book 59

The Book of James

Who wrote the book of James: James, the brother of Jesus

When was it written: 48 to 50 A.D.

The book of James is one of the New Testament books referred to as a 'general letter'. The general letters are written to Christians in general, rather than to a specific church (like Ephesians, for example). This does not mean that the letters written to the specific churches are any less important and relevant to Christians then, now, and in the future. It simply means they speak in general terms of Christian conduct rather than addressing specific problems the churches were facing (and still face).

We know from reading the four books of the gospel writers that Jesus' siblings were not strong supporters of his ministry in the beginning. In fact, Mark 3:20-33, we read that they were embarrassed by their brother's ministry…that they did not believe their oldest brother was the Son of the one true God. Following Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, however, James had a change of heart. This was likely due to the fact that Jesus appeared to James post-resurrection.

Jesus' appearance to James wasn't a coincidence. Neither was it because he and James shared an extra-special brotherly bond. It was undoubtedly because he (Jesus) saw

in James the great teacher and Church leader he turned out to be.

Yes, that's right. James because a prominent leader in the early church in Jerusalem. James pastored, taught, and encouraged the early Christians as they went through the growing pains of going from Judaism to Christianity. He shepherded them through the persecution and ridicule they faced; focusing on everyday living and Christian character rather than doctrinal issues. James tells us what it is and means to be truly faithful, truly wise, and truly religious.

As you read through the list of things we learn from the book of James, I ask that you do so with the mindset of measuring your own life against James words of wise instruction because when you look in the mirror or when others look at you, the person James describes is the person you need to see staring back and you and the person others need to see.

What we learn from the book of James

- We are to view the trials we face with joy and with the attitude that we will learn from them and allow them to grow and mature our faith in God. (1:2)
- When our faith grows because of the difficult situations and difficult times we face, we also develop perseverance. (1:4)
- All we have to do in order to gain wisdom is ask God for it. (1:5)
- We MUST believe and not doubt. Otherwise we will receive nothing from God. (1:6-7)
- Rich or poor—it doesn't matter. What matters is that we have a heart of humility toward God. (1:9-11)
- We will be blessed when we persevere through hardships without losing faith. (1:12)
- God does not tempt us. Temptations come from the evil desires Satan places in our hearts and mind. (1:14)
- Living a lifestyle that gives in to temptations results in spiritual death. (1:15)
- EVERY good thing comes from God and only God. (1:17)
- We are to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. (1:19)
- We are to get rid of all anger, moral filth, and evil thought we have. (1:21)
- It's not enough to know what God's Word says. We have to live it 24/7 in order for it to be real and relevant…for our faith to be real and relevant. (1:22)
- We are to keep a tight rein on our tongue (what we say). Otherwise, our religion is worthless. (1:26)
- God's definition of religion: To look after orphans and widows and to keep oneself from being polluted by the

world. (1:27)

- We aren't to show favoritism toward people based on their looks, their social status, their heritage (race, etc.), or their popularity. We are to love everyone and treat everyone the way we want them to treat us. (2:8-9)
- Sin is sin—none is greater or lesser than another in God's eyes. (2:10-12
- We are to extend mercy to others rather than pass judgement on them. (2:13) NOTE: Judgement is not the same as holding someone accountable for *falling away from* God's direct commands.
- We are saved by faith—a faith that is demonstrated by its deeds. Faith and deeds go hand in hand. Without deeds faith isn't faith…it is lip service. (2:14-26)
- Teachers of the Word will be judged with more scrutiny than those who are not teachers of the Word. (3:1)
- Not everyone is called to teach the Word of God on a broad scale, but we are all called to share the Word of God with those around us. (3:1)
- We are not perfect, as in sinless, but we should strive to be perfect as in striving to be like God in all ways. (3:2)
- An excellent message containing analogies on keeping ourselves in check. (3:3-12)
- What is wisdom? It is living a good life of deeds done in humility out of a love for God and a desire to love as he loves. Godly wisdom is pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, merciful, impartial, sincere, and includes acts of service and ministering to the needs of others. (3:13 and 17)
- We are to get rid of any bitterness, envy, and selfish ambition we are harboring in our hearts. (3:14)
- Having a world-view of wisdom leads to earthly, unspiritual ways of thinking and acting. These things are from the devil and should be avoided at all costs. (3:15-16)
- Conflict is nearly always the result of fighting to get our own way. (4:1-2)

- We are to ask God for what we want. But when we ask with wrong or impure motives, or when we ask for things that go against God's expectations and desires for our life, we should not expect to grant our requests. Why? Because God will never give us anything contrary to his perfect will for our lives. (4:2-3)
- When we submit to God, the devil doesn't stand a chance with us. (4:7)
- God will never push himself on us or force his will on us. But when we come near to him, he welcomes us with loving and open arms; drawing us close to his side. (4:8)
- When we humble ourselves before God he blesses us. (4:10)
- God is the judge of man. (4:12)
- We should seek God's will for our lives in all things and make our plans accordingly. (4:13-16)
- Anyone who knows the right and Godly thing to do, but doesn't do it, is guilty of sin. (4:17)
- Warnings for making money and wealth a priority and the basis of your identity. (5:1-6)
- We are to be patient and kind to one another. (5:7-8)
- We are to be people of integrity—men/women of our word. (5:12)
- We are to be people of prayer and people who willingly and joyfully offer up praises to God. (5:13)
- God is a healer. (5:14-15)
- We are to confess our sins to God and to each other. (5:16)
- There is tremendous power in prayer. (5:16-17)
- We are to hold our brothers and sisters in Christ accountable for their actions, and they are to do the same for us. Additionally, when we see a fellow Christian falling away from God and choosing a lifestyle of sin, we should try to win that person back to Christ. (5:19-20)

Book 60

The book of 1st Peter

Who wrote the book of 1st Peter: Peter

When was it written: 64 A.D.

The book of 1st Peter is written to Christians scattered throughout the known world of that day; specifically Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, which with the exception of Asia, were all located in what is now Turkey.

This area, which was part of the vast Roman Empire, was the 'hot bed' of Christianity. Yes, it is true that the Church was established in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, but if you will recall in the book of Acts (chapters 5, 8, and 11), persecution at the hands of Jewish leaders, extremists, including Saul (who later became Paul), and the Roman government caused many early Christians to scatter. This scattering resulted in small groups of dedicated and faithful Christians spreading the message of the Gospel throughout the communities where they settled. And by the grace and guiding hand of God, it spread like wildfire.

The fact that the Gospel was spreading and the Church was growing did not mean the opposition and persecution ended when they left Jerusalem, though. The early Christians experienced hardships and trials because of their faith no matter where they were. Thus, Peter, being one of, if not the most influential leader of the early Church, wrote this letter

to Christians everywhere as a reminder or pep talk to stay the course.

In this letter Peter focuses on doctrinal issues as well as Christian character. He acknowledges the fact that as a body of believers they are suffering persecution. He goes on to say, however, that they don't need to worry or be fearful of these things because God is in control and is watching over them. Peter also reminds readers of God's holy and gracious nature and that we are to imitate these things as we wait for the day of Christ's return.

Peter's letters (1st and 2nd Peter) are direct and to the point. He doesn't mince words, but then we wouldn't expect him to. This is Peter we are talking about. When Jesus reinstated Peter in the last chapter of the book of John, Peter decided right then and there (if not before) that he wasn't going to ever make the mistake of letting Jesus down again. This doesn't mean Peter was perfect and sinless the rest of his life. We are all sinners in need of the Savior. What it does mean, however, is that Peter took his role of transferring from a disciple (one who was being taught) to apostle (one who was teaching) very seriously.

Peter's writing demonstrates his dedication and desire to share the Good News of the Gospel and to help others avoid being separated from Christ. He had experienced the dark hopelessness of separation for only a brief time, but it was long enough to know that he wanted to save anyone and everyone he could from going there. So while Peter's directness can often be blunt, that's okay. We need that so that we don't fall into the temptation of twisting and contorting God's Word to justify our desires and appease our conscience. We need to know that there are things God has commanded us to do—that yes means yes and no means no.

Peter isn't afraid to tell us these things. Are we afraid to listen and obey?

What we learn from the book of 1st Peter

- Peter calls readers ‘strangers in the world’; meaning we are to intentionally strive to avoid getting caught up in worldly pleasures, thought processes, and justifications. We are to see the world as God sees it and live life according to God’s standards. (1:1)
- We have been chosen to be saved by the blood of Jesus and live in obedience to him. (1:2) NOTE: Being chosen by God does NOT mean that only a select few can and will be saved. Being chosen is an all-encompassing term. We, as in the entire human race, were chosen over all other creatures God created to be like him and to spend eternity with him. Because of sin, however, we have to choose whether or not that happens.
- Our hope for rebirth (eternal life) has been made possible by the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. (1:3-4)
- A reminder of what faith is and the value of it. (1:7-9)
- A reminder that the purpose of the prophets was to prepare the way for Jesus. Jesus was the fulfillment of their messages. (1:10-12)
- We are to be holy, self-controlled, obedient to God, and we are to rely on his grace. This is not something we can feel or be in the mood for, though. It is a mindset. We have to decide to be these things. In other words, faith is not a feeling or an emotion. Faith is as decision. We must decide…make the choice to be holy and turn away from evil desires, which are feelings. (1:13-16)
- God will judge each of us fairly. (1:17)
- We are to live with reverent fear of God’s judgement—a fear that is utter respect for his holiness, power, and

authority. This fear and respect should come as a result of gratitude and the knowledge that we were redeemed by the sacrificial blood of Jesus' own body. Jesus…the one and only Son of God who is naturally his and not adopted as we are. (1:18-19)

- Our salvation should inspire and drive us to be like Jesus; loving others as he does and treating them as we want to be treated. (1:22)
- This world and everything in it will disappear, but the Word of the LORD stands forever. (1:24)
- We are to rid ourselves of every bit of malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander. (2:1)
- We are to strive toward spiritual maturity. (2:2-3)
- We are to be active in our faith. We are to see ourselves as a living, breathing part of the Church. (2:4-6)
- is the foundation of the Church—the solid rock on which it stands. Jesus is also the stone over which unbelievers stumble and fall. (2:7-8)
- Peter reminds us that though we (Gentiles) were not members of God's chosen people, Israel, we are now God's children and recipients of his mercy, love, and grace. (2:9-10)
- We are to live as strangers (there's that word again) in this world. We are to resist and run from the evil desires Satan tempts us with. We are to live in such a way that 1) no one can justly accuse us of wrong and 2) people will automatically see Jesus in us—even if they don't realize Jesus is who/what makes the difference. (2:11-12 and 15)
- We are to submit to all authorities (law enforcement and government). (2:13-14)
- We are NOT to use our freedom in Christ as an excuse for breaking the law or covering up evil. (2:16)
- We are to show respect and love to everyone. We are also to fear God, submit to our employers. (2:17-18)
- We aren't to worry about, hold grudges against, or rebel against those who treat us unfairly or harshly. Instead of

taking matters into our own hands we are to hand them over to God. When we do we can rest assured that God will bless us and deal harshly with those who mistreat us. (2:18-20)

- Rather than being surprised or upset when we are ridiculed and persecuted, we should expect it and even consider it an honor to be recognized as a Christian. (2:21)
- We are reminded of how and why Jesus suffered on the cross. (2:21-24)
- We are Jesus' sheep and he is the shepherd and overseer of our souls. NOTE: To be Jesus' sheep is quite a compliment. Why? Because in spite of what most people think, sheep are NOT dumb, stupid, or whatever synonym you might want to use. Sheep are *trusting, compliant,* and *creatures of habit.* They want to be led. They want to be taken care of and they trust and even expect the shepherd to always be there to tend to their needs. And THIS is exactly what Jesus wants from us.
- We are again reminded of God's command to wives to be submissive to their husbands. Wives of unbelieving husbands are also to submit in hopes that they will come to know Christ as Savior because of their actions and faith. (3:1-2)
- The true beauty of a woman is NOT found in her outward appearance—clothes, makeup, hair styles, and jewelry. The true beauty of a woman comes from her inner self—an inner self that is gentle and has a calm, serene, and discreet spirit. (3:3-5)
- Husbands are to treat their wives with TLC and respect. In doing so they are fulfilling a God-commanded spiritual duty. Christian men who do not treat their wives in this manner place an obstruction or hindrance between their prayers and God. (3:7)
- Women are the weaker sex. NOTE: This is not a criticism or meant to be derogatory. It is fact. Women are, generally speaking, less muscular and their bodies

are built to bear up under pregnancy and childbirth rather than continuous, hard physical labor. Women and men are also wired differently mentally and emotionally. This doesn't make one right and one wrong. It makes us different—equipped for excelling at different things. So in giving men the responsibility to watch over women and respect them as the "…weaker partner…." God is not slamming us. He is giving us an extra dose of TLC. (3:7)

- Once again we are told to get along with one another. We are told to live in harmony, to be sympathetic, compassionate, loving, and humble. We aren't to repay evil with evil or insults with insults, but rather overcome evil with good and extend kindness to those who insult or hurt you as a means of 1) setting a Christ-like example and 2) receiving a blessing from God for doing good. (3:8-9)
- Most of the time we won't be harmed for doing what is right and good, but if we are, God will bless us for it. (3:13)
- Jesus is to be the LORD of everything in our life. We are also supposed to be ready, willing, and able to answer questions concerning who Jesus is and why we claim him as LORD and Savior. (3:15-17)
- Jesus Christ is the ultimate and only sacrifice that can save us from our sins. Accepting Jesus as Savior happens when we are baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of our sins for the purpose of washing away our old self in exchange for a new and good conscience toward God. This "…new conscience…." is reflected by living obediently so that we can receive our reward, which is a home in heaven for all eternity. (3:18-22)
- We should be willing to suffer for Christ and the Church since he suffered for us. (4:1)
- We will all have to give an account for our lives on the day of judgement. (4:5-6)

- We are to live as if each day is our last—prayerfully and with a clear conscience. We are to love one another, show hospitality to one another, and use our God-given talents and abilities to serve the Church, serve others, and to minister to those in need. In other words, we are to live 24/7 for Christ and like Christ. (4:7-11)
- Peter once again reminds us that any suffering, persecution, or ridicule we receive because of our faith is nothing to be ashamed of or afraid of. He says we should see it as a blessing and that God will bless us even more when we endure it with grace, dignity, and continued faith. (4:12-19)
- Elders are to be shepherds/leaders of the congregation. They are to serve willingly, faithfully, and humbly. (5:1-4)
- Young men in the church are to be respectful and submissive; learning from the older men so that they will be ready to take their place when the time comes. (5:5)
- We are to humble ourselves before God; putting all our cares, worries, and fears in his capable and loving hands. (5:6-7)
- We are to be always ready to resist the devil. We should be constantly on guard against him; watching for his devious schemes. We are also told in these verses that the best way to do this is to know the truth of God's Word and know it well. (5:7-9)

Book 61

The Book of 2nd Peter

Who wrote the book of 2nd Peter: Peter

When was it written: 66 A.D.

Peter wrote this second letter to the same people he was writing to in 1st Peter—Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire (Asia Minor).

Peter's primary focus in this second letter is to warn his brothers and sisters in Christ against false teachers.

Peter had been one of Jesus' constant companions throughout his ministry here on earth. Peter knew the truth because he had:

- Learned the truth by the very one who IS truth
- Seen the truth in witnessing the miracles and signs from Jesus
- Seen the truth in witnessing the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus
- Experienced the truth of Jesus' sacrifice by being forgiven and reinstated as a disciple and apostle following his denial of knowing Jesus
- Lived the truth in being given the power to heal and perform miracles in the name of Jesus for the purpose of spreading the truth of the Gospel

- Spoken the truth when Jesus asked Peter who he believed Jesus to be
- Spoken the truth on the Day of Pentecost, which was the birthday of the New Testament Church
- Shared the truth with countless others throughout the known world
- Lived the truth in his establishment and overseeing of the Church and its various congregations
- Died for the truth as a Christian martyr at the hands of Nero—crucified like Christ had been, but hanging upside down because he would not 'raise himself to Christ's level' by being nailed to the cross in the exact same way Jesus had.

Peter's passion for the truth was the fuel that fed his energy and devotion for ensuring the truth persisted and prevailed in the Church. He would give his very life to make sure that happened.

What we learn from the book of 2nd Peter

- Our faith is valuable and precious. There is nothing comparable to it. (1:1)
- God is the provider of everything we need in this life. (1:3)
- promises, which are the promises we base our faith upon, save us from corruption and make it possible for us to achieve moral excellence. (1:4)
- Faith on its own is not really faith. Real faith is demonstrated and complimented by goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, kindness, and love. All of these put together 'equal' godliness. (1:5-7)
- When we live faithfully, demonstrating godly character, we produce 'good fruit' for the kingdom of God here on earth. We are productive and effective in sharing the message of the Gospel through our words, deeds, and attitude. We are a reflection of who Jesus is. (1:8)
- Those who call themselves Christians, but fail to live productive lives for the kingdom are described as ungrateful and blind to the gift of salvation. (1:9)
- Even though we may be firmly established and rooted in the truth of God's Word, we need to continually study to gain even more wisdom and knowledge of the same. We can never know too much about the Bible or be too close to God. By continuing to grow in knowledge and wisdom of God's Word we are better equipped to fend off any false teachings that are presented to us. (1:12-16)
- False teachers will be present in this world until the day Jesus returns. Some will blatantly and boldly deny the holiness and sovereignty of the LORD. Other false teachers will worm their way into the church. They will

use deceitful, seemingly-correct teachings to lure people away from the truth. They will also create divisions in the Church when some chose to follow these teachings. (2:1-3)

- We are warned that God will have no mercy on false teachers. They will receive the same punishment the angels who rebelled against him did…hell. (chapter 2) NOTE: This passage of scripture is an important one in the fact that it describes the full nature of God. All too often people are content to keep God in a nice, neat little box labeled LOVE. They choose to see him as nothing more than a glorified Santa Claus or genie in a lamp. But when things go bad, they are quick to deny his being. "A *loving* God would never do *that,*" they say. So which is it? God is love, but love in its purest form includes justice. Think about it…how loving would you think God is if he tolerated evil? The evil that would negatively affect your life?
    - Our concept of time is entirely different that God's. To God a day like a thousand years. But know this: Jesus is going to return. We don't know when, but it will happen. (3:8)
    - God is just and will punish the evil and those who don't accept Jesus as Savior, but he is patiently waiting for as many as possible to be saved. (3:9)
    - When Jesus comes back there will be no doubt in our minds about what is taking place. (3:10)
    - We need to live in readiness for the day of Jesus' return and the final judgement. (3:11-15)

Book 62

The Book of 1st John

Who wrote the book of 1st John: John the disciple

When was it written: Most likely around 90 A. D.

In order to refresh your memory on who John was, I am repeating a portion of the introduction to the book of the Gospel of John:

John was one of the first four disciples Jesus called into full-time ministry; making him privy just about every moment of Jesus' three year evangelistic crusade. John is also known as the disciple that Jesus loved. Among the twelve disciples Jesus chose as his core group of confidants and assistants, he had an even more select group of three—Peter, James, and John. And from those three we see numerous times when it was John Jesus relied on. It was John Jesus entrusted his mom to right before he (Jesus) breathed his last breath on the cross. Yes, in spite of the fact that Jesus had several brothers (the writer of James and the writer of Jude being two of them), he entrusted him mother to John. But why? What made John so special?

The answer is simple: Family. John was family…Jesus' first cousin, to be exact. The fact that Jesus, James, and John were first cousins is not specifically stated in scripture like that, i.e. "Jesus, James, and John were

cousins". But the fact presents itself in all four of the gospels when you put them together to see what they say.

Fact #1: We learn early-on that James and John are the sons of Zebedee.

Fact #2: The Gospel writers tell us that among the women standing with Mary (Jesus' mother) at the cross was Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the lessor, and the mother of Zebedee's children (Matthew). The book of Mark tells us the same thing, only he calls the mother of Zebedee's children by name—Salome.

Fact #3: Salome and Mary (Jesus' mother) were sisters. John tells us in recording who was with Mary at the cross that the group of women consisted of Mary, Mary Magdalene, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary's sister, Salome.

Unlike Jesus' siblings (among them, New Testament writers James and Jude), John had been with Jesus from the start of his ministry. Like Peter he had heard, seen, lived, experienced, and spoken the truth. It was as much a part of him as his right arm. And it was because of this that John wrote this letter and the two that follow.

At the time of his writing Christians were still undergoing a tremendous amount of persecution. They were also under attack from the Gnostics. If you will remember from earlier reading, the Gnostics:

- Believe Jesus was nothing more than a good man whose life is worthy to be emulated.
- Believe we live more than one mortal life so there is no resurrection of the physical body.
- God came from humans and is a glorified human. To say that God has always been is to say he is not

real because everything has to have a beginning.
- We have the capacity to be equal with God.
- The body and all things made of matter are evil, but the spirit is entirely good.
- Faith is a choice, but there is no condemnation in walking away from God.

John's primary focus in this first letter was to expose the lies of the Gnostics and reassure Christians of the hope and truth of salvation and the second coming of Christ.

What we learn from the book of 1st John

- He reiterates that he is an eye-witness to the truth and that the truth was, is, and forever will be the same. (1:1-4)
- God is light and in him there is no darkness, or evil (sin). When we walk (live) in that light all darkness (sin) will be exposed. (1:5-7)
- We are all sinners in need of the Savior and when we confess our sins before Christ he will forgive us and purify us; making us right with God. But if we claim to be without sin, we are lying and calling God a liar, as well. (1:9-10)
- We are to try to live our lives as free of sin as possible; trying to emulate Jesus in all things. But when we do fall short (and we will) we have the comfort of knowing that forgiveness is ours for the asking. (2:1-6)
- Hate has no place in the hearts and minds of Christians. (2:9-11)
- We are to live in the world, but not embrace or love the world's view of happiness, money, pleasure, and God. The world was created by God, but it is full of evil and we are not to participate in that evil. (2:15-16)
- Those who choose God over the world (good over evil) will live forever with God. (2:17)
- The antichrist: who is it? What is it? Where is it? (chapter 2)
- Live in such a way that you can stand before God with confidence and assurance on the day of judgement. (2:28)

- God's love is immeasurable and we are blessed to be called his children. (3:1)
- As a child of God we are to live in sin. We will sin, but that is not the same as living in sin; repeatedly and continually doing what God has commanded us not to. Those who continually live in sin cannot be part of God's family. Those who claim to live in Christ MUST walk as Jesus did. (3:4-10)
- We shouldn't be surprised when the world displays its hate for us because of our faith. (3:13)
- Once again we are told to love one another. We are also given examples of what love 'looks' like. The ultimate example of course, is the love Jesus displayed in giving his own life as a sacrifice for our sins. After reminding us of this, John clearly states that we, too, should be willing to give our life for our brothers/sisters in Christ. Love also shares material wealth and possessions with those in need without hesitation or resentment. He says that true love as God has called us to love is much more than just words. It is demonstrated and lived out. (3:16-18)
- God knows everything and can see into the deepest, most secret places in our hearts and minds. (3:20)
- When we live according to God's commands, he will give us whatever we ask for because he knows that anything we ask for will be pleasing to him and his will for our lives. (3:23-24)
- We are not to automatically believe everything we hear or are taught—even in church. We are to test the spirits, which means we are to compare or measure everything we are taught to see how it lines up with the Bible. False teachers and antichrists are literally everywhere. We need to know the difference so we aren't drawn away from

the truth, thus putting our salvation in jeopardy. (4:1-6)

- One more reminder to love each other as God loves us is given. We are told that even though we cannot see God we know he lives in us when we are capable and willing to extend to others the love he extends to us. We also learn that when we experience the love of God and when we exhibit the love, we have nothing to fear. Nothing. (chapter 4)
- God recognizes us as his children when we carry out his commands. (5:2)
- Only those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God will overcome the world (sin). (5:5) NOTE: The literal translation of this verse says "…he who is believing…". This directly implies that the belief is not just a thought tucked into the back of one's mind, but rather an active faith. To be believing is to live according to your beliefs. In other words, simply saying you believe that Jesus is God's son is not enough. Your actions have to reflect what you say. And if your actions reflect what you say, you will be living a life of faithful obedience in all things God has commanded us to do.
- A brief explanation of the trinity. (5:6-12)
- When we live a life that reflects our belief that Jesus is the Son of God, we have the confidence of knowing we will spend eternity in heaven. We also have the confidence of the promise that whatever we ask for according to God's will, will be given to us. (5:13-15)
- We are to pray for and try to help lead anyone who goes astray back to the LORD. (5:16)
- There is one sin that is unforgiveable by God. (5:17) NOTE: We know from other passages of scripture (Matthew 12:31-32) that the sin John is

speaking of here is blasphemy, which means to deny the existence of the Holy Spirt.

- We cannot continue to live a sinful lifestyle if we want to be considered God's child and inherit salvation. (5:18-20)
- We are to keep ourselves free from (away from) idols of any kind. (5:21) NOTE: Idols are not limited to statues of things presumed to be gods or goddesses. Money, food, sex, drugs, material possessions, our career, our reputation, and even other people can become idols in our life. Simply speaking, an idol is anything you put more value, time, effort, and energy into than you do God and your relationship with him.

Book 63

The Book of 2nd John

Who wrote the book of 2nd John: John the disciple

See also the introduction to the gospel of John and 1st John for more information about who he was.

When was it written: Most likely around 90 A.D.

John wrote this second letter about the same time he wrote his first letter to Christians around the known world. In this letter John continues his emphasis on love by reminding us that Christ's love for us is the ultimate example of love and that we are called by God to love one another in the same way Jesus loves us. He stresses that for Christians love is not an option. It is a command.

John's other main concern addressed in this brief book of the Bible is for Christians to watch out for false teachers. He was most likely specifically speaking about the Gnostics who were diligently trying to invade the Church to tear it down. And because the early church (the first two centuries or so) depending primarily on missionaries and traveling evangelists, it was actually quite easy for these false teachers to deceive their way into groups of Christians learning, worshipping, and growing together.

Because John:

- Was an eye witness to the life and ministry of Jesus
- Was an active participant in the life and ministry of Jesus
- Was completely ‘sold out’ for Jesus and the truth that is Christianity

he was passionate about making sure he did everything possible to prevent Christians around the world from being lured away from the truth.

INTERESTING NOTE: The letter that is the book of 2nd John has fewer chapters and verses than any book in the Bible (one chapter and thirteen verses). The book of 3rd John, however, is actually the shortest book in the Bible because in spite of the fact that it has one chapter and fourteen verses, it has fewer words.

What we learn from the book of 2nd John

- The truth of the Gospel will never change. (1:2)
- A reminder of what love is and that we are to love. (1:5-6)
- Warnings against the false teachers who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as the Son of God or acknowledge that he came in the flesh and lived a perfect and sinless life that ultimately ended here on earth as a sacrifice for our sins. (1:7)
- Warnings not to let the false teachers (antichrists) be responsible for leading us away from God and ultimately robbing us of our salvation. (1:8-11)

Book 64

The Book of 3rd John

Who wrote the book of 3rd John: John the disciple

See also the introduction to the gospel of John and 1st John for more information about who he was.

When was it written: Most likely around 90 A.D.

This final letter from John which makes up the New Testament book of 3rd John was written near the same time as his first two letters. Unlike the previous two letters, however, this third letter is specifically addressed to one of the faithful leaders of the Church—Gaius.

John's purpose in writing Gaius is three-fold. One: He encourages Gaius to continue in his faithfulness to God and to the Christians in the province of Asia. Two: He thanks Gaius for being such a solid believer and for upholding the message of truth in spite of the fact that a leader in one of the other churches in Asia Minor was doing whatever he could to discredit John and those like him (meaning those who taught the truth of the Gospel). The man's name we learn, was Diotrephes.

Diotrephes was a rogue preacher/teacher—much like more than a few televangelists in our century. These are men who allowed the notoriety, power, material wealth,

sexual sins, and other sins of this world to lure them away from the truth and into false piety and teaching.

Diotrephes had allowed many of these same things to happen to him. His greed for power and control over his congregation had caused him to become extremely dictatorial—so much so that he was excommunicating people (kicking them out) who held to the true message of the Gospel and who welcomed missionaries sent by John and other church leaders.

John's devotion to the Church and to the spreading of the Gospel made it impossible for him to sit on the sidelines and let this happen. But due to distances, the time it took to travel, and other logistical issues, John couldn't deal with Diotrephes alone. Gaius provided the help he needed and his letter to Gaius provides us the help we need to combat similar issues today.

What we learn from the book of 2nd John

- We should take joy in knowing that our brothers and sisters in Christ outside our local congregation are doing well. We also need to view these verses as God's encouragement to us to develop and enjoy relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ beyond the local congregation. (1:3-4)
- We are to extend hospitality to others—especially those who devote themselves to preaching and teaching God' Word (missionaries). (1:8)
- The ungodly actions and attitude of Diotrephes is explained and John tells Gaius that he plans to deal with it. (1:9-10)
- A distinction is made between the Godly and ungodly. Those who do good are Godly. Those who aren't are ungodly. (1:11) NOTE: To "…do good…." goes far beyond just doing a few good deeds or even doing good deeds on a regular basis. The 'good deeds' John speaks of here means to obey God's commands in all things.
- John indicates that Diotrephes is basically a good man—that he simply needs to be held accountable for his actions and brought back to the truth. (1:12)

In reading John's words of warning and chastisement, we once again see that God will not tolerate disobedience or disrespect but that forgiveness and restoration is lovingly offered to those who are truly repentant.

Book 65

The Book of Jude

Who wrote the book of Jude: Jude, the brother of Jesus

When was it written: 65 A.D.

Jude, who was also called Judas, was one of Jesus' siblings. Technically the two (along with Simon, James, Joseph, and some unnamed sisters) were half-siblings since they shared the same biological mother, but Joseph was, of course, only Jesus' earthly father. (Matthew 13:55-56)

Like their brother James, who wrote the New Testament book of James, Jude did not readily accept his oldest brother as the Messiah. How could his brother, the same guy he'd played with, squabbled with, eaten with, done chores with…done life with…how could he be the one? He (Jesus) sure didn't seem to be any different than the rest of them. Besides, wouldn't their parents have treated Jesus differently if he was who he claimed to be? Wouldn't they have said something?

All of these questions and more surely played a role in Jude's journey to faith and salvation. We don't know exactly when Jude accepted the truth, but we know he did. We also know in reading Acts 1 that Jude was part of the very select group who joined with the remaining disciples in the days immediately following Jesus'

resurrection and return to heaven. They gathered to pray for wisdom, understanding, and guidance on how to go on without Jesus' physical presence.

All that being said, we know Jude's faith in Jesus the Son of God was deep and sincere. The concern he has for the spiritual wellbeing of his brothers and sisters in Christ is obvious in every sentence he writes.

Jude wrote this letter to one or more of the congregations scattered around the Roman Empire. The fact that the letter was written to more than one church was not uncommon. Those who traveled to the various churches to preach and teach, or the elder leaders of the Church (Peter, John, James, and Jude being among them) often wrote 'round robin' letters in order to make their correspondence more efficient and effective.

Jude's opening statement tells us quite a bit about Jude's passion for evangelism. He plainly states that he has a passion for preaching the Good News of the Gospel—the message of salvation. But the people he is writing to had already been baptized into Christ. So instead, the purpose of Jude's letter was to encourage readers to remain steadfast in their faith. The people needed reminders such as this due to the fact that there was a real and constant danger of being lured away from the faith by false teachers.

False teachers had been trying to destroy the church since its 'birth' on the Day of Pentecost. They still are. Their tactics (message) change from time to time, but their goal is always the same—to malign the holiness of God and Jesus the Son.

The message from the false teachers Jude was 'fighting' against was that God's grace was a license to sin. They purposed that since God is a forgiving God, we can do

anything we want, ask forgiveness (and receive it) and then start the ‘process’ all over again.

We know from Hebrews 10:26, 1st John 3:6, and Romans 6:1 that this way of thinking is not God’s way of thinking. Grace is not a license to sin and Jude wanted to make sure the early Christians didn’t forget this essential truth.

What we learn from the book of Jude

- We are to hold our brothers and sisters in Christ accountable for their actions and we should expect the same from them on our behalf. (1:3)
- Grace is NOT a license for sin and immorality. (1:4)
- False teachers are sneaky and deceptive. (1:4)
- God punishes those who willfully and deliberately disobey him. (1:5-7)
- There is a day of judgement coming and those who are not in Christ will be banished to everlasting darkness (hell). (1:6)
- We are not to verbally or physically attack false teachers. Our duty is to put them out of the church and to discredit their teachings by living and teaching the truth. (1:9-10)
- The prophets and Jesus himself warned us that we would have to deal with false teachers and be on guard against them. (1:14-19)
- The only way we will be able to stand against the false teachers is to let the Holy Spirit guide and direct us. (1:19)
- We are to be merciful and patient with those new to the faith and those who experience feelings of doubt. We are to patiently, yet firmly lead them to a more secure place in their faith. (1:22)

Book 66

The Book of Revelation

Who wrote the book of Revelation: John

When was it written: About 95 A.D.

The book or Revelation is many things. It is a book of prophecy, a book of analogies, a book containing literal descriptions, a book of warnings and chastisements, and a book of promises. Yet if you were to ask most anyone, Christian or non-Christian, the first words that come to mind when they think about the book of Revelation are the words confusion or mysterious. The reasons people feel this way about the book of Revelation include:

- Fear of the unknown
- Guilt
- A lack of knowledge about the rest of the Bible
- Preconceived notions
- Improper teaching
- A lack of faith that is comfortable with the fact that we don't need to know everything about the end times and the day of judgement
- The inability to accept that the book is both literal and figurative

John wrote the book of Revelation to record the things God disclosed (revealed) to John by way of an angel or messenger. John wrote the book of Revelation while a

prisoner on the Island of Patmos. He was a prisoner of the Roman Government under the leadership of Emperor Domitian. Domitian was an egotistical man who strongly enforced the practice of emperor worship; meaning anyone who didn't worship the Roman emperor was sent to prison or killed.

By the time John was banished to Patmos, he was in his nineties, the only remaining disciple/apostle who had been an eye-witness to Jesus' ministry, and had already survived being doused with hot oil for refusing to obey Domitian's laws for emperor worship. Age, persecution, and intense physical suffering weren't enough to squelch John's love for Jesus and his dedication to fulfilling the great commission (Matthew 28:18-20).

Putting all of these things together made John the logical choice in God's mind to reveal this one final prophecy to. Who better than John was there to receive such an important message?

At the time John received these revelations his thoughts were most likely not about us—the coming generations. His thoughts were with the Christians spread throughout the Roman Empire. More than a few were proposing that the Church make some concessions with the government by acknowledging the Emperor as someone worthy of praise along with God. Their reasoning for entertaining such a compromise was obviously meant to be a measure of self-preservation and a means by which they could avoid persecution, prison, or even death.

Now while some may feel the people were justified in their actions—possibly even quoting scripture about obeying the laws of the land and such, this type of compromise cannot be. Why? Because:

- For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ~Colossians 1:16
- God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? ~Numbers 23:19
- That they may know that you alone, whose name is the Lord, are the Most High over all the earth. ~Psalm 83:18
- For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. “If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. ~Psalm 50:10-12
- Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. ~Isaiah 44:6
- Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said, “Caesar's.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” ~Matthew 22:17-21

So you see there is no justification for putting anyone or anything above God or even equal to him. God rules the world and on the day of his choosing he will present himself to us so that we can stand before him to give an account of our lives and be judged. We will be judged and pronounced saved or unsaved. And that is the

message John wanted to send to the Church. It was a message that said, “Don’t give up! Don’t lose sight of what is going to take place. Don’t forfeit your eternal destiny for temporary relief.”

Now that you have a little more background of the book’s origin, let’s begin looking at the book itself. First of all I want to say that this is by no means a comprehensive or all-inclusive commentary of Revelation. Secondly, it is not an unveiling of a great mystery being solved, i.e., I don’t have all the answers. And the reason I don’t have all the answers is simple: no one does. There are simply some things we won’t know until we are there—living the day of judgement and the eternity that follows. Lastly, we are going to take the book of Revelation at ‘face value’. By that I mean I am going to point out or clarify those things that are literal and ask that you accept the things that are figurative on faith.

Chapter 1

Chapter one starts off by introducing/identifying John as the writer (verse 4). Just prior to that John states that what he is about to write was revealed to him by an angel and that that he has a solid reputation for being a dedicated leader of the Church and a man known for his honesty. His reason in saying these things is to 'prove' the validity of what he is about to say. John also tells readers that those who hear it and take it to heart will be blessed, because the end is coming.

The angel then addresses John as if he was writing a letter. He addresses John and prepares John to get ready to hear directly from God as God addresses seven churches in the province of Asia (minor). The seven churches addressed in the letter were seven actual churches in existence during that time. While they weren't the only churches that had been established, the seven that were addressed were all dealing with different spiritual problems or areas of concern. These problems still exist in our churches, making each 'speech' relevant and useful to this day.

After the angel gets John's attention and informs him of what is about to take place, God himself speaks to John, saying, *I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." (1:8)*

God then instructs John to write down what God tells him and to send it to the seven churches he lists. These instructions are literal and not difficult to understand. God told John to write and John wrote. John wrote, but not before he turned to see who was speaking to him.

Verses 12 through 17 of chapter 1 are John's description of who he saw (1:17-18). It is important to note that he used the word 'like' several times in that description. For example, when John said he had eyes like blazing fire, he didn't mean God's eyes were actually a blazing fire. He means they were intense and piercing. And when John said God's voice was like the sound of rushing water, he didn't mean it was inaudible and 'whooshing'. He meant it was powerful and forceful.

John was obviously humbled and even a bit afraid of being in the presence of God, but God told him he had no reason to be afraid. He then told John it was time to get to work….

Chapter 2

Ephesus

praises the church of Ephesus for standing up to false teachings and not allowing them to permeate the church or distract from the truth of the Gospel. The church in Ephesus has, however, become a bit stagnant and ‘dry’. It appears they are falling into the habit of just going through the motions of Christianity rather than making it their passion and heart’s desire. God warns them against letting this go any further and encourages them to get back on track.

Smyrna

God comforts the people of Smyrna by telling them that he is aware of their lack of material possessions and of the persecution and suffering they are going through… and that he hasn't forgotten them. He tells them that things are going to get worse before they get better, but that when 'better' comes, it will be more than they could have imagined or hoped for.

Pergamum

God praises the church for being so steadfast—even though it has cost several of them their lives. He is grateful for their faith and their perseverance. But, God says, some of the Christians in Pergamum have allowed this mindset of compromise to taint their relationship with him. They have turned a blind eye to sexual immorality and some forms of idol worship. Some are even participating in these sinful practices. God warns them to get back on track and devote themselves wholly to him before it is too late.

Thyatira

God once again begins his message to the church by complimenting them on their faithful perseverance. Or rather he compliments those who actually are remaining faithful and assures them they have nothing to fear as long as they remain faithful. He then goes on to reprimand them for allowing a prostitute named Jezebel who is calling herself a prophetess in order to perform sexual acts with the men of the church. God says he has given her time to repent, but that his patience is gone. She, along with her family and anyone who has had sex with her, will suffer severely. God does, state, however, that if those who are guilty of sexual sins with Jezebel repent and if their repentance is genuine, he will spare them from the suffering.

Chapter 3

Sardis

The church in Sardis is dying a spiritual death. They have the attitude that they've done their part and are now just going through the motions. This is not the way it is supposed to be. Christianity isn't something we do. It is who we are from the day we confess Jesus as Savior and are baptized into him until the day we die. God warns the people of Sardis to not forget this.

Philadelphia

The church is commended for their faith and commitment to keeping God's commands. Because of this, God tells the church in Philadelphia that he will spare them from great suffering and testing. He tells them that if they will continue to hold fast to the truth as they have and were currently doing, they would be abundantly blessed.

Laodicea

The church of Laodicea is not one God is pleased with. They are bland. Idle. Lukewarm. So because of their lukewarm-ness, God says he is going to spit them out of his mouth; meaning he will not bless them or be in their presence. The people there have prospered and are putting their faith in material wealth and possessions. They depend on their own wisdom and abilities rather than God's. God goes on to say, though, that he still loves them and that if they repent and genuinely turn back to him, he will welcome them back with open arms.

NOTE: Do you see the relevancy of God's messages to the seven churches? Are these still not the very things we need to guard against today? Are we still not called to be completely and wholly obedient to all of God's commands?

Chapter 4

John is given just a small glimpse of heaven. His description is once again filled with comparisons (like this or that). John's description also contains, however, direct or literal descriptions of things—things like a radiant rainbow encircling God's throne and heavenly beings who continually sang praises to God (4:3-8).

While these things seem strange or even alien-like to us, what does it matter? Our faith leads us to believe that heaven is beyond our imagination, so why would read this and think otherwise?

Chapter 5

In this chapter John tells us how overcome he was with emotion when he experienced another small piece of heaven. What John sees and reveals to us is a foretelling of what is to come on the day of judgement. Jesus, the sacrificial lamb who died for our sins, is the only one worthy of opening the scroll described earlier in the chapter.

As for what is on the scroll, we don't know. Most theologians compare it to a deed of trust for property—the 'deed' that declares God the creator and master of the universe. This makes sense due to the fact of what John sees next—countless angels and creatures singing praises to God.

What follows in verse 13 of this chapter is what definitively tells us that what John is experiencing is a foretelling of what is to come because every creature on heaven and earth have not yet joined forces to praise and worship God. But it will happen (Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:10).

Chapter 6

The imagery of the six seals opened by Jesus (the Lamb) and described by John is one of the visions God gave him for the purpose of writing this letter. The fact that John had these visions should not confuse or mystify anyone. God gave Daniel visions from which he prophesied. God gave Joseph the ability to interpret the dreams/visions Pharaoh had. Peter had a vision in which

God used creative imagery as a means to tell Peter he needed to share the message of the Gospel with the Gentile nations. So why not use visions to remind us of God's unmatchable holiness and power and to give us a hint of what heaven will be like?

The seals clearly represent different world-events, so to speak. The first most likely represents the fact that God is the supreme and all-powerful master of the universe. Images of war, peace, death, grief, famine, and even an image of those who remain faithful are seen. And finally, the sixth seal is clearly a vision of the second coming of Christ and the destruction of the earth.

Chapter 7

John's vision of the seals continues without the opening of the seventh seal. Instead, an angel stops the destruction taking place to allow for preview of the day of judgement for all mankind, dead or alive.

John describes how 144,000 people were to be sealed—12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. This number has been the root of a considerable amount of debate and disagreement over the centuries. Is it a literal number? If so, have those people already been chosen? If so, then what's the use? If not, then…?

As you can see when looking at it from that perspective, AND to look at the Bible in its entirety (including the verses immediately following this section) that the number of 144,000 is most likely not a literal number, but rather a number that signifies perfection or completion, i.e. 12,000 from 12 tribes. *This* meaning that God's chosen people will have finally come full circle and return to him.

It is impossible to logically believe that the number is literal---that only 144,000 will spend eternity in heaven, because in verse nine, John's vision reveals that countless people from every tribe of every nation are also standing before the throne of God singing his praises and worshipping him. This is not something a multitude of people condemned to hell for all eternity would be doing. Add to that the numerous verses in the Bible that speak of God's patience in waiting for more to be saved and the command given to us by Jesus that says we are to spread the Gospel to all the earth so that as many as possible can be saved.

The vision described in chapter seven ends with an elder or angel in heaven asking John if he knows who the white-robed people are. He then answers his own question by telling John they are the saved—the ones who have remained faithful to a) their dying day or b) Christ's return. They are the ones who will spend eternity in heaven, where…

"Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (7:16-17)

Chapter 8

This chapter talks about the opening of the seventh seal followed by a period of silence, which was then followed by four trumpet blasts. Each trumpet blast was followed by devastating events on earth. An earthquake, thunder, hail, water turning to blood, horrendous forest fires, violent waters, violent deaths….

But these things were nothing, John was told, compared to the misery that would come after the blasts from the final three trumpets.

NOTE: The fact that there were seven trumpets is just another indication of the importance of the number seven. Seven is God's number of completion. For example: God created the world in seven days. He rested on the seventh day.

Chapter 9

The fifth and sixth trumpet blasts were followed by images of devastation that Satan and his minions will be allowed to inflict on the earth before its final destruction and the day of judgement.

This chapter is filled with 'like' phrases, i.e. "…they wore something like…." "…hair like…." "…sound of their wings was like…." These phrases indicate imagery—not actual acts taking place. God knows that these word pictures are the most effective means he has in depicting just how dreadful things will be. The evil, destruction, death, and devastation described in chapter nine is figurative in regards to how it happened (fiery horses with lion's heads and scorpions with tails that tormented people). It is, however, literal from the perspective of how emotionally, physically, and spiritually painful it will be.

The most tragic words spoken in chapter nine are found in verses eleven and twelve. They tell us that in spite of all the pain and suffering, there will still be people who refuse to stop worshipping demons and idols. They will continue murdering, stealing, committing sexually immoral acts, and all kinds of other evil. They will refuse to repent. They will chose eternal suffering over eternal joy.

Chapter 10

In this chapter John tells us that there were things he heard that he was instructed to omit from his writing. John gave no indication of what these things were, which is just one more piece of evidence as to the genuineness of his faith and his obedience.

Chapter 11

John's vision in chapter eleven reminds us that God's family consists of both Jews and Gentiles who recognize Jesus as the Savior of the world. This chapter is filled with reference of Old Testament prophets, references to Sodom and Egypt which are alluding to the fact that the world is evil and overrun with idol worshippers, and references to Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. All of these things are referred to as the 'second woe', with the third and final woe to come…the blast of the seventh trumpet followed by second coming of Christ.

Included in the coming of Christ is unabashed praise for God, the Almighty.

Chapter 12

The signs that appeared in heaven were not actual events that were taking place, but rather signs or scenes being played out before John's eyes. You might even call them dramatic reenactments. The first six verses seem to be a dramatization of Jesus' birth and the events that followed, i.e. Herod searching for the Baby Jesus to kill him and God sending Mary, Joseph, and their newborn son, Jesus, to Egypt (the desert) to live until the danger had passed. NOTE: It is estimated that the family stayed in Egypt about three years, which is close to the 1,260 days mentioned in verse 6.

Jesus' birth definitely brought out the absolute worst in Satan. Prior to Jesus' birth he had little trouble getting people to fall into temptation. It was somewhat easy to lure them away from the Old Law and to plant seeds of doubt in their minds that the prophets of sooooo long ago were telling the truth about a coming Messiah. But the arrival of Jesus on earth in human form once again caused Satan to go into 'overdrive'. He was again called on his arm of demons to go to all-out war against God.

The description John gives us of a dragon trying to devour a child and the rage he displays is gruesome. But this is undoubtedly God's perspective of what took place. The all-knowing, all-seeing God of the universe sees beyond the outward appearances. He sees straight into the hearts and minds of everyone—including Satan; making what John saw a dramatization of what these events looked like from the inside out.

As for the numbers (12 stars, 7 heads, 10 horns), there are all sorts of speculations as to what they mean or represent. Quite honestly it doesn't really matter. This is one of those things we can't really understand. But since our acceptance of salvation doesn't hinge on our knowing, I am of the opinion that it isn't worth wondering about or stressing over.

Beginning in verse 7, John begins telling us how Satan came to be. It is important to note that this is not a sign or a vision. He is telling us of an actual event. It is as if he has asked God or the angel talking to him the questions, "Why does Satan exist?" and "Where did Satan come from?"

In short, Satan was an angel created by God before the creation of the earth. Satan, along with some other angels who wanted to be equal to or greater than God (Isaiah 14), waged war against Michael the archangel (highest ranking angel) and those angels who remained faithful to God. Satan lost. He and his angles were banished to earth where he was given power to lead people away from God.

For most people this is by far the most perplexing aspect of God's character. Why didn't he just do away with Satan? Why did he allow Satan to remain? Why did God give him the power to "…lead the whole world astray…."?

While this is something obviously only God can answer for sure, the general consensus is that:

- Allowing Satan to remain is God's way of executing free-will among mankind. While it is his heart's desire that we submit to him in faithful obedience, he wants it to be our *choice* rather than an absolute or involuntary act.

- God's love for his angels, even Satan, is such that he wanted to give Satan the opportunity to repent. But because he didn't, his punishment is hell, because we know that God cannot and will not tolerate disobedience and blasphemy.
- Spending eternity in hell is the worst possible punishment God could inflict on Satan. The time Satan is allowed to have power over the world is nothing compared to what eternity will be.

Following John's explanation of how Satan came to be, his attention is then turned back to the visions of Satan's pillaging of the earth. Seeing Satan at work from God's perspective is both sad and frightening and should make us more keenly aware of our need to resist Satan and cling to God.

Chapter 13

There are two beasts described in chapter 13. The first is Satan, who blasphemes God, who wages war against anyone who follows Jesus, and who has been given authority (power) over the inhabitants of the earth. Those whose name is not found in the Lamb's book of life (saved through the acceptance of Jesus' gift of salvation) worship this beast.

NOTE: It is important to note that Satan was given the authority he has; meaning it came from someone higher than him. That someone, of course, is God.

The other beast is the beast of the earth—false teachers. This beast (the false teachers) acts on behalf of the first beast (Satan). The beast that is false teachers is a deceiver. It appears to be good; even doing miraculous works at times. But it is not. It is of Satan.

The final portion of chapter 13 is arguably the most controversial in the entire Bible. Beginning in verse 16, the beast of the earth (false teachers) forces everyone to receive a mark on their hand or forehead. It is a mark that is the name of the beast or the number of his name. And then in verse 18, the last sentence tells us that man's number is 666.

Much speculation has gone into the meaning of the number 666. Is it going to be a world-wide event? Is it something that will happen on the day of judgement to differentiate between the saved and the unsaved? Has it already happened, i.e. the Holocaust? Was it something that was taking place in the Roman Empire? Or is it even an actual mark? Is the mark a figure of speech?

The answer is this: God only knows.

That's enough for me and it should be enough for us all. Instead we should focus on the first part of verse 18 which says, "This calls for wisdom…." The 'this' John is talking about is being aware of the beast, standing firmly against the beast, and refusing to allow the beast to invade your heart, soul, and mind. Wisdom and knowledge are power and in this case, they are also the difference between joy and suffering for all eternity.

Chapter 14

Chapter fourteen brings quite a change of scenery. John isn't seeing heaven or imagery depicting God's perspective of things. John is seeing the future of an actual place—Mt. Zion. In viewing Mt. Zion John also sees things coming down from heaven—another indication that John is being given a supernatural view of an actual place.

John's vision is also quite different in the fact that it is peaceful. No beast. No war. This would indicate that what he sees is what happens after the way—a war we already know the outcome of. God will be victorious over Satan.

The 144,000 are mentioned again as being redeemed because of their purity and faithfulness. They are singing a new song (a victory song). Who are these 144,000? We truly don't know. They might be the remnant of Israel restored to Jerusalem. And if they are, so be it. Did God not promise over and over to restore them to greatness? Are they not his chosen people?

Who they are should not concern us because in reading further into the chapter we once again see God's angels harvesting the earth; separating the faithful from the unfaithful. In other words, it shouldn't matter to us what our status is in heaven. Only that we are residents should matter.

Chapter 15 and 16

These two chapters provide us with ‘visual aids’ as to what God has planned for the final stages of the end times.

John tells us there will be seven plagues put upon the earth. We are told what the plagues will be and that the people of the earth will never have seen anything like them.

We can read through the plagues as described in chapter 16 and compare them to things happening in our world today. But then they could do that several generations—even a century or more ago.

Yet here we are still waiting.

The point to be made is that while we are to be expectantly waiting for Christ’s return, we shouldn’t be analyzing current events in order to try to determine when that day might be. No, we are to be living with joyful expectation knowing that because of our obedience to Christ, we have nothing to fear. It should be enough for us to know that he is coming back and not worry about the *when.*

Chapters 17 and 18

In this chapter an angel explains several things to John about the beast (Satan) and gives sin the embodiment of a woman—a prostitute. The angel continues by explaining that those whose names are not found in the Lamb's book of life are going to be astonished and perplexed when they see what has become of the beast —how he has been brought down and that they, too, are going to share his destiny (hell).

Chapter 18 sees John meeting another angel. John is now in the present again. No visions. No imagery. 'Just' angels speaking the truth as instructed by God. This angel describes the fall of Babylon and what it was like for the people who experienced it. In doing so the angel is also warning Christians that the same thing is going to happen to the Roman Empire because of its godless leadership and way of life.

Remember…John is writing this to warn the Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire to resist the ideas of compromising between worshipping God only and emperor worship. So in sharing the angel's message with them, John is telling them to "Come out of her…so that you will not receive any of her plagues…." (18:4)

These two chapters are just as relevant for us today as they were for the Christians back then. Sadly the Church has allowed worldly views, i.e. sin, to become benign, harmless, just the way things are. We have allowed ourselves to water down the truth and the commands of God to make life easier for us. We've conformed to the world instead of reforming it—which

is exactly what the angle and John are warning us against.

Chapter 19

The coming of Jesus Christ! John is allowed to see into the future—what it will be like when Jesus comes to finish what he started the night he was born in that dark, dank, stable.

The choir of angels and the songs of praise were overwhelming to John. He fell at the feet of the angle to give praise, but the angel immediately refused to accept John's praise by reminding him (John) that they were fellow-servants of Jesus Christ and that he was not worthy of John's praise.

John then describes Jesus' appearance and seeing Satan, his demons, and the beast of the earth being thrown into a lake of burning sulfur, where they will spend eternity.

Chapter 20

This chapter continues with John's continued vision of the second coming and judgement. He speaks about a period of one thousand years in which Satan is locked up and powerless over the earth. It is almost utopia-like. During this time John says that those who died because of their faith in Christ were raised from the dead and lived with him for this thousands years.

After the thousand years has passed, Satan is going to be released onto the earth again for a short time before being thrown back into hell for good.

There is much discussion as to when this thousand years is going to take place. Will it be after Jesus' initial return and prior to the final judgement and destruction of the world? Is it taking place now or in the future before Jesus actually makes his appearance?

After Satan is locked back into the Abyss, everyone who was dead from the time the world began to whatever day it is God chooses for this to take place, will be raised back to life and stand before God to be judged. Those who were faithful will be saved. Those who were not will be thrown into the lake of fire that is the second death. (20:12-15)

These questions have come from preconceived notions and as a result of not taking the Bible in its entirety. But when you read John's words, and look at the book of Revelation as a whole, you will see that the events in chapters 19 and 20 are all part of the second coming.

- Jesus appears and his name is the WORD OF GOD (19:11-13)

- The beast is captured and locked into the Abyss for the 1,000 years. The name given to the beast is Satan. (19:19-20 and 20:1-3)
- Christian martyrs are raised from the dead—something that we are told will not happen until Christ's return. (20:4-6)

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 opens with John seeing heaven and earth pass away and is given instructions to be sure and write down what he is about to see. It is also during this time that those who are still living on earth when all of this takes place will be judged (21:6-8). And then life as we have known it for centuries is over. Eternity has begun.

John is then given what has to have been the most magnificent of all his visions. John sees heaven! His description doesn't do it justice, we know, but it whets our appetite for wanting to be there. But if you will notice, the description doesn't answer the question everyone asks: "What will we do in heaven?"

It is my personal opinion that we will do many things in heaven. God is far too creative and has far too good of an imagination for it to be anything but exciting and good. But whatever we do we can be sure that praising God for his amazing grace, goodness and love will be a part of it.

Chapter 22

This final chapter of the book of Revelation opens with John's last little look at heaven. Following these few verses Jesus speaks to John telling him that he is coming soon and that those who keep the words of this prophecy (the one just given to John) will be blessed for all eternity.

John ends the book by reiterating that what he has written is true and that what he says he saw he actually saw. What he says he heard he actually heard. And lastly, John implores us to remain faithful unto death so that we can spend eternity in the holy city described in this letter. The city of heaven.

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