Selections from the
NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

THE STORY

THE BIBLE AS ONE CONTINUING STORY OF GOD AND HIS PEOPLE



FOREWORD BY
MAX LUCADO & RANDY FRAZEE

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Contents

Cover
Title Page
Welcome to The Story—God's Story
Preface
Timeline of The Story
1 Creation: The Beginning of Life as We Know It
2 God Builds a Nation
3 Joseph: From Slave to Deputy Pharaoh
4 Deliverance
5 New Commands and a New Covenant
6 Wandering
7 The Battle Begins
8 A Few Good Men … and Women
9 The Faith of a Foreign Woman
10 Standing Tall, Falling Hard
11 From Shepherd to King
12 The Trials of a King
13 The King Who Had It All
14 A Kingdom Torn in Two
15 God's Messengers
16 The Beginning of the End (of the Kingdom of Israel)
17 The Kingdoms' Fall
18 Daniel in Exile
19 The Return Home
20 The Queen of Beauty and Courage

21 Rebuilding the Walls
22 The Birth of the King
23 Jesus' Ministry Begins
24 No Ordinary Man
25 Jesus, the Son of God
26 The Hour of Darkness
27 The Resurrection
28 New Beginnings
29 Paul's Mission
30 Paul's Final Days
31 The End of Time
Epilogue
Discussion Questions
Characters
Chart of References
Copyright
About the Publisher
Share Your Thoughts

Welcome to *The Story*—God's Story

THIS BOOK TELLS THE GRANDEST, most compelling story of all time: the story of a true God who loves his children, who established for them a way of salvation and provided a route to eternity. Each story in these 31 chapters reveals the God of grace — the God who speaks; the God who acts; the God who listens; the God whose love for his people culminated in his sacrifice of Jesus, his only Son, to atone for the sins of humanity.

What's more: this same God is alive and active today — still listening, still acting, still pouring out his grace on us. His grace extends to our daily foibles; our ups, downs, and in-betweens; our moments of questions and fears; and most important, our response to his call on our lives. He's the same God who forgave David's failures and rescued Jonah from the dark belly of a fish. This same heavenly Father who shepherded the Israelites through the wilderness desires to shepherd us through our wanderings, to help us get past our failures and rescue us for eternity.

It's our prayer that these stories will encourage you to listen for God's call on your life, as he helps write your own story.

MAX LUCADO and RANDY FRAZEE

Preface

THE STORY, through its unique and easy-to-read format, opens a door to God's truth. It's a door that every person is consciously or unconsciously searching for. A door that leads to freedom, hope and God himself! The Bible is filled with exciting and intense stories of love, war, birth, death and miracles. There's poetry, culture, history and theology. It's a suspense novel, a book of sociology, a history lesson — all woven around one eternal conflict: good versus evil. This story offers a glimpse of people in a different time and place who are yet very much like us today.

As you read *The Story* you will encounter not only the story of humankind but also the story of who God is and what he has done for us — for *you.* This story makes the insistent claim that a loving God has sought you and provided a way of redemption — a way for you to enter a relationship with him.

The Story includes the actual, God-breathed words of the Bible. The 31 chapters that comprise *The Story* contain portions of Scripture that were thoughtfully and carefully excerpted and then placed in chronological order. Transitions, which appear in *Italic,* were written to summarize omitted Scripture text in order to help the storyline read smoothly. The texts were chosen to retain the overall flow of the narrative, so that when you read this story, you will get a sense of the "big picture" of the Bible. Line spaces were added when text was omitted, and a chart at the back of this book will let you know what portions of Scripture were included.

Other helpful material placed at the end of *The Story* include an epilogue that gives you an idea of the global impact this story has had on the world, a discussion guide with questions for you to reflect on personally or with a group and a cast of characters with brief descriptions so that you can tell who's who at a glance.

The Scripture text used in *The Story* is taken from the New International Version (NIV). Our goal was to make the Bible read smoothly and easily, so that you can read it just like you'd read a novel.

But *The Story* you're reading isn't any ordinary story. You are reading a story that has the power to change who you are, what you think and how you view life. You are exposing yourself to deep, transforming truth.

So sit back and enjoy the truest, greatest story ever written.

Timeline of *The Story*[*]

1 Creation: The Beginning of Life as We Know It
Creation
Noah and the Flood Abram born (2166)

2 God Builds a Nation
Abram moves to Canaan (2091)
Isaac born (2066)
Abraham offers Isaac (2050)
Rebekah gives birth to Jacob and Esau (2006)
Abraham dies (1991)
Rachel gives birth to Joseph (1915)
Isaac dies (1886)

3 Joseph: From Slave to Deputy Pharaoh
Joseph sold into slavery in Egypt (1898)
Jacob and family settle in Egypt (1876)
Jacob dies (1859)
Joseph dies (1805)

4 Deliverance
Moses is born (1526)
God sends the plagues (1446)
The exodus, Red Sea crossed (1446)
Wilderness wanderings, God sends quail and manna (1446–1406)

5 New Commands and a New Covenant
Moses receives the Ten Commandments (1445)
Moses spends 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai (1445)
Aaron and the golden calf (1445)
Building of the tabernacle (1445)

6 Wandering
Wilderness wanderings, God sends quail and manna
(1446–1406) Spies sent to Canaan (1443)

Aaron dies (1406)
Israelites camp in the plains of Moab (1406)
Moses dies (1406)

7 The Battle Begins
Joshua appointed leader (1406)
Israelites enter Canaan (1406)
Conquest of Canaan (1406–1375) Joshua dies (1375)

8 A Few Good Men … and Women
Judges begin to rule (1375)
Deborah's rule (1209–1169)
Gideon's rule (1162–1122)
Samson's rule (1075–1055)

9 The Faith of a Foreign Woman
Time of the judges (1375–1050)
Naomi and Ruth return from Moab Ruth meets Boaz Boaz marries Ruth

10 Standing Tall, Falling Hard
Hannah gives birth to Samuel (1105)
Samuel ministers under Eli The Israelites ask for a king Saul's reign (1050–1010)

11 From Shepherd to King
Samuel anoints David (1025)
David kills Goliath (1025)
Saul repeatedly tries to kill David
Saul dies (1010)
David named king (1010)

12 The Trials of a King
David's reign (1010–970)
David commits adultery with Bathsheba
Solomon's reign (970–930)
Building of the temple (966–959)

13 The King Who Had It All
David dies (970)
Solomon's reign (970–930)

Solomon displays great wisdom
Building of the temple (966–959)
Solomon marries foreign wives and betrays God

14 A Kingdom Torn in Two
Division of the kingdom (930)
King Jeroboam I of Israel reigns (930–909)
King Rehoboam of Judah reigns (930–913)
King Ahab of Israel reigns (874–853)
King Jehoshaphat of Judah (872–848)

15 God's Messengers
Elijah's ministry in Israel (875–848)
Elisha's ministry in Israel (c. 848–797)
Amos's ministry in Israel (760–750)
Hosea's ministry in Israel (750–715)

16 The Beginning of the End (of the Kingdom of Israel)
Fall of Israel (722)
Exile of Israel to Assyria (722)
Isaiah's ministry in Judah (740–681)
Hezekiah's reign (715–686)

17 The Kingdoms' Fall
Manasseh's reign (697–642)
Amon's reign (642–640)
Josiah's reign (640–609)
Jeremiah's ministry in Judah (626–585)
Jehoiakim's reign (609–598)
Zedekiah's reign (597–586)
Ezekiel's ministry (593–571)
Fall of Jerusalem (586)

18 Daniel in Exile
Daniel exiled to Babylon (605)
Daniel's ministry (605–536)
Nebuchadnezzar's reign (605–562)
Daniel and the lions' den (539)
Fall of Babylon (539)

19 The Return Home

First return of exiles to Jerusalem (538)
Ministries of Haggai and Zechariah (520–480)
Exiles face opposition in building the temple Temple restoration completed (516)

20 The Queen of Beauty and Courage

Xerxes' reign in Persia (486–465)
Esther becomes queen of Persia (479)
Esther saves the Jews from Haman's murderous plot
Days of Purim are established

21 Rebuilding the Walls

Second return of exiles to Jerusalem under Ezra (458)
Last group of exiles return to Jerusalem under Nehemiah (445)
Exiles face opposition in rebuilding the wall
Jerusalem's wall rebuilt (445)
Malachi's ministry (c. 440–430)

22 The Birth of the King

Mary gives birth to Jesus the Messiah (6/5)
Joseph, Mary and Jesus' flight to Egypt (5/4)
Jesus' visit to the temple (AD 7/8)

23 Jesus' Ministry Begins

John the Baptist begins ministry (26)
Jesus baptized (26)
Jesus begins ministry (26)
Wedding at Cana (27)
The woman at the well (27)
John the Baptist imprisoned (27/28)

24 No Ordinary Man

Jesus begins ministry (26)
Jesus uses parables to teach (26)
Jesus gives Sermon on the Mount (28)
Jesus sends closest followers out to preach (28)
John the Baptist dies (28/29)
Jesus feeds 5,000 people (29)
Jesus proclaims himself as the bread of life (29)

25 Jesus, the Son of God
Jesus begins ministry (26)
Jesus teaches at the Mount of Olives (29)
Jesus resurrects Lazarus (29)
Jesus drives the money changers from the temple (30)
Judas betrays Jesus (30)

26 The Hour of Darkness
The Lord's Supper (30)
Jesus washes his disciples' feet
Jesus comforts his disciples
Jesus is arrested
Peter denies Jesus
Jesus is crucified

27 The Resurrection
Jesus is buried (30)
Jesus is resurrected
Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and the disciples

28 New Beginnings
Jesus' ascension (30)
Coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost
Paul believed in Jesus as the promised Messiah (35)
James martyred, Peter imprisoned (44)
Paul's first missionary journey (46–48)

29 Paul's Mission
Paul's first missionary journey (46–48)
Jerusalem Council (49–50)
Paul's second missionary journey (50–52)
Paul's third missionary journey (53–57)

30 Paul's Final Days
Paul's first imprisonment in Rome (59–62)
Paul's second imprisonment in Rome and execution (67–68)
John exiled on Patmos (90–95)

31 The End of Time
John becomes a disciple (26)

John exiled on Patmos (90–95)
Revelation written (95)

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[*]*Dates are approximate and dependent on the interpretative theories of various scholars.*

1

Creation: The Beginning of Life as We Know It

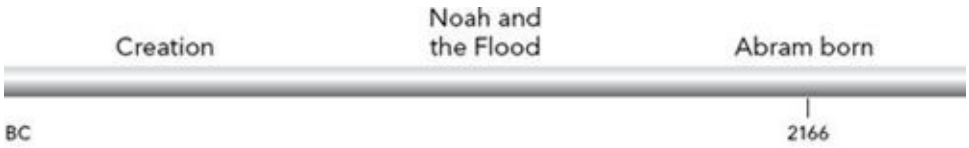
IN THE BEGINNING God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning — the first day.

And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.” So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning — the second day.

And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.” And it was so. The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning — the third day.



And God said, “Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times,

and days and years, and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth." And it was so. God made two great lights — the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning — the fourth day.

And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky." So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." And there was evening, and there was morning — the fifth day.

And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

> So God created mankind in his own image,
> in the image of God he created them;
> male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the

whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground — everything that has the breath of life in it — I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

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. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground — trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

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 tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

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

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he

would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. 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 then 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.

The man said,

> "This is now bone of my bones
> and flesh of my flesh;
> she shall be called 'woman,'
> for she was taken out of man."

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

God had created a beautiful world and filled it with glorious, diverse creatures. Of all his creation, he singled out two humans to build a relationship with — Adam and Eve. These two people were blessed to share their paradise with each other and God, so why would they want anything else?

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and

pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”

He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

The man said, “The woman you put here with me — she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”

The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this,

> “Cursed are you above all livestock
> and all wild animals!
> You will crawl on your belly
> and you will eat dust
> all the days of your life.
> And I will put enmity
> between you and the woman,
> and between your offspring and hers;
> he will crush your head,
> and you will strike his heel.”

To the woman he said,

> “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;

with painful labor you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you."

To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,'

"Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it
all the days of your life.
It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return."

Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.

The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man." Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time

Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering[1] to the LORD. And Abel also brought an offering — fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin[2] is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

> *The tragic accounts of the mistakes and poor choices of Adam and Eve, and their firstborn son Cain, are echoed in the later stories of hardship and tragedy for their children and their children’s children. As people began to populate the globe, leaving the area of Eden and traveling as far as feet and beast could carry them, humanity’s legacy of hate, anger, murder and deception play out as people continue to neglect their relationship with God. Eventually, nearly everyone just plain forgets their Creator and the whole point of being alive. For most people, life becomes one big party with no thought of consequences … except for one man.*

The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the LORD said, “I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created — and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground — for I regret that I have made them.” But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

This is the account of Noah and his family.

Noah was a righteous[3] man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God. Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth.

Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of violence. God

saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. So God said to Noah, “I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide and thirty cubits high. Make a roof for it, leaving below the roof an opening one cubit high all around. Put a door in the side of the ark and make lower, middle and upper decks. I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish. But I will establish my covenant[4] with you, and you will enter the ark — you and your sons and your wife and your sons’ wives with you. You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. Two of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal and of every kind of creature that moves along the ground will come to you to be kept alive. You are to take every kind of food that is to be eaten and store it away as food for you and for them.”

Noah did everything just as God commanded him.

The LORD then said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation.

Seven days from now I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and I will wipe from the face of the earth every living creature I have made.”

Noah was six hundred years old when the floodwaters came on the earth. And Noah and his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives entered the ark to escape the waters of the flood. Pairs of clean and unclean animals, of birds and of all creatures that move along the ground, male and female, came to Noah and entered the ark, as God had commanded Noah. And after the seven days the floodwaters came on the earth.

On that very day Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, together with his wife and the wives of his three sons, entered the ark. They had with them every wild animal according to its kind, all livestock according to their kinds, every creature that moves along the

ground according to its kind and every bird according to its kind, everything with wings. Pairs of all creatures that have the breath of life in them came to Noah and entered the ark. The animals going in were male and female of every living thing, as God had commanded Noah. Then the LORD shut him in.

For forty days the flood kept coming on the earth, and as the waters increased they lifted the ark high above the earth. The waters rose and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the surface of the water. They rose greatly on the earth, and all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered. The waters rose and covered the mountains to a depth of more than fifteen cubits. Every living thing that moved on land perished — birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind. Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; people and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds were wiped from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

The waters flooded the earth for a hundred and fifty days.

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. Now the springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens had been closed, and the rain had stopped falling from the sky. The water receded steadily from the earth. At the end of the hundred and fifty days the water had gone down, and on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. The waters continued to recede until the tenth month, and on the first day of the tenth month the tops of the mountains became visible.

By the first day of the first month of Noah's six hundred and first year, the water had dried up from the earth. Noah then removed the covering from the ark and saw that the surface of the ground was dry. By the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth was completely dry.

Then God said to Noah, "Come out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and their wives. Bring out every kind of living creature that is with you — the birds, the animals, and all the creatures that move along

the ground — so they can multiply on the earth and be fruitful and increase in number on it."

So Noah came out, together with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. All the animals and all the creatures that move along the ground and all the birds — everything that moves on land — came out of the ark, one kind after another.

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done."

Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall on all the beasts of the earth, and on all the birds in the sky, on every creature that moves along the ground, and on all the fish in the sea; they are given into your hands."

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you — the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you — every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

"Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth."

The earth recovered from this great flood. Animal and plant life flourished. Noah's family repopulated the earth. The cycle of life

continued, and people remembered God. Ancient businesses grew, homesteads and farms developed, and trade routes brought wealth and opportunity for travel. It was time for God's next move, time to build a nation in a land that would become the cultural and ethnic home to … well, that part of the story is yet to come.

Abram (whose name God later changed to Abraham) had all the wrong qualifications for being a founder of God's nation: His relatives worshiped other gods in a country far from what would become the promised land; Abram and his wife, Sarai (whose name God later changed to Sarah), were way beyond childbearing years and Sarai couldn't get pregnant—no children meant no people to populate God's nation. No problem. God promised the impossible to Abram, and Abram watched as the impossible occurred. Here's how it happened.

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1 **Offering:** Something given to God in an act of thankfulness, worship or payment for disobedience. In the Old Testament, there were five kinds of offerings: burnt, grain, fellowship, sin and guilt. The death of Jesus in the New Testament is the ultimate offering that paid the full price of sin. This word is synonymous with *sacrifice.*

2 **Sin:** Evil, moral shortcoming, wrongdoing or disobedience. This term refers to any action, thought or attitude that does not meet the standards set by God.

3 **Righteous:** Living according to the standards set by God. *God's righteousness* refers to his justice and perfection.

4 **Covenant:** An agreement or promise between two parties. A covenant was intended to be unbreakable.

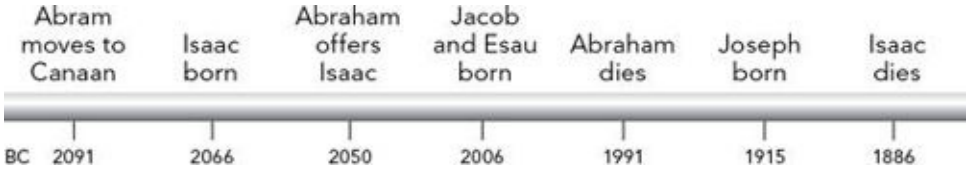
2

God Builds a Nation

THE LORD HAD SAID TO ABRAM, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

> “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.”

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.



By faith[1] Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The

LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together.

The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, “Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.”

So Abram went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he pitched his tents. There he built an altar to the LORD.

By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Lot made some bad decisions and found himself in deep trouble. He took up residence near Sodom. In retrospect, it was a poor choice of real estate. Soon the kings of Sodom, Gomorrah and three other kings squared off in battle against an enemy army. The kings of Sodom and Gomorrah lost, and the cities were looted. Lot and his family were among the captives.

When this news reached Abram, he pulled together 318 trusted men and without hesitation set out to rescue his nephew. Their night attack caught the looters by surprise. Abram freed the captives and recovered the spoil. Meeting a priest by the name of Melchizedek, he gave him a tenth of the spoils and delivered to the king what rightfully belonged to him.

Despite Abram’s growing sense of God’s power, one problem remained that even the Almighty seemed unable to solve. It was Abram’s greatest worry and the main topic of his dialogues with

God.

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:

> “Do not be afraid, Abram.
> I am your shield,
> your very great reward.”

But Abram said, “Sovereign[2] LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars — if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead — since he was about a hundred years old — and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Abram believed that the promised child would come from his own body, but as far as he and Sarai knew, God didn’t specify that Sarai would be the mother. In a move common during this time, they decided that Sarai’s slave, Hagar, would be a surrogate mother for the promised child. However, after Hagar conceived, she and Sarai quarreled, and Hagar was sent away, helpless and pregnant to wander in the wilderness. Just as she despaired of her life, God spoke to her.

Then the angel of the LORD told her, “Go back to your mistress and submit to her.” The angel added, “I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.”

The angel of the LORD also said to her:

> “You are now pregnant
> and you will give birth to a son.
> You shall name him Ishmael,
> for the LORD has heard of your misery.
> 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.”

She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: “You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.” That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”

Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where

you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.”

Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.[3] You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.

“Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

God also said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.”

Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him.

And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

Abraham gave the name Isaac[4] to the son Sarah bore him. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.” And she added, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

God gave Abraham a child of promise. But Abraham had a child already through Hagar — Ishmael. What would become of him?

The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”

The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. But God said to him, “Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring.”

Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba.

When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, “I cannot watch the boy die.” And as she sat there, she began to sob.

God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.”

Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer.

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love — Isaac — and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”

Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had

told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?”

“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.

When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

“Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.”

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”

Eventually Sarah died, and Abraham bought a field and buried her, wondering all the while what would become of him and Isaac and God’s promise. Abraham had taken another wife, a woman named Keturah, and had more children. Yet his entire estate went to the special son of promise, Isaac. Abraham died when he was 175 years old and was laid to rest next to Sarah. But the story is far from over.

Isaac married Rebekah. As was the custom, she was chosen for him, but he truly loved her. Twenty years after the wedding, the couple was still childless; but in response to many prayers, Rebekah gave birth to twins. Esau, the elder brother, grew up to love the outdoors and hunting; he was his dad’s favorite. Jacob, the younger brother, was quiet and stayed at home; he was clearly his mother’s favorite. The two boys vied for the inheritance rights, and Jacob proved to be a master manipulator and schemer.

One day Esau came home famished, demanding some of the stew Jacob was cooking. Seeing an opportunity, Jacob “sold” a meal to his brother in exchange for Esau’s birthright — the double share of inheritance due to Esau (because he was the older brother).

Sometime later, as Isaac lay in bed, weak and blind, he asked his hunter son for a tasty meal of char-grilled wild meat. After the meal, Isaac would officially pass on his blessing—and God’s favor — to Esau. This was to be Esau’s long-awaited big day.

Rebekah overheard Isaac’s plan and came up with a plan of her own. She dressed her favorite son, Jacob, in Esau’s clothes and covered his hands and neck with goatskins to resemble Esau’s hairy skin. She quickly cooked up some meat and sent Jacob, posing as Esau, into Isaac’s bedroom. Isaac, squinting his eyes and touching

Jacob, wondered if this was really his hunter son. Twice deceitful Jacob lied to his aged dad. Isaac ate. After kissing his son and smelling his scent, Isaac was convinced he was talking to Esau. Then Isaac gave the blessing, also confirming the double share of the material inheritance, to Jacob, irrevocably and completely.

Soon after, Esau arrived with his own platter of grilled meat, only to discover that mom and brother had robbed him of his entire future. Angry to the point of fury, he planned to kill Jacob. Rebekah intervened once more and sent Jacob to live with relatives until Esau's anger abated.

Forced vacations may sometimes result in pleasant surprises. In this case, Jacob fell in love with his boss's (and uncle's) daughter, Rachel, and worked for her family until she could become his wife. As part of the deal to marry Rachel, Jacob first had to marry her older sister, Leah. For twenty years Jacob tended flocks and farmland, and finally he took his large family home to meet Esau once again. But Jacob was careful to approach Esau with respect and humility. The wounds between them were deep and long, and he wasn't sure if Esau was friend or foe.

Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. He instructed them: "This is what you are to say to my lord Esau: 'Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there till now. I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, male and female servants. Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes.'"

When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, "We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."

In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. He thought, "If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape."

Then Jacob prayed, "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, LORD, you who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' I am unworthy of all the

kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, ‘I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.’”

He spent the night there, and from what he had with him he selected a gift for his brother Esau: two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. He put them in the care of his servants, each herd by itself, and said to his servants, “Go ahead of me, and keep some space between the herds.”

He instructed the one in the lead: “When my brother Esau meets you and asks, ‘Who do you belong to, and where are you going, and who owns all these animals in front of you?’ then you are to say, ‘They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us.’”

He also instructed the second, the third and all the others who followed the herds: “You are to say the same thing to Esau when you meet him. And be sure to say, ‘Your servant Jacob is coming behind us.’” For he thought, “I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me.” So Jacob’s gifts went on ahead of him, but he himself spent the night in the camp.

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.”

But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

The man asked him, “What is your name?”

“Jacob,” he answered.

Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel,

because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two female servants. He put the female servants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.

But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept. Then Esau looked up and saw the women and children. "Who are these with you?" he asked.

Jacob answered, "They are the children God has graciously given your servant."

Then the female servants and their children approached and bowed down. Next, Leah and her children came and bowed down. Last of all came Joseph and Rachel, and they too bowed down.

Esau asked, "What's the meaning of all these flocks and herds I met?"

"To find favor in your eyes, my lord," he said.

But Esau said, "I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself."

"No, please!" said Jacob. "If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably. Please accept the present that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need." And because Jacob insisted, Esau accepted it.

Then Esau said, "Let us be on our way; I'll accompany you."

Then God said to Jacob, "Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from

your brother Esau."

So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves and change your clothes. Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone." So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods they had and the rings in their ears, and Jacob buried them under the oak at Shechem. Then they set out, and the terror of God fell on the towns all around them so that no one pursued them.

Jacob and all the people with him came to Luz (that is, Bethel) in the land of Canaan. There he built an altar, and he called the place El Bethel, because it was there that God revealed himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother.

After Jacob returned from Paddan Aram, God appeared to him again and blessed him. God said to him, "Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel." So he named him Israel.

And God said to him, "I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will be among your descendants. The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you."

Then they moved on from Bethel. While they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and had great difficulty. And as she was having great difficulty in childbirth, the midwife said to her, "Don't despair, for you have another son." As she breathed her last — for she was dying — she named her son Ben-Oni. But his father named him Benjamin.

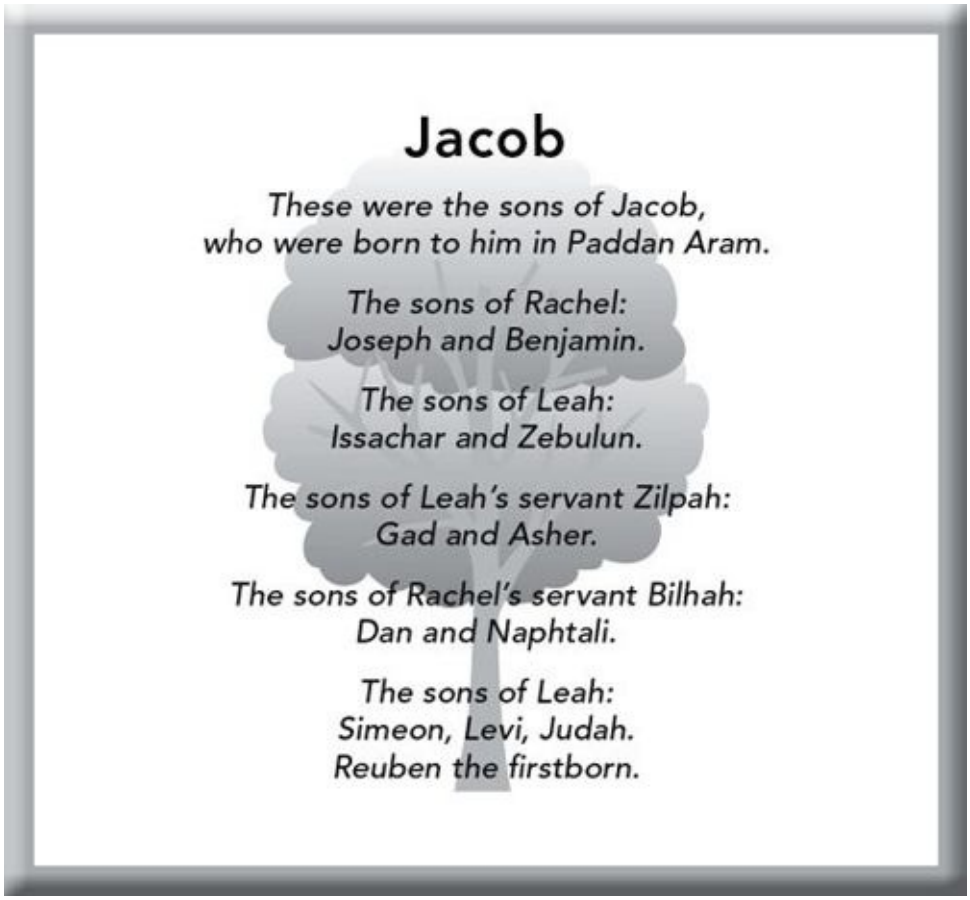
So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).

While Israel was living in that region, Reuben went in and slept with his father's concubine Bilhah, and Israel heard of it.

Jacob came home to his father Isaac in Mamre, near Kiriath Arba (that

is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had stayed. Isaac lived a hundred and eighty years. Then he breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, old and full of years. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

God's story of promise and prosperity moves from Jacob to his son Joseph. Of Jacob's 12 sons, Joseph was clearly Jacob's favorite, leading the rest of Jacob's boys to resent their younger brother. Jacob only heightened the family stress when he gave a beautiful coat to Joseph. And Joseph didn't help matters when he twice told his older brothers that he had a dream that they would someday bow to him. Finally, the brothers had heard enough from their arrogant little brother. They hatched a conspiracy. For seventeen-year-old Joseph, it would be a very bad day indeed.



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1 **Faith:** Complete trust. True faith is much deeper than mere

intellectual agreement with certain facts — it affects the desires of one's heart.

2 **Sovereign:** This term describes the fact that God has complete control over all things.

3 **Circumcised, circumcision:** A surgical removal of the foreskin of the male genitals, performed on the eighth day following birth. In the Old Testament this ritual symbolized the baby's entrance into the Hebrew community. Biblical uses of the term are often metaphorical, referring to the obedience of the heart represented by the outward symbol of circumcision.

4 **Isaac:** *Isaac* means "he laughs."

3

Joseph: From Slave to Deputy Pharaoh

NOW HIS BROTHERS had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, and Israel said to Joseph, "As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them."

"Very well," he replied.

So he said to him, "Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me." Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron.

When Joseph arrived at Shechem, a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, "What are you looking for?"

He replied, "I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?"

"They have moved on from here," the man answered. "I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.'"

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.

"Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."



When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben

said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe — the ornate robe he was wearing — and they took him and threw him into the cistern. The cistern was empty; there was no water in it.

As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.

Judah said to his brothers, “What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover 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 blood.” His brothers agreed.

So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. He went back to his brothers and said, “The boy isn’t there! Where can I turn now?”

Then they got Joseph’s robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornate robe back to their father and said, “We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son’s robe.”

He recognized it and said, “It is my son’s robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces.”

Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. “No,” he said, “I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave.” So his father wept for him.

Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard.

Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there.

The LORD was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the

house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. So Potiphar left everything he had in Joseph's care; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"

But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.

When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, she called her household servants. "Look," she said to them, "this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. Then she told him this story: "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger. Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were

confined.

But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

Joseph's administrative skills surfaced both in the house of his Egyptian master and in jail. Joseph also cultivated another talent while confined to Pharaoh's stinking prison: God gifted him with the unusual ability to discern the meaning of dreams. Once during his confinement, Joseph helped two of Pharaoh's civil servants interpret their dreams. When Pharaoh's dream life took a bizarre turn, Joseph was summoned to the royal court.

When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream.

In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him.

So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh.

Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."

"I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."

Pharaoh explained his two dreams this way: Seven beautiful, fat cows emerge from the Nile only to be eaten by seven ugly, skinny cows; then seven savory heads of grain on a single stalk are swallowed up by seven dried up, worthless heads. "What do you make of that?" Pharaoh asked Joseph.

Giving credit to God for this gift of interpretation, Joseph told Pharaoh that the twin dreams foretold seven years of bumper crops to be followed by seven years of dried up fields and famine. God planned it this way, Joseph said, so there could be no doubt it would happen.

Joseph's recommendation to Pharaoh was to put a wise man in charge of storing food and preparing for the coming famine.

The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials.

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you."

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt." Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and people shouted before him, "Make way!" Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt.

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt."

Sure enough, for seven wonderful years Egyptian farmers could hardly believe how full their harvests were. Farms yielded enough for the people to eat well and still store up for the coming bad times. Joseph knew another kind of fruitfulness during this time: his wife had two sons. He gave them the names Manasseh[1] and Ephraim.[2] Then, as Joseph had predicted, the blue skies over Egypt became hot and parched; the crops withered. But Joseph had already planned ahead and stored a sufficient supply of food to keep the Egyptians healthy and Pharaoh's foreign trade business even healthier.

Even the weather patterns fit into God's bigger plan. Because the drought was so severe, neighboring nations began to approach Egypt for help just to stay alive. And just look who shows up.

When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, “Why do you just keep looking at each other?” He continued, “I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us, so that we may live and not die.”

Then ten of Joseph’s brothers went down to buy grain from Egypt. But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph’s brother, with the others, because he was afraid that harm might come to him.

Now Joseph was the governor of the land, the person who sold grain to all its people. So when Joseph’s brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground. As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them. “Where do you come from?” he asked.

“From the land of Canaan,” they replied, “to buy food.”

Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. Then he remembered his dreams about them and said to them, “You are spies! You have come to see where our land is unprotected.”

“No, my lord,” they answered. “Your servants have come to buy food. We are all the sons of one man. Your servants are honest men, not spies.”

“No!” he said to them. “You have come to see where our land is unprotected.”

But they replied, “Your servants were twelve brothers, the sons of one man, who lives in the land of Canaan. The youngest is now with our father, and one is no more.”

Joseph said to them, “It is just as I told you: You are spies! And this is how you will be tested: As surely as Pharaoh lives, you will not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. Send one of your number to get your brother; the rest of you will be kept in prison, so that your words may be tested to see if you are telling the truth. If you are not, then as surely as Pharaoh lives, you are spies!” And he put them all in custody for three days.

On the third day, Joseph said to them, “Do this and you will live, for I fear God: If you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here in prison, while the rest of you go and take grain back for your starving

households. But you must bring your youngest brother to me, so that your words may be verified and that you may not die." This they proceeded to do.

They said to one another, "Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come on us."

Reuben replied, "Didn't I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn't listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood." They did not realize that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter.

He turned away from them and began to weep, but then came back and spoke to them again. He had Simeon taken from them and bound before their eyes.

Joseph developed a deceitful plan: He imprisoned one of his brothers, Simeon, as a supposed "hostage" until his absent younger brother Benjamin could appear in Egypt; he secretly returned the money used to purchase their grain to the brothers' bags; he kept his own identity from them by using his second language, all the while hearing perfectly well their own expressed fears.

These ten brothers were desperately confused.

But father Jacob wasn't confused at all. When the ten sons told him the terms of sale, Jacob wouldn't budge. No way would he surrender the young Benjamin to this Egyptian leader's examination, or even to the sorry band of sons who had allegedly lost Joseph to a wild beast so many years before.

It looked like a stalemate—stubborn souls refusing to confront their secret fears—until hunger, that great persuader, drove them toward compromise and compliance.

Now the famine was still severe in the land. So when they had eaten all the grain they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, "Go back and buy us a little more food."

But Judah said to him, "The man warned us solemnly, 'You will not

see my face again unless your brother is with you.'"

Then their father Israel said to them, "If it must be, then do this: Put some of the best products of the land in your bags and take them down to the man as a gift — a little balm and a little honey, some spices and myrrh, some pistachio nuts and almonds.

"Take your brother also and go back to the man at once. And may God Almighty grant you mercy before the man so that he will let your other brother and Benjamin come back with you. As for me, if I am bereaved, I am bereaved."

So the men took the gifts and double the amount of silver, and Benjamin also. They hurried down to Egypt and presented themselves to Joseph.

When Joseph came home, they presented to him the gifts they had brought into the house, and they bowed down before him to the ground. He asked them how they were, and then he said, "How is your aged father you told me about? Is he still living?"

They replied, "Your servant our father is still alive and well." And they bowed down, prostrating themselves before him.

As he looked about and saw his brother Benjamin, his own mother's son, he asked, "Is this your youngest brother, the one you told me about?" And he said, "God be gracious to you, my son." Deeply moved at the sight of his brother, Joseph hurried out and looked for a place to weep. He went into his private room and wept there.

After he had washed his face, he came out and, controlling himself, said, "Serve the food."

The men had been seated before him in the order of their ages, from the firstborn to the youngest; and they looked at each other in astonishment. When portions were served to them from Joseph's table, Benjamin's portion was five times as much as anyone else's. So they feasted and drank freely with him.

Now Joseph gave these instructions to the steward of his house: "Fill the men's sacks with as much food as they can carry, and put each man's

silver in the mouth of his sack. Then put my cup, the silver one, in the mouth of the youngest one's sack, along with the silver for his grain." And he did as Joseph said.

As morning dawned, the men were sent on their way with their donkeys. They had not gone far from the city when Joseph said to his steward, "Go after those men at once, and when you catch up with them, say to them, 'Why have you repaid good with evil? Isn't this the cup my master drinks from and also uses for divination? This is a wicked thing you have done.'"

When he caught up with them, he repeated these words to them. But they said to him, "Why does my lord say such things? Far be it from your servants to do anything like that! We even brought back to you from the land of Canaan the silver we found inside the mouths of our sacks. So why would we steal silver or gold from your master's house? If any of your servants is found to have it, he will die; and the rest of us will become my lord's slaves."

"Very well, then," he said, "let it be as you say. Whoever is found to have it will become my slave; the rest of you will be free from blame."

Each of them quickly lowered his sack to the ground and opened it. Then the steward proceeded to search, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest. And the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. At this, they tore their clothes. Then they all loaded their donkeys and returned to the city.

Joseph was still in the house when Judah and his brothers came in, and they threw themselves to the ground before him. Joseph said to them, "What is this you have done? Don't you know that a man like me can find things out by divination?"

"What can we say to my lord?" Judah replied. "What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants' guilt. We are now my lord's slaves — we ourselves and the one who was found to have the cup."

But Joseph said, "Far be it from me to do such a thing! Only the man who was found to have the cup will become my slave. The rest of you, go back to your father in peace."

Then Judah went up to him and said: "Pardon your servant, my lord,

let me speak a word to my lord. Do not be angry with your servant, though you are equal to Pharaoh himself.

"Your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons. One of them went away from me, and I said, "He has surely been torn to pieces." And I have not seen him since. If you take this one from me too and harm comes to him, you will bring my gray head down to the grave in misery.'

"So now, if the boy is not with us when I go back to your servant my father, and if my father, whose life is closely bound up with the boy's life, sees that the boy isn't there, he will die. Your servants will bring the gray head of our father down to the grave in sorrow. Your servant guaranteed the boy's safety to my father. I said, 'If I do not bring him back to you, I will bear the blame before you, my father, all my life!'

"Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come on my father."

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it.

Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.

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 be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me

father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. Now hurry back to my father and say to him, ‘This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don’t delay. You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me — you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.’

“You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am speaking to you. Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly.”

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.

So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. They told him, “Joseph is still alive! In fact, he is ruler of all Egypt.” Jacob was stunned; he did not believe them. But when they told him everything Joseph had said to them, and when he saw the carts Joseph had sent to carry him back, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. And Israel said, “I’m convinced! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.”

So Israel set out with all that was his, and when he reached Beersheba, he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac.

And God spoke to Israel in a vision at night and said, “Jacob! Jacob!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

“I am God, the God of your father,” he said. “Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph’s own hand will close your eyes.”

Then Jacob left Beersheba, and Israel’s sons took their father Jacob and their children and their wives in the carts that Pharaoh had sent to transport him.

Now Jacob sent Judah ahead of him to Joseph to get directions to Goshen. When they arrived in the region of Goshen, Joseph had his chariot made ready and went to Goshen to meet his father Israel. As soon as Joseph appeared before him, he threw his arms around his father and wept for a long time.

Israel said to Joseph, “Now I am ready to die, since I have seen for myself that you are still alive.”

So Joseph settled his father and his brothers in Egypt and gave them property in the best part of the land, the district of Rameses, as Pharaoh directed.

Jacob lived in Egypt seventeen years, and the years of his life were a hundred and forty-seven. When the time drew near for Israel to die, he called for his son Joseph and said to him, “If I have found favor in your eyes, put your hand under my thigh and promise that you will show me kindness and faithfulness. Do not bury me in Egypt, but when I rest with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried.”

“I will do as you say,” he said.

“Swear to me,” he said. Then Joseph swore to him, and Israel worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

Then Israel said to Joseph, “I am about to die, but God will be with you and take you back to the land of your fathers.”

Jacob died at the ripe age of 147 years. Before that last day, he gathered his sons to bless them, pronounce their future and give them ongoing responsibilities. Not all the sons got what they wanted. Reuben, for example, was chastised for an earlier sexual sin that no doubt he had hoped his father would not remember. Jacob’s last words foretold that some of his sons and their descendants would experience success, others hard times. Jacob adopted Joseph’s two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, as his own; this allowed Jacob to give Joseph a double inheritance as one whose character had earned his trust and confidence.

When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said,

“What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?” So they sent word to Joseph, saying, “Your father left these instructions before he died: ‘This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.’ Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.” When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. “We are your slaves,” they said.

But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

Joseph stayed in Egypt, along with all his father’s family. He lived a hundred and ten years and saw the third generation of Ephraim’s children. Also the children of Makir son of Manasseh were placed at birth on Joseph’s knees.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” And Joseph made the Israelites swear an oath and said, “God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place.”

So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt.

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1 **‘Manasseh:** *Manasseh* sounds like and may be derived from the Hebrew for “forget.”

2 **‘Ephraim:** *Ephraim* sounds like the Hebrew for “twice fruitful.”

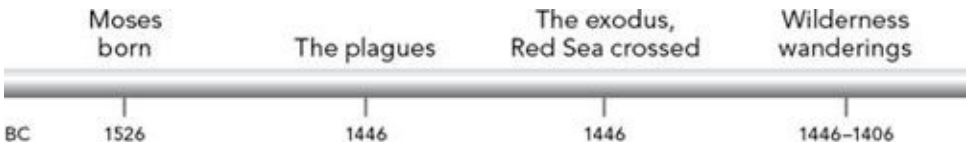
4

Deliverance

NOW JOSEPH and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.

Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.”

So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.



Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: “Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave to get it. She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said.

Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?"

"Yes, go," she answered. So the girl went and got the baby's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."

One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. The next day he went out and saw two Hebrews fighting. He asked the one in the wrong, "Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?"

The man said, "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "What I did must have become known."

When Pharaoh heard of this, he tried to kill Moses, but Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian, where he sat down by a well. Now a priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came to draw water and fill the troughs to water their father's flock. Some shepherds came along and drove them away, but Moses got up and came to their rescue and watered their flock.

When the girls returned to Reuel their father, he asked them, "Why have you returned so early today?"

They answered, "An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds. He even drew water for us and watered the flock."

"And where is he?" Reuel asked his daughters. "Why did you leave him? Invite him to have something to eat."

Moses agreed to stay with the man, who gave his daughter Zipporah

to Moses in marriage. Zipporah gave birth to a son, and Moses named him Gershom, saying, “I have become a foreigner in a foreign land.”

During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. 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.

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight — why the bush does not burn up.”

When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

“Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy[1] ground.” Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

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 from 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—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.”

Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

God 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.’”

God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers — the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob — has sent me to you.’

“This is my name forever,
the name you shall call me from
generation to generation.”

Moses said to the LORD, “Pardon your servant, LORD. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.”

The LORD said to him, “Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.”

But Moses said, “Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else.”

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 his way to meet you, and he will be glad to see you. You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do. He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him. But take this staff in your hand so you can perform the signs with it.”

The LORD said to Aaron, “Go into the wilderness to meet Moses.” So he met Moses at the mountain of God and kissed him. Then Moses told Aaron everything the LORD had sent him to say, and also about all the signs he had commanded him to perform.

Moses and Aaron brought together all the elders of the Israelites, and

Aaron told them everything the LORD had said to Moses. He also performed the signs before the people, and they believed. And when they heard that the LORD was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped.

> *Unfortunately, things didn't go so well with Moses and Aaron's first audience with Pharaoh. He not only refused their request to let the people of Israel hold a festival to the Lord in the wilderness, but he also made their slave labor even more difficult. Without reducing their production of bricks, they would have to find their own straw to mix in with the clay.*

The Israelite overseers realized they were in trouble when they were told, "You are not to reduce the number of bricks required of you for each day." When they left Pharaoh, they found Moses and Aaron waiting to meet them, and they said, "May the LORD look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us."

Moses returned to the LORD and said, "Why, Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and you have not rescued your people at all."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country."

God also said to Moses, "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself fully known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they resided as foreigners. Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant.

"Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem[2] you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God,

who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD.'"

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "When Pharaoh says to you, 'Perform a miracle,' then say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh,' and it will become a snake."

So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts: Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Yet Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the LORD had said.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is unyielding; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning as he goes out to the river. Confront him on the bank of the Nile, and take in your hand the staff that was changed into a snake. Then say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness. But until now you have not listened. This is what the LORD says: By this you will know that I am the LORD: With the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed into blood. The fish in the Nile will die, and the river will stink; the Egyptians will not be able to drink its water.'"

The LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron, 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt — over the streams and canals, over the ponds and all the reservoirs — and they will turn to blood.' Blood will be everywhere in Egypt, even in vessels of wood and stone."

Moses and Aaron did just as the LORD had commanded. He raised his staff in the presence of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was changed into blood. The fish in the Nile died, and the river smelled so bad that the Egyptians could not drink its water. Blood was everywhere in Egypt.

But the Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts, and Pharaoh's heart became hard; he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said. Instead, he turned and went into his

palace, and did not take even this to heart. And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile to get drinking water, because they could not drink the water of the river.

> *The next plague included millions of frogs, hopping into every kitchen, every street and every field in Egypt. Pharaoh's court magicians again were able to conjure their own similar plague, and then even more frogs were leaping about. Unable to take one more amphibian, Pharaoh agreed to let the Hebrews go if Moses would get rid of the frogs. Moses prayed and the frogs died. With the immediate crisis resolved, Pharaoh again stubbornly refused to make good on his part of the deal.*
>
> *So Moses hit the dust with his staff, and gnats swarmed the land. Pharaoh's magicians could not replicate this plague, and they expressed respect for the Hebrews' God. Still Pharaoh would not budge. God continued to show his power as he prepared to rescue his people.*
>
> *The cycle continued through plagues that included swarms of flies, a disease that killed livestock, terrible boils that afflicted people and animals, thunderstorms with destructive hail, devouring locusts and a frightening time of darkness. After each devastating plague, Pharaoh assured Moses that he could leave with the people. But later he would change his mind.*

But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he was not willing to let them go. Pharaoh said to Moses, "Get out of my sight! Make sure you do not appear before me again! The day you see my face you will die."

"Just as you say," Moses replied. "I will never appear before you again."

Now the LORD had said to Moses, "I will bring one more plague on Pharaoh and on Egypt. After that, he will let you go from here, and when he does, he will drive you out completely."

So Moses said, "This is what the LORD says: 'About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of

the female slave, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt — worse than there has ever been or ever will be again. But among the Israelites not a dog will bark at any person or animal.' Then you will know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. All these officials of yours will come to me, bowing down before me and saying, 'Go, you and all the people who follow you!' After that I will leave." Then Moses, hot with anger, left Pharaoh.

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, "This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household.

"The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast.

"This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD's Passover.[3]

"On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt."

Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. None of you shall go out of the door of your house until morning. When the

LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.

"Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants."

The Israelites did just what the LORD commanded Moses and Aaron.

At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well. 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.

During the night Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the LORD as you have requested. Take your flocks and herds, as you have said, and go. And also bless me."

The Egyptians urged the people to hurry and leave the country. "For otherwise," they said, "we will all die!"

Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years. At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the LORD's divisions left Egypt.

> *God had remembered his enslaved people and rescued them. They packed their carts with supplies and spoils freely given to them by the Egyptians and prepared for a long, dusty journey. God provided a sure-fire way for them to stay on course, day and night. But their deliverance from Egypt wasn't complete yet …*

By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon. Pharaoh will think, ‘The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.’ And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD.” So the Israelites did this.

When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, “What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!” So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly. The Egyptians — all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots, horsemen and troops — pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea near Pi Hahiroth, opposite Baal Zephon.

As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!”

Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.”

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his

horsemen."

Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. He jammed the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen — the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

> *This unforgettable escape impressed upon the Israelites that God was indeed taking care of them. Enemy horses and chariot drivers were thrown into the sea! The people celebrated and sang for joy.*

Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was

bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.) So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What are we to drink?”

Then Moses cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became fit to drink.

There the LORD issued a ruling and instruction for them and put them to the test. He said, “If you listen carefully to 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.”

Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water.

The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”

So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?” 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. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD.”

Then Moses told Aaron, “Say to the entire Israelite community, ‘Come before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.’”

While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud.

The LORD said to Moses, “I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, ‘At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.’”

That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was.

Moses said to them, “It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat.”

> *The people called these honey-tasting crackers manna, which sounds like “What is it?” They all received exactly as much as they needed for each day. On the sixth day of the week they gathered a double portion, for no manna fell on the seventh day, the holy day set apart for rest and worship. And so the people learned to trust God to provide for them and lead them to a new land … well, not quite.*

The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.”

Moses replied, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?”

But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?”

Then Moses cried out to the LORD, “What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

The LORD answered Moses, “Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

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[1]**Holy, holiness:** The common literal meaning of this word is *set apart.*

God is holy and fundamentally different from humans because of his purity and perfection; however, God invites people to be holy and live in a way that is set apart to serve him.

[2]**Redeem:** In this instance, *redeem* refers to rescue from captivity. It can also refer to the payment of the price required to release a guilty person from an obligation.

[3]**Passover:** The feast that celebrates the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The *Passover Lamb* refers to the animal sacrificed prior to the feast. This parallels the sacrifice of Jesus in the New Testament, which released humanity from the debt of sin.

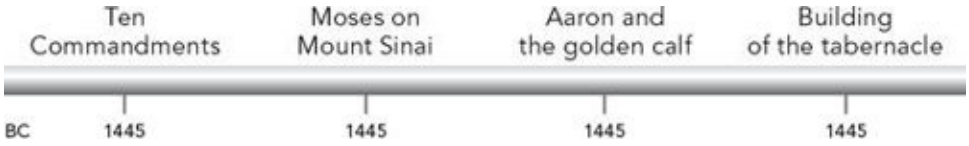
5

New Commands and a New Covenant

ON THE FIRST DAY of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt — on that very day — they came to the Desert of Sinai. After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

The LORD said to Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you.” Then Moses told the LORD what the people had said.



And the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and conescrate[1] them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day, because on that day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, ‘Be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death. They are to be stoned or shot with arrows; not a hand is to be laid on them. No person or animal shall be permitted to live.’ Only when the ram’s horn sounds a long blast may they approach the

mountain."

After Moses had gone down the mountain to the people, he consecrated them, and they washed their clothes. Then he said to the people, "Prepare yourselves for the third day. Abstain from sexual relations."

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up and the LORD said to him, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish. Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them."

Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, 'Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.'"

The LORD replied, "Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the LORD, or he will break out against them."

So Moses went down to the people and told them.

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."

Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."

The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick

darkness where God was.

> *On the cloud-covered summit of Mount Sinai, God handed down the ten most-quoted, best-known rules humankind has ever heard—straightforward, no-nonsense rules for how the Israelites were to relate to God (commands 1–4) and to each other (commands 5–10).*

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

"You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

"Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

"You shall not murder.

"You shall not commit adultery.

"You shall not steal.

"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

> *Moses was clearly the intermediary between God and the Hebrew people. After Moses received the Ten Commandments, he was given the laws of the Book of the Covenant— consisting largely of expansions of the Ten Commandments. Now he would lead the Israelites in establishing their covenant with the Lord.*

When Moses went and told the people all the LORD’s words and laws, they responded with one voice, “Everything the LORD has said we will do.” Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said.

He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel.[2] Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.”

Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction.”

When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

The LORD said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give.

“Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle[3] and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.”

Along with giving Moses the Ten Commandments and other laws, God instructed him as to how to organize worship for the Israelites. From that time on, God’s presence would reside in the tabernacle, a portable tent of worship. Inside the tabernacle sat the lavishly designed ark of the covenant,[4] containing the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments.

God set apart priests for service, who conducted ritual sacrifices and other important worship activities. One day every week—the Sabbath—was set apart to worship God and to rest from chores and business.

Moses was away on the mountain for nearly six weeks. Meanwhile in the valley below, the people’s impatience would lead to Moses facing a bitter homecoming.

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.”

Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol[5] cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”

When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD.” So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got

up to indulge in revelry.

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’

“I have seen these people,” the LORD said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.”

But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. “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 your 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.

Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.

When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, “There is the sound of war in the camp.”

Moses replied:

“It is not the sound of victory,
    it is not the sound of defeat;
    it is the sound of singing that I hear.”

When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing,

his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. And he took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.

He said to Aaron, “What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?”

“Do not be angry, my lord,” Aaron answered. “You know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’ So I told them, ‘Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.’ Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!”

Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, “Whoever is for the LORD, come to me.” And all the Levites rallied to him.

Then he said to them, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.’” The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. Then Moses said, “You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day.”

The next day Moses said to the people, “You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.”

So Moses went back to the LORD and said, “Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin — but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.”

The LORD replied to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin.”

And the LORD struck the people with a plague because of what they

did with the calf Aaron had made.

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.”

Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the “tent of meeting.” Anyone inquiring of the LORD would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the LORD spoke with Moses. Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to their tent. The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.

Moses said to the LORD, “You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, ‘I know you by name and you have found favor with me.’ If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people.”

The LORD replied, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

Then Moses said to him, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”

And the LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.”

Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.”

And the LORD said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”

Then the LORD said, “There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”

The LORD said to Moses, “Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Be ready in the morning, and then come up on Mount Sinai. Present yourself to me there on top of the mountain. No one is to come with you or be seen anywhere on the mountain; not even the flocks and herds may graze in front of the mountain.”

So Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning, as the LORD had commanded him; and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands. Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”

Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped. “Lord,” he said, “if I have found favor in your eyes, then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance.”

Then the LORD said: “I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the LORD, will do for you.

“Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous,

is a jealous God."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant — the Ten Commandments.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the LORD had given him on Mount Sinai.

When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. But whenever he entered the LORD's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the LORD.

> *Moses had experienced God's awesome presence, and it showed. Now God would come down and reside among his people — in the tabernacle. This holy tent provided space for the rituals of sacrifice and cleansing from sin that God required. The best Hebrew artisans used their skills in woodworking, metalworking, weaving and embroidering to craft the materials for the tabernacle, including the lampstand, the table for sacred bread and the ark of the covenant. The ark was gold-covered, with poles of acacia wood, also covered with gold, for transport. The specifications for all these materials were quite detailed, and the results must have been beautiful indeed. Yet the most awesome and important feature of this portable temple was not the furniture that filled it, but the Person who filled it.*

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out — until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.

> *During the year that the Israelites were camped near Mount Sinai, God taught them who he was and what he required of them: "I am holy, so you are to be holy." God instructed his people to bring specific offerings to the tabernacle — burnt offerings, grain offerings, fellowship offerings, sin offerings and guilt offerings. The line of priests was anointed[6] and an intricate system of animal sacrifices was instituted for the atonement of the people's sins.*
>
> *The Hebrews learned God's laws about marriage and divorce, appropriate sexual relations, punishment for murder and robbery and how to make restitution for wrongs. God desired that his people become compassionate, merciful and just.*
>
> *The promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was now a reality. And this new nation was to be different, so that the entire world would know and worship the one true God, the very source of life and hope.*

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[1]'**Consecrate:** To dedicate a person or thing to God's service.

[2]**Twelve tribes of Israel:** The twelve groups that inhabited Israel after leaving Egypt. Each group was descended from one of Jacob's twelve sons.

[3]**Tabernacle:** A portable structure, also referred to as the *tent of meeting,* in which the presence of God dwelled with his people. A permanent

temple replacing the tabernacle was later built by King Solomon.

[4]**Ark of the covenant:** A portable wooden chest covered with gold, about four feet by two-and-a-half feet wide, which contained the Ten Commandments. The Israelites considered it the most important symbol of God's continual presence with them.

[5]**Idol:** Any object, person or idea that someone worships other than the one true God.

[6]**Anoint, anointed:** To pour oil on a person (usually on their head) as a ceremonial symbol, setting him or her apart for blessings or special service to God. An object can also be anointed to show its sacredness or significance in worship. The term *anointed* can sometimes be interchanged with *choose,* as in the phrase, "God's anointed."

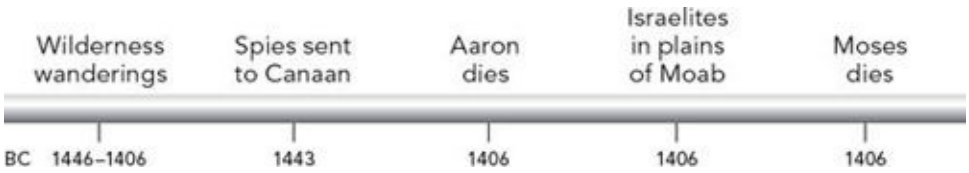
6

Wandering

ON THE TWENTIETH DAY of the second month of the second year, the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle of the covenant law. Then the Israelites set out from the Desert of Sinai and traveled from place to place until the cloud came to rest in the Desert of Paran. They set out, this first time, at the LORD's command through Moses.

> *The people marched out from their yearlong campout near Mount Sinai in organized units, grouped according to the 12 tribes (named after the 12 sons of Jacob). God continued to guide them with the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. He had rescued his people from slavery, showed them his power, guided their steps, given them his law and gifted them with his presence. By now, perhaps the people would trust God and his leading. But the Israelites continued to blame God for their hardships.*

Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the LORD, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. When the people cried out to Moses, he prayed to the LORD and the fire died down. So that place was called Taberah,[1] because fire from the LORD had burned among them.



The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost — also the cucumbers,

melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!”

The manna was like coriander seed and looked like resin. The people went around gathering it, and then ground it in a hand mill or crushed it in a mortar. They cooked it in a pot or made it into loaves. And it tasted like something made with olive oil. When the dew settled on the camp at night, the manna also came down.

Moses heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance to their tents. The LORD became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled. He asked the LORD, “Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me — if I have found favor in your eyes — and do not let me face my own ruin.”

The LORD said to Moses:

“Tell the people: ‘Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow, when you will eat meat. The LORD heard you when you wailed, “If only we had meat to eat! We were better off in Egypt!” Now the LORD will give you meat, and you will eat it. You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, but for a whole month — until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it — because you have rejected the LORD, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, “Why did we ever leave Egypt?"”

But Moses said, “Here I am among six hundred thousand men on foot, and you say, ‘I will give them meat to eat for a whole month!’ Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?”

The LORD answered Moses, “Is the LORD’s arm too short? Now you will see whether or not what I say will come true for you.”

Now a wind went out from the LORD and drove quail in from the sea. It scattered them up to two cubits deep all around the camp, as far as a day's walk in any direction. All that day and night and all the next day the people went out and gathered quail. No one gathered less than ten homers. Then they spread them out all around the camp. But while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, the anger of the LORD burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague. Therefore the place was named Kibroth Hattaavah,[2] because there they buried the people who had craved other food.

Though God had dealt harshly with the people's lack of faith, soon there was more trouble in the ranks, this time from Moses' own sister and brother.

Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?" And the LORD heard this.

(Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.)

At once the LORD said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, "Come out to the tent of meeting, all three of you." So the three of them went out. Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When the two of them stepped forward, he said, "Listen to my words:

"When there is a prophet[3] among you,
I, the LORD, reveal myself to them in visions,
I speak to them in dreams.

But this is not true of my servant Moses;
he is faithful in all my house.

With him I speak face to face,
clearly and not in riddles;
he sees the form of the LORD.

Why then were you not afraid
to speak against my servant Moses?"

The anger of the LORD burned against them, and he left them.

When the cloud lifted from above the tent, Miriam's skin was leprous — it became as white as snow. Aaron turned toward her and saw that she had a defiling skin disease, and he said to Moses, "Please, my lord, I ask you not to hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed. Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother's womb with its flesh half eaten away."

So Moses cried out to the LORD, "Please, God, heal her!"

The LORD replied to Moses, "If her father had spit in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days? Confine her outside the camp for seven days; after that she can be brought back." So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not move on till she was brought back.

After that, the people left Hazeroth and encamped in the Desert of Paran.

The LORD said to Moses, "Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders."

When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, "Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in it or not? Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land." (It was the season for the first ripe grapes.)

So they went up and explored the land from the Desert of Zin as far as Rehob, toward Lebo Hamath.

When they reached the Valley of Eshkol, they cut off a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes. Two of them carried it on a pole between them, along with some pomegranates and figs.

At the end of forty days they returned from exploring the land.

They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite

community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. They gave Moses this account: “We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there.”

Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.”

But the men who had gone up with him said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.”

That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?” And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there. Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite assembly, “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them.”

But the whole assembly talked about stoning them. Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites. The LORD said to Moses, “How long will these people treat me with contempt?

How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them? I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they."

Moses said to the LORD, "Then the Egyptians will hear about it! By your power you brought these people up from among them. And they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it. They have already heard that you, LORD, are with these people and that you, LORD, have been seen face to face, that your cloud stays over them, and that you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. If you put all these people to death, leaving none alive, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, 'The LORD was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath, so he slaughtered them in the wilderness.'

"Now may the Lord's strength be displayed, just as you have declared: '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 parents to the third and fourth generation.' In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now."

The LORD replied, "I have forgiven them, as you asked. Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, not one of those who saw my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times — not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it. But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it. Since the Amalekites and the Canaanites are living in the valleys, turn back tomorrow and set out toward the desert along the route to the Red Sea."

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron: "How long will this wicked community grumble against me? I have heard the complaints of these grumbling Israelites. So tell them, 'As surely as I live, declares the LORD, I will do to you the very thing I heard you say: In this wilderness your bodies will fall — every one of you twenty years old or more who was

counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected. But as for you, your bodies will fall in this wilderness. Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the wilderness. For forty years — one year for each of the forty days you explored the land — you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you.' I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will surely do these things to this whole wicked community, which has banded together against me. They will meet their end in this wilderness; here they will die."

> *Grumbling, complaining, plotting, unbelieving—the Hebrews were slow learners. As God declared, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness until the people 20 years old or more at the time died.*
>
> *The story picks up again nearly 40 years later. The Israelites return to Kadesh, site of the rebellion that occurred when the spies returned from Canaan. The promised land lies before them again. By now, most of the people 20 years old or more at the time of that tragic rebellion had died. Sadly, however, the attitude of this generation clearly resembles that of the previous one.*

In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried.

Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. They quarreled with Moses and said, "If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the LORD! Why did you bring the LORD's community into this wilderness, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!"

Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the tent

of meeting and fell facedown, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them. The LORD said to Moses, “Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink.”

So Moses took the staff from the LORD’s presence, just as he commanded him. He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, “Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?” Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

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.”

These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the LORD and where he was proved holy among them.

> *The frustration and anger that had built up in Moses over the last 40 years came to expression. In his rage, Moses struck the rock rather than obeying God’s instructions to speak to it. Moses (and evidently Aaron) demonstrated a lack of trust in God and respect for his presence among his people. The consequences were clear: neither Moses nor Aaron would enter the promised land.*
>
> *As the Israelites continued their march to Canaan, they came to the edge of territory controlled by their distant cousins, the Edomites (descended from Esau, Jacob’s brother). But their foreign policy negotiations proved to be difficult. They requested permission for passage, a shortcut, across that land. “No way, not without a fight,” replied the king of Edom, who promptly sent a large and powerful army to ensure they didn’t enter his territory. Thwarted, the Israelites soon had other sad events to attend to.*

The whole Israelite community set out from Kadesh and came to Mount Hor. At Mount Hor, near the border of Edom, the LORD said to

Moses and Aaron, “Aaron will be gathered to his people. He will not enter the land I give the Israelites, because both of you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah. Get Aaron and his son Eleazar and take them up Mount Hor. Remove Aaron’s garments and put them on his son Eleazar, for Aaron will be gathered to his people; he will die there.”

Moses did as the LORD commanded: They went up Mount Hor in the sight of the whole community. Moses removed Aaron’s garments and put them on his son Eleazar. And Aaron died there on top of the mountain. Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain, and when the whole community learned that Aaron had died, all the Israelites mourned for him thirty days.

When the Canaanite king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming along the road to Atharim, he attacked the Israelites and captured some of them. Then Israel made this vow to the LORD: “If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities.” The LORD listened to Israel’s plea and gave the Canaanites over to them. They completely destroyed them and their towns; so the place was named Hormah.[4]

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”

Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

The Israelites traveled on through the dusty wilderness. As they had done with the nation of Edom, they requested cooperation

from the king of the Amorites to pass through their land. And as with the Edomites, God's people found that the Amorites were less than helpful.

Israel sent messengers to say to Sihon king of the Amorites:

"Let us pass through your country. We will not turn aside into any field or vineyard, or drink water from any well. We will travel along the King's Highway until we have passed through your territory."

But Sihon would not let Israel pass through his territory. He mustered his entire army and marched out into the wilderness against Israel. When he reached Jahaz, he fought with Israel. Israel, however, put him to the sword and took over his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, but only as far as the Ammonites, because their border was fortified. Israel captured all the cities of the Amorites and occupied them, including Heshbon and all its surrounding settlements. Heshbon was the city of Sihon king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab and had taken from him all his land as far as the Arnon.

So Israel settled in the land of the Amorites.

After Moses had sent spies to Jazer, the Israelites captured its surrounding settlements and drove out the Amorites who were there. Then they turned and went up along the road toward Bashan, and Og king of Bashan and his whole army marched out to meet them in battle at Edrei.

The LORD said to Moses, "Do not be afraid of him, for I have delivered him into your hands, along with his whole army and his land. Do to him what you did to Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon."

So they struck him down, together with his sons and his whole army, leaving them no survivors. And they took possession of his land.

With results such as this, local kings were intimidated by Israel's forces. One king, Balak, ruler of Moab, called on a pagan diviner, Balaam, to curse the Israelites. Caught between assurances of wealth from Balak and God's command not to curse them, Balaam was in a dilemma. He finally mounted his donkey to head out to Moab, but the donkey refused to move.

Balaam tried his whip, and the donkey suddenly talked, objecting to unfair treatment.

Donkey: "Did I ever hurt you?" Balaam: "No."

Donkey: "So why are you whipping me?" Balaam: "Because you're not moving, you stupid animal." Donkey: "Open your eyes and see why!" Then Balaam saw the angel of the Lord in the road, opposing him. As a result of this strange occurrence, Balaam gained the courage he needed to tell Balak what God wanted him to hear: Israel would be blessed; Moab would be cursed.

In the meantime, Moabite women were doing more damage to Hebrew solidarity than Balak's army ever could.

While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the LORD's anger burned against them.

The LORD said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of these people, kill them and expose them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the LORD's fierce anger may turn away from Israel."

So Moses said to Israel's judges,[5] "Each of you must put to death those of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor."

Then an Israelite man brought into the camp a Midianite woman right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel while they were weeping at the entrance to the tent of meeting. When Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear into both of them, right through the Israelite man and into the woman's stomach. Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped; but those who died in the plague numbered 24,000.

The LORD said to Moses, "Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites. Since he was as zealous for my honor among them as I am, I did not put an end to them in my zeal. Therefore tell him I am making my covenant of peace with

him. He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites."

As the battle for the promised land approached, Moses took a census and discovered that all the Israelites who had rebelled against God's instruction to enter Canaan nearly 40 years earlier had passed away. After all these years, the next generation was finally poised to enter the land. But Moses himself had to face the sad reality of some tough consequences.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go up this mountain in the Abarim Range and see the land I have given the Israelites. After you have seen it, you too will be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron was, for when the community rebelled at the waters in the Desert of Zin, both of you disobeyed my command to honor me as holy before their eyes." (These were the waters of Meribah Kadesh, in the Desert of Zin.)

Moses said to the LORD, "May the LORD, the God who gives breath to all living things, appoint someone over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd."

So the LORD said to Moses, "Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit of leadership, and lay your hand on him. Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly and commission him in their presence. Give him some of your authority so the whole Israelite community will obey him."

Moses did as the LORD commanded him. He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole assembly. Then he laid his hands on him and commissioned him, as the LORD instructed through Moses.

Many administrative details required Moses' attention before he died and the people crossed the Jordan River. How to arrange worship, how to handle captives and spoils from battle, how to deal with crime and vengeance inside the Hebrew nation, how to set up inheritance rights—God, through Moses, was

preparing a basic governmental system for life in the promised land. Moses' final task regarding the anxious and excited people was a grand valedictory speech. "Remember who you are," he told them, "and to Whom you belong."

These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel in the wilderness east of the Jordan:

The LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything.

Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?

You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other. From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, and you heard his words from out of the fire. Because he loved your ancestors and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence and his great strength, to drive out before you nations greater and stronger than you and to bring you into their land to give it to you for your inheritance, as it is today.

Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the LORD your God gives you for all time.

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 on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors. Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you.

Hear, Israel: You are now about to cross the Jordan to go in and dispossess nations greater and stronger than you, with large cities that have walls up to the sky. The people are strong and tall — Anakites! You know about them and have heard it said: “Who can stand up against the Anakites?” But be assured today that the LORD your God is the one who goes across ahead of you like a devouring fire. He will destroy them; he will subdue them before you. And you will drive them out and annihilate them quickly, as the LORD has promised you.

After the LORD your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, “The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.” No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you. It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to

possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.

Moses summoned all the Israelites and said to them:

Your eyes have seen all that the LORD did in Egypt to Pharaoh, to all his officials and to all his land. With your own eyes you saw those great trials, those signs and great wonders. But to this day the LORD has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear. Yet the LORD says, “During the forty years that I led you through the wilderness, your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet. You ate no bread and drank no wine or other fermented drink. I did this so that you might know that I am the LORD your God.”

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Though Moses often complained that he was not a public speaker, his strong words of encouragement kept the people

faithful, focused and hopeful for many years. Moses knew God well, and he loved the people. That knowledge and love were often expressed in poetic prayers full of lament, joy, passion and devotion.

Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the presence of all Israel, “Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the LORD swore to their ancestors to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance. 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.”

On that same day the LORD told Moses, “Go up into the Abarim Range to Mount Nebo in Moab, across from Jericho, and view Canaan, the land I am giving the Israelites as their own possession. There on the mountain that you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people. This is because both of you broke faith with me in the presence of the Israelites at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the Desert of Zin and because you did not uphold my holiness among the Israelites. Therefore, you will see the land only from a distance; you will not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel.”

Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the LORD showed him the whole land — from Gilead to Dan, all of Naphtali, the territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Mediterranean Sea, the Negev and the whole region from the Valley of Jericho, the City of Palms, as far as Zoar. Then the LORD said to him, “This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it.”

And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in Moab, as the LORD had said. He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone. The Israelites grieved for Moses in the plains of Moab

thirty days, until the time of weeping and mourning was over.

Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, who did all those signs and wonders the LORD sent him to do in Egypt — to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.

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[1]**Taberah:** *Taberah* means “burning.”

[2]**Kibroth Hattaavah:** *Kibroth Hattaavah* means “graves of craving.”

[3]**Prophet:** A person selected by God to deliver divinely-inspired messages to his people.

[4]**Hormah:** *Hormah* means “destruction.”

[5]**Judges:** National leaders and deliverers of Israel.

7

The Battle Begins

AFTER THE DEATH OF MOSES the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them — to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates — all the Hittite country — to the Mediterranean Sea in the west. No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors 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. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; 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. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."



So Joshua ordered the officers of the people: "Go through the camp and tell the people, 'Get your provisions ready. Three days from now you will cross the Jordan here to go in and take possession of the land the LORD your God is giving you for your own.'"

Then they answered Joshua, "Whatever you have commanded us we

will do, and wherever you send us we will go. Just as we fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you. Only may the LORD your God be with you as he was with Moses. Whoever rebels against your word and does not obey it, whatever you may command them, will be put to death. Only be strong and courageous!”

Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. “Go, look over the land,” he said, “especially Jericho.” So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there.

The king of Jericho was told, “Look, some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land.” So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: “Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land.”

But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, “Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, they left. I don’t know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them.” (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.) So the men set out in pursuit of the spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof and said to them, “I know that the LORD has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

“Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them — and that you will save us from death.”

“Our lives for your lives!” the men assured her. “If you don’t tell what

we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the LORD gives us the land."

So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall. She said to them, "Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return, and then go on your way."

When they left, they went into the hills and stayed there three days, until the pursuers had searched all along the road and returned without finding them. Then the two men started back. They went down out of the hills, forded the river and came to Joshua son of Nun and told him everything that had happened to them. They said to Joshua, "The LORD has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us."

> *Two things separated the Israelites from their promise of a homeland. First, the Jordan River, a formidable barrier in an era before span bridges. Second, the rite of circumcision, the sign of God's covenant with his people. (None of this generation had been circumcised.)*
>
> *Joshua organized the march to the land, with the ark of the covenant leading the way. When the priests carrying the sacred ark touched the river bank, the Jordan's brisk flow ceased. All the people crossed on dry ground. Once camped on the other side, the circumcisions were performed. For a few painful days, the only able-bodied people in the camp were females.*
>
> *Then came the first battle—a test of faith and courage after 40 years of training.*

Now the gates of Jericho were securely barred because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in.

Then the LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the

trumpets. When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have the whole army give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the army will go up, everyone straight in."

So Joshua son of Nun called the priests and said to them, "Take up the ark of the covenant of the LORD and have seven priests carry trumpets in front of it." And he ordered the army, "Advance! March around the city, with an armed guard going ahead of the ark of the LORD."

When Joshua had spoken to the people, the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets before the LORD went forward, blowing their trumpets, and the ark of the LORD's covenant followed them. The armed guard marched ahead of the priests who blew the trumpets, and the rear guard followed the ark. All this time the trumpets were sounding. But Joshua had commanded the army, "Do not give a war cry, do not raise your voices, do not say a word until the day I tell you to shout. Then shout!" So he had the ark of the LORD carried around the city, circling it once. Then the army returned to camp and spent the night there.

Joshua got up early the next morning and the priests took up the ark of the LORD. The seven priests carrying the seven trumpets went forward, marching before the ark of the LORD and blowing the trumpets. The armed men went ahead of them and the rear guard followed the ark of the LORD, while the trumpets kept sounding. So on the second day they marched around the city once and returned to the camp. They did this for six days.

On the seventh day, they got up at daybreak and marched around the city seven times in the same manner, except that on that day they circled the city seven times. The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the army, "Shout! For the LORD has given you the city! The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent."

When the trumpets sounded, the army shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the men gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so everyone charged straight in, and they took the city. They devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it — men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.

Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, “Go into the prostitute’s house and bring her out and all who belong to her, in accordance with your oath to her.” So the young men who had done the spying went in and brought out Rahab, her father and mother, her brothers and sisters and all who belonged to her. They brought out her entire family and put them in a place outside the camp of Israel.

Then they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the LORD’s house. But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho — and she lives among the Israelites to this day.

At that time Joshua pronounced this solemn oath: “Cursed before the LORD is the one who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho.”

So the LORD was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land.

> *God had told Joshua and the Israelites that the spoil of war was his alone. And everyone obeyed — except for one man, Achan. As a result of Achan’s sin, God was not with the Israelite army when they attacked Ai. Joshua and the other leaders were humiliated and confused. When God revealed that the defeat was because Achan had sinned, the people repented, and Achan was killed for his actions.*

Then the LORD said to Joshua, “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Take the whole army with you, and go up and attack Ai. For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land. You shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king, except that you may carry off their plunder and livestock for yourselves. Set an ambush behind the city.”

Early the next morning Joshua mustered his army, and he and the leaders of Israel marched before them to Ai. The entire force that was with him marched up and approached the city and arrived in front of it. They set up camp north of Ai, with the valley between them and the city. Joshua had taken about five thousand men and set them in ambush

between Bethel and Ai, to the west of the city. So the soldiers took up their positions — with the main camp to the north of the city and the ambush to the west of it. That night Joshua went into the valley.

When the king of Ai saw this, he and all the men of the city hurried out early in the morning to meet Israel in battle at a certain place overlooking the Arabah. But he did not know that an ambush had been set against him behind the city. Joshua and all Israel let themselves be driven back before them, and they fled toward the wilderness. All the men of Ai were called to pursue them, and they pursued Joshua and were lured away from the city. Not a man remained in Ai or Bethel who did not go after Israel. They left the city open and went in pursuit of Israel.

Then the LORD said to Joshua, “Hold out toward Ai the javelin that is in your hand, for into your hand I will deliver the city.” So Joshua held out toward the city the javelin that was in his hand. As soon as he did this, the men in the ambush rose quickly from their position and rushed forward. They entered the city and captured it and quickly set it on fire.

The men of Ai looked back and saw the smoke of the city rising up into the sky, but they had no chance to escape in any direction; the Israelites who had been fleeing toward the wilderness had turned back against their pursuers. For when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had taken the city and that smoke was going up from it, they turned around and attacked the men of Ai. Those in the ambush also came out of the city against them, so that they were caught in the middle, with Israelites on both sides. Israel cut them down, leaving them neither survivors nor fugitives.

Twelve thousand men and women fell that day — all the peopleof Ai.

Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the Israelites.

Afterward, Joshua read all the words of the law—the blessings and the curses — just as it is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the

foreigners who lived among them.

> *God helped the Israelites to be victorious over the army of Ai. Yet Joshua made a mistake in not turning to God to guide him when some deceptive people from Gibeon arrived. They pretended to be from a far-off land, and they sought a treaty with the Israelites. Joshua made the treaty without consulting the wisdom of the Lord. Then he found out that the delegation was really from Gibeon, a neighboring tribe. He was constrained by his treaty, so he could not conquer the people and take their land. Word got out about Joshua's peace treaty, and other kings took up arms.*

Now Adoni-Zedek king of Jerusalem heard that Joshua had taken Ai and totally destroyed it, doing to Ai and its king as he had done to Jericho and its king, and that the people of Gibeon had made a treaty of peace with Israel and had become their allies. He and his people were very much alarmed at this, because Gibeon was an important city, like one of the royal cities; it was larger than Ai, and all its men were good fighters. So Adoni-Zedek king of Jerusalem appealed to Hoham king of Hebron, Piram king of Jarmuth, Japhia king of Lachish and Debir king of Eglon. "Come up and help me attack Gibeon," he said, "because it has made peace with Joshua and the Israelites."

Then the five kings of the Amorites — the kings of Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish and Eglon — joined forces. They moved up with all their troops and took up positions against Gibeon and attacked it.

The Gibeonites then sent word to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal: "Do not abandon your servants. Come up to us quickly and save us! Help us, because all the Amorite kings from the hill country have joined forces against us."

So Joshua marched up from Gilgal with his entire army, including all the best fighting men. The LORD said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid of them; I have given them into your hand. Not one of them will be able to withstand you."

After an all-night march from Gilgal, Joshua took them by surprise. The LORD threw them into confusion before Israel, so Joshua and the

Israelites defeated them completely at Gibeon. Israel pursued them along the road going up to Beth Horon and cut them down all the way to Azekah and Makkedah. As they fled before Israel on the road down from Beth Horon to Azekah, the Lord hurled large hailstones down on them, and more of them died from the hail than were killed by the swords of the Israelites.

On the day the LORD gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the LORD in the presence of Israel:

"Sun, stand still over Gibeon,
and you, moon, over the Valley of Aijalon."

So the sun stood still,
and the moon stopped,
till the nation avenged itself on its enemies,

as it is written in the Book of Jashar.

The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the LORD listened to a human being. Surely the LORD was fighting for Israel!

Then Joshua returned with all Israel to the camp at Gilgal.

Now the five kings had fled and hidden in the cave at Makkedah. When Joshua was told that the five kings had been found hiding in the cave at Makkedah, he said, "Roll large rocks up to the mouth of the cave, and post some men there to guard it. But don't stop; pursue your enemies! Attack them from the rear and don't let them reach their cities, for the LORD your God has given them into your hand."

So Joshua and the Israelites defeated them completely, but a few survivors managed to reach their fortified cities. The whole army then returned safely to Joshua in the camp at Makkedah, and no one uttered a word against the Israelites.

Joshua said, "Open the mouth of the cave and bring those five kings out to me." So they brought the five kings out of the cave — the kings of Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish and Eglon. When they had brought these kings to Joshua, he summoned all the men of Israel and said to the army commanders who had come with him, "Come here and put your

feet on the necks of these kings." So they came forward and placed their feet on their necks.

Joshua said to them, "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Be strong and courageous. This is what the LORD will do to all the enemies you are going to fight." Then Joshua put the kings to death and exposed their bodies on five poles, and they were left hanging on the poles until evening.

At sunset Joshua gave the order and they took them down from the poles and threw them into the cave where they had been hiding. At the mouth of the cave they placed large rocks, which are there to this day.

That day Joshua took Makkedah. He put the city and its king to the sword and totally destroyed everyone in it. He left no survivors. And he did to the king of Makkedah as he had done to the king of Jericho.

So Joshua subdued the whole region, including the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills and the mountain slopes, together with all their kings. He left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded. Joshua subdued them from Kadesh Barnea to Gaza and from the whole region of Goshen to Gibeon. All these kings and their lands Joshua conquered in one campaign, because the LORD, the God of Israel, fought for Israel.

Then Joshua returned with all Israel to the camp at Gilgal.

When Jabin king of Hazor heard of this, he sent word to Jobab king of Madon, to the kings of Shimron and Akshaph, and to the northern kings who were in the mountains, in the Arabah south of Kinnereth, in the western foothills and in Naphoth Dor on the west; to the Canaanites in the east and west; to the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites and Jebusites in the hill country; and to the Hivites below Hermon in the region of Mizpah. They came out with all their troops and a large number of horses and chariots — a huge army, as numerous as the sand on the seashore. All these kings joined forces and made camp together at the Waters of Merom to fight against Israel.

The LORD said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid of them, because by this time tomorrow I will hand all of them, slain, over to Israel. You are to hamstring their horses and burn their chariots."

So Joshua and his whole army came against them suddenly at the Waters of Merom and attacked them, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Israel. They defeated them and pursued them all the way to Greater Sidon, to Misrephoth Maim, and to the Valley of Mizpah on the east, until no survivors were left. Joshua did to them as the LORD had directed: He hamstrung their horses and burned their chariots.

At that time Joshua turned back and captured Hazor and put its king to the sword. (Hazor had been the head of all these kingdoms.) Everyone in it they put to the sword. They totally destroyed them, not sparing anyone that breathed, and he burned Hazor itself.

Joshua took all these royal cities and their kings and put them to the sword. He totally destroyed them, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded. Yet Israel did not burn any of the cities built on their mounds — except Hazor, which Joshua burned. The Israelites carried off for themselves all the plunder and livestock of these cities, but all the people they put to the sword until they completely destroyed them, not sparing anyone that breathed. As the LORD commanded his servant Moses, so Moses commanded Joshua, and Joshua did it; he left nothing undone of all that the LORD commanded Moses.

So Joshua took the entire land, just as the LORD had directed Moses, and he gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions. Then the land had rest from war.

> *These ancient cities defeated by Joshua and the Israelites have been forgotten by history. Yet, for the Israelites, each name listed represented risk, loss, hardship and struggle. God's promise to Abraham centuries earlier was coming to pass. A new nation was being formed. Much of the promised land was theirs; much still remained to be taken. In the meantime, their leader had some final words of encouragement and challenge.*

After a long time had passed and the LORD had given Israel rest from all their enemies around them, Joshua, by then a very old man, summoned all Israel — their elders, leaders, judges and officials — and said to them: "I am very old. You yourselves have seen everything the LORD your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the

LORD your God who fought for you. Remember how I have allotted as an inheritance for your tribes all the land of the nations that remain — the nations I conquered — between the Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea in the west. The LORD your God himself will push them out for your sake. He will drive them out before you, and you will take possession of their land, as the LORD your God promised you.

“Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed. But just as all the good things the LORD your God has promised you have come to you, so he will bring on you all the evil things he has threatened, until the LORD your God has destroyed you from this good land he has given you.” If you violate the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the LORD’S anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you.

Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God.

Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I assigned the hill country of Seir to Esau, but Jacob and his family went down to Egypt.

“'Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there, and I brought you out. When I brought your people out of Egypt, you came to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued them with chariots and horsemen as far as the Red Sea. But they cried to the LORD for help, and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians; he brought the sea over them and covered them. You saw with your own eyes what I did to the Egyptians. Then you lived in the wilderness for a long time.

“'I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived east of the Jordan. They fought against you, but I gave them into your hands. I destroyed them from before you, and you took possession of their land. When Balak son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent for Balaam son of Beor to put a curse on you. But I would not listen to Balaam, so he blessed you again and again, and I delivered you out of his hand.

“'Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands. I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove them out before you — also the two Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow. So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.’

“Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the LORD our God and obey him.”

On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he reaffirmed for them decrees and laws. And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the LORD.

“See!” he said to all the people. “This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the LORD has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God.”

Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to their own inheritance.

After these things, Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. And they buried him in the land of his

inheritance, at Timnath Serah in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the LORD had done for Israel.

8

A Few Good Men … and Women

THE PEOPLE SERVED THE LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel.

Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals.[1] They forsook the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the LORD's anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. In his anger against Israel the LORD gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them. He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.



Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. They quickly turned from the ways of their ancestors, who had been obedient to the LORD's commands. Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with

the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the LORD relented because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.

Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and said, “Because this nation has violated the covenant I ordained for their ancestors and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD and walk in it as their ancestors did.”

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. The anger of the LORD burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. But when they cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother, who saved them. The Spirit of the LORD[2] came on him, so that he became Israel’s judge and went to war. The LORD gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died.

> *Eventually the people of Israel turned away from God again, and the cycle of social chaos began anew. The Moabite leader, Eglon, forged a coalition and for 18 years oppressed Israel. The people cried out to God, who faithfully gave them another judge/leader, Ehud, to deliver them. Ehud tricked Eglon into a private meeting and killed the king with his sword in a surprise attack. The king was so overweight that the sword handle was covered by his fat girth. With Eglon dead, Moab fell easily to Ehud’s raiders. Then the Israelites had peace for 80 years.*

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, now that Ehud was dead. So the LORD sold them into the hands of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. Sisera, the commander of his army, was

based in Harosheth Haggoyim. Because he had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the LORD for help.

Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.’”

Barak said to her, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.”

“Certainly I will go with you,” said Deborah. “But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. There Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali, and ten thousand men went up under his command. Deborah also went up with him.

Now Heber the Kenite had left the other Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses’ brother-in-law, and pitched his tent by the great tree in Zaanannim near Kedesh.

When they told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, Sisera summoned from Harosheth Haggoyim to the Kishon River all his men and his nine hundred chariots fitted with iron.

Then Deborah said to Barak, “Go! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?” So Barak went down Mount Tabor, with ten thousand men following him. At Barak’s advance, the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot.

Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Hag-goyim, and all Sisera’s troops fell by the sword; not a man was left. Sisera, meanwhile, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there was an alliance between Jabin king of Hazor and the

family of Heber the Kenite.

Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, “Come, my lord, come right in. Don’t be afraid.” So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket.

“I’m thirsty,” he said. “Please give me some water.” She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up.

“Stand in the doorway of the tent,” he told her. “If someone comes by and asks you, ‘Is anyone in there?’ say ‘No.’”

But Jael, Heber’s wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.

Just then Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. “Come,” she said, “I will show you the man you’re looking for.” So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple — dead.

On that day God subdued Jabin king of Canaan before the Israelites. And the hand of the Israelites pressed harder and harder against Jabin king of Canaan until they destroyed him.

> *Following this victory, the land experienced 40 years of peace. After that, another strong leader was needed, but at this point in Israel’s history, the roster seemed empty. A splintered, tribal coalition could not sustain its national identity. The people, forgetting their special relationship to God, began to adapt to the surrounding cultures, eventually joining their unconquered neighbors in pagan worship. As a result, God no longer aided the Israelite army, which began losing battles. Once again the people discovered the tragic cycle of the consequences of their disobedience.*

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds. Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples

invaded the country. They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys. They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count them or their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it. Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the LORD for help.

When the Israelites cried out to the LORD because of Midian, he sent them a prophet, who said, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians. And I delivered you from the hand of all your oppressors; I drove them out before you and gave you their land. I said to you, ‘I am the LORD your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.’ But you have not listened to me.”

> *In their hunger and weakness, the Israelites appealed to God, who informed them that their big problem was not agricultural or military, but spiritual. To illustrate, God picked for service a farmer from the weakest clan in his tribe. Like most new leaders, Gideon was uncertain if he could measure up. But God was looking for a faithful follower, not a decorated soldier.*

The angel of the LORD came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, “The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.”

“Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now the LORD has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian.”

The LORD turned to him and said, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?”

“Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.”

The LORD answered, “I will be with you, and you will strike down all

the Midianites, leaving none alive."

Gideon replied, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me. Please do not go away until I come back and bring my offering and set it before you."

And the LORD said, "I will wait until you return."

Gideon went inside, prepared a young goat, and from an ephah of flour he made bread without yeast. Putting the meat in a basket and its broth in a pot, he brought them out and offered them to him under the oak.

The angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread, place them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And Gideon did so. Then the angel of the LORD touched the meat and the unleavened bread with the tip of the staff that was in his hand. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. And the angel of the LORD disappeared. When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the LORD, he exclaimed, "Alas, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!"

But the LORD said to him, "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die."

So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD Is Peace. To this day it stands in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

Now all the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples joined forces and crossed over the Jordan and camped in the Valley of Jezreel. Then the Spirit of the LORD came on Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, summoning the Abiezrites to follow him. He sent messengers throughout Manasseh, calling them to arms, and also into Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, so that they too went up to meet them.

Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised — look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said." And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew — a bowlful of water.

Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me. Let me make just

one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece, but this time make the fleece dry and let the ground be covered with dew." That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew.

Early in the morning, Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) and all his men camped at the spring of Harod. The camp of Midian was north of them in the valley near the hill of Moreh. The LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, 'My own strength has saved me.' Now announce to the army, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.'" So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.

But the LORD said to Gideon, "There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will thin them out for you there. If I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go; but if I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go."

So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the LORD told him, "Separate those who lap the water with their tongues as a dog laps from those who kneel down to drink." Three hundred of them drank from cupped hands, lapping like dogs. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.

The LORD said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the others go home." So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites home but kept the three hundred, who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others.

Now the camp of Midian lay below him in the valley. During that night the LORD said to Gideon, "Get up, go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands. If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah and listen to what they are saying. Afterward, you will be encouraged to attack the camp." So he and Purah his servant went down to the outposts of the camp. The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore.

Gideon arrived just as a man was telling a friend his dream. "I had a

dream," he was saying. "A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed."

His friend responded, "This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands."

When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he bowed down and worshiped. He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, "Get up! The LORD has given the Midianite camp into your hands." Dividing the three hundred men into three companies, he placed trumpets and empty jars in the hands of all of them, with torches inside.

"Watch me," he told them. "Follow my lead. When I get to the edge of the camp, do exactly as I do. When I and all who are with me blow our trumpets, then from all around the camp blow yours and shout, 'For the LORD and for Gideon.'"

Gideon and the hundred men with him reached the edge of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just after they had changed the guard. They blew their trumpets and broke the jars that were in their hands. The three companies blew the trumpets and smashed the jars. Grasping the torches in their left hands and holding in their right hands the trumpets they were to blow, they shouted, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" While each man held his position around the camp, all the Midianites ran, crying out as they fled.

When the three hundred trumpets sounded, the LORD caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords. The army fled to Beth Shittah toward Zererah as far as the border of Abel Meholah near Tabbath. Israelites from Naphtali, Asher and all Manasseh were called out, and they pursued the Midianites. Gideon sent messengers throughout the hill country of Ephraim, saying, "Come down against the Midianites and seize the waters of the Jordan ahead of them as far as Beth Barah."

So all the men of Ephraim were called out and they seized the waters of the Jordan as far as Beth Barah. They also captured two of the Midianite leaders, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb at the winepress of Zeeb. They pursued the Midianites and

brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon, who was by the Jordan.

Thus Midian was subdued before the Israelites and did not raise its head again. During Gideon's lifetime, the land had peace forty years.

No sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals. They set up Baal-Berith as their god and did not remember the LORD their God, who had rescued them from the hands of all their enemies on every side.

> *Once again the Israelites forgot their faithful, holy God — and once again they suffered the consequences of their unbelief. Several Israelite leaders tried to keep enemies at bay, with mixed results. No one had Gideon's daring or success. But God was still working, and he sent an angel to make an extraordinary announcement.*

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, so the LORD delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.

A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was childless, unable to give birth. The angel of the LORD appeared to her and said, "You are barren and childless, but you are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son. Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean. You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines."

> *The birth happened just as the angel had said, and the parents raised the child as God had directed. Young Samson, wild and unusually strong, became a man with a secret.*

The woman gave birth to a boy and named him Samson. He grew and the LORD blessed him, and the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him while he was in Mahaneh Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.

Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman. When he returned, he said to his father and mother, "I have

seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife."

His father and mother replied, "Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?"

But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me. She's the right one for me." (His parents did not know that this was from the LORD, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines; for at that time they were ruling over Israel.)

Samson went down to Timnah together with his father and mother. As they approached the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion came roaring toward him. The Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as he might have torn a young goat. But he told neither his father nor his mother what he had done. Then he went down and talked with the woman, and he liked her.

Some time later, when he went back to marry her, he turned aside to look at the lion's carcass, and in it he saw a swarm of bees and some honey. He scooped out the honey with his hands and ate as he went along. When he rejoined his parents, he gave them some, and they too ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the lion's carcass.

Now his father went down to see the woman. And there Samson held a feast, as was customary for young men. When the people saw him, they chose thirty men to be his companions.

"Let me tell you a riddle," Samson said to them. "If you can give me the answer within the seven days of the feast, I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes. If you can't tell me the answer, you must give me thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes."

"Tell us your riddle," they said. "Let's hear it."

He replied,

"Out of the eater, something to eat;
    out of the strong, something sweet."

For three days they could not give the answer.

On the fourth day, they said to Samson's wife, "Coax your husband into explaining the riddle for us, or we will burn you and your father's

household to death. Did you invite us here to steal our property?"

Then Samson's wife threw herself on him, sobbing, "You hate me! You don't really love me. You've given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the answer."

"I haven't even explained it to my father or mother," he replied, "so why should I explain it to you?" She cried the whole seven days of the feast. So on the seventh day he finally told her, because she continued to press him. She in turn explained the riddle to her people.

Before sunset on the seventh day the men of the town said to him,

"What is sweeter than honey?
    What is stronger than a lion?"

Samson said to them,

"If you had not plowed with my heifer,
    you would not have solved my riddle."

Then the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him. He went down to Ashkelon, struck down thirty of their men, stripped them of everything and gave their clothes to those who had explained the riddle. Burning with anger, he returned to his father's home. And Samson's wife was given to one of his companions who had attended him at the feast.

Later on, at the time of wheat harvest, Samson took a young goat and went to visit his wife. He said, "I'm going to my wife's room." But her father would not let him go in.

"I was so sure you hated her," he said, "that I gave her to your companion. Isn't her younger sister more attractive? Take her instead."

Samson said to them, "This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines; I will really harm them." So he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails, lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing grain, together with the vineyards and olive groves.

When the Philistines asked, "Who did this?" they were told, "Samson, the Timnite's son-in-law, because his wife was given to his companion."

So the Philistines went up and burned her and her father to death.

Samson said to them, “Since you’ve acted like this, I swear that I won’t stop until I get my revenge on you.” He attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them. Then he went down and stayed in a cave in the rock of Etam.

The Philistines went up and camped in Judah, spreading out near Lehi. The people of Judah asked, “Why have you come to fight us?”

“We have come to take Samson prisoner,” they answered, “to do to him as he did to us.”

Then three thousand men from Judah went down to the cave in the rock of Etam and said to Samson, “Don’t you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us? What have you done to us?”

He answered, “I merely did to them what they did to me.”

They said to him, “We’ve come to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines.”

Samson said, “Swear to me that you won’t kill me yourselves.”

“Agreed,” they answered. “We will only tie you up and hand you over to them. We will not kill you.” So they bound him with two new ropes and led him up from the rock. As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came toward him shouting. The Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands. Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men.

Then Samson said,

“With a donkey’s jawbone
I have made donkeys of them.

With a donkey’s jawbone
I have killed a thousand men.”

When he finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and the place was called Ramath Lehi.

Because he was very thirsty, he cried out to the LORD, “You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?” Then God opened up the hollow place in Lehi, and water came out of it. When Samson drank, his

strength returned and he revived. So the spring was called En Hakkore, and it is still there in Lehi.

Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines.

One day Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute. He went in to spend the night with her. The people of Gaza were told, “Samson is here!” So they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the city gate. They made no move during the night, saying, “At dawn we’ll kill him.”

But Samson lay there only until the middle of the night. Then he got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts, and tore them loose, bar and all. He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron.

Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah. The rulers of the Philistines went to her and said, “See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver.”

So Delilah said to Samson, “Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued.”

Samson answered her, “If anyone ties me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, I’ll become as weak as any other man.”

Then the rulers of the Philistines brought her seven fresh bowstrings that had not been dried, and she tied him with them. With men hidden in the room, she called to him, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” But he snapped the bowstrings as easily as a piece of string snaps when it comes close to a flame. So the secret of his strength was not discovered.

Then Delilah said to Samson, “You have made a fool of me; you lied to me. Come now, tell me how you can be tied.”

He said, “If anyone ties me securely with new ropes that have never been used, I’ll become as weak as any other man.”

So Delilah took new ropes and tied him with them. Then, with men hidden in the room, she called to him, “Samson, the Philistines are upon

you!” But he snapped the ropes off his arms as if they were threads.

Delilah then said to Samson, “All this time you have been making a fool of me and lying to me. Tell me how you can be tied.”

He replied, “If you weave the seven braids of my head into the fabric on the loom and tighten it with the pin, I’ll become as weak as any other man.” So while he was sleeping, Delilah took the seven braids of his head, wove them into the fabric and tightened it with the pin.

Again she called to him, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” He awoke from his sleep and pulled up the pin and the loom, with the fabric.

Then she said to him, “How can you say, ‘I love you,’ when you won’t confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven’t told me the secret of your great strength.” With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was sick to death of it.

So he told her everything. “No razor has ever been used on my head,” he said, “because I have been a Nazirite dedicated to God from my mother’s womb. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man.”

When Delilah saw that he had told her everything, she sent word to the rulers of the Philistines, “Come back once more; he has told me everything.” So the rulers of the Philistines returned with the silver in their hands. After putting him to sleep on her lap, she called for someone to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength left him.

Then she called, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!”

He awoke from his sleep and thought, “I’ll go out as before and shake myself free.” But he did not know that the LORD had left him.

Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding grain in the prison. But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.

Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, “Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands.”

When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying,

"Our god has delivered our enemy
into our hands,

the one who laid waste our land
and multiplied our slain."

While they were in high spirits, they shouted, "Bring out Samson to entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them.

When they stood him among the pillars, Samson said to the servant who held his hand, "Put me where I can feel the pillars that support the temple, so that I may lean against them." Now the temple was crowded with men and women; all the rulers of the Philistines were there, and on the roof were about three thousand men and women watching Samson perform. Then Samson prayed to the LORD, "Sovereign LORD, remember me. Please, God, strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes." Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived.

Then his brothers and his father's whole family went down to get him. They brought him back and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. He had led Israel twenty years.

After Samson, the Israelites continued their pattern of spiritual compromise during this sad period of their history. Enter Ruth, a young Moabite woman, into God's story. If the Hebrew people thought God was their exclusive property, this foreign woman challenged that myth. Ruth was loyal, determined, lovely and clever. She became part of the lineage of King David. More important, she was God's choice to illustrate the worldwide reach of God's special gift of hope and life — his plan of salvation as broad and deep as his divine love.

[1]**Baal(s), Ashtoreth, Asherah:** False gods of ancient pagan cultures.

[2]**The Spirit of the LORD:** In the Old Testament, this term referred to the intangible presence of God and all of his attributes. The phrase is used to show how God empowered certain individuals to carry our specific callings.

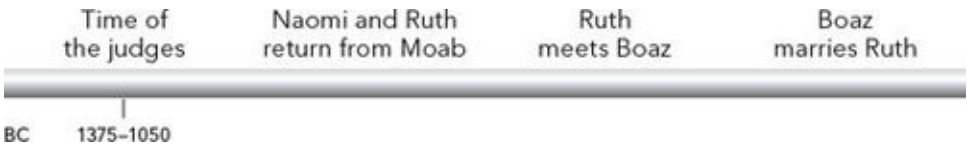
9

The Faith of a Foreign Woman

IN THE DAYS when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.



Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another

husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me — even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons — would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has turned against me!"

At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

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. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"

"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz.

And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor."

Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek.

Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters,

“The LORD be with you!”

“The LORD bless you!” they answered.

Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, “Who does that young woman belong to?”

The overseer replied, “She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.’ She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter.”

So Boaz said to Ruth, “My daughter, listen to me. Don’t go and glean in another field and don’t go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled.”

At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, “Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me — a foreigner?”

Boaz replied, “I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband — how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”

“May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord,” she said. “You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your servant — though I do not have the standing of one of your servants.”

At mealtime Boaz said to her, “Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar.”

When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, “Let her gather among the sheaves and don’t reprimand her. Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don’t rebuke her.”

So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the

barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough.

Her mother-in-law asked her, “Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!”

Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. “The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz,” she said.

“The LORD bless him!” Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. “He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.” She added, “That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers.”

Then Ruth the Moabite said, “He even said to me, ‘Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.’”

Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, “It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with the women who work for him, because in someone else’s field you might be harmed.”

So Ruth stayed close to the women of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

One day Ruth’s mother-in-law Naomi said to her, “My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.”

“I will do whatever you say,” Ruth answered. So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do.

When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned — and there was a

woman lying at his feet!

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I am your servant Ruth,” she said. “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.”

“The LORD bless you, my daughter,” he replied. “This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, don’t be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character. Although it is true that I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I. Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to do his duty as your guardian-redeemer, good; let him redeem you. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it. Lie here until morning.”

So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized; and he said, “No one must know that a woman came to the threshing floor.”

He also said, “Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out.” When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and placed the bundle on her. Then he went back to town.

When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, “How did it go, my daughter?”

Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her and added, “He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, ‘Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’”

Then Naomi said, “Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today.”

Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat down there just as the guardian-redeemer he had mentioned came along. Boaz said, “Come over here, my friend, and sit down.” So he went over and sat down.

Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, “Sit here,” and they did so. Then he said to the guardian-redeemer, “Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our relative Elimelek. I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and

suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line."

"I will redeem it," he said.

Then Boaz said, "On the day you buy the land from Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the dead man's widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property."

At this, the guardian-redeemer said, "Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it."

(Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel.)

So the guardian-redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it yourself." And he removed his sandal.

Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelek, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from his hometown. Today you are witnesses!"

Then the elders and all the people at the gate said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. Through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah."

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."

Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. The women living there said, “Naomi has a son!” And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

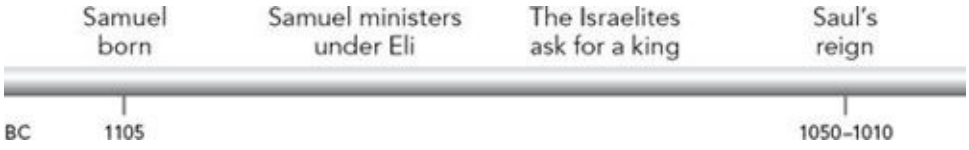
> *Within Ruth’s story we catch a glimpse of an amazing tale yet to come—the life of her great-grandson David, the renowned shepherd-king. But much will take place before David’s golden reign. A godly priest and prophet of Israel will first become an important player in this drama. Samuel was himself a child miraculously born out of struggle and promise. After being recognized by the people as the Lord’s prophet, Samuel’s first order of business was to call the people back to God and subdue the Philistines. Then he had the unenviable task of finding the nation a king. It seemed that nothing happened easily for God’s people, but all that happened was part of God’s faithful plan.*

10

Standing Tall, Falling Hard

THERE WAS A CERTAIN MAN from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.

Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD. Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the LORD had closed her womb. Because the LORD had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah would say to her, "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?"



Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the LORD's house. In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly. And she made a vow, saying, "Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

As she kept on praying to the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, “How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine.”

“Not so, my lord,” Hannah replied, “I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.”

Eli answered, “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.”

She said, “May your servant find favor in your eyes.” Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

Early the next morning they arose and worshiped before the LORD and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah made love to his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, “Because I asked the LORD for him.”

When her husband Elkanah went up with all his family to offer the annual sacrifice to the LORD and to fulfill his vow, Hannah did not go. She said to her husband, “After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him before the LORD, and he will live there always.”

“Do what seems best to you,” her husband Elkanah told her. “Stay here until you have weaned him; only may the LORD make good his word.” So the woman stayed at home and nursed her son until she had weaned him.

After he was weaned, she took the boy with her, young as he was, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh. When the bull had been sacrificed, they brought the boy to Eli, and she said to him, “Pardon me, my lord. As surely as you live, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the LORD. I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD.” And he worshiped the LORD there.

Then Hannah prayed and said:

“My heart rejoices in the LORD;
in the LORD my horn is lifted high.
My mouth boasts over my enemies,
for I delight in your deliverance.

“There is no one holy like the LORD;
there is no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.”

Each year his mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice. Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, saying, “May the LORD give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to the LORD.” Then they would go home. And the LORD was gracious to Hannah; she gave birth to three sons and two daughters. Meanwhile, the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the LORD.

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.

One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the LORD, where the ark of God was. Then the LORD called Samuel.

Samuel answered, “Here I am.” And he ran to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.”

But Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.” So he went and lay down.

Again the LORD called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.”

“My son,” Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.”

Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

A third time the LORD called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.”

Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!”

Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

And the LORD said to Samuel: “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family — from beginning to end. For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them. Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, ‘The guilt of Eli’s house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.’”

Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the LORD. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, but Eli called him and said, “Samuel, my son.”

Samuel answered, “Here I am.”

“What was it he said to you?” Eli asked. “Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you.” So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, “He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes.”

The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel’s words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD. The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.

And Samuel’s word came to all Israel.

Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines. The Israelites camped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines at Aphek. The Philistines deployed their forces to meet Israel, and as the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand of them on the battlefield. When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, “Why did the LORD bring defeat on us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the LORD’s covenant from Shiloh, so

that he may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies."

So the people sent men to Shiloh, and they brought back the ark of the covenant of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim. And Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

When the ark of the LORD's covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook. Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, "What's all this shouting in the Hebrew camp?"

When they learned that the ark of the LORD had come into the camp, the Philistines were afraid. "A god has come into the camp," they said. "Oh no! Nothing like this has happened before. We're doomed! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!"

So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

That same day a Benjamite ran from the battle line and went to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dust on his head. When he arrived, there was Eli sitting on his chair by the side of the road, watching, because his heart feared for the ark of God. When the man entered the town and told what had happened, the whole town sent up a cry.

Eli heard the outcry and asked, "What is the meaning of this uproar?"

The man hurried over to Eli, who was ninety-eight years old and whose eyes had failed so that he could not see. He told Eli, "I have just come from the battle line; I fled from it this very day."

Eli asked, "What happened, my son?"

The man who brought the news replied, "Israel fled before the Philistines, and the army has suffered heavy losses. Also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured."

When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell backward off his chair by the side of the gate. His neck was broken and he died, for he was an old

man, and he was heavy. He had led Israel forty years.

> *No doubt the loss of his sons staggered Eli, but the loss of the ark of the covenant hit him even harder. The sacred ark in pagan hands? Unthinkable! The very presence of God, now captured by the Philistines? A tragedy!*
>
> *The Philistines understood what a symbolic victory they had won and promptly placed the ark next to the statue of their god Dagon in the great temple in Ashdod, one of the five fortified Philistine cities. But God would not be mocked by the false gods of the Philistines. Israel had been brought here in the first place for the very purpose of showing the one true God to these people. So the Dagon statue tumbled to pieces on the temple floor.*
>
> *Next, God afflicted the Philistines with tumors, and after seven months of pure misery, the Philistines put the ark on a cart and sent it back to the Israelites, who kept it in the border town of Kiriath Jearim for 20 years, wondering what to do with it.*
>
> *Meanwhile, Samuel insisted that the Israelites stop worshiping pagan deities and return to the true God. He led the people in successfully subduing the Philistines. But the people stubbornly thought that having a king like everybody else would solve their leadership problems.*

When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as Israel's leaders. The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. But his sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.

So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have."

But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. And the LORD told him: "Listen to all

that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights."

Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, "This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your male and female

servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the LORD will not answer you in that day."

But the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles."

When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. The LORD answered, "Listen to them and give them a king."

Then Samuel said to the Israelites, "Everyone go back to your own town."

There was a Benjamite, a man of standing, whose name was Kish son of Abiel, the son of Zeror, the son of Bekorath, the son of Aphiah of Benjamin. Kish had a son named Saul, as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else.

Now the donkeys belonging to Saul's father Kish were lost, and Kish

said to his son Saul, “Take one of the servants with you and go and look for the donkeys.” So he passed through the hill country of Ephraim and through the area around Shalisha, but they did not find them. They went on into the district of Shaalim, but the donkeys were not there. Then he passed through the territory of Benjamin, but they did not find them.

When they reached the district of Zuph, Saul said to the servant who was with him, “Come, let’s go back, or my father will stop thinking about the donkeys and start worrying about us.”

But the servant replied, “Look, in this town there is a man of God; he is highly respected, and everything he says comes true. Let’s go there now. Perhaps he will tell us what way to take.”

“Good,” Saul said to his servant. “Come, let’s go.” So they set out for the town where the man of God was.

They went up to the town, and as they were entering it, there was Samuel, coming toward them on his way up to the high place.

Now the day before Saul came, the LORD had revealed this to Samuel: “About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him ruler over my people Israel; he will deliver them from the hand of the Philistines. I have looked on my people, for their cry has reached me.”

When Samuel caught sight of Saul, the LORD said to him, “This is the man I spoke to you about; he will govern my people.”

Saul approached Samuel in the gateway and asked, “Would you please tell me where the seer’s house is?”

“I am the seer,” Samuel replied. “Go up ahead of me to the high place, for today you are to eat with me, and in the morning I will send you on your way and will tell you all that is in your heart. As for the donkeys you lost three days ago, do not worry about them; they have been found. And to whom is all the desire of Israel turned, if not to you and your whole family line?”

Saul answered, “But am I not a Benjamite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why do you say such a thing to me?”

Then Samuel took a flask of olive oil and poured it on Saul's head and kissed him, saying, "Has not the LORD anointed you ruler over his inheritance? When you leave me today, you will meet two men near Rachel's tomb, at Zelzah on the border of Benjamin. They will say to you, 'The donkeys you set out to look for have been found. And now your father has stopped thinking about them and is worried about you. He is asking, "What shall I do about my son?"'

"After that you will go to Gibeah of God, where there is a Philistine outpost. As you approach the town, you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, timbrels, pipes and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying. The Spirit of the LORD will come powerfully upon you, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person. Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you."

As Saul turned to leave Samuel, God changed Saul's heart, and all these signs were fulfilled that day.

Samuel summoned the people of Israel to the LORD at Mizpah and said to them, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I brought Israel up out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the power of Egypt and all the kingdoms that oppressed you.' But you have now rejected your God, who saves you out of all your disasters and calamities. And you have said, 'No, appoint a king over us.' So now present yourselves before the LORD by your tribes and clans."

When Samuel had all Israel come forward by tribes, the tribe of Benjamin was taken by lot. Then he brought forward the tribe of Benjamin, clan by clan, and Matri's clan was taken. Finally Saul son of Kish was taken. But when they looked for him, he was not to be found. So they inquired further of the LORD, "Has the man come here yet?"

And the LORD said, "Yes, he has hidden himself among the supplies."

They ran and brought him out, and as he stood among the people he

was a head taller than any of the others. Samuel said to all the people, “Do you see the man the LORD has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people.”

Then the people shouted, “Long live the king!”

Samuel explained to the people the rights and duties of kingship. He wrote them down on a scroll and deposited it before the LORD. Then Samuel dismissed the people to go to their own homes.

Saul also went to his home in Gibeah, accompanied by valiant men whose hearts God had touched.

> *The future king found hiding among the supplies may have been history’s most inauspicious royal inauguration. The rest of Saul’s story is just as unpredictable. Though he was chosen by God, he was a jealous, impatient and impetuous man. Yet he led the people into battle, and they rallied to support a strong central leader, forging a nation out of local tribes.*

Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh Gilead. And all the men of Jabesh said to him, “Make a treaty with us, and we will be subject to you.”

But Nahash the Ammonite replied, “I will make a treaty with you only on the condition that I gouge out the right eye of every one of you and so bring disgrace on all Israel.”

The elders of Jabesh said to him, “Give us seven days so we can send messengers throughout Israel; if no one comes to rescue us, we will surrender to you.”

When the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul and reported these terms to the people, they all wept aloud. Just then Saul was returning from the fields, behind his oxen, and he asked, “What is wrong with everyone? Why are they weeping?” Then they repeated to him what the men of Jabesh had said.

When Saul heard their words, the Spirit of God came powerfully upon him, and he burned with anger. He took a pair of oxen, cut them into pieces, and sent the pieces by messengers throughout Israel, proclaiming, “This is what will be done to the oxen of anyone who does not follow

Saul and Samuel." Then the terror of the LORD fell on the people, and they came out together as one. When Saul mustered them at Bezek, the men of Israel numbered three hundred thousand and those of Judah thirty thousand.

They told the messengers who had come, "Say to the men of Jabesh Gilead, 'By the time the sun is hot tomorrow, you will be rescued.'" When the messengers went and reported this to the men of Jabesh, they were elated. They said to the Ammonites, "Tomorrow we will surrender to you, and you can do to us whatever you like."

The next day Saul separated his men into three divisions; during the last watch of the night they broke into the camp of the Ammonites and slaughtered them until the heat of the day. Those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together.

The people then said to Samuel, "Who was it that asked, 'Shall Saul reign over us?' Turn these men over to us so that we may put them to death."

But Saul said, "No one will be put to death today, for this day the LORD has rescued Israel."

Then Samuel said to the people, "Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingship." So all the people went to Gilgal and made Saul king in the presence of the LORD. There they sacrificed fellowship offerings before the LORD, and Saul and all the Israelites held a great celebration.

Samuel said to all Israel, "I have listened to everything you said to me and have set a king over you. Now you have a king as your leader.

"When you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites was moving against you, you said to me, 'No, we want a king to rule over us' — even though the LORD your God was your king. Now here is the king you have chosen, the one you asked for; see, the LORD has set a king over you. If you fear the LORD and serve and obey him and do not rebel against his commands, and if both you and the king who reigns over you follow the LORD your God — good! But if you do not obey the LORD, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you, as it was against your ancestors.

"Now then, stand still and see this great thing the LORD is about to do

before your eyes! Is it not wheat harvest now? I will call on the LORD to send thunder and rain. And you will realize what an evil thing you did in the eyes of the LORD when you asked for a king."

Then Samuel called on the LORD, and that same day the LORD sent thunder and rain. So all the people stood in awe of the LORD and of Samuel.

The people all said to Samuel, "Pray to the LORD your God for your servants so that we will not die, for we have added to all our other sins the evil of asking for a king."

"Do not be afraid," Samuel replied. "You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart. Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless. For the sake of his great name the LORD will not reject his people, because the LORD was pleased to make you his own. As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right. But be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you. Yet if you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will perish."

> *After Samuel's stern warning, Saul attempted to reign successfully, but he seemed always to be one step behind common sense. When facing battle, he failed to measure the strength of the enemy, then impulsively took matters into his own hands while waiting for Samuel. What sort of king was this?*

Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel forty-two years.

Saul chose three thousand men from Israel; two thousand were with him at Mikmash and in the hill country of Bethel, and a thousand were with Jonathan at Gibeah in Benjamin. The rest of the men he sent back to their homes.

Jonathan attacked the Philistine outpost at Geba, and the Philistines heard about it. Then Saul had the trumpet blown throughout the land and said, "Let the Hebrews hear!" So all Israel heard the news: "Saul has

attacked the Philistine outpost, and now Israel has become obnoxious to the Philistines." And the people were summoned to join Saul at Gilgal.

The Philistines assembled to fight Israel, with three thousand chariots, six thousand charioteers, and soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore. They went up and camped at Mikmash, east of Beth Aven. When the Israelites saw that their situation was critical and that their army was hard pressed, they hid in caves and thickets, among the rocks, and in pits and cisterns. Some Hebrews even crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead.

Saul remained at Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear. He waited seven days, the time set by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and Saul's men began to scatter. So he said, "Bring me the burnt offering and the fellowship offerings." And Saul offered up the burnt offering. Just as he finished making the offering, Samuel arrived, and Saul went out to greet him.

"What have you done?" asked Samuel.

Saul replied, "When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Mikmash, I thought, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the LORD's favor.' So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering."

"You have done a foolish thing," Samuel said. "You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command."

Samuel said to Saul, "I am the one the LORD sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the LORD. This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.'"

So Saul summoned the men and mustered them at Telaim — two hundred thousand foot soldiers and ten thousand from Judah.

Then Saul attacked the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur, near the eastern border of Egypt. He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword. But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs — everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed.

> *Saul sinned against God again. God had instructed him to destroy all of the Amalekite property, but Saul and his men instead kept a good share of it. Sparing the good livestock, Saul claimed he intended to offer them as animal sacrifices to God. It was still disobedience. Samuel, sad that Saul had failed as king, warned Saul that his time was up. It was time to find a successor. But having enjoyed the perks of high office, Saul would not go without resistance.*

11

From Shepherd to King

THE LORD SAID TO SAMUEL, “How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.”

Samuel did what the LORD said. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met him. They asked, “Do you come in peace?”

Samuel replied, “Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me.” Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed stands here before the LORD.”

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 people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”



Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, “The LORD has not chosen this one either.” Jesse then had Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, “Nor has the LORD chosen this one.” Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, “The LORD has not chosen these.” So he asked Jesse, “Are these all the sons you have?”

“There is still the youngest,” Jesse answered. “He is tending the

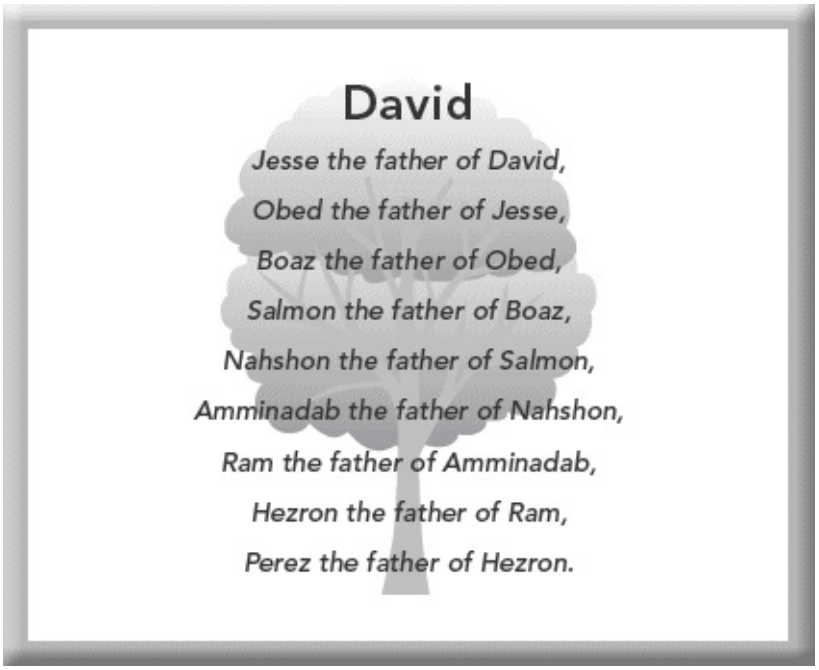
sheep.”

Samuel said, “Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives.”

So he sent for him and had him brought in. He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features.

Then the LORD said, “Rise and anoint him; this is the one.”

So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David.



Now the Philistines gathered their forces for war and assembled at Sokoh in Judah. They pitched camp at Ephes Dammim, between Sokoh and Azekah. Saul and the Israelites assembled and camped in the Valley of Elah and drew up their battle line to meet the Philistines. The Philistines occupied one hill and the Israelites another, with the valley between them.

A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. His height was six cubits and a span. He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing five thousand shekels; on his legs he wore bronze greaves, and a bronze

javelin was slung on his back. His spear shaft was like a weaver's rod, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels. His shield bearer went ahead of him.

Goliath stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us." Then the Philistine said, "This day I defy the armies of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other." On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified.

For forty days the Philistine came forward every morning and evening and took his stand.

Now Jesse said to his son David, "Take this ephah of roasted grain and these ten loaves of bread for your brothers and hurry to their camp. Take along these ten cheeses to the commander of their unit. See how your brothers are and bring back some assurance from them. They are with Saul and all the men of Israel in the Valley of Elah, fighting against the Philistines."

Early in the morning David left the flock in the care of a shepherd, loaded up and set out, as Jesse had directed. He reached the camp as the army was going out to its battle positions, shouting the war cry. Israel and the Philistines were drawing up their lines facing each other. David left his things with the keeper of supplies, ran to the battle lines and asked his brothers how they were. As he was talking with them, Goliath, the Philistine champion from Gath, stepped out from his lines and shouted his usual defiance, and David heard it. Whenever the Israelites saw the man, they all fled from him in great fear.

Now the Israelites had been saying, "Do you see how this man keeps coming out? He comes out to defy Israel. The king will give great wealth to the man who kills him. He will also give him his daughter in marriage and will exempt his family from taxes in Israel."

David asked the men standing near him, "What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes this disgrace from Israel? Who

is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?”

They repeated to him what they had been saying and told him, “This is what will be done for the man who kills him.”

When Eliab, David’s oldest brother, heard him speaking with the men, he burned with anger at him and asked, “Why have you come down here? And with whom did you leave those few sheep in the wilderness? I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is; you came down only to watch the battle.”

“Now what have I done?” said David. “Can’t I even speak?” He then turned away to someone else and brought up the same matter, and the men answered him as before. What David said was overheard and reported to Saul, and Saul sent for him.

David said to Saul, “Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him.”

Saul replied, “You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a young man, and he has been a warrior from his youth.”

But David said to Saul, “Your servant has been keeping his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The LORD who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.”

Saul said to David, “Go, and the LORD be with you.”

Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them.

“I cannot go in these,” he said to Saul, “because I am not used to them.” So he took them off. Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd’s bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.

Meanwhile, the Philistine, with his shield bearer in front of him, kept coming closer to David. He looked David over and saw that he was little more than a boy, glowing with health and handsome, and he despised him. He said to David, “Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?” And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. “Come here,” he said, “and I’ll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals!”

David said to the Philistine, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hands, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD’s, and he will give all of you into our hands.”

As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground.

So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him.

David ran and stood over him. He took hold of the Philistine’s sword and drew it from the sheath. After he killed him, he cut off his head with the sword.

When the Philistines saw that their hero was dead, they turned and ran. Then the men of Israel and Judah surged forward with a shout and pursued the Philistines to the entrance of Gath and to the gates of Ekron. Their dead were strewn along the Shaaraim road to Gath and Ekron. When the Israelites returned from chasing the Philistines, they plundered their camp.

David took the Philistine’s head and brought it to Jerusalem; he put the Philistine’s weapons in his own tent.

Saul was impressed with David’s victory over Goliath. During

their post-battle interview, Saul asked David about his family and then drafted David into service at the king's court. David and Saul's son Jonathan had an instant rapport. The two young men formed a friendship of love and loyalty as strong as any brothers'. But David's popularity did not play well in the final days of Saul's reign.

As soon as David returned from killing the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul, with David still holding the Philistine's head.

"Whose son are you, young man?" Saul asked him.

David said, "I am the son of your servant Jesse of Bethlehem."

After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return home to his family. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.

Whatever mission Saul sent him on, David was so successful that Saul gave him a high rank in the army. This pleased all the troops, and Saul's officers as well.

When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with timbrels and lyres. As they danced, they sang:

"Saul has slain his thousands,
and David his tens of thousands."

Saul was very angry; this refrain displeased him greatly. "They have credited David with tens of thousands," he thought, "but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?" And from that time on Saul kept a close eye on David.

The next day an evil spirit from God came forcefully on Saul. He was prophesying in his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he

usually did. Saul had a spear in his hand and he hurled it, saying to himself, “I’ll pin David to the wall.” But David eluded him twice.

Saul was afraid of David, because the LORD was with David but had departed from Saul. So he sent David away from him and gave him command over a thousand men, and David led the troops in their campaigns. In everything he did he had great success, because the LORD was with him. When Saul saw how successful he was, he was afraid of him. But all Israel and Judah loved David, because he led them in their campaigns.

Saul was struggling to make sense of the mess he was in and becoming more paranoid and unstable as the days progressed. Many of Saul’s subjects, as well as members of his own family, including Jonathan and Saul’s daughter, Michal, seemed to prefer the young shepherd warrior over the unreasonable king. Consumed by anger and jealousy, on numerous occasions Saul tried to kill David, whom he perceived as his greatest internal threat.

Finally, David, in fear for his life, fled from Saul. But Saul was driven to hunt down David. He even ordered the slaughter of 85 priests who had given David shelter.

About 600 loyal men gathered around David, a militia too small to challenge Israel’s army but large enough to provide an offensive force. Inside Saul’s palace, Jonathan became a double agent. While Saul groomed Jonathan for kingship, Jonathan passed information to David. Jonathan recognized that David would be Israel’s next leader. But this prospect seemed increasingly unlikely as Saul’s army approached David’s battalion in the Desert of En Gedi. In danger, David did what he always did: he poured out his fears to God and prayed for help.

Deliver me from my enemies, O God;

be my fortress against those who are attacking me.

Deliver me from evildoers

and save me from those who are after my blood.

See how they lie in wait for me!
Fierce men conspire against me
for no offense or sin of mine, LORD.
I have done no wrong, yet they are ready to attack me.
Arise to help me; look on my plight!
You, LORD God Almighty,
you who are the God of Israel,
rouse yourself to punish all the nations;
show no mercy to wicked traitors.

You are my strength, I watch for you;
you, God, are my fortress,
my God on whom I can rely.

But I will sing of your strength,
in the morning I will sing of your love;
for you are my fortress,
my refuge in times of trouble.

You are my strength, I sing praise to you;
you, God, are my fortress,
my God on whom I can rely.

No matter how close Saul got, David consistently outmaneuvered him. David was quite accustomed to commando-type raids, but none was so daring as his encounter with Saul in a darkened cave.

After Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told, “David is in the Desert of En Gedi.” So Saul took three thousand able young men from all Israel and set out to look for David and his men near the Crags of the Wild Goats.

He came to the sheep pens along the way; a cave was there, and Saul went in to relieve himself. David and his men were far back in the cave. The men said, “This is the day the LORD spoke of when he said to you, ‘I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish.’” Then David crept up unnoticed and cut off a corner of Saul’s robe.

Afterward, David was conscience-stricken for having cut off a corner of his robe. He said to his men, “The LORD forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the LORD’s anointed, or lay my hand on him; for he is the anointed of the LORD.” With these words David sharply rebuked his men and did not allow them to attack Saul. And Saul left the cave and went his way.

Then David went out of the cave and called out to Saul, “My lord the king!” When Saul looked behind him, David bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. He said to Saul, “Why do you listen when men say, ‘David is bent on harming you'? This day you have seen with your own eyes how the LORD delivered you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, ‘I will not lay my hand on my lord, because he is the LORD’s anointed.’ See, my father, look at this piece of your robe in my hand! I cut off the corner of your robe but did not kill you. See that there is nothing in my hand to indicate that I am guilty of wrongdoing or rebellion. I have not wronged you, but you are hunting me down to take my life. May the LORD judge between you and me. And may the LORD avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you. As the old saying goes, ‘From evildoers come evil deeds,’ so my hand will not touch you.

“Against whom has the king of Israel come out? Who are you pursuing? A dead dog? A flea? May the LORD be our judge and decide between us. May he consider my cause and uphold it; may he vindicate me by delivering me from your hand.”

When David finished saying this, Saul asked, “Is that your voice, David my son?” And he wept aloud. “You are more righteous than I,” he said.

“You have treated me well, but I have treated you badly. You have just now told me about the good you did to me; the LORD delivered me into your hands, but you did not kill me. When a man finds his enemy, does he let him get away unharmed? May the LORD reward you well for the way you treated me today. I know that you will surely be king and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hands. Now swear to me by the LORD that you will not kill off my descendants or wipe out my name from my father’s family.”

So David gave his oath to Saul. Then Saul returned home, but David and his men went up to the stronghold.

David sang to the LORD the words of this song when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. He said:

> “The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
> my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge,
> my shield and the horn of my salvation.
> He is my stronghold, my refuge and my savior —
> from violent people you save me.
>
> “I called to the LORD, who is worthy of praise,
> and have been saved from my enemies.
> The waves of death swirled about me;
> the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.
> The cords of the grave coiled around me;
> the snares of death confronted me.
>
> “In my distress I called to the LORD;

I called out to my God.
From his temple he heard my voice;
my cry came to his ears.
"The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock!
Exalted be my God, the Rock, my Savior!"

The peace treaty between David and Saul (basically an agreement to not kill each other) should have settled the matter. But Saul, always unpredictable, turned on David and pursued him once again. Wisely, David retreated with his band of loyalists to Philistine territory, out of Saul's reach. How ironic that David, Israel's king-to-be, pitched his tent with the very people who waged war against his own nation and eventually took the life of his closest friend.

Now the Philistines fought against Israel; the Israelites fled before them, and many fell dead on Mount Gilboa. The Philistines were in hot pursuit of Saul and his sons, and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua. The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically.

Saul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me."

But his armor-bearer was terrified and would not do it; so Saul took his own sword and fell on it. When the armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he too fell on his sword and died with him. So Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together that same day.

When the Israelites along the valley and those across the Jordan saw that the Israelite army had fled and that Saul and his sons had died, they abandoned their towns and fled. And the Philistines came and occupied them.

The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. They cut off his head and stripped off his armor, and they sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to proclaim the news in the temple of their idols

and among their people. They put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths and fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.

When the people of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all their valiant men marched through the night to Beth Shan. They took down the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall of Beth Shan and went to Jabesh, where they burned them.

> *David grieved deeply over not only Jonathan's death but also Saul's. But over the course of time, God directed David to assert his calling as king. His own tribe of Judah came to Hebron to anoint him king over the house of Judah. But it wasn't until after a seven-year struggle between David and those loyal to Saul's son Ish-Bosheth that David was made king over all of Israel.*
>
> *Soon afterward, David twice led the Israelites in decisive victories over the troublesome Philistines. This period also saw one of David's most important accomplishments: he defeated the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem — making it Israel's national and spiritual capital.*
>
> *David was concerned about more than just military success. He loved God deeply and wanted his nation to love God too. David's passion for God led him to retrieve the ark of the covenant stored at the house of Abinadab. It was a joyous parade of people that set out to bring the ark to its new home in Jerusalem, the City of David.*

David again brought together all the able young men of Israel — thirty thousand. He and all his men went to Baalah in Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim on the ark. They set the ark of God on a new cart and brought it from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, were guiding the new cart with the ark of God on it, and Ahio was walking in front of it. David and all Israel were celebrating with all their might before the LORD, with castanets, harps, lyres, timbrels, sistrums and cymbals.

When they came to the threshing floor of Nakon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. The LORD's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the ark of God.

Then David was angry because the LORD's wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah.

David was afraid of the LORD that day and said, "How can the ark of the LORD ever come to me?" He was not willing to take the ark of the LORD to be with him in the City of David. Instead, he took it to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite. The ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite for three months, and the LORD blessed him and his entire household.

Now King David was told, "The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God." So David went to bring up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. When those who were carrying the ark of the LORD had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the LORD with all his might, while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets.

> *David's infectious delight led him to put on quite a public display of exuberance and worship when the ark was brought into Jerusalem. Most onlookers shared David's enthusiasm. But David's wife Michal was none too happy with her uninhibited husband.*

As the ark of the LORD was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, she despised him in her heart.

They brought the ark of the LORD and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the LORD. After he had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD Almighty. Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each person in the whole crowd of

Israelites, both men and women. And all the people went to their homes.

When David returned home to bless his household, Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet him and said, “How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!”

David said to Michal, “It was before the LORD, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the LORD’s people Israel — I will celebrate before the LORD. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honor.”

And Michal daughter of Saul had no children to the day of her death.

> *Aware that the treasured ark deserved a majestic home, David began to conceive of a permanent temple so awesome that people all over the world would say, “The God of the Israelites is great indeed!” David consulted with Nathan, a trusted prophet of God, about his plans. And the prophet’s reply, reflecting God’s mind on the matter, must have stunned David.*

After David was settled in his palace, he said to Nathan the prophet, “Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of the covenant of the LORD is under a tent.”

Nathan replied to David, “Whatever you have in mind, do it, for God is with you.”

But that night the word of God came to Nathan, saying:

“Go and tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD says: You are not the one to build me a house to dwell in. I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought Israel up out of Egypt to this day. I have moved from one tent site to another, from one dwelling place to another. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their leaders whom I commanded to shepherd my people, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?”’

“Now then, tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD Almighty

says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name like the names of the greatest men on earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also subdue all your enemies.

"'I declare to you that the LORD will build a house for you: When your days are over and you go to be with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor. I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever.'"

Nathan reported to David all the words of this entire revelation.

Then King David went in and sat before the LORD, and he said:

"Who am I, LORD God, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far? And as if this were not enough in your sight, my God, you have spoken about the future of the house of your servant. You, LORD God, have looked on me as though I were the most exalted of men.

"What more can David say to you for honoring your servant? For you know your servant, LORD. For the sake of your servant and according to your will, you have done this great thing and made known all these great promises.

"There is no one like you, LORD, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears. And who is like your people Israel — the one nation on earth whose God went out to redeem a people for himself, and to make a name for yourself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt? You made your people Israel your very own

forever, and you, LORD, have become their God.

“And now, LORD, let the promise you have made concerning your servant and his house be established forever. Do as you promised, so that it will be established and that your name will be great forever. Then people will say, ‘The LORD Almighty, the God over Israel, is Israel’s God!’ And the house of your servant David will be established before you.

“You, my God, have revealed to your servant that you will build a house for him. So your servant has found courage to pray to you. You, LORD, are God! You have promised these good things to your servant. Now you have been pleased to bless the house of your servant, that it may continue forever in your sight; for you, LORD, have blessed it, and it will be blessed forever.”

A king without an army is not a king for long. David organized an effective army with trusted leadership and used it strategically to stabilize his borders and eliminate regional opposition. Mercenaries could not defeat him, and two-front battles still ended in decisive victories for him. David was a warrior, a poet and a man after God’s heart. He was a leader who put God first, who loved and followed God. Everywhere the record showed that God blessed this shepherd-king.

But David was not a perfect man. One day, with his generals gone to war, the king was confronted by an internal foe as intense as any enemy he faced on the battlefield.

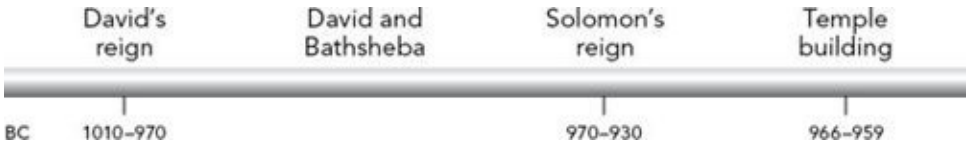
12

The Trials of a King

IN THE SPRING, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem.

One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite." Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (Now she was purifying herself from her monthly uncleanness.) Then she went back home. The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, "I am pregnant."

So David sent this word to Joab: "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent him to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked him how Joab was, how the soldiers were and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." So Uriah left the palace, and a gift from the king was sent after him. But Uriah slept at the entrance to the palace with all his master's servants and did not go down to his house.



David was told, "Uriah did not go home." So he asked Uriah, "Haven't you just come from a military campaign? Why didn't you go home?"

Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my commander Joab and my lord's men are camped in the open country. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and make love to my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!"

Then David said to him, “Stay here one more day, and tomorrow I will send you back.” So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. At David’s invitation, he ate and drank with him, and David made him drunk. But in the evening Uriah went out to sleep on his mat among his master’s servants; he did not go home.

In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah. In it he wrote, “Put Uriah out in front where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die.”

So while Joab had the city under siege, he put Uriah at a place where he knew the strongest defenders were. When the men of the city came out and fought against Joab, some of the men in David’s army fell; moreover, Uriah the Hittite died.

When Uriah’s wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him. After the time of mourning was over, David had her brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the LORD.

The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, “There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

“Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.”

David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.”

Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master’s house to you, and your master’s wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all

this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.'

"This is what the LORD says: 'Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity on you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will sleep with your wives in broad daylight. You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.'"

Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD."

Unlike Saul, David didn't make excuses for his sin. Humbled and broken in heart, David acknowledged his sin and poured out his feelings in this prayer.

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;

according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions. [1]

Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.

Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;

so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.

Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.

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

Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit [2] from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

The king was humbled by the same sexual weakness known to many men. But unlike many men, David understood that his sin had broken a relationship with God. He had disappointed God by his greed, lust and murder. David's sin was a breach in a divine friendship that needed repairing. His repentance was real, but there were still consequences for his actions.

Nathan replied, "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. But because by doing this you have shown utter contempt for the LORD, the son born to you will die."

After Nathan had gone home, the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and he became ill. David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and spent the nights lying in sackcloth on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them.

On the seventh day the child died. David's attendants were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they thought, "While the child was still living, he wouldn't listen to us when we spoke to him. How can we now tell him the child is dead? He may do something desperate."

David noticed that his attendants were whispering among themselves, and he realized the child was dead. “Is the child dead?” he asked.

“Yes,” they replied, “he is dead.”

Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped.

Forgiveness cleanses the wounds of sin. David, filled with remorse, asked God to forgive him, and God said yes. God values the person who respects his holiness and treasures his friendship. David expressed his gratitude for God’s gift of forgiveness in one of his psalms.

Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the one
whose sin the LORD does not count against them
and in whose spirit is no deceit.

When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;

my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.

I said, “I will confess
my transgressions to the LORD.”

And you forgave
the guilt of my sin.

Therefore let all the faithful pray to you
while you may be found;

surely the rising of the mighty waters
will not reach them.

You are my hiding place;
you will protect me from trouble
and surround me with songs of deliverance.

Many are the woes of the wicked,
but the LORD's unfailing love
surrounds the one who trusts in him.

Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous;

sing, all you who are upright in heart!

Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba, and he went to her and made love to her. She gave birth to a son, and they named him Solomon. The LORD loved him; and because the LORD loved him, he sent word through Nathan the prophet to name him Jedidiah. [3]

His sin forgiven, David again praised God with a full heart and continued to lead the army with great success. This brilliant strategist knew how to motivate men. Among his own sons, however, a struggle was brewing that David did not see coming. With respect to his son Absalom especially, David's normally deep insight into human behavior failed him. David failed to act as Absalom subtly undermined his father's administration and courted the populace. Finally, Absalom challenged David's political position. This beautiful man, with an untamed spark that David must have recognized, became a traitor.

David now faced uncharted territory—a rebellion from within his own family, an enemy who was also a beloved son. How do you march against a foe you love? How do you throw a spear into the heart of another, when the thrust crushes your

own heart as well?

David mustered the men who were with him and appointed over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. David sent out his troops, a third under the command of Joab, a third under Joab's brother Abishai son of Zeruiah, and a third under Ittai the Gittite. The king told the troops, "I myself will surely march out with you."

But the men said, "You must not go out; if we are forced to flee, they won't care about us. Even if half of us die, they won't care; but you are worth ten thousand of us. It would be better now for you to give us support from the city."

The king answered, "I will do whatever seems best to you."

So the king stood beside the gate while all his men marched out in units of hundreds and of thousands. The king commanded Joab, Abishai and Ittai, "Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake." And all the troops heard the king giving orders concerning Absalom to each of the commanders.

David's army marched out of the city to fight Israel, and the battle took place in the forest of Ephraim. There Israel's troops were routed by David's men, and the casualties that day were great — twenty thousand men. The battle spread out over the whole countryside, and the forest swallowed up more men that day than the sword.

Now Absalom happened to meet David's men. He was riding his mule, and as the mule went under the thick branches of a large oak, Absalom's hair got caught in the tree. He was left hanging in midair, while the mule he was riding kept on going.

When one of the men saw what had happened, he told Joab, "I just saw Absalom hanging in an oak tree."

Joab said to the man who had told him this, "What! You saw him? Why didn't you strike him to the ground right there? Then I would have had to give you ten shekels of silver and a warrior's belt."

But the man replied, "Even if a thousand shekels were weighed out into my hands, I would not lay a hand on the king's son. In our hearing the king commanded you and Abishai and Ittai, 'Protect the young man Absalom for my sake.' And if I had put my life in jeopardy—and nothing

is hidden from the king — you would have kept your distance from me."

Joab said, "I'm not going to wait like this for you." So he took three javelins in his hand and plunged them into Absalom's heart while Absalom was still alive in the oak tree. And ten of Joab's armor-bearers surrounded Absalom, struck him and killed him.

Then Joab sounded the trumpet, and the troops stopped pursuing Israel, for Joab halted them. They took Absalom, threw him into a big pit in the forest and piled up a large heap of rocks over him. Meanwhile, all the Israelites fled to their homes.

During his lifetime Absalom had taken a pillar and erected it in the King's Valley as a monument to himself, for he thought, "I have no son to carry on the memory of my name." He named the pillar after himself, and it is called Absalom's Monument to this day.

Then Joab said to a Cushite, "Go, tell the king what you have seen." The Cushite bowed down before Joab and ran off.

Then the Cushite arrived and said, "My lord the king, hear the good news! The LORD has vindicated you today by delivering you from the hand of all who rose up against you."

The king asked the Cushite, "Is the young man Absalom safe?"

The Cushite replied, "May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up to harm you be like that young man."

The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you — O Absalom, my son, my son!"

The king covered his face and cried aloud, "O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Absalom's rebellion was suppressed and the political damage repaired. Now David turned his attention to more pleasant concerns. The word of the Lord had come to David that the temple project would fall to his successor, Solomon. David

planned big and gathered lavish materials, but Solomon would later manage the construction itself. David's work was nearly done. A time of transition was coming. Would the future be as God-blessed as the past?

Then David said, "The house of the LORD God is to be here, and also the altar of burnt offering for Israel."

So David gave orders to assemble the foreigners residing in Israel, and from among them he appointed stonecutters to prepare dressed stone for building the house of God. He provided a large amount of iron to make nails for the doors of the gateways and for the fittings, and more bronze than could be weighed. He also provided more cedar logs than could be counted, for the Sidonians and Tyrians had brought large numbers of them to David.

David said, "My son Solomon is young and inexperienced, and the house to be built for the LORD should be of great magnificence and fame and splendor in the sight of all the nations. Therefore I will make preparations for it." So David made extensive preparations before his death.

Then he called for his son Solomon and charged him to build a house for the LORD, the God of Israel. David said to Solomon: "My son, I had it in my heart to build a house for the Name of the LORD my God. But this word of the LORD came to me: 'You have shed much blood and have fought many wars. You are not to build a house for my Name, because you have shed much blood on the earth in my sight. But you will have a son who will be a man of peace and rest, and I will give him rest from all his enemies on every side. His name will be Solomon, [4] and I will grant Israel peace and quiet during his reign. He is the one who will build a house for my Name. He will be my son, and I will be his father. And I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel forever.'

"Now, my son, the LORD be with you, and may you have success and build the house of the LORD your God, as he said you would. May the LORD give you discretion and understanding when he puts you in command over Israel, so that you may keep the law of the LORD your God. Then you will have success if you are careful to observe the decrees and laws that the LORD gave Moses for Israel. Be strong and courageous.

Do not be afraid or discouraged.

“I have taken great pains to provide for the temple of the LORD a hundred thousand talents of gold, a million talents of silver, quantities of bronze and iron too great to be weighed, and wood and stone. And you may add to them. You have many workers: stonecutters, masons and carpenters, as well as those skilled in every kind of work in gold and silver, bronze and iron — craftsmen beyond number. Now begin the work, and the LORD be with you.”

Then David ordered all the leaders of Israel to help his son Solomon. He said to them, “Is not the LORD your God with you? And has he not granted you rest on every side? For he has given the inhabitants of the land into my hands, and the land is subject to the LORD and to his people. Now devote your heart and soul to seeking the LORD your God. Begin to build the sanctuary of the LORD God, so that you may bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD and the sacred articles belonging to God into the temple that will be built for the Name of the LORD.”

Then King David said to the whole assembly: “My son Solomon, the one whom God has chosen, is young and inexperienced. The task is great, because this palatial structure is not for man but for the LORD God. With all my resources I have provided for the temple of my God — gold for the gold work, silver for the silver, bronze for the bronze, iron for the iron and wood for the wood, as well as onyx for the settings, turquoise, stones of various colors, and all kinds of fine stone and marble — all of these in large quantities. Besides, in my devotion to the temple of my God I now give my personal treasures of gold and silver for the temple of my God, over and above everything I have provided for this holy temple: three thousand talents of gold (gold of Ophir) and seven thousand talents of refined silver, for the overlaying of the walls of the buildings, for the gold work and the silver work, and for all the work to be done by the craftsmen. Now, who is willing to consecrate themselves to the LORD today?”

Then the leaders of families, the officers of the tribes of Israel, the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds, and the officials in charge of the king’s work gave willingly. They gave toward the work on the temple of God five thousand talents and ten thousand darics of gold, ten thousand talents of silver, eighteen thousand talents

of bronze and a hundred thousand talents of iron. Anyone who had precious stones gave them to the treasury of the temple of the LORD in the custody of Jehiel the Gershonite. The people rejoiced at the willing response of their leaders, for they had given freely and wholeheartedly to the LORD. David the king also rejoiced greatly.

David praised the LORD in the presence of the whole assembly, saying,

> “Praise be to you, LORD,
> the God of our father Israel,
> from everlasting to everlasting.
> Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power
> and the glory and the majesty and the splendor,
> for everything in heaven and earth is yours.
> Yours, LORD, is the kingdom;
> you are exalted as head over all.
> Wealth and honor come from you;
> you are the ruler of all things.
> In your hands are strength and power
> to exalt and give strength to all.
> Now, our God, we give you thanks,
> and praise your glorious name.

“But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand. We are foreigners and strangers in your sight, as were all our ancestors. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope. LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you. I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things I have given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you. LORD, the God of

our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Israel, keep these desires and thoughts in the hearts of your people forever, and keep their hearts loyal to you. And give my son Solomon the wholehearted devotion to keep your commands, statutes and decrees and to do everything to build the palatial structure for which I have provided."

Then David said to the whole assembly, "Praise the LORD your God." So they all praised the LORD, the God of their fathers; they bowed down, prostrating themselves before the LORD and the

king.

What formed the center of this leader's intriguing personality? Was it power and avarice, the normal style of kings? No. It was love of God. David was a man full of drive and passion, his wealth was secure, and his family was as large as a small village. But what ruled his life and consumed his heart was a deep love for God. Take the rest away, and God remained. God was the generous Giver and loving Father who led David from childhood to old age. David's poetry paints a beautiful picture of his relationship with his God — a protector, Father and Lord.

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,

he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths,
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,

I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

David knew his days as a warrior were over and his energy to lead a nation was waning. Still he resisted transferring power to his son Solomon. One day his lovely wife Bathsheba whispered in his ear: "Now, David, now is the time." And the king complied.

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[1]**Transgression(s):** Offense against God; synonymous with *sin.*

[2]**Holy Spirit:** The manifestation of God who dwells within those who believe in Jesus Christ and empowers them to follow God's way. God is one God but acts in three "persons" of God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit.

[3]**Jedidiah:** *Jedidiah* means "loved by the **Lord."**

[4]**Solomon:** *Solomon* sounds like and may be derived from the Hebrew for "peace."

13

The King Who Had It All

WHEN KING DAVID WAS VERY OLD, he could not keep warm even when they put covers over him.

Bathsheba went to see the aged king in his room, where Abishag the Shunammite was attending him. Bathsheba bowed down, prostrating herself before the king.

"What is it you want?" the king asked.

She said to him, "My lord, you yourself swore to me your servant by the LORD your God: 'Solomon your son shall be king after me, and he will sit on my throne.'"

The king then took an oath: "As surely as the LORD lives, who has delivered me out of every trouble, I will surely carry out this very day what I swore to you by the LORD, the God of Israel: Solomon your son shall be king after me, and he will sit on my throne in my place."

Then Bathsheba bowed down with her face to the ground, prostrating herself before the king, and said, "May my lord King David live forever!"



When the time drew near for David to die, he gave a charge to Solomon his son.

"I am about to go the way of all the earth," he said. "So be strong, act like a man, and observe what the LORD your God requires: Walk in obedience to him, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and regulations, as written in the Law of Moses. Do this so that you may

prosper in all you do and wherever you go and that the LORD may keep his promise to me: ‘If your descendants watch how they live, and if they walk faithfully before me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a successor on the throne of Israel.’”

Then David rested with his ancestors and was buried in the City of David. He had reigned forty years over Israel — seven years in Hebron and thirty-three in Jerusalem. So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David, and his rule was firmly established.

Solomon made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt and married his daughter. He brought her to the City of David until he finished building his palace and the temple of the LORD, and the wall around Jerusalem. The people, however, were still sacrificing at the high places, because a temple had not yet been built for the Name of the LORD. Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the instructions given him by his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places.

The king went to Gibeon to offer sacrifices, for that was the most important high place, and Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.”

Solomon answered, “You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.

“Now, LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”

The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for

discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for — both wealth and honor — so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in obedience to me and keep my decrees and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life." Then Solomon awoke — and he realized it had been a dream.

He returned to Jerusalem, stood before the ark of the Lord's covenant and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Then he gave a feast for all his court.

Now two prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. One of them said, "Pardon me, my lord. This woman and I live in the same house, and I had a baby while she was there with me. The third day after my child was born, this woman also had a baby. We were alone; there was no one in the house but the two of us.

"During the night this woman's son died because she lay on him. So she got up in the middle of the night and took my son from my side while I your servant was asleep. She put him by her breast and put her dead son by my breast. The next morning, I got up to nurse my son — and he was dead! But when I looked at him closely in the morning light, I saw that it wasn't the son I had borne."

The other woman said, "No! The living one is my son; the dead one is yours."

But the first one insisted, "No! The dead one is yours; the living one is mine." And so they argued before the king.

The king said, "This one says, 'My son is alive and your son is dead,' while that one says, 'No! Your son is dead and mine is alive.'"

Then the king said, "Bring me a sword." So they brought a sword for the king. He then gave an order: "Cut the living child in two and give half to one and half to the other."

The woman whose son was alive was deeply moved out of love for her son and said to the king, "Please, my lord, give her the living baby! Don't kill him!"

But the other said, “Neither I nor you shall have him. Cut him in two!”

Then the king gave his ruling: “Give the living baby to the first woman. Do not kill him; she is his mother.”

When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice.

> *The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy. And Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. These countries brought tribute and were Solomon’s subjects all his life.*

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else, including Ethan the Ezrahite — wiser than Heman, Kalkol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. From all nations people came to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.

> *Solomon’s name is synonymous with wisdom, in part due to the collection of his sayings contained in the famous book of Proverbs. Touching on many life issues, these catchy couplets offer practical insight into what it means to fear God, to have God-honoring relationships and how to wisely handle finances, work and life.*

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

for gaining wisdom and instruction;

for understanding words of insight;

for receiving instruction in prudent behavior,
doing what is right and just and fair;

for giving prudence to those who are simple.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

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 —

indeed, 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.

For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men,
from men whose words are perverse.

My son, do not forget my teaching,
but keep my commands in your heart,

for they will prolong your life many years
and bring you peace and prosperity.

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

Then you will win favor and a good name
in the sight of God and man.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight.

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 firstfruits of all your crops;
then your barns will be filled to overflowing,
and your vats will brim over with new wine.

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.

Can a man walk on hot coals
without his feet being scorched?
So is he who sleeps with another man's wife;
no one who touches her will go unpunished.

A king's wrath strikes terror like the roar of a lion;
those who anger him forfeit their lives.
It is to one's honor to avoid strife,
but every fool is quick to quarrel.

Sluggards do not plow in season;
so at harvest time they look but find nothing.

The righteous lead blameless lives;
blessed are their children after them.

Differing weights and differing measures —

the LORD detests them both.

Do not love sleep or you will grow poor;
stay awake and you will have food to spare.

Gold there is, and rubies in abundance,
but lips that speak knowledge are a rare jewel.

Food gained by fraud tastes sweet,
but one ends up with a mouth full of gravel.

A gossip betrays a confidence;
so avoid anyone who talks too much.

If someone curses their father or mother,
their lamp will be snuffed out in pitch darkness.

An inheritance claimed too
soon will not be blessed at the end.

Do not say, “I’ll pay you back for this wrong!”
Wait for the LORD, and he will avenge you.

A person’s steps are directed by the LORD.
How then can anyone understand their own way?

The human spirit is the lamp of the LORD
that sheds light on one's inmost being.

The glory of young men is their strength,
gray hair the splendor of the old.

In the LORD's hand the king's heart is a stream of water
that he channels toward all who please him.

A person may think their own ways are right,
but the LORD weighs the heart.

To do what is right and just
is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.

Haughty eyes and a proud heart —
the unplowed field of the wicked — produce sin.

The plans of the diligent lead to profit
as surely as haste leads to poverty.

A fortune made by a lying tongue
is a fleeting vapor and a deadly snare.

The violence of the wicked will drag them away,
for they refuse to do what is right.

The wicked crave evil;
their neighbors get no mercy from them.

Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor
will also cry out and not be answered.

A gift given in secret soothes anger,
and a bribe concealed in the cloak pacifies great
wrath.

When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous
but terror to evildoers.

Whoever loves pleasure will become poor;
whoever loves wine and olive oil will never be rich.

Better to live in a desert
than with a quarrelsome and nagging wife.

The wise store up choice food and olive oil,
but fools gulp theirs down.

Whoever pursues righteousness and love finds life,
prosperity and honor.

Those who guard their mouths and their tongues
keep themselves from calamity.

The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable —
how much more so when brought with evil intent!

A false witness will perish,
but a careful listener will testify successfully.

There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan
that can succeed against the LORD.

The horse is made ready for the day of battle,
but victory rests with the LORD.

Because his father's military success had secured Israel's borders, King Solomon could focus on diplomacy, architecture and temple construction. If David's first approach to neighbors was to brandish a sword, Solomon's was to say a wise word and cut a good deal. David was the warrior king; Solomon was the brilliant general contractor.

When Hiram king of Tyre heard that Solomon had been anointed king to succeed his father David, he sent his envoys to Solomon, because he had always been on friendly terms with David. Solomon sent back this message to Hiram:

"You know that because of the wars waged against my father David from all sides, he could not build a temple for the Name of the LORD his God until the LORD put his enemies under his feet. But now the LORD my God has given me rest on every side, and there is no adversary or disaster. I intend, therefore, to build a temple for the Name of the LORD my God, as the LORD told my father

David, when he said, 'Your son whom I will put on the throne in your place will build the temple for my Name.'

"So give orders that cedars of Lebanon be cut for me. My men will work with yours, and I will pay you for your men whatever wages you set. You know that we have no one so skilled in felling timber as the Sidonians."

When Hiram heard Solomon's message, he was greatly pleased and said, "Praise be to the LORD today, for he has given David a wise son to rule over this great nation."

So Hiram sent word to Solomon:

"I have received the message you sent me and will do all you want in providing the cedar and juniper logs. My men will haul them down from Lebanon to the Mediterranean Sea, and I will float them as rafts by sea to the place you specify. There I will separate them and you can take them away. And you are to grant my wish by providing food for my

royal household."

In this way Hiram kept Solomon supplied with all the cedar and juniper logs he wanted, and Solomon gave Hiram twenty thousand cors of wheat as food for his household, in addition to twenty thousand baths of pressed olive oil. Solomon continued to do this for Hiram year after year. The LORD gave Solomon wisdom, just as he had promised him. There were peaceful relations between Hiram and Solomon, and the two of them made a treaty.

In the four hundred and eightieth year after the Israelites came out of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, the second month, he began to build the temple of the LORD.

> *Construction details revealed a temple of modest footprint (90 feet by 30 feet) but of spectacular beauty and historic significance. Two bronze pillars led to the portico, which then led to the Holy Place, built with cedar, pine, juniper and olive wood, and then the Most Holy Place, overlaid in gold. The ark of God was placed in the Most Holy Place, where entry was limited to the high priest. The floor plan of Solomon's temple followed the pattern of the tabernacle Moses had built during the Israelites' wilderness journey. Construction took seven years of work by 180,000 conscripted laborers and nearly 4,000 supervisors. The percussion of hammer and chisel rang loud at the quarry. At the building site itself, a quiet solemnity anticipated the inauguration of the house of God.*

When all the work King Solomon had done for the temple of the LORD was finished, he brought in the things his father David had dedicated — the silver and gold and the furnishings — and he placed them in the treasuries of the LORD's temple.

Then King Solomon summoned into his presence at Jerusalem the elders of Israel, all the heads of the tribes and the chiefs of the Israelite families, to bring up the ark of the LORD's covenant from Zion, the City of David. All the Israelites came together to King Solomon at the time of

the festival in the month of Ethanim, the seventh month.

When all the elders of Israel had arrived, the priests took up the ark, and they brought up the ark of the LORD and the tent of meeting and all the sacred furnishings in it. The priests and Levites carried them up, and King Solomon and the entire assembly of Israel that had gathered about him were before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and cattle that they could not be recorded or counted.

The priests then brought the ark of the LORD's covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and put it beneath the wings of the cherubim.

The priests then withdrew from the Holy Place. All the priests who were there had consecrated themselves, regardless of their divisions. All the Levites who were musicians — Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun and their sons and relatives — stood on the east side of the altar, dressed in fine linen and playing cymbals, harps and lyres. They were accompanied by 120 priests sounding trumpets. The trumpeters and musicians joined in unison to give praise and thanks to the LORD. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, the singers raised their voices in praise to the LORD and sang:

> "He is good;
> his love endures forever."

Then the temple of the LORD was filled with the cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the temple of God.

Then Solomon said, "The LORD has said that he would dwell in a dark cloud; I have indeed built a magnificent temple for you, a place for you to dwell forever."

While the whole assembly of Israel was standing there, the king turned around and blessed them.

Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in front of the whole

assembly of Israel, spread out his hands toward heaven and said:

“Lord, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below — you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it — as it is today.

“But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! Yet give attention to your servant’s prayer and his plea for mercy, LORD my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day. May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, ‘My Name shall be there,’ so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.

“Now, my God, may your eyes be open and your ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.

> “Now arise, LORD God, and come to your resting place,
> you and the ark of your might.
> May your priests, LORD God, be clothed with salvation,
> may your faithful people rejoice in your goodness.
> LORD God, do not reject your anointed one.
> Remember the great love promised to David your servant.”

When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled it. When all the Israelites saw

the fire coming down and the glory of the LORD above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave thanks to the LORD, saying,

"He is good;
his love endures forever."

When Solomon had finished all these prayers and supplications to the LORD, he rose from before the altar of the LORD, where he had been kneeling with his hands spread out toward heaven. He stood and blessed the whole assembly of Israel in a loud voice, saying:

"Praise be to the LORD, who has given rest to his people Israel just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses. May the LORD our God be with us as he was with our ancestors; may he never leave us nor forsake us. May he turn our hearts to him, to walk in obedience to him and keep the commands, decrees and laws he gave our ancestors. And may these words of mine, which I have prayed before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night, that he may uphold the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel according to each day's need, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God and that there is no other. And may your hearts be fully committed to the LORD our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands, as at this time."

Then the king and all the people offered sacrifices before the LORD. And King Solomon offered a sacrifice of twenty-two thousand head of cattle and a hundred and twenty thousand sheep and goats. So the king and all the people dedicated the temple of God.

When Solomon had finished the temple of the LORD and the royal palace, and had succeeded in carrying out all he had in mind to do in the temple of the LORD and in his own palace, the LORD appeared to him at night and said:

"I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a

temple for sacrifices.

“When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, 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 I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place. I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my Name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.

“As for you, if you walk before me faithfully as David your father did, and do all I command, and observe my decrees and laws, I will establish your royal throne, as I covenanted with David your father when I said, ‘You shall never fail to have a successor to rule over Israel.’

“But if you [1] turn away and forsake the decrees and commands I have given you and go off to serve other gods and worship them, then I will uproot Israel from my land, which I have given them, and will reject this temple I have consecrated for my Name. I will make it a byword and an object of ridicule among all peoples. This temple will become a heap of rubble. All who pass by will be appalled and say, ‘Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this temple?’ People will answer, ‘Because they have forsaken the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who brought them out of Egypt, and have embraced other gods, worshiping and serving them — that is why he brought all this disaster on them.’”

> *The gold ornamentation and cedar woodwork in the temple brought glory to God and were gifts of beauty to many generations. But God reminded Solomon that faithfulness, integrity of heart, uprightness and obedience were what he desired even more. All this Solomon heard, believed and followed even when faced with the accolades of admirers. Visitors came from everywhere to meet this famous king.*

When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relationship to the LORD, she came to test Solomon with hard questions. Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan — with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones — she came to

Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind. Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her. When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the LORD, she was overwhelmed.

She said to the king, “The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. How happy your people must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD’s eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness.”

And she gave the king 120 talents of gold, large quantities of spices, and precious stones. Never again were so many spices brought in as those the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon.

King Solomon gave the queen of Sheba all she desired and asked for, besides what he had given her out of his royal bounty. Then she left and returned with her retinue to her own country.

The weight of the gold that Solomon received yearly was 666 talents, not including the revenues from merchants and traders and from all the Arabian kings and the governors of the territories.

King Solomon made two hundred large shields of hammered gold; six hundred shekels of gold went into each shield. He also made three hundred small shields of hammered gold, with three minas of gold in each shield. The king put them in the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon.

Then the king made a great throne covered with ivory and overlaid with fine gold. The throne had six steps, and its back had a rounded top. On both sides of the seat were armrests, with a lion standing beside each of them. Twelve lions stood on the six steps, one at either end of each step. Nothing like it had ever been made for any other kingdom. All King

Solomon's goblets were gold, and all the household articles in the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon were pure gold. Nothing was made of silver, because silver was considered of little value in Solomon's days. The king had a fleet of trading ships at sea along with the ships of Hiram. Once every three years it returned, carrying gold, silver and ivory, and apes and baboons.

King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart. Year after year, everyone who came brought a gift — articles of silver and gold, robes, weapons and spices, and horses and mules.

Solomon accumulated chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he kept in the chariot cities and also with him in Jerusalem. The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and cedar as plentiful as sycamore-fig trees in the foothills. Solomon's horses were imported from Egypt and from Kue — the royal merchants purchased them from Kue at the current price. They imported a chariot from Egypt for six hundred shekels of silver, and a horse for a hundred and fifty. They also exported them to all the kings of the Hittites and of the Arameans.

> *During Solomon's time, polygamy was considered normal (but was not sanctioned by God). Like other kings, Solomon had a large harem of wives, some of whom were from other nations. For Solomon, unfortunately, the irresistible draw of sweet perfume led to relaxing his guard against pagan worship as well … a bad decision from a fellow renowned for wisdom. It was the beginning of the end.*

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter — Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his

wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molek the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done.

The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the LORD's command. So the LORD said to Solomon, "Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates. Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son. Yet I will not tear the whole kingdom from him, but will give him one tribe for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen."

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[1]You: The Hebrew is plural for both instances of *you* in this sentence.

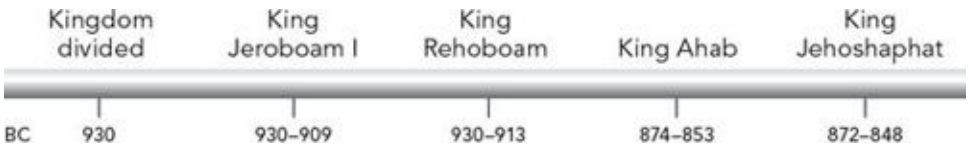
14

A Kingdom Torn in Two

Through the prophet Ahijah, God told a rising young star in Solomon's administration by the name of Jeroboam that he would be the future king. God would give Jeroboam all but one of the tribes of Israel. After possibly making a preemptive bid for the throne, Jeroboam learned to wait on God's timing. Solomon was not ready to relinquish the throne and tried to kill Jeroboam to keep him from becoming king. Jeroboam fled to Egypt and waited there for an opportunity to make his next move.

After Solomon died, his own tribe of Judah automatically accepted his son Rehoboam as the next king. But much of the population, especially from the other tribes, had grown to resent Solomon's heavy taxation and conscripted labor for his grand projects. As representatives from all of Israel gathered to make Rehoboam king, they let their complaints be known.

REHOBOAM WENT TO SHECHEM, for all Israel had gone there to make him king. When Jeroboam son of Nebat heard this (he was still in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), he returned from Egypt. So they sent for Jeroboam, and he and the whole assembly of Israel went to Rehoboam and said to him: "Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you."



Rehoboam answered, "Go away for three days and then come back to me." So the people went away.

Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. “How would you advise me to answer these people?” he asked.

They replied, “If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants.”

But Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and were serving him. He asked them, “What is your advice? How should we answer these people who say to me, ‘Lighten the yoke your father put on us'?”

The young men who had grown up with him replied, “These people have said to you, ‘Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but make our yoke lighter.’ Now tell them, ‘My little finger is thicker than my father’s waist. My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.’”

Three days later Jeroboam and all the people returned to Rehoboam, as the king had said, “Come back to me in three days.” The king answered the people harshly. Rejecting the advice given him by the elders, he followed the advice of the young men and said, “My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.” So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from the LORD, to fulfill the word the LORD had spoken to Jeroboam son of Nebat through Ahijah the Shilonite.

When all Israel saw that the king refused to listen to them, they answered the king:

> “What share do we have in David,
>
> what part in Jesse’s son?
>
> To your tents, Israel!
>
> Look after your own house, David!”

So the Israelites went home. But as for the Israelites who were living in the towns of Judah, Rehoboam still ruled over them.

Rehoboam retreated to rule Judah (the smaller, southern region), while Jeroboam became king over Israel (the larger, northern region). God had forewarned that the kingdom would become divided because Solomon failed to keep pagan worship outside the realm. Already divided in worship practices, the nation now also became divided in politics, in priesthood, in security and in safety. For two generations, Israel's army had been the pride of the region, her storerooms filled with precious metals, her people fed, her cities busy and her temple active. Now what would happen to Israel and Judah, split by disputes their leaders could not resolve?

King Rehoboam sent out Adoniram, who was in charge of forced labor, but all Israel stoned him to death. King Rehoboam, however, managed to get into his chariot and escape to Jerusalem. So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day.

When all the Israelites heard that Jeroboam had returned, they sent and called him to the assembly and made him king over all Israel. Only the tribe of Judah remained loyal to the house of David.

When Rehoboam arrived in Jerusalem, he mustered all Judah and the tribe of Benjamin — a hundred and eighty thousand able young men — to go to war against Israel and to regain the kingdom for Rehoboam son of Solomon.

But this word of God came to Shemaiah the man of God: "Say to Rehoboam son of Solomon king of Judah, to all Judah and Benjamin, and to the rest of the people, 'This is what the LORD says: Do not go up to fight against your brothers, the Israelites. Go home, every one of you, for this is my doing.'" So they obeyed the word of the LORD and went home again, as the LORD had ordered.

Then Jeroboam fortified Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim and lived there. From there he went out and built up Peniel.

Jeroboam thought to himself, "The kingdom will now likely revert to the house of David. If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah. They will kill me and return to King Rehoboam."

After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan. And this thing became a sin; the people came to worship the one at Bethel and went as far as Dan to worship the other.

Jeroboam built shrines on high places and appointed priests from all sorts of people, even though they were not Levites. He instituted a festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the festival held in Judah, and offered sacrifices on the altar. This he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves he had made. And at Bethel he also installed priests at the high places he had made. On the fifteenth day of the eighth month, a month of his own choosing, he offered sacrifices on the altar he had built at Bethel. So he instituted the festival for the Israelites and went up to the altar to make offerings.

By the word of the LORD a man of God came from Judah to Bethel, as Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make an offering. By the word of the LORD he cried out against the altar: “Altar, altar! This is what the LORD says: ‘A son named Josiah will be born to the house of David. On you he will sacrifice the priests of the high places who make offerings here, and human bones will be burned on you.’” That same day the man of God gave a sign: “This is the sign the LORD has declared: The altar will be split apart and the ashes on it will be poured out.”

When King Jeroboam heard what the man of God cried out against the altar at Bethel, he stretched out his hand from the altar and said, “Seize him!” But the hand he stretched out toward the man shriveled up, so that he could not pull it back. Also, the altar was split apart and its ashes poured out according to the sign given by the man of God by the word of the LORD.

Then the king said to the man of God, “Intercede with the LORD your God and pray for me that my hand may be restored.” So the man of God interceded with the LORD, and the king’s hand was restored and became as it was before.

> Even after this, Jeroboam did not change his evil ways, but once more appointed priests for the high places from all sorts of people. Anyone who wanted to become a priest

he consecrated for the high places.

At that time, Abijah son of Jeroboam became ill, and Jeroboam said to his wife, “Go, disguise yourself, so you won’t be recognized as the wife of Jeroboam. Then go to Shiloh. Ahijah the prophet is there — the one who told me I would be king over this people. Take ten loaves of bread with you, some cakes and a jar of honey, and go to him. He will tell you what will happen to the boy.” So Jeroboam’s wife did what he said and went to Ahijah’s house in Shiloh.

Now Ahijah could not see; his sight was gone because of his age. But the LORD had told Ahijah, “Jeroboam’s wife is coming to ask you about her son, for he is ill, and you are to give her such and such an answer. When she arrives, she will pretend to be someone else.”

So when Ahijah heard the sound of her footsteps at the door, he said, “Come in, wife of Jeroboam. Why this pretense? I have been sent to you with bad news. Go, tell Jeroboam that this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘I raised you up from among the people and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. I tore the kingdom away from the house of David and gave it to you, but you have not been like my servant David, who kept my commands and followed me with all his heart, doing only what was right in my eyes. You have done more evil than all who lived before you. You have made for yourself other gods, idols made of metal; you have aroused my anger and turned your back on me.

“‘Because of this, I am going to bring disaster on the house of Jeroboam. I will cut off from Jeroboam every last male in Israel — slave or free. I will burn up the house of Jeroboam as one burns dung, until it is all gone. Dogs will eat those belonging to Jeroboam who die in the city, and the birds will feed on those who die in the country. The LORD has spoken!’

“As for you, go back home. When you set foot in your city, the boy will die. All Israel will mourn for him and bury him. He is the only one belonging to Jeroboam who will be buried, because he is the only one in the house of Jeroboam in whom the LORD, the God of Israel, has found anything good.

“The LORD will raise up for himself a king over Israel who will cut off the family of Jeroboam. Even now this is beginning to happen. And the

LORD will strike Israel, so that it will be like a reed swaying in the water. He will uproot Israel from this good land that he gave to their ancestors and scatter them beyond the Euphrates River, because they aroused the LORD'S anger by making Asherah poles. And he will give Israel up because of the sins Jeroboam has committed and has caused Israel to commit."

Then Jeroboam's wife got up and left and went to Tirzah. As soon as she stepped over the threshold of the house, the boy died. They buried him, and all Israel mourned for him, as the LORD had said through his servant the prophet Ahijah.

Rehoboam son of Solomon was king in Judah. He was forty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem, the city the LORD had chosen out of all the tribes of Israel in which to put his Name.

Judah did evil in the eyes of the LORD. By the sins they committed they stirred up his jealous anger more than those who were before them had done. They also set up for themselves high places, sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree. There were even male shrine prostitutes in the land; the people engaged in all the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites.

In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, Shishak king of Egypt attacked Jerusalem. He carried off the treasures of the temple of the LORD and the treasures of the royal palace. He took everything, including all the gold shields Solomon had made. So King Rehoboam made bronze shields to replace them and assigned these to the commanders of the guard on duty at the entrance to the royal palace. Whenever the king went to the LORD'S temple, the guards bore the shields, and afterward they returned them to the guardroom.

There was continual warfare between Rehoboam and Jeroboam. And Rehoboam rested with his ancestors and was buried with them in the City of David. His mother's name was Naamah; she was an Ammonite.

And Abijah his son succeeded him as king.

In the eighteenth year of the reign of Jeroboam son of Nebat, Abijah became king of Judah, and he reigned in Jerusalem three years. His mother's name was Maakah daughter of Abishalom.

He committed all the sins his father had done before him; his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his forefather had been. Nevertheless, for David's sake the LORD his God gave him a lamp in Jerusalem by raising up a son to succeed him and by making Jerusalem strong. For David had done what was right in the eyes of the LORD and had not failed to keep any of the LORD'S commands all the days of his life — except in the case of Uriah the Hittite.

There was war between Abijah and Jeroboam throughout Abi-jah's lifetime.

And Abijah rested with his ancestors and was buried in the City of David. And Asa his son succeeded him as king.

In the twentieth year of Jeroboam king of Israel, Asa became king of Judah, and he reigned in Jerusalem forty-one years. His grandmother's name was Maakah daughter of Abishalom.

Asa did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, as his father David had done. He expelled the male shrine prostitutes from the land and got rid of all the idols his ancestors had made. He even deposed his grandmother Maakah from her position as queen mother, because she had made a repulsive image for the worship of Asherah. Asa cut it down and burned it in the Kidron Valley. Although he did not remove the high places, Asa's heart was fully committed to the LORD all his life. He brought into the temple of the LORD the silver and gold and the articles that he and his father had dedicated.

There was war between Asa and Baasha king of Israel throughout their reigns. Baasha king of Israel went up against Judah and fortified Ramah to prevent anyone from leaving or entering the territory of Asa king of Judah.

Asa then took all the silver and gold that was left in the treasuries of the LORD'S temple and of his own palace. He entrusted it to his officials and sent them to Ben-Hadad son of Tabrimmon, the son of Hezion, the

king of Aram, who was ruling in Damascus. “Let there be a treaty between me and you,” he said, “as there was between my father and your father. See, I am sending you a gift of silver and gold. Now break your treaty with Baasha king of Israel so he will withdraw from me.”

Ben-Hadad agreed with King Asa and sent the commanders of his forces against the towns of Israel. He conquered Ijon, Dan, Abel Beth Maakah and all Kinnereth in addition to Naphtali. When Baasha heard this, he stopped building Ramah and withdrew to Tirzah. Then King Asa issued an order to all Judah — no one was exempt — and they carried away from Ramah the stones and timber Baasha had been using there. With them King Asa built up Geba in Benjamin, and also Mizpah.

As for all the other events of Asa’s reign, all his achievements, all he did and the cities he built, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Judah? In his old age, however, his feet became diseased. Then Asa rested with his ancestors and was buried with them in the city of his father David. And Jehoshaphat his son succeeded him as king.

After 22 years as king of Israel, Jeroboam also died. Various kings reigned in Israel and Judah. Most of them did evil. Only a few kings were considered “good,” like King Asa of Judah, who “did what was right in the eyes of the LORD.” Doing right included ridding the kingdom of idolatry. King Asa went so far as to remove his grandmother, Maakah, from her lofty position of queen mother because of her pagan worship. Asa didn’t stop there. He understood that only the Lord God was worthy of worship, and he cleaned the entire land of Judah of its idols.

On the despicable side, Jeroboam’s son Nadab “did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following in the ways of his father.” A man named Baasha plotted against Nadab and killed the king and Jeroboam’s whole family, fulfilling God’s prophecy through the prophet Ahijah. But Baasha, “committing the same sin Jeroboam had caused Israel to commit,” was no better as a king. Likewise Zimri, who also followed the evil “ways of Jeroboam,” killed his predecessor, King Elah, to get onto the throne. But Zimri had failed to calculate his popular support, or lack thereof, and was in power all of seven days before

burning himself to death in the palace and leaving the ashes of his discontent to Omri, the people's choice. During his reign Omri made the city of Samaria the capital of the northern kingdom, and "Samaria" also came to signify the entire territory of the northern tribes.

When Omri died, his son Ahab became king of Israel. But the real power in the family was Ahab's infamous wife Jezebel, a powerful woman of iron will and the daughter of a pagan foreign king. Ahab and Jezebel worshiped Baal and hated the prophets of God, of whom Elijah was chief. Elijah became public enemy number one, but God had a fiery confrontation planned to show the people whose side God himself was on.

In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years. Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him.

In Ahab's time, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram, and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, in accordance with the word of the LORD spoken by Joshua son of Nun.

15

God's Messengers

NOW ELIJAH THE TISHBITE, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word."

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: "Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there."

So he did what the LORD had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

After a long time, in the third year, the word of the LORD came to Elijah: "Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land." So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab.

When he saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?"



"I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the LORD'S commands and have followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets

on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”

But the people said nothing.

Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only one of the LORD’S prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let Baal’s prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire — he is God.”

Then all the people said, “What you say is good.”

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire.” So they took the bull given them and prepared it.

Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. “Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.

At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which had been torn down. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, “Your name shall be Israel.” With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs[1] of seed. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, “Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.”

“Do it again,” he said, and they did it again.

“Do it a third time,” he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”

Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The LORD — he is God! The LORD — he is God!”

Then Elijah commanded them, “Seize the prophets of Baal. Don’t let anyone get away!” They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.

And Elijah said to Ahab, “Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain.” So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.

“Go and look toward the sea,” he told his servant. And he went up and looked.

“There is nothing there,” he said.

Seven times Elijah said, “Go back.”

The seventh time the servant reported, “A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.”

So Elijah said, “Go and tell Ahab, ‘Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.’”

Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. The power of the LORD came on Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.

Jezebel was not one to count her losses. When Ahab’s own will

to fight was exhausted, he could count on Jezebel to keep charging. Her will to win overcame any doubts she might have had about the failure on Mount Carmel.

Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.”

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Lord,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night.

And the word of the LORD came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it,

he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

The LORD said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel — all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”

So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. “Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye,” he said, “and then I will come with you.”

“Go back,” Elijah replied. “What have I done to you?”

So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant.

> *King Ahab constantly vacillated, appearing kingly one day, then floundering the next. He spared the life of his archenemy Ben-Hadad when God delivered the king of Aram into Ahab’s hand in battle. Yet Ahab took the life of his own subject, Naboth, in order to steal Naboth’s vineyard. In the end, Ahab died in battle disguised as a foot soldier, hit by a random arrow. His son Aha-ziah could not improve on his parents’ dismal record, so he also joined the annals of the wicked kings and died without a successor. In Judah, Asa’s son Jehoshaphat*

followed God, survived enemies' threats, and the southern kingdom began to prosper.

Meanwhile, Elijah's time had come to an end. There was never a grander exit than his, or more compelling proof to his successor Elisha that the mantle of divine power had now passed to him.

When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel."

But Elisha said, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.

Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"

"Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied.

"You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours — otherwise, it will not."

As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.

Elisha then picked up Elijah's cloak that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and struck the water with it. "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over.

The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." And they went to meet him and

bowed to the ground before him.

Elijah was gone. Elisha was left to carry on the work, and his dramatic miracles made it clear that his God was one of unspeakable power and glory. In one instance, Elisha purified a spring to provide fresh water to an entire town. Another time, through Elisha's intervention, a poor widow and her sons were saved from financial ruin and slavery by a bottomless jar of oil. Elisha appreciated the small favors that lightened a prophet's stressful load. On one occasion he was offered a meal by a wealthy woman from Shunem, who eventually suggested to her husband that they offer Elisha a place to stay whenever he came to their area. Grateful for her friendship and kindness, Elisha prayed to God for the woman, who had no son.

One day when Elisha came, he went up to his room and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, "Call the Shunammite." So he called her, and she stood before him. Elisha said to him, "Tell her, 'You have gone to all this trouble for us. Now what can be done for you? Can we speak on your behalf to the king or the commander of the army?'"

She replied, "I have a home among my own people."

"What can be done for her?" Elisha asked.

Gehazi said, "She has no son, and her husband is old."

Then Elisha said, "Call her." So he called her, and she stood in the doorway. "About this time next year," Elisha said, "you will hold a son in your arms."

"No, my lord!" she objected. "Please, man of God, don't mislead your servant!"

But the woman became pregnant, and the next year about that same time she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her.

Later, when the child was older, he grew ill. Imagine his mother's distress when the child died in her arms. Her first move was to travel to see Elisha.

When she reached the man of God at the mountain, she took hold of

his feet. Gehazi came over to push her away, but the man of God said, “Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me why.”

“Did I ask you for a son, my lord?” she said. “Didn’t I tell you, ‘Don’t raise my hopes'?”

Elisha said to Gehazi, “Tuck your cloak into your belt, take my staff in your hand and run. Don’t greet anyone you meet, and if anyone greets you, do not answer. Lay my staff on the boy’s face.”

But the child’s mother said, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So he got up and followed her.

Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the boy’s face, but there was no sound or response. So Gehazi went back to meet Elisha and told him, “The boy has not awakened.”

When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch. He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got on the bed and lay on the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out on him, the boy’s body grew warm. Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out on him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes.

Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, “Call the Shunammite.” And he did. When she came, he said, “Take your son.” She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out.

Among the many notable deeds of Elisha, one of the most famous began with the testimony of a young girl from Israel. Her name is unknown, but her plight is not uncommon. She was captured by enemy raiders from Aram and then lived as a slave in the household of the commander of their army. This man, Naaman, had leprosy. The Israelite girl compassionately urged him to seek healing from the prophet of her God. In faith born of desperation, Naaman sought out Elisha and received from the prophet surprising instructions: go and wash in the Jordan River. When Naaman complied, he was healed completely. But when Gehazi, Elisha’s servant, tried to extract

a small fee for this miracle, he became leprous for his greed.

Neither the prophet of God nor the words he spoke were to be taken lightly or treated casually. The king of Aram discovered this fact for himself.

Now the king of Aram was at war with Israel. After conferring with his officers, he said, “I will set up my camp in such and such a place.”

The man of God sent word to the king of Israel: “Beware of passing that place, because the Arameans are going down there.” So the king of Israel checked on the place indicated by the man of God. Time and again Elisha warned the king, so that he was on his guard in such places.

This enraged the king of Aram. He summoned his officers and demanded of them, “Tell me! Which of us is on the side of the king of Israel?”

“None of us, my lord the king,” said one of his officers, “but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom.”

“Go, find out where he is,” the king ordered, “so I can send men and capture him.” The report came back: “He is in Dothan.” Then he sent horses and chariots and a strong force there. They went by night and surrounded the city.

When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. “Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?” the servant asked.

“Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”

And Elisha prayed, “Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see.” Then the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

As the enemy came down toward him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, “Strike this army with blindness.” So he struck them with blindness, as Elisha had asked.

Elisha told them, “This is not the road and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will lead you to the man you are looking for.” And he led them

to Samaria.

After they entered the city, Elisha said, “Lord, open the eyes of these men so they can see.” Then the LORD opened their eyes and they looked, and there they were, inside Samaria.

When the king of Israel saw them, he asked Elisha, “Shall I kill them, my father? Shall I kill them?”

“Do not kill them,” he answered. “Would you kill those you have captured with your own sword or bow? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their master.” So he prepared a great feast for them, and after they had finished eating and drinking, he sent them away, and they returned to their master. So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel’s territory.

Before Elisha died, he ordered that Jehu be anointed king of Israel. This same Jehu, filled with holy zeal, marched a regiment to the home of Jezebel in the town of Jezreel. Fearlessly Jehu confronted her, calling for her servants to throw her from the window. So the “cursed woman” died that day, and later, all of Ahab’s offspring were killed. These events happened in fulfillment of Elijah’s prophetic judgment years earlier. Then Jehu turned his sword on ministers of the pagan god Baal, for surely the most subtle and pernicious threats lay in the subversion of worship from the true God. The Baal altars had to be destroyed before Israel could be secure.

Many kings came and went in Israel and Judah. Some achieved godly reforms; others made a mess of what they inherited. Jehoahaz, son of Jehu, lost his army but kept the nation together. Around 797 BC, Elisha made one more pronouncement against the Arameans, responding to the pleas of a desperate King Jehoash. Once the king was assured of victory, Elisha died.

Jeroboam II took the reins and secured Israel’s borders, but he never guarded Israel’s soul. The worship of false gods and idol-making businesses flourished during his regime. During this prosperous period, a prophet arose with a stirring message of justice and judgment.

The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa — the vision he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel.

He said:

Hear this word, people of Israel, the word the LORD has spoken against you — against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt:

"You only have I chosen
  of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you
  for all your sins."
Proclaim to the fortresses of Ashdod
  and to the fortresses of Egypt:
"Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria;
  see the great unrest within her
  and the oppression among her people."
"They do not know how to do right," declares the LORD,
  "who store up in their fortresses
what they have plundered and looted."

Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"An enemy will overrun your land,
  pull down your strongholds
  and plunder your fortresses."
The Sovereign LORD has sworn by his holiness:
  "The time will surely come
when you will be taken away with hooks,
  the last of you with fishhooks.
You will each go straight out

through breaches in the wall,
and you will be cast out toward Harmon,"
declares the LORD.

"I gave you empty stomachs in every city
and lack of bread in every town,
yet you have not returned to me,"
declares the LORD.

"I sent plagues among you
as I did to Egypt.
I killed your young men with the sword,
along with your captured horses.
I filled your nostrils with the stench of your camps,
yet you have not returned to me,"
declares the LORD.

"Therefore this is what I will do to you, Israel,
and because I will do this to you, Israel,
prepare to meet your God."

Seek the LORD and live,
or he will sweep through the tribes of Joseph like a fire;
it will devour them.

Seek good, not evil,
that you may live.
Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you,
just as you say he is.
Hate evil, love good;

maintain justice in the courts.
Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy
on the remnant of Joseph.

"Surely the eyes of the Sovereign LORD
are on the sinful kingdom.
I will destroy it
from the face of the earth.
Yet I will not totally destroy
the descendants of Jacob,"
declares the LORD.

Hosea followed as a prophet in Israel. He poured out his heart, pleading with a nation that refused to love a faithful God. Hosea warned the northern kingdom that if they did not repent and turn back to God, they would face serious consequences.

Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites,
because the LORD has a charge to bring
against you who live in the land:
"There is no faithfulness, no love,
no acknowledgment of God in the land.
There is only cursing,[2] lying and murder,
stealing and adultery;
they break all bounds,
and bloodshed follows bloodshed.

"Their deeds do not permit them
to return to their God.
A spirit of prostitution is in their heart;
they do not acknowledge the LORD.

“They are unfaithful to the LORD;
they give birth to illegitimate children.
When they celebrate their New Moon feasts,
he will devour their fields.

“For I will be like a lion to Ephraim,
like a great lion to Judah.
I will tear them to pieces and go away;
I will carry them off, with no one to rescue them.
Then I will return to my lair
until they have borne their guilt
and seek my face —
in their misery
they will earnestly seek me.”

“Now he will remember their wickedness
and punish their sins:
They will return to Egypt.
Israel has forgotten their Maker
and built palaces;
Judah has fortified many towns.
But I will send fire on their cities
that will consume their fortresses.”

The days of punishment are coming,
the days of reckoning are at hand.
Let Israel know this.
Because your sins are so many
and your hostility so great,
the prophet is considered a fool,

the inspired person a maniac.
Return, Israel, to the LORD your God.
Your sins have been your downfall!
Take words with you
and return to the LORD.
Say to him:
"Forgive all our sins
and receive us graciously,
that we may offer the fruit of our lips."

Though the prophets warned the people, the northern kingdom of Israel didn't listen. They hardened their hearts and continued to ignore God's pleas to return to his ways. The kings of Israel led the people into spiritual and social chaos. Between Jeroboam II and Hoshea came a series of five other kings, noted for doing "evil in the eyes of the LORD." All of them came into power and/or had their reigns ended through assassination.

How long would the people turn their back on God?

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[1] **Two seahs:** That is, probably about 24 pounds or about 11 kilograms.

[2] **Cursing:** That is, to pronounce a curse on.

16

The Beginning of the End (of the Kingdom of Israel)

IN THE TWELFTH YEAR of Ahaz king of Judah, Hoshea son of Elah became king of Israel in Samaria, and he reigned nine years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, but not like the kings of Israel who preceded him.

Shalmaneser king of Assyria came up to attack Hoshea, who had been Shalmaneser's vassal and had paid him tribute. But the king of Assyria discovered that Hoshea was a traitor, for he had sent envoys to So king of Egypt, and he no longer paid tribute to the king of Assyria, as he had done year by year. Therefore Shalmaneser seized him and put him in prison. The king of Assyria invaded the entire land, marched against Samaria and laid siege to it for three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria. He settled them in Halah, in Gozan on the Habor River and in the towns of the Medes.

All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshiped other gods.



They did wicked things that aroused the LORD'S anger. They worshiped idols, though the LORD had said, "You shall not do this." The LORD warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers: "Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your ancestors to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets."

But they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their ancestors,

who did not trust in the LORD their God.

So the people of Israel were taken from their homeland into exile in Assyria, and they are still there.

The LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah was left.

> *Take no prisoners. Terrorize the conquered. Such were the common practices of ancient empires. To ensure against organized rebellion, Sargon II of Assyria deported more than 27,000 people from the northern kingdom of Israel to distant cities after Israel's defenses broke down. Any semblance of a nation — a people with a common cause and heritage — was gone.*
>
> *In the southern kingdom of Judah, young King Hezekiah watched these developments take place. How do you run a tiny nation when the greatest army in the world is camped on your northern border?*

In the third year of Hoshea son of Elah king of Israel, Hezekiah son of Ahaz king of Judah began to reign. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother's name was Abijah daughter of Zechariah. He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done. He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles.

And the LORD was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him.

The king of Assyria sent his supreme commander, his chief officer and his field commander with a large army, from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. They came up to Jerusalem and stopped at the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field. They called for the king; and Eliakim son of Hilkiah the palace administrator, Shebna

the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph the recorder went out to them.

The field commander said to them, “Tell Hezekiah:

“‘This is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says: On what are you basing this confidence of yours? You say you have the counsel and the might for war — but you speak only empty words. On whom are you depending, that you rebel against me? Look, I know you are depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces the hand of anyone who leans on it! Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who depend on him. But if you say to me, “We are depending on the LORD our God” — isn’t he the one whose high places and altars Hezekiah removed, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, “You must worship before this altar in Jerusalem"?

“‘Come now, make a bargain with my master, the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses — if you can put riders on them! How can you repulse one officer of the least of my master’s officials, even though you are depending on Egypt for chariots and horsemen? Furthermore, have I come to attack and destroy this place without word from the Lord? The LORD himself told me to march against this country and destroy it.’”

Then the commander stood and called out in Hebrew, “Hear the word of the great king, the king of Assyria! This is what the king says: Do not let Hezekiah deceive you. He cannot deliver you from my hand. Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the LORD when he says, ‘The LORD will surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.’

“Do not listen to Hezekiah. This is what the king of Assyria says: Make peace with me and come out to me. Then each of you will eat fruit from your own vine and fig tree and drink water from your own cistern, until I come and take you to a land like your own — a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey. Choose life and not death!

“Do not listen to Hezekiah, for he is misleading you when he says, ‘The LORD will deliver us.’ Has the god of any nation ever delivered his

land from the hand of the king of Assyria?”

> *Sennacherib, king of Assyria, sent his field commander to intimidate Hezekiah, a king faithful to God. Clearly outnumbered and facing a brutal defeat, Hezekiah appealed to the prophet Isaiah. “Please pray for God’s help,” the king entreated, tearing his clothes and wearing sackcloth in utter desperation. Isaiah, speaking for God, assured Hezekiah that God would dispose of Sennacherib and his army. With all escape routes cut off, Hezekiah’s humble prayer brought dramatic results.*

Now Sennacherib received a report that Tirhakah, the king of Cush, was marching out to fight against him. So he again sent messengers to Hezekiah with this word: “Say to Hezekiah king of Judah: Do not let the god you depend on deceive you when he says, ‘Jerusalem will not be given into the hands of the king of Assyria.’ Surely you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the countries, destroying them completely. And will you be delivered? Did the gods of the nations that were destroyed by my predecessors deliver them — the gods of Gozan, Harran, Rezeph and the people of Eden who were in Tel Assar? Where is the king of Hamath or the king of Arpad? Where are the kings of Lair, Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah?”

Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD. And Hezekiah prayed to the Lord: “Lord, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Give ear, LORD, and hear; open your eyes, LORD, and see; listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God.

“It is true, LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste these nations and their lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. Now, LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone, LORD, are God.”

Then Isaiah son of Amoz sent a message to Hezekiah: “This is what the

LORD, the God of Israel, says: I have heard your prayer concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria. This is the word that the LORD has spoken against him:

"'Who is it you have ridiculed and blasphemed?[1]
Against whom have you raised your voice
and lifted your eyes in pride?
Against the Holy One of Israel!
By your messengers
you have ridiculed the Lord.

"'But I know where you are
and when you come and go
and how you rage against me.
Because you rage against me
and because your insolence has reached my ears,
I will put my hook in your nose
and my bit in your mouth,
and I will make you return
by the way you came.'

"Therefore this is what the LORD says concerning the king of Assyria:

"'He will not enter this city
or shoot an arrow here.
He will not come before it with shield
or build a siege ramp against it.
By the way that he came he will return;
he will not enter this city,
declares the LORD.
I will defend this city and save it,
for my sake and for the sake of David my servant.'"

That night the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning — there were all the dead bodies! So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there.

One day, while he was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisrok, his sons Adrammelek and Sharezer killed him with the sword, and they escaped to the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son succeeded him as king.

> *The greatest of the writing prophets, Isaiah, began his work in Jerusalem (capital of Judah, the southern kingdom) in 740 BC, shortly before King Uzziah died. Isaiah achieved prominence during Hezekiah's reign, helping the king to stand-down the Assyrian threat by relying on God alone. Such a strategy must be founded on rock solid faith, and this kind of faith Isaiah clearly practiced and developed. His call to service came in a powerful vision — an apt start to a prophetic vocation that would span nearly 60 years.*

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim,[2] each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

> "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
> the whole earth is full of his glory."

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my

mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”

False prophets acted as public relations consultants, measuring their message against audience expectations. But true prophets like Isaiah simply spoke the word of God without bowing to political pressure. This truly literary prophet was no mere stylist. Isaiah’s message contained some bad news: Jerusalem would fall. Once announced, that event was sure to happen.

See now, the Lord,
the LORD Almighty,

is about to take from Jerusalem and Judah
both supply and support:

all supplies of food and all supplies of water,
the hero and the warrior,

the judge and the prophet,
the diviner and the elder,

the captain of fifty and the man of rank,
the counselor, skilled craftsman and clever enchanter.

Jerusalem staggers,
Judah is falling;

their words and deeds are against the LORD,
defying his glorious presence.

The look on their faces testifies against them;
they parade their sin like Sodom;
they do not hide it.

Woe to them!
They have brought disaster upon themselves.

My people, your guides lead you astray;
they turn you from the path.

The LORD takes his place in court;
he rises to judge the people.

Listen, a noise on the mountains,
like that of a great multitude!

Listen, an uproar among the kingdoms,
like nations massing together!

The LORD Almighty is mustering
an army for war.

They come from faraway lands,
from the ends of the heavens —

the LORD and the weapons of his wrath —
to destroy the whole country.

The people turned away from God and faced the consequences of exile and oppression. But the story was far from over. God had not forgotten them, and he longed to lavish compassion and grace on them yet again. Isaiah's prophecies also foretold that after God's judgment, the Israelites would return home from Babylon and rebuild their nation, clearly revealing that the Lord God was in control of world events.

The LORD will have compassion on Jacob;
once again he will choose Israel
and will settle them in their own land.

Foreigners will join them
and unite with the descendants of Jacob.

Nations will take them
and bring them to their own place.

And Israel will take possession of the nations
and make them male and female servants in
the LORD'S land.

They will make captives of their captors
and rule over their oppressors.

On the day the LORD gives you relief from your suffering and turmoil and from the harsh labor forced on you, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon:

How the oppressor has come to an end!
How his fury has ended!

The LORD has broken the rod of the wicked,
the scepter of the rulers.

This is what the LORD says:

"In the time of my favor I will answer you,
and in the day of salvation I will help you;

I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people,

to restore the land
and to reassign its desolate inheritances,

to say to the captives, 'Come out,'
and to those in darkness, 'Be free!'"

Shout for joy, you heavens;
rejoice, you earth;
burst into song, you mountains!

For the LORD comforts his people
and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me,
the Lord has forgotten me."

"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?

Though she may forget,
I will not forget you!

See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are ever before me.

Your children hasten back, and those who laid you waste
depart from you.

Lift up your eyes and look around;
all your children gather and come to you.

As surely as I live," declares the LORD,
"you will wear them all as ornaments;
you will put them on, like a bride.

"Then you will know that I am the LORD;
those who hope in me will not be disappointed.

"Then all mankind will know that I,
the LORD, am your Savior,
your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob."

The promised future return of the kingdom of Judah was to be a precursor of something much more glorious that was still to come — God's greater plan for giving his people endless freedom and glory. Isaiah's prophecies ended with promises of a suffering Servant, the Messiah, who would usher in a glorious kingdom without end.

Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the LORD been
revealed?

He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.

Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,

yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;

the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;

and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;

he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?

For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.

He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,

though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the LORD'S will to crush him and cause him
to suffer,
and though the LORD makes his life an offering for
sin,

he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

After he has suffered,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;

by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,

because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.

For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

In the meantime, faithful King Hezekiah died and was buried. Unfortunately, his son, Manasseh, did not follow the faithful example set by his father. Manasseh's reign actively supported detestable religious practices and brutal oppression. The righteous[3] people in the land must have recalled fond memories of the good old days of Hezekiah, while enduring Manasseh's betrayals and compromise.

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[1]**Blasphemed:**Uttered words or actions intended to insult or devalue God.

[2]**Seraphim:**Angelic beings occupied constantly in the praise and worship of God.

[3]**Righteous:**A righteous person is one who values God above everyone and everything. A righteous person lives a life of obedience to God.

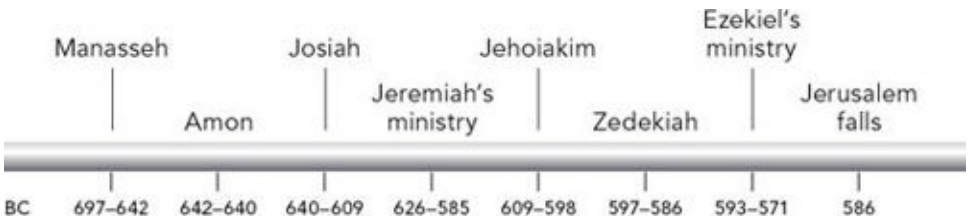
17

The Kingdoms' Fall

MANASSEH WAS TWELVE YEARS OLD when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. His mother's name was Hephzibah.

He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he also erected altars to Baal and made an Asherah pole, as Ahab king of Israel had done. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them. He built altars in the temple of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem I will put my Name." In the two courts of the temple of the LORD, he built altars to all the starry hosts. He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced divination, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, arousing his anger.

He took the carved Asherah pole he had made and put it in the temple, of which the LORD had said to David and to his son Solomon, "In this temple and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my Name forever. I will not again make the feet of the Israelites wander from the land I gave their ancestors, if only they will be careful to do everything I commanded them and will keep the whole Law that my servant Moses gave them." But the people did not listen. Manasseh led them astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites.



The LORD said through his servants the prophets: "Manasseh king of

Judah has committed these detestable sins. He has done more evil than the Amorites who preceded him and has led Judah into sin with his idols. Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I am going to bring such disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. I will stretch out over Jerusalem the measuring line used against Samaria and the plumb line used against the house of Ahab. I will wipe out Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. I will forsake the remnant of my inheritance and give them into the hands of enemies. They will be looted and plundered by all their enemies; they have done evil in my eyes and have aroused my anger from the day their ancestors came out of Egypt until this day."

Moreover, Manasseh also shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end—besides the sin that he had caused Judah to commit, so that they did evil in the eyes of the LORD.

The LORD spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention. So the LORD brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon. In his distress he sought the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God.

> *Any feelings of new hope and promise aroused by Manasseh's repentance were suppressed when his son Amon became king following Manasseh's death.*

Amon was twenty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem two years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, as his father Manasseh had done. Amon worshiped and offered sacrifices to all the idols Manasseh had made. But unlike his father Manasseh, he did not humble himself before the LORD; Amon increased his guilt.

Amon's officials conspired against him and assassinated him in his

palace. Then the people of the land killed all who had plotted against King Amon, and they made Josiah his son king in his place.

Amon's son Josiah was only eight years old when he began to reign. Josiah reigned with success, even distinction, for 31 years of spiritual renewal and reform. During his reign the ancient Book of the Law of Moses was discovered after Josiah had ordered the run-down temple to be repaired, and Josiah followed its prescriptions zealously. He put his heart and soul into rediscovering for all the people God's way of living. But as a result of a fateful political decision he died in battle against Pharaoh Necho of Egypt in 609 BC.

The old pattern of father-not-like-son continued, and Josiah's son Jehoahaz was pathetic as king, lasting only three months. Next came Jehoiakim, who was no better.

Jehoiakim was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years.

And he did evil in the eyes of the LORD, just as his predecessors had done.

During Jehoiakim's reign, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon invaded the land, and Jehoiakim became his vassal for three years. But then he turned against Nebuchadnezzar and rebelled. The LORD sent Babylonian, Aramean, Moabite and Ammonite raiders against him to destroy Judah, in accordance with the word of the LORD proclaimed by his servants the prophets.

Jehoiakim rested with his ancestors. And Jehoiachin his son succeeded him as king.

Jehoiachin was eighteen years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem three months. His mother's name was Ne-hushta daughter of Elnathan; she was from Jerusalem. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father had done.

At that time the officers of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon advanced on Jerusalem and laid siege to it, and Nebuchadnezzar himself came up to the city while his officers were besieging it. Jehoiachin king of Judah, his mother, his attendants, his nobles and his officials all surrendered to him.

In the eighth year of the reign of the king of Babylon, he took Jehoiachin prisoner. As the LORD had declared, Nebuchadnezzar removed the treasures from the temple of the LORD and from the royal palace, and cut up the gold articles that Solomon king of Israel had made for the temple of the LORD. He carried all Jerusalem into exile: all the officers and fighting men, and all the skilled workers and artisans — a total of ten thousand. Only the poorest people of the land were left.

Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin captive to Babylon. He also took from Jerusalem to Babylon the king's mother, his wives, his officials and the prominent people of the land. The king of Babylon also deported to Babylon the entire force of seven thousand fighting men, strong and fit for war, and a thousand skilled workers and artisans. He made Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, king in his place and changed his name to Zedekiah.

> *God allowed the powerful King Nebuchadnezzar to begin crushing Jerusalem, Judah's last stronghold of promise and hope. Under Nebuchadnezzar's order, a second, larger group of Israelites was deported to Babylon in 597 BC. Among them was a young priest named Ezekiel, a man of keen intellect, immense literary giftedness and spiritual insight.*
>
> *Ezekiel relayed to his fellow exiles the stern message of God's judgment. Jerusalem was still standing, but it was the beginning of the end. In a vision, Ezekiel received his marching orders and his prophetic message: unbelief leads to doom.*

In my thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north — an

immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was human, but each of them had four faces and four wings.

Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked something like a vault, sparkling like crystal, and awesome. Under the vault their wings were stretched out one toward the other, and each had two wings covering its body. When the creatures moved, I heard the sound of their wings, like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty, like the tumult of an army. When they stood still, they lowered their wings.

Then there came a voice from above the vault over their heads as they stood with lowered wings. Above the vault over their heads was what looked like a throne of lapis lazuli, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him.

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

He said to me, “Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you.” As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.

He said: “Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me to this very day. The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says.’

“And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briers and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or be terrified by them, though they are a rebellious people. You must speak my words to

them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious."

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, set your face against the mountains of Israel; prophesy against them and say: 'You mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Sovereign LORD. This is what the Sovereign LORD says to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys: I am about to bring a sword against you, and I will destroy your high places. Your altars will be demolished and your incense altars will be smashed; and I will slay your people in front of your idols. I will lay the dead bodies of the Israelites in front of their idols, and I will scatter your bones around your altars. Wherever you live, the towns will be laid waste and the high places demolished, so that your altars will be laid waste and devastated, your idols smashed and ruined, your incense altars broken down, and what you have made wiped out. Your people will fall slain among you, and you will know that I am the LORD.

"'But I will spare some, for some of you will escape the sword when you are scattered among the lands and nations. Then in the nations where they have been carried captive, those who escape will remember me — how I have been grieved by their adulterous hearts, which have turned away from me, and by their eyes, which have lusted after their idols. They will loathe themselves for the evil they have done and for all their detestable practices. And they will know that I am the LORD; I did not threaten in vain to bring this calamity on them.'

"This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"'Disaster! Unheard-of disaster!
See, it comes!

"'Doom has come upon you,
upon you who dwell in the land.

The time has come! The day is near!
There is panic, not joy, on the mountains.

I am about to pour out my wrath on you
and spend my anger against you.

I will judge you according to your conduct
and repay you for all your detestable practices.’”

Back on the home front, things were going from bad to worse in Jerusalem. But God continued to pursue and warn his people. Another prophet, named Jeremiah, was called into service in a very interesting conversation with God.

The word of the LORD came to me, saying,

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

“Alas, Sovereign Lord,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.”

But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD.

Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.

“Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land — against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD.

Knowing God was with him, Jeremiah shed his fears. Known as the “weeping prophet,” Jeremiah felt deeply the burden of the people’s sin and the coming judgment. It didn’t help that his message was unwelcome and unwanted. He told of the coming destruction of Jerusalem, God’s judgment for the people’s sins of idolatry and pride.

But another truth Jeremiah also knew and told: God's mercy will never fail, though reprieve from punishment may seem distant. For all the crumbled buildings, lives lost in hapless battles and lives squandered pursuing pagan pleasure, still God's mercies endure—tender mercies that will be lavished on a nation that had forsaken him. With the God of majestic love, nothing is impossible.

Hear the word of the LORD, you descendants of Jacob,
all you clans of Israel.

"Has a nation ever changed its gods?
(Yet they are not gods at all.)

But my people have exchanged their glorious God
for worthless idols.

Be appalled at this, you heavens,
and shudder with great horror,"

declares the LORD.

"My people have committed two sins:

They have forsaken me,
the spring of living water,

and have dug their own cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

"Long ago you broke off your yoke
and tore off your bonds;
you said, 'I will not serve you!'

"I had planted you like a choice vine
of sound and reliable stock.

How then did you turn against me
into a corrupt, wild vine?

Although you wash yourself with soap
and use an abundance of cleansing powder,

the stain of your guilt is still before me,”
declares the Sovereign LORD.

“As a thief is disgraced when he is caught,
so the people of Israel are disgraced —
they, their kings and their officials,
their priests and their prophets.
They say to wood, ‘You are my father,’
and to stone, ‘You gave me birth.’
They have turned their backs to me
and not their faces;
yet when they are in trouble, they say,
‘Come and save us!’
Where then are the gods you made for yourselves?
Let them come if they can save you
when you are in trouble!
For you, Judah, have as many gods
as you have towns.

“Announce in Judah and proclaim in Jerusalem and say:
‘Sound the trumpet throughout the land!’
Cry aloud and say:
‘Gather together!
Let us flee to the fortified cities!’
Raise the signal to go to Zion!
Flee for safety without delay!
For I am bringing disaster from the north,
even terrible destruction.”

A lion has come out of his lair;
a destroyer of nations has set out.

He has left his place
to lay waste your land.

Your towns will lie in ruins
without inhabitant.

So put on sackcloth,
lament and wail,

for the fierce anger of the LORD
has not turned away from us.

"Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem,
look around and consider,
search through her squares.

If you can find but one person
who deals honestly and seeks the truth,
I will forgive this city."

If you do not listen,
I will weep in secret
because of your pride;

my eyes will weep bitterly,
overflowing with tears,
because the LORD'S flock will be taken captive.

Say to the king and to the queen mother,
"Come down from your thrones,

for your glorious crowns
will fall from your heads."

The cities in the Negev will be shut up,
and there will be no one to open them.

All Judah will be carried into exile,
carried completely away.

The words of Jeremiah were clear, but the kings who followed

Josiah refused to listen. They grew increasingly brash, ignoring the prophet's warnings and wisdom. Their tactics of duplicity and greed were destined to fail. Finally, Judah's kings had to face Babylon's full military muscle, rock hard and set to kill.

The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy.

Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD his God and did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke the word of the LORD. He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him take an oath in God's name. He became stiff-necked and hardened his heart and would not turn to the LORD, the God of Israel. Furthermore, all the leaders of the priests and the people became more and more unfaithful, following all the detestable practices of the nations and defiling the temple of the LORD, which he had consecrated in Jerusalem.

So in the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army. He encamped outside the city and built siege works all around it. The city was kept under siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah.

By the ninth day of the fourth month the famine in the city had become so severe that there was no food for the people to eat.

On the surface, it appeared that God had abandoned his people. Where was his mercy now? Zedekiah and his associates wanted Jeremiah to step in and ask God for help. Instead, Jeremiah foretold defeat and death as the consequence of the people's continued sin.

The word came to Jeremiah from the LORD when King Zedekiah sent to him Pashhur son of Malkijah and the priest Zephaniah son of Maaseiah. They said: “Inquire now of the LORD for us because Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon is attacking us. Perhaps the LORD will perform wonders for us as in times past so that he will withdraw from us.”

But Jeremiah answered them, “Tell Zedekiah, ‘This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I am about to turn against you the weapons of war that are in your hands, which you are using to fight the king of Babylon and the Babylonians who are outside the wall besieging you. And I will gather them inside this city. I myself will fight against you with an outstretched hand and a mighty arm in furious anger and in great wrath. I will strike down those who live in this city — both man and beast — and they will die of a terrible plague. After that, declares the LORD, I will give Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials and the people in this city who survive the plague, sword and famine, into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and to their enemies who want to kill them. He will put them to the sword; he will show them no mercy or pity or compassion.’

“Furthermore, tell the people, ‘This is what the LORD says: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague. But whoever goes out and surrenders to the Babylonians who are besieging you will live; they will escape with their lives. I have determined to do this city harm and not good, declares the LORD. It will be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he will destroy it with fire.’”

Then the city wall was broken through, and the whole army fled at night through the gate between the two walls near the king’s garden, though the Babylonians were surrounding the city. They fled toward the Arabah, but the Babylonian army pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho. All his soldiers were separated from him and scattered, and he was captured.

He was taken to the king of Babylon at Riblah, where sentence was pronounced on him. They killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes. Then they put out his eyes, bound him with bronze shackles and took

him to Babylon.

On the seventh day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard, an official of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He set fire to the temple of the LORD, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down. The whole Babylonian army under the commander of the imperial guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard carried into exile the people who remained in the city, along with the rest of the populace and those who had deserted to the king of Babylon. But the commander left behind some of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields.

So Judah went into captivity, away from her land.

Jerusalem had fallen. But the prophet Jeremiah was not deported. Rather, Nebuchadnezzar advised him to reside with the region's new governor, Gedaliah. Shortly thereafter, Gedaliah was assassinated. Many of the Jews still in Judah, afraid of Babylon's reprisal, fled to Egypt and forced Jeremiah to go with them. (Jewish tradition says Jeremiah was stoned to death while living in Egypt.) But Jeremiah's heart was always in the holy city of his homeland — once busy with trade and prayer, now empty and still. Jeremiah wept bitterly for his people.

How deserted lies the city,
once so full of people!

How like a widow is she,
who once was great among the nations!

She who was queen among the provinces
has now become a slave.

Bitterly she weeps at night,

tears are on her cheeks.

Among all her lovers
there is no one to comfort her.

All her friends have betrayed her;
they have become her enemies.

After affliction and harsh labor,
Judah has gone into exile.

She dwells among the nations;
she finds no resting place.

All who pursue her have overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.

The LORD has done what he planned;
he has fulfilled his word,
which he decreed long ago.

He has overthrown you without pity,
he has let the enemy gloat over you,
he has exalted the horn of your foes.

Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:

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.

I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him."

The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him,
to the one who seeks him;

it is good to wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.

Remember, LORD, what has happened to us;
look, and see our disgrace.

Joy is gone from our hearts;
our dancing has turned to mourning.

The crown has fallen from our head.
Woe to us, for we have sinned!

You, LORD, reign forever;
your throne endures from generation to generation.

Why do you always forget us?
Why do you forsake us so long?

Restore us to yourself, LORD, that we may return;
renew our days as of old.

Though Jeremiah was faced with sorrow and tragedy, he trusted in God's mercies—as did Ezekiel. Before Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, the prophet Ezekiel warned the people of the destruction that was to come. And yet once Ezekiel and his fellow exiles in Babylon received the news that Jerusalem had fallen, his message turned to hope. Although the people had turned their backs on God, they would again receive an abundance of undeserved grace and mercy.

"Therefore say to the Israelites, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.

“‘For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God.

“‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: On the day I cleanse you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns, and the ruins will be rebuilt. The desolate land will be cultivated instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass through it. They will say, “This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden; the cities that were lying in ruins, desolate and destroyed, are now fortified and inhabited.” Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the LORD have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.’”

The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

I said, “Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”

Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.’“

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin

covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet — a vast army.

Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.’“

18

Daniel in Exile

Daniel and three other young men were among those taken to Babylon in 605 BC as part of the first deportation of Jews prior to the fall of Jerusalem. These four have become the most well-known quartet of heroes in the Old Testament. They successfully adapted to the losses of home and family and survived the tough training in foreign etiquette. It's not hard to see how they quickly became the king's favorites.

THEN THE KING ORDERED ASHPENAZ, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility — young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.



But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who

has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep. So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed. When they came in and stood before the king, he said to them, "I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means."

Then the astrologers answered the king, "May the king live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it."

The king replied to the astrologers, "This is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble. But

if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. So tell me the dream and interpret it for me."

Once more they replied, "Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will interpret it."

Then the king answered, "I am certain that you are trying to gain time, because you realize that this is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me the dream, there is only one penalty for you. You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me."

The astrologers answered the king, "There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans."

This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon. So the decree was issued to put the wise men to death, and men were sent to look for Daniel and his friends to put them to death.

When Arioch, the commander of the king's guard, had gone out to put to death the wise men of Babylon, Daniel spoke to him with wisdom and tact. He asked the king's officer, "Why did the king issue such a harsh decree?" Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel. At this, Daniel went in to the king and asked for time, so that he might interpret the dream for him.

Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven and said:

"Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;
wisdom and power are his.

He changes times and seasons;
he deposes kings and raises up others.
He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to the discerning.
He reveals deep and hidden things;
he knows what lies in darkness,
and light dwells with him.
I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors:
You have given me wisdom and power,
you have made known to me what we asked of you,
you have made known to us the dream of the king."

Then Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to execute the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, "Do not execute the wise men of Babylon. Take me to the king, and I will interpret his dream for him."

Arioch took Daniel to the king at once and said, "I have found a man among the exiles from Judah who can tell the king what his dream means."

The king asked Daniel (also called Belteshazzar), "Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?"

Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you were lying in bed are these:

"As Your Majesty was lying there, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen. As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than anyone else alive, but so that Your Majesty may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind."

First, amazingly Daniel described the king's dream in every

detail. His subsequent interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream was a history lesson using the king's magnificent dream statue as a visual aid. The head of the statue was gold. The figure's chest and arms were silver, the belly and thighs bronze, the legs iron and the feet a mix of iron and baked clay. Each part of the statue represented an empire.

The statue's gold head represented Nebuchadnezzar himself and his empire. He was chief among chiefs, leader of the known world, dazzling and incomparable. But not, unfortunately, permanent. Babylon would someday give way to an inferior but momentarily stronger power, the Medo-Persians under Cyrus. They would also fall—to the Greeks led by Alexander the Great. And then the Romans would come. The statue's feet made partly from iron and partly from clay could point to a globalized world of shifting power bases as history spins forward, while some Bible interpreters have found in the ten toes symbolic clues to our own future at the end of history.

For Nebuchadnezzar, though, the message was clear and simple: God directs history, and Babylon's power, prestige and privilege formed only a short chapter in a much longer story. Such news at the height of an empire's influence was bound to create a strong response.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. The king said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery."

Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men. Moreover, at Daniel's request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court.

Daniel was gifted to interpret the meaning of dream images, but

neither he nor his three buddies were authorized to bow down before idols. There was one thing they refused to adapt to—foreign worship practices that violated their commitment to God. In that regard they were holdouts, malcontents and lawbreakers. Nebuchadnezzar decided to erect a statue some 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide. When the people were ordered to bow low and worship the statue, three men stood tall and refused to comply. The king was not happy …

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.

Then the herald loudly proclaimed, “Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.”

Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, “May the king live forever! Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon — Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego — who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold

you have set up."

Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?"

They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty."

He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most

High God, come out! Come here!”

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

Then Nebuchadnezzar said, “Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.”

Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

Pride regularly precedes a fall, but few world leaders fall as far as Nebuchadnezzar and then recover their power. The king had another spectacular dream, this time of a tree. Daniel was called in again and informed Nebuchadnezzar that the great tree represented the king himself. In the dream a loud voice issues a command to cut down the tree, symbolizing that the king would lose everything, becoming so deranged that his behavior will resemble a beast in the wild. One year later, as words of arrogant pride were on his lips, Nebuchadnezzar was struck suddenly with a mental/behavioral disorder that caused the most severe forms of disorientation. He lived in the bush, eating grass and acting like a common animal. Then, miraculously he was healed — which he credited to Daniel’s God — and returned to Babylon’s palace a whole man.

Fast forward to the new king, Belshazzar, who ignored Daniel and dishonored Daniel’s God. Once, at a gala party, Belshazzar poured his best wine into chalices taken from Jerusalem’s holy temple, and his guests drank merrily in ridicule. At the height of the fun, suddenly a large and

mysterious hand appeared and wrote something on the wall of the banquet chamber: Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin.

The king was frightened and called in Daniel to make sense of it. The meaning of the writing on the wall was, "You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting." The king was great now, but soon he and his kingdom would become weak, Daniel warned. That very night, as the party waned, invading Persians rode victoriously through Babylon's gates and killed King Belshazzar.

So Daniel served yet another king and empire with honor and distinction. He became a top administrator under "Darius" — likely either the Babylonian throne name of King Cyrus of Persia or a name given to Cyrus's newly appointed governor over Babylon. But what happens when you mix a new ruler, jealous colleagues and prayer?

It pleased Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel. The satraps were made accountable to them so that the king might not suffer loss. Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. Finally these men said, "We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God."

So these administrators and satraps went as a group to the king and said: "May King Darius live forever! The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lions' den. Now, Your Majesty, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered — in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed." So King

Darius put the decree in writing.

Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: “Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or human being except to you, Your Majesty, would be thrown into the lions’ den?”

The king answered, “The decree stands — in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed.”

Then they said to the king, “Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, Your Majesty, or to the decree you put in writing. He still prays three times a day.” When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him.

Then the men went as a group to King Darius and said to him, “Remember, Your Majesty, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed.”

So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions’ den. The king said to Daniel, “May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!”

A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel’s situation might not be changed. Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep.

At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions’ den. When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, “Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?”

Daniel answered, “May the king live forever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before

you, Your Majesty."

The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

At the king's command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lions' den, along with their wives and children. And before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones.

Then King Darius wrote to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth:

"May you prosper greatly!

"I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel.

"For he is the living God
and he endures forever;

his kingdom will not be destroyed,
his dominion will never end.

He rescues and he saves;
he performs signs and wonders
in the heavens and on the earth.

He has rescued Daniel
from the power of the lions."

Even in exile a remnant of God's faithful people was growing. The prophet Jeremiah was now dead, but perhaps his message still rang in their hearts—the message of God's ultimate compassion and the promise of returning to their homeland. Though Jeremiah had prophesied a cloud of gloom and doom, the "weeping prophet" of Judah had not ended the story in a minor key. Behind the pages of ruin and loss was one bright page of mercy, one last word of restoration that was bound up

in the loving character of God. “This is what the Lord says … I will save you.”

“This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Write in a book all the words I have spoken to you. The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave their ancestors to possess,’ says the LORD.

“‘In that day,’ declares the LORD Almighty,
‘I will break the yoke off their necks
and will tear off their bonds;
no longer will foreigners enslave them.

“‘So do not be afraid, Jacob my servant;
do not be dismayed, Israel,’
declares the LORD.
‘I will surely save you out of a distant place,
your descendants from the land of their exile.
Jacob will again have peace and security,
and no one will make him afraid.
I am with you and will save you,’
declares the LORD.
‘Though I completely destroy all the nations
among which I scatter you,
I will not completely destroy you.
I will discipline you but only in due measure;
I will not let you go entirely unpunished.’”

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “When I bring them back from captivity, the people in the land of Judah and in its towns will once again use these words: ‘The LORD bless you, you prosperous city, you sacred mountain.’ People will live together in Judah and all its towns — farmers and those who move about with their flocks.

I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint."

This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. 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. I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

> *Jeremiah's words rang clear. Mighty Babylon did fall to Persian invaders in 539 BC. During the first year of his official reign over the kingdom, Cyrus, the great Persian overlord, issued a decree permitting Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem. Thus, a little less than 70 years after the first deportations began in 605 BC, a caravan of deportees retraced their steps, praising God each step of the way for guiding history toward his good end. They were going home!*

19

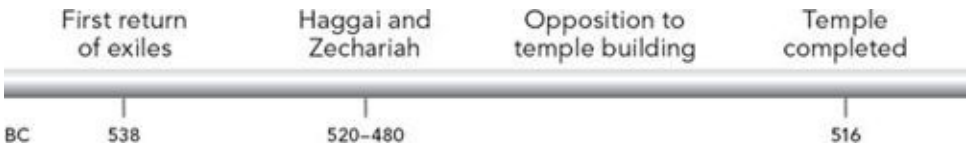
The Return Home

IN THE FIRST YEAR of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing:

"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

"'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.'"

Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites — everyone whose heart God had moved — prepared to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem. All their neighbors assisted them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with valuable gifts, in addition to all the freewill offerings.



Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god.

In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and of silver. Sheshbazzar

brought all these along with the exiles when they came up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

The whole company numbered 42,360, besides their 7,337 male and female slaves; and they also had 200 male and female singers. They had 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels and 6,720 donkeys.

> *The Babylonians appointed Zerubbabel, grandson of Jehoiachin, Judah's next-to-last king, as governor of Judah—making him the last of the line of David to be entrusted with political authority. Around 537 BC, Zerubbabel led these nearly 50,000 people back home to begin their rebuilding mission. With long, hard labor ahead of them, the people remembered to put first things first. With courage and conviction, they rebuilt the altar first, and then laid the foundation for the house of God. True worship was again a reality.*

When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled together as one in Jerusalem. Then Joshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening sacrifices. Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Festival of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day. After that, they presented the regular burnt offerings, the New Moon sacrifices and the sacrifices for all the appointed sacred festivals of the LORD, as well as those brought as freewill offerings to the LORD.

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD:

“He is good;
his love toward Israel endures forever.”

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.

When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the LORD, the God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, “Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here.”

But Zerubbabel, Joshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, “You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us.”

Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

> *The returnees’ initial success alarmed the Samaritans and other neighbors who feared what a rebuilt temple in a thriving Jewish state might mean to the political stability of the area. They therefore opposed the project vigorously, hindering the work for about six years and stopping it completely for another ten years. Weary of the resistance and fighting, the Israelites began thinking that maybe this wasn’t the right time to build the Lord’s house after all. Instead, they concentrated on their own homes and settling down. But God had different plans. Once again intervening, he sent his prophets to jump-start the temple*

project. Haggai's message helped shake the people out of their complacency.

In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest:

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house.'"

Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD. "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil and everything else the ground produces, on people and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands."

Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD.

Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: "I am with you," declares the LORD. So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the

spirit of Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month.

Haggai continued his prophetic message of encouragement. God had not forgotten his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he said. And he hinted at a glorious future promise that sounded too good to be true—a promise that would ultimately be fulfilled when Jesus the Messiah visited this temple.

In the second year of King Darius, on the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, 'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? But now be strong, Zerubbabel,' declares the LORD. 'Be strong, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the LORD, 'and work. For I am with you,' declares the LORD Almighty. 'This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.'

"This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty. 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty. 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the LORD Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the LORD Almighty."

Zechariah, a prophet and priest, began his work in Jerusalem in 520 BC, during the time of Haggai's ministry. Both men wanted to stimulate renewal in the temple rebuilding project. Like Haggai, Zechariah had a dual message: The temple is important, but it's a sign and symbol of something greater coming. Work on the temple; don't be afraid. But watch for the

day when God will bless Jerusalem once again.

In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo:

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her.”

This is what the LORD says: “I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the Faithful City, and the mountain of the LORD Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain.”

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with cane in hand because of their age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.”

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “It may seem marvelous to the remnant of this people at that time, but will it seem marvelous to me?” declares the LORD Almighty.

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west. I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God.”

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Now hear these words, ‘Let your hands be strong so that the temple may be built.’ This is also what the prophets said who were present when the foundation was laid for the house of the LORD Almighty. Before that time there were no wages for people or hire for animals. No one could go about their business safely because of their enemies, since I had turned everyone against their neighbor. But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as I did in the past,” declares the LORD Almighty.

“The seed will grow well, the vine will yield its fruit, the ground will produce its crops, and the heavens will drop their dew. I will give all these things as an inheritance to the remnant of this people. Just as you, Judah and Israel, have been a curse among the nations, so I will save you, and you will be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong.”

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Just as I had determined to bring disaster on you and showed no pity when your ancestors angered me,” says the LORD Almighty, “so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid. These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against each other, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this,” declares the LORD.

The word of the LORD Almighty came to me.

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore love truth and peace.”

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, ‘Let us go at once to entreat the Lord and seek the LORD Almighty. I myself am going.’ And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the LORD Almighty and to entreat him.”

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.’”

Thanks to Haggai’s and Zechariah’s encouragement, the people returned to their work on the temple. However, they were not the only ones back at work. So was their opposition, this time from Tattenai, the governor of the Trans-Euphrates region. But the people could not have anticipated what God would do next.

At that time Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and She-thar-Bozenai and their associates went to them and asked, “Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and to finish it?” They also asked, “What are the names of those who are constructing this building?” But the eye of their God was watching over the elders of the Jews, and they were not stopped until a report could go to Darius and his written reply be received.

This is a copy of the letter that Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates,

and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates, the officials of Trans-Euphrates, sent to King Darius. The report they sent him read as follows:

To King Darius:

Cordial greetings.

The king should know that we went to the district of Judah, to the temple of the great God. The people are building it with large stones and placing the timbers in the walls. The work is being carried on with diligence and is making rapid progress under their direction.

We questioned the elders and asked them, “Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and to finish it?” We also asked them their names, so that we could write down the names of their leaders for your information.

This is the answer they gave us:

“We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, one that a great king of Israel built and finished. But because our ancestors angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar the Chaldean, king of Babylon, who destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon.

“However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God. He even removed from the temple of Babylon the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to the temple in Babylon. Then King Cyrus gave them to a man named Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor, and he told him, ‘Take these articles and go and deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem. And rebuild the house of God on its site.’

“So this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem. From that day to the present it has been under construction but is not yet finished.”

Now if it pleases the king, let a search be made in the royal archives of Babylon to see if King Cyrus did in fact issue a decree to rebuild this house of God in Jerusalem. Then let the king send us his decision in this matter.

King Darius then issued an order, and they searched in the archives stored in the treasury at Babylon. A scroll was found in the citadel of Ecbatana in the province of Media, and this was written on it:

Memorandum:

In the first year of King Cyrus, the king issued a decree concerning the temple of God in Jerusalem:

Let the temple be rebuilt as a place to present sacrifices, and let its foundations be laid. It is to be sixty cubits[1] high and sixty cubits wide, with three courses of large stones and one of timbers. The costs are to be paid by the royal treasury. Also, the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, are to be returned to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; they are to be deposited in the house of God.

Now then, Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and you other officials of that province, stay away from there. Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. Let the governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its site.

Moreover, I hereby decree what you are to do for these elders of the Jews in the construction of this house of God:

Their expenses are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury, from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates, so that the work will not stop. Whatever is needed — young bulls, rams, male lambs for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and olive oil, as requested by the priests in Jerusalem — must be given them daily without fail, so that they may offer sacrifices pleasing to the God of heaven and pray for the well-being of the king and his sons.

Furthermore, I decree that if anyone defies this edict, a beam is to be pulled from their house and they are to be impaled on it. And for this crime their house is to be made a pile of rubble. May God, who has

caused his Name to dwell there, overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to change this decree or to destroy this temple in Jerusalem.

I Darius have decreed it. Let it be carried out with diligence.

Then, because of the decree King Darius had sent, Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates carried it out with diligence. So the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah, a descendant of Iddo. They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia. The temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

> *So on March 12, 516 BC, almost 70 years after its destruction, the rebuilding of the temple was complete. Sustained work had continued on the project for three and a half years. Though not as large or spectacular as Solomon's temple, the rebuilt temple actually enjoyed a longer life.*

Then the people of Israel — the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles — celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy. For the dedication of this house of God they offered a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred male lambs and, as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats, one for each of the tribes of Israel. And they installed the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their groups for the service of God at Jerusalem, according to what is written in the Book of Moses.

> *Many Jews chose not to return to Judah. One man, Mordecai, was living in the city of Susa — one of the four capitals of the Persian Empire — with his adopted daughter Hadassah, also known as Esther. Through a series of miraculous events, they both become involved in a web of circumstances that involved the king, a royal decree and a heinous plot of betrayal.*

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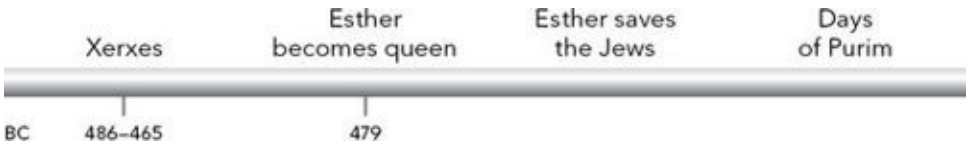
[1]**Sixty cubits:** That is, about 90 feet or 27 meters.

20

The Queen of Beauty and Courage

THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush: At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present.

For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa. The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality. By the king's command each guest was allowed to drink with no restrictions, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished.



Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes.

On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him — Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Karkas — to bring before him

Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.

Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times and were closest to the king — Karshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memukan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom.

"According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?" he asked. "She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her."

Then Memukan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, "Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes. For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, 'King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.' This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord.

"Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she. Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest."

The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memukan proposed. He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in their own language, proclaiming that every man should be ruler over his own household, using his native tongue.

Later when King Xerxes' fury had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. Then the king's

personal attendants proposed, “Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king’s eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them. Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.” This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it.

> *Vashti paid the price for her stand against the king. Although she was the rightful queen, she was deposed at the whim of her husband. Such was the precarious state of women—and men — in the royal court.*
>
> *Women outside the court were also subject to the king’s plans. His decree that girls from the kingdom be brought into his harem was irrefutable. The girls and their families had no say in the matter. If the king summoned, the family had no choice but to surrender their daughter to the king.*

Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadas-sah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

When the king’s order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king’s palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. She pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king’s palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem.

Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background,

because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.

Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name.

When the turn came for Esther (the young woman Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

When the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. But Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordecai had told her to do, for she continued to follow Mordecai's instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up.

During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Big-thana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were impaled on poles. All this

was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.

> *Haman, a noble in the king's court, was not aware of Esther's background and Mordecai's loyalty to the king or he may not have plotted so openly against the Jews. However, Jewish tradition considers him to have been a descendant of the Amalekite king Agag, an enemy of Israel during Saul's reign. The Amalekites were ancient enemies of the Jews. So perhaps his confrontation with Mordecai and resulting decree against the Jews was inevitable.*

After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles. All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor.

Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?" Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew.

When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.

In the twelfth year of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, the *pur* (that is, the lot) was cast in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. And the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar.

Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king's

administrators for the royal treasury.”

So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. “Keep the money,” the king said to Haman, “and do with the people as you please.”

Then on the thirteenth day of the first month the royal secretaries were summoned. They wrote out in the script of each province and in the language of each people all Haman’s orders to the king’s satraps, the governors of the various provinces and the nobles of the various peoples. These were written in the name of King Xerxes himself and sealed with his own ring. Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews — young and old, women and children — on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day.

The couriers went out, spurred on by the king’s command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered.

When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. But he went only as far as the king’s gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

When Esther’s eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. Then Esther summoned Hathak, one of the king’s eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.

So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king’s gate. Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay

into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: "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 your royal position for such a time as

this?"

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

> *Queen Vashti had earlier risked her life by refusing to appear before the king when summoned. As a result she lost her standing as queen. Now Esther risks her life by appearing before the same king uninvited.*

On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the

tip of the scepter.

Then the king asked, “What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you.”

“If it pleases the king,” replied Esther, “let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him.”

“Bring Haman at once,” the king said, “so that we may do what Esther asks.”

So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, “Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted.”

Esther replied, “My petition and my request is this: If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king’s question.”

Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king’s gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage against Mordecai. Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home.

Calling together his friends and Zeresh, his wife, Haman boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king had honored him and how he had elevated him above the other nobles and officials. “And that’s not all,” Haman added. “I’m the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave. And she has invited me along with the king tomorrow. But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king’s gate.”

His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, “Have a pole set up, reaching to a height of fifty cubits,[1] and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai impaled on it. Then go with the king to the banquet and enjoy yourself.” This suggestion delighted Haman, and he had the pole set up.

That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and

Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes.

"What honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?" the king asked.

"Nothing has been done for him," his attendants answered.

The king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about impaling Mordecai on the pole he had set up for him.

His attendants answered, "Haman is standing in the court."

"Bring him in," the king ordered.

When Haman entered, the king asked him, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?"

Now Haman thought to himself, "Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?" So he answered the king, "For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'"

"Go at once," the king commanded Haman. "Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended."

So Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!"

Afterward Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief, and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him.

His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him — you will surely come to ruin!" While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared.

So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet, and as they were drinking wine on the second day, the king again asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."

Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life — this is my petition. And spare my people — this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king."

King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is he — the man who has dared to do such a thing?"

Esther said, "An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!"

Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen. The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life.

Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining.

The king exclaimed, "Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?"

As soon as the word left the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face. Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, "A pole reaching to a height of fifty cubits stands by Haman's house. He had it set up for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king."

The king said, "Impale him on it!" So they impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided.

That same day King Xerxes gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came into the presence of the king, for Esther had told how he was related to her. The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai. And Esther appointed him over Haman's estate.

Esther and Mordecai are secure, but the irrevocable decree is still a threat to the rest of the Jews. Haman's overthrow and

Mordecai's elevation could not give Esther comfort so long as Haman's decree against the Jews remained in force.

Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews. Then the king extended the gold scepter to Esther and she arose and stood before him.

"If it pleases the king," she said, "and if he regards me with favor and thinks it the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces. For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?"

King Xerxes replied to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther, and they have impaled him on the pole he set up. Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring — for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked."

At once the royal secretaries were summoned — on the twenty-third day of the third month, the month of Sivan. They wrote out all Mordecai's orders to the Jews, and to the satraps, governors and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush. These orders were written in the script of each province and the language of each people and also to the Jews in their own script and language. Mordecai wrote in the name of King Xerxes, sealed the dispatches with the king's signet ring, and sent them by mounted couriers, who rode fast horses especially bred for the king.

The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate the armed men of any nationality or province who might attack them and their women and children, and to plunder the property of their enemies. The day appointed for the Jews to do this in all the provinces of King Xerxes was the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar. A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so that the Jews would be

ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies.

The couriers, riding the royal horses, went out, spurred on by the king's command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa.

When Mordecai left the king's presence, he was wearing royal garments of blue and white, a large crown of gold and a purple robe of fine linen. And the city of Susa held a joyous celebration. For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor. In every province and in every city to which the edict of the king came, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them.

On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, the edict commanded by the king was to be carried out. On this day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them. The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Xerxes to attack those determined to destroy them. No one could stand against them, because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them.And all the nobles of the provinces, the satraps, the governors and the king's administrators helped the Jews, because fear of Mordecai had seized them. Mordecai was prominent in the palace; his reputation spread throughout the provinces, and he became more and more powerful.

The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and they did what they pleased to those who hated them. In the citadel of Susa, the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men. They also killed Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai and Vaizatha, the ten sons of Haman son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. But they did not lay their hands on the plunder.

The number of those killed in the citadel of Susa was reported to the king that same day. The king said to Queen Esther, "The Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman in the citadel of Susa. What have they done in the rest of the king's provinces? Now what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? It

will also be granted."

"If it pleases the king," Esther answered, "give the Jews in Susa permission to carry out this day's edict tomorrow also, and let Haman's ten sons be impaled on poles."

So the king commanded that this be done. An edict was issued in Susa, and they impaled the ten sons of Haman. The Jews in Susa came together on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and they put to death in Susa three hundred men, but they did not lay their hands on the plunder.

Meanwhile, the remainder of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also assembled to protect themselves and get relief from their enemies. They killed seventy-five thousand of them but did not lay their hands on the plunder. This happened on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy.

> *This story of Esther and Mordecai is also the story of the beginnings of one of the annual Jewish festivals, the festival of Purim. The story also keeps the memory alive of the great deliverance of the Jewish people during the reign of Xerxes.*

Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

So the Jews agreed to continue the celebration they had begun, doing what Mordecai had written to them. For Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them and had cast the *pur* (that is, the lot) for their ruin and destruction. But when the plot came to the king's attention, he issued written orders that the evil scheme Haman had devised against the Jews should come back onto his own head, and that he and his sons should be impaled on poles. (Therefore these days were called Purim, from the

word *pur.)* Because of everything written in this letter and because of what they had seen and what had happened to them, the Jews took it on themselves to establish the custom that they and their descendants and all who join them should without fail observe these two days every year, in the way prescribed and at the time appointed. These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family, and in every province and in every city. And these days of Purim should never fail to be celebrated by the Jews — nor should the memory of these days die out among their descendants.

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[1]**Fifty cubits:** That is, about 75 feet or about 22.5 meters.

21

Rebuilding the Walls

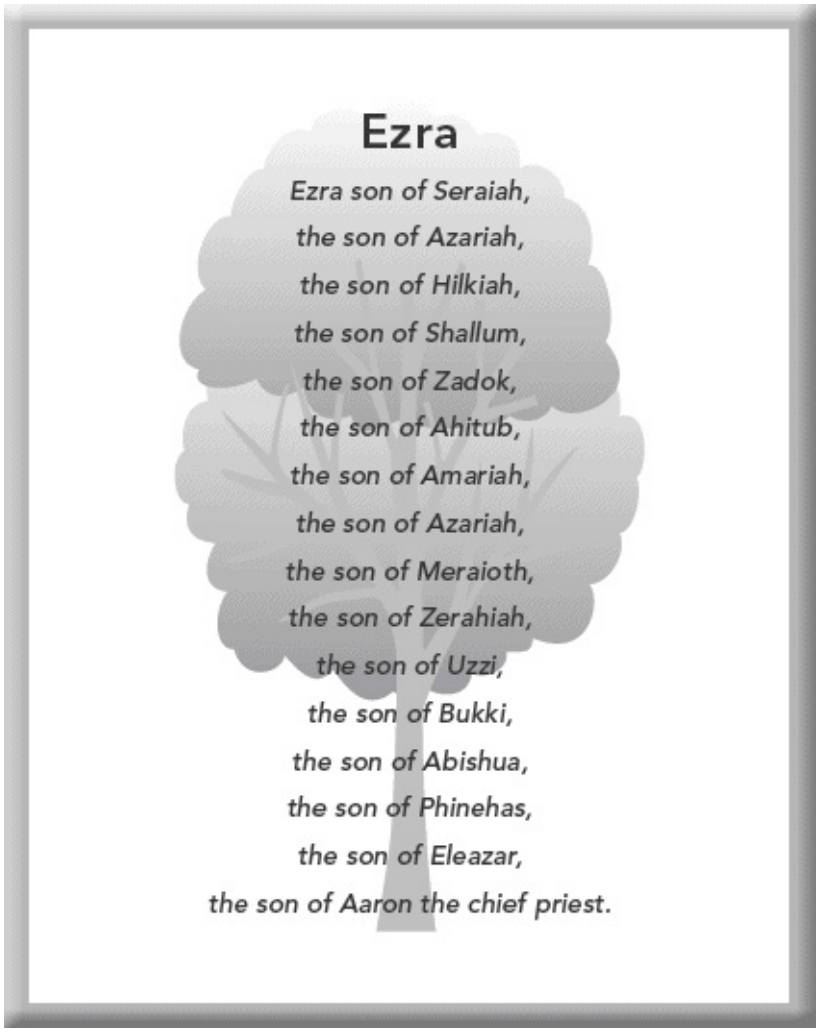
God had promised the people that some day he would bring them back to their land. And, as promised, the people began to return to Judah. Once there, Zerubbabel and the prophets had spurred the people on to finish the temple, the Jews' central worship site in Jerusalem. Enter Ezra (half a century later), a respected priest and teacher of the Law living in Babylon, who took a serious interest in making sure that God's Law was heard and followed again now that the people had returned home.

DURING THE REIGN of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, the son of Shal-lum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, the son of Zerahiah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest — this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him. Some of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.



Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to

teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.



This is a copy of the letter King Artaxerxes had given to Ezra the priest, a teacher of the Law, a man learned in matters concerning the commands and decrees of the LORD for Israel:

Artaxerxes, king of kings,

To Ezra the priest, teacher of the Law of the God of heaven:

Greetings.

Now I decree that any of the Israelites in my kingdom, including

priests and Levites, who volunteer to go to Jerusalem with you, may go. You are sent by the king and his seven advisers to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God, which is in your hand. Moreover, you are to take with you the silver and gold that the king and his advisers have freely given to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, together with all the silver and gold you may obtain from the province of Babylon, as well as the freewill offerings of the people and priests for the temple of their God in Jerusalem. With this money be sure to buy bulls, rams and male lambs, together with their grain offerings and drink offerings, and sacrifice them on the altar of the temple of your God in Jerusalem.

You and your fellow Israelites may then do whatever seems best with the rest of the silver and gold, in accordance with the will of your God. Deliver to the God of Jerusalem all the articles entrusted to you for worship in the temple of your God. And anything else needed for the temple of your God that you are responsible to supply, you may provide from the royal treasury.

Now I, King Artaxerxes, decree that all the treasurers of Trans-Euphrates are to provide with diligence whatever Ezra the priest, the teacher of the Law of the God of heaven, may ask of you — up to a hundred talents of silver, a hundred cors of wheat, a hundred baths of wine, a hundred baths of olive oil, and salt without limit. Whatever the God of heaven has prescribed, let it be done with diligence for the temple of the God of heaven. Why should his wrath fall on the realm of the king and of his sons? You are also to know that you have no authority to impose taxes, tribute or duty on any of the priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers, temple servants or other workers at this house of God.

And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates — all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them. Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment.

Praise be to the LORD, the God of our ancestors, who has put it into

the king's heart to bring honor to the house of the LORD in Jerusalem in this way and who has extended his good favor to me before the king and his advisers and all the king's powerful officials. Because the hand of the LORD my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me.

Loaded down with the king's gifts and supplies, Ezra led several thousand fellow Israelites on a journey to Jerusalem. He found the temple in good order, but he also discovered that the people were intermarrying with neighboring cultures who worshiped other gods. God's Law clearly warned the people against such actions. Appalled, Ezra tore his clothes in grief and wept as he prayed, confessing the people's sin and asking for God's mercy. Convicted by Ezra's display of remorse, the people of Jerusalem repented.

About 13 years later, Nehemiah, cupbearer to the king of Persia (a position requiring the highest level of security clearance), received a visit from his brother who lived in Judah. Nehemiah was anxious to hear news of the city of Jerusalem. But as Ezra had discovered earlier, the news from home wasn't so good.

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said:

"LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your

servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you.

"Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."

> *The temple in Jerusalem was completed, but the wall of the city still lay in ruins. A city without a wall? Might as well just invite the pillagers to walk through the open doors. Nehemiah decided he would lead the people in rebuilding the city's walls.*
>
> *A mission of this scope required permission from Artaxerxes, king of Persia. After praying for God's help, Nehemiah approached the king, who was pleased to send Nehemiah on his way with letters for safe-conduct and supplies. Hard work lay ahead, long days and restless nights, but Nehemiah packed and led his caravan toward Jerusalem.*

I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." I also told them

about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, “Let us start rebuilding.” So they began this good work.

> *Just as the Jews had received opposition from the neighboring peoples when they worked at rebuilding the temple a century earlier, they came under attack for trying to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls. Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, and Tobiah, a leading official and perhaps governor of Transjordan, were undoubtedly particularly threatened by the fact that King Artaxerxes had not only provided for Nehemiah’s journey to Jerusalem but had also appointed him governor of Judah.*

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, “What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble — burned as they are?”

Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, “What they are building — even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!”

Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.

So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.

But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem’s walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night

to meet this threat.

Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, “The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.”

Also our enemies said, “Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work.”

Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, “Wherever you turn, they will attack us.”

Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the LORD, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.”

When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to our own work.

From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me.

Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!”

So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. At that time I also said to the people, “Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and as workers by day.” Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.

Nehemiah showed steady persistence and grace under pressure. He moved ahead while every indicator showed trouble. He also

showed a savvy perception of human nature, as he could smell a trap a mile away.

When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it — though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates — Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.”

But they were scheming to harm me; so I sent messengers to them with this reply: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?” Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.

Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter in which was written:

“It is reported among the nations — and Geshem says it is true — that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: ‘There is a king in Judah!’ Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us meet together.”

I sent him this reply: “Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.”

They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.”

But I prayed, “Now strengthen my hands.”

One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, “Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you — by night they are coming to kill you.”

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two

days.

When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.

> *First the temple and now the walls of the city were complete. But why build temples and walls if people's hearts were still wandering? Both Ezra and Nehemiah wanted to ensure that a pure system of worship was in place and to enforce the laws against intermarriage with people of ungodly nations. What better way than to let God's Word speak for itself?*

After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers, the musicians and the Levites were appointed. I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do.

All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

The Levites — Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shab-bethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah — instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there.

They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.”

Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law. They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters” — as it is written.

So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

The Israelites had indeed rebuilt the temple and were worshiping God again; yet many of the people and priests strayed from the faith. God called Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, to offer a final word to the people. Malachi likely lived in the same period as Ezra and Nehemiah. Perhaps his prophecies came after Ezra's death and during the time when Nehemiah was called to return to the service of the king of Persia. Through Malachi, God issued his warnings against the people's hypocrisy, but also reminded them of his never-ending covenant promise.

A prophecy: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi.

"A son honors his father, and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" says the LORD Almighty.

"It is you priests who show contempt for my name.

"But you ask, 'How have we shown contempt for your name?'

"By offering defiled food on my altar.

"But you ask, 'How have we defiled you?'

"By saying that the LORD's table is contemptible. When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the LORD Almighty.

"Now plead with God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you?" — says the LORD Almighty.

"Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD Almighty, "and I will accept no offering from your hands. My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations," says the LORD Almighty.

Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favor on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth.

"The man who hates and divorces his wife," says the LORD, the God of Israel, "does violence to the one he should protect," says the LORD Almighty.

So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful.

"I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty.

"But you ask, 'How are we to return?'

"Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me.

"But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?'

"In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse — your whole nation — because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe," says the LORD Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.

"You have spoken arrogantly against me," says the LORD.

"Yet you ask, 'What have we said against you?'

"You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD

Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it.'"

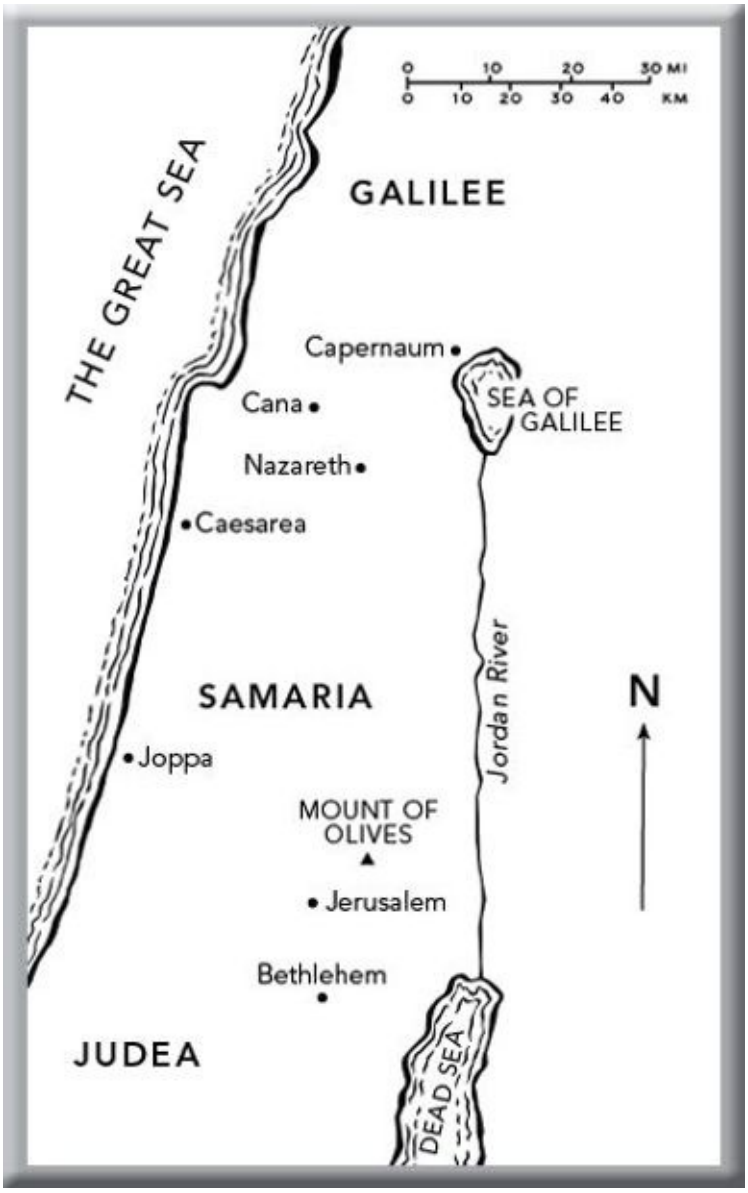
Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name.

"On the day when I act," says the LORD Almighty, "they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act," says the LORD Almighty.

"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."



*F*OR 400 YEARS after Malachi's prophecies, no prophets or leaders rose to the level of inclusion in the record of Holy Scripture. For this reason, the period is sometimes referred to as the "silent years." In actuality, these years of social and political upheaval were anything but silent for the Jewish people.

The Maccabean revolt against the Seleucids during the second century BC was one of the most heroic eras of Jewish history. During these 400 years numerous significant writings were produced as well. The Qumran community

copied the books of Isaiah, the Psalms, Deuteronomy and other sacred writings. These ancient manuscripts were discovered by a shepherd boy in AD 1947 near the Dead Sea and are known today as the "Dead Sea Scrolls."

The Deuterocanonical books, or books of the Apocrypha, accepted as Holy Scripture by the Roman and Eastern churches, were written in the years between the Old and New Testament. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the old Testament, was also an important product of the period. It became the Bible for Greek-speaking Jews outside Palestine and later for the early church.

But God's story wasn't finished. "When the set time had fully come," as the apostle Paul put it, God spoke again—this time in the person of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, whose birth, life, death and resurrection changed everything.

Now the prophets' ancient promises of a new Servant-King and kingdom of God, the promises anticipated for so many years, came to life in bold new ways. Now the people could see personified God's gracious, compassionate, unfailing love and dedication to restoring lost relationships through this carpenter and itinerant teacher, Jesus — the Messiah [1] come to set his people free. All the wisdom and purposes of God centered in Jesus' mission on planet Earth. He was God's final word. And this is how it happened …

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[1]**Messiah:** A name of Jesus that emphasizes his role as God's chosen deliverer.

22

The Birth of the King

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.



The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace [1] and truth.

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, [2]

for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me —
holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful

to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”

How did Mary, a virgin, become pregnant? She and Joseph were engaged but had not had sexual relations. No medical doctor could answer this question, but such was the mysterious nature of Mary’s conception and Jesus’ birth — a miraculous beginning ordained by God’s power alone. Imagine Mary’s problem explaining this incredible experience! She couldn’t understand it herself, much less explain it to her friends and family.

In that day and time, an engagement was considered as strong a commitment as marriage although Joseph and Mary were not officially married. Although he probably wanted to believe Mary, Joseph was in a difficult situation. Engaged and committed to a woman whom his family and friends would now despise, Joseph decided it was best to break off the engagement … until an unusual visitor changed his perspective.

Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the

prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news [3] that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

> “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
>
> and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard

it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

> *Joseph and Mary decided to remain in Bethlehem after Jesus was born. Faithful to the Law of Moses, they had Jesus circumcised when he was eight days old. There the new family was greeted by two older saints, Simeon and Anna, to whom God gave the opportunity to see and recognize the Messiah before the end of their days. And these wouldn't be the last individuals to discern the special nature of the child Jesus.*

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi [4] from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

> "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
>
> are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
>
> for out of you will come a ruler
>
> who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and

they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

> “A voice is heard in Ramah,
> weeping and great mourning,
> Rachel weeping for her children
> and refusing to be comforted,
> because they are no more.”

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”

So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth.

Nothing more is known about the boy Jesus until he appears in

Jerusalem at age 12. Most likely he learned carpentry skills as a youngster from Joseph and studied in the synagogue. His mind grew strong, along with his body and soul. While still a youth, his agile mind was ready to engage in discussion with synagogue leaders. One time Jesus became so engrossed in learning and questioning that he lost track of time.

Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."

"Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

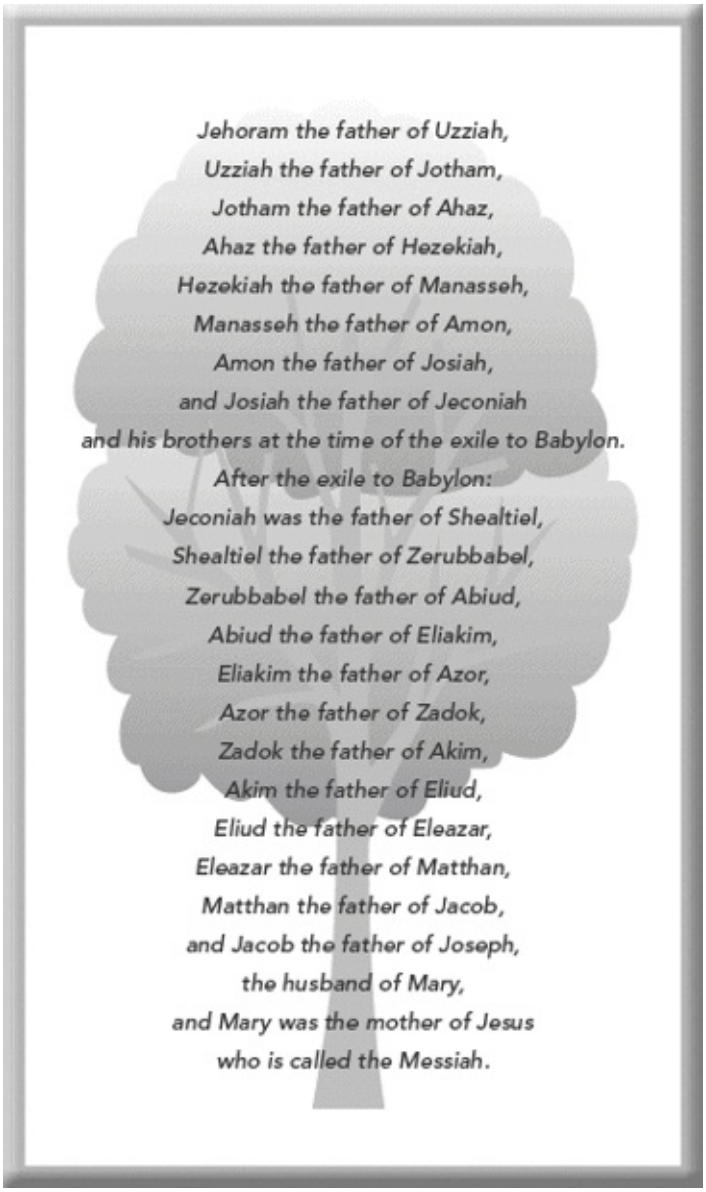
Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

Who was this Jesus? A new prophet? A scholar destined to be a great rabbi? Perhaps a political leader with the charisma to finally send the oppressive Roman armies, who controlled Judea, back across the sea? None of these expectations turned out to describe him adequately. In fact, Jesus defied expectations as the people watched and wondered.

Jesus

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah,
the son of David,
the son of Abraham:

Abraham was the father of Isaac,
Isaac the father of Jacob,
Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,
Judah the father of Perez and Zerah,
whose mother was Tamar,
Perez the father of Hezron,
Hezron the father of Ram,
Ram the father of Amminadab,
Amminadab the father of Nahshon
Nahshon the father of Salmon,
Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,
Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,
Obed the father of Jesse,
and Jesse the father of King David.
David was the father of Solomon,
whose mother had been Uriah's wife,
Solomon the father of Rehoboam,
Rehoboam the father of Abijah,
Abijah the father of Asa,
Asa the father of Jehoshaphat,
Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram,



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[1]**Grace:** Unmerited favor and blessing. In the New Testament, this term often refers to the undeserved pardon from sin through Jesus' death.

[2]**Savior:** One who rescues or heals. Jesus Christ is revealed as the Savior who rescues his people from sin and eternal punishment.

[3]**Good news:** The literal translation of the word *gospel,* this word refers to the message that Jesus has come to reconcile humanity to God. The good news is that each individual can accept this undeserved gift and enter into a relationship with him.

[4]**Magi:** Traditionally *wise men.*

23

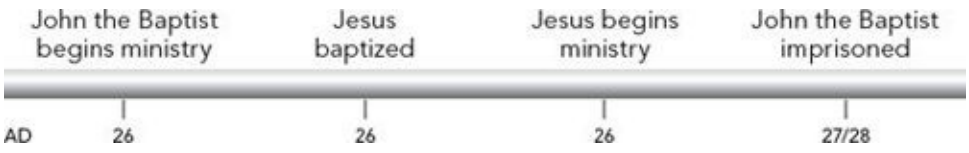
Jesus' Ministry Begins

Imagine if you were introducing the Savior of the world. Wouldn't you make it a gala event? Call in the media? Spotlight the attending celebs? Give the Savior the red-carpet treatment? Get people's attention?

God doesn't work that way. He planned his Son's introduction using a scruffy bohemian prophet called John the Baptist. John, the son of Mary's relative Elizabeth, was the one who had been foretold to precede the Messiah "in the spirit and power of Elijah." John was unique among the prophets. He lived outside of the mainstream religious culture, yet his message was more timely than any other.

IN THOSE DAYS John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized [1] by him in the Jordan River.



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.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

> "'He will command his angels concerning you,
> and they will lift you up in their hands,
> so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Following the test in the wilderness, Jesus began his public ministry. John the Baptist continued to point to Jesus, claiming that everything God had promised centered on this one man. This was startling news to the religious elite, and John was asked to explain himself. Imagine skilled religious lawyers questioning this rough-hewn eccentric, a man without credentials or authorization. The interrogation began.

Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah."

They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No."

Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

Now the Pharisees [2] who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

"I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, [3] who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."

The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. [4] When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"

When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you

want?”

They said, “Rabbi” (which means “Teacher”), “where are you staying?”

“Come,” he replied, “and you will see.”

So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon.

Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which, when translated, is Peter). [5]

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, “Follow me.”

Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote — Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked.

“Come and see,” said Philip.

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

“How do you know me?” Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”

Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.” [6]

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to

the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

"Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.

Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

> *Jesus began to reveal who he was, and he was like no other person anyone had known. Although he was fully human, he was also fully God. With his 12 disciples as interns, Jesus began his itinerant ministry of teaching and healing.*
>
> *Soon he traveled to the city of Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast. It was in Jerusalem that political and religious decisions were made; power brokers set their agendas in this bustling town. Many people listened to Jesus' teachings and believed he was the Messiah. Others thought he was a troublemaker. One inquisitive religious leader sought Jesus out privately, under cover of darkness. Jesus took the opportunity to summarize his mission by talking about being born … again.*

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said,

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” [7]

“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven — the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.

> *The kind of claims Jesus made did not make him very popular with the religious elite. But Jesus knew his purpose, and he spent much of his time with ordinary people who had ordinary human needs. One such person was a woman he met in the region of Samaria. Women were second-class citizens in the*

culture of that day. In addition, there was a harsh rivalry between Jews and Samaritans, and most Jews would not associate in any way with Samaritans, let alone a woman. But once again, Jesus broke the mold.

Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

"I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors

worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you — I am he."

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"

Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers.

They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

After the two days he left for Galilee.

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, "What do you want with us,

Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are — the Holy One of God!”

“Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching — and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.” News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!”

Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else — to the nearby villages — so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.”

Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed.

Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: “See that you don’t tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.” Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news.

As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

From the start, Jesus appeared to be a different kind of rabbi. He seemed to disregard the many customary laws that defined proper behavior for Jewish people. He put people before laws. His "new way" was forgiving and kind. Jesus didn't come off as a rabble-rouser but as a friend to people on the outside, people suspected of not being pure, people most religious leaders disliked.

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."

Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.

He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians [8] how they might kill Jesus.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him. For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. Whenever the impure spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." But he gave them strict orders not to tell others about him.

The Jews were convinced that when the long-awaited Messiah came, he would free the people from political oppression. He would liberate them from the power of the Roman Empire. They were looking for an earthly king to bring their nation into power. But Jesus' purpose was much deeper, his intentions more significant, and his kingship infinitely more glorious than what the people were expecting. They had to learn the true meaning of the word "Messiah"—Anointed One. They had to discover who Jesus really was. Only then would they have his okay to spread the Good News.

Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons. 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.

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

Apparently even John the Baptist didn't really understand who Jesus was. John had announced Jesus as the coming Messiah, but Jesus' work hadn't brought the results John evidently expected. Added to John's disappointment was the fact that he had been languishing in prison for some time because he had publicly criticized Herod Antipas.

Herod Antipas was one of the sons of Herod the Great, who ruled at the time of Jesus' birth. Herod Antipas was the Roman puppet ruler over Galilee, and he had convinced his brother's wife to leave her husband and marry him, a violation of Jewish law. John had been locked up for pointing out Herod's sin.

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written:

"'I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'

Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come."

Jesus' answer to John gave more insight into Jesus' role as Savior and the Messiah. Many people were intrigued by this prophet and teacher, and they wanted to hear more.

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[1]Baptized, baptism: A symbolic act demonstrating that new believers

have abandoned their former ways and have embarked on new life.

[2]Pharisees: The most powerful group of religious authorities within Judaism. The Pharisees were highly focused on their interpretation of the laws given by God, and they often challenged Jesus regarding these precepts.

[3]Lamb of God: One of the names of Jesus, which demonstrates the connection between Jesus' sacrificial death and the offerings of the Old Testament.

[4]Disciples: The followers of Jesus.

[5]Peter: *Cephas* (Aramaic) and *Peter* (Greek) both mean "rock."

[6]Son of Man: A name of Jesus that emphasizes his dual nature as both fully God and fully human.

[7]Born again: A term signifying the new spiritual life gained when one believes in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and accepts his death on the cross as a "free gift" that releases people from the penalty of sin.

[8]Herodians: A Jewish sect.

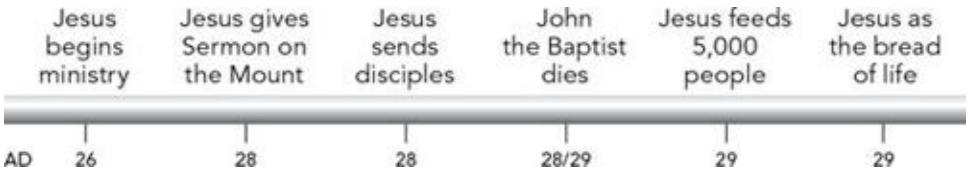
24

No Ordinary Man

AGAIN JESUS BEGAN TO TEACH by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."

Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that,



> "'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
> and ever hearing but never understanding;
> otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'"

Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How

then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop — some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."

He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear."

"Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you — and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them."

He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain — first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."

With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

Jesus often used parables to teach the people. These stories, typically drawn from nature or everyday life, pointed out a central truth that called out an intended response from the listeners. On one occasion Jesus told three parables in response to the self-righteous complaints of the Pharisees and teachers of the law about the company Jesus kept.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Then Jesus told them this parable: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set

out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

"'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Another time Jesus used a parable when he was questioned by a religious leader.

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii[1] and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Besides teaching in parables, Jesus also taught in a more direct style, as seen in what came to be known as the “Sermon on the Mount.”

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.

He said:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn,

for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for
righteousness,
for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of
righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will

reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

"This, then, is how you should pray:

> "'Our Father in heaven,
> hallowed be your name,
> your kingdom come,
> your will be done,
> on earth as it is in heaven.
> Give us today our daily bread.
> And forgive us our debts,
> as we also have forgiven our debtors.
> And lead us not into temptation,
> but deliver us from the evil one.'

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father

feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you — you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

> *Jesus' teachings moved many people and changed lives. However, those who continually heard his parables and sermons were his disciples. At one point during their travels together, the disciples' trust in Jesus was put to the test when a violent storm overtook their boat.*

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!"

Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”

They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. He shouted at the top of his voice, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God’s name don’t torture me!” For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of this man, you impure spirit!”

Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?”

“My name is Legion,” he replied, “for we are many.” And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. The demons begged Jesus, “Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.” He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man — and told about the pigs as well. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Jesus did not let him, but said, “Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for

you, and how he has had mercy on you." So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. He pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." So Jesus went with him.

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"

"You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'"

But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher anymore?"

Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, "Don't be afraid; just believe."

He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is

not dead but asleep.” But they laughed at him.

After he put them all out, he took the child’s father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, *“Talitha koum!”* (which means “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!”

When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to him, and he asked them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?”

“Yes, Lord,” they replied.

Then he touched their eyes and said, “According to your faith let it be done to you"; and their sight was restored. Jesus warned them sternly, “See that no one knows about this.” But they went out and spread the news about him all over that region.

While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, “Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.”

But the Pharisees said, “It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.”

> *Jesus commissioned his closest followers, the 12 disciples, to spread out and tell people that the kingdom of God had come. He also gave them spiritual authority to heal people from sickness and demonic oppression.*
>
> *This first band of preachers was sent out with almost no supplies in order to learn about faith and prayer. God performed many miracles through them, adding to the mounting excitement among the populace. A top official also heard the reports … filtered through his guilty conscience.*

King Herod heard about this, for Jesus’ name had become well known.

Some were saying, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.”

Others said, “He is Elijah.”

And still others claimed, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.”

But when Herod heard this, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!”

For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.

The king said to the girl, “Ask me for anything you want, and I’ll give it to you.” And he promised her with an oath, “Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.”

She went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?”

“The head of John the Baptist,” she answered.

At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: “I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”

The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John’s disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going

that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”

So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. “This is a remote place,” they said, “and it’s already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”

But he answered, “You give them something to eat.”

They said to him, “That would take more than half a year’s wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?”

“How many loaves do you have?” he asked. “Go and see.”

When they found out, they said, “Five — and two fish.”

Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

“Come,” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognized Jesus, they sent word to all the surrounding country. People brought all their sick to him and begged him to let the sick just touch the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realized that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples, but that they had gone away alone. Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?”

Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.”

Then they asked him, “What must we do to do the works God

requires?”

Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”

So they asked him, “What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

“Sir,” they said, “always give us this bread.”

Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life.[2] Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

“Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.”

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

“You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve.

Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Then Jesus replied, “Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!” (He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him.)

> *Jesus could get very personal, in-your-face, below the surface. He had a rock-solid sense of who he was, and he wanted his followers to know him to the core. Listening to his teaching and admiring his character were not enough. To follow this rabbi, his followers needed to know him in a deeper way, a way that would change their hearts, pursuits and lives. He wanted to be the center, the joy, the “bread” and sustenance of their lives. As Jesus continued his ministry, he began to reveal more about who he was and why he had come.*

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[1]**Denarii:**A denarius was the daily wage of a day laborer.

[2]**Bread of life:**By saying this, Jesus was proclaiming that he is the source of true fulfillment and satisfaction.

25

Jesus, the Son of God

JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

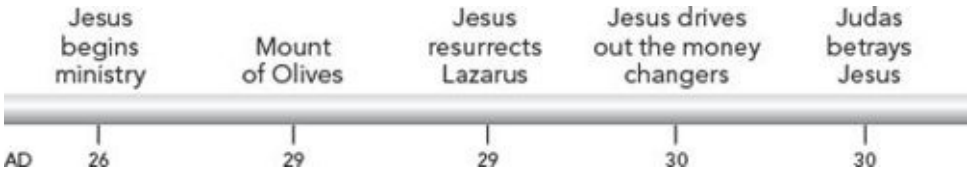
They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

> “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”
>
> Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”
>
> Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel[1] will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”



After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.

Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.

Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what “rising from the dead” meant.

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want

anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

> *Remember King David and King Solomon? All the great kings of ancient Israel had been warriors, builders and diplomats. Little wonder that most people, if they believed at all in a coming Messiah, imagined the new king would be the greatest warrior, builder and deliverer of all. How odd, then, that Jesus seemed indifferent to regime change. His message was “Open your hearts to God.” He did not gather a cache of weapons or train a commando platoon for toppling Roman rule. This unexpected focus, coupled with Jesus’ insistence on genuine personal repentance, offended many in Jerusalem’s religious establishment. Some educated Pharisees considered him a teacher of dangerous and misleading philosophy. In the midst of growing Jewish opposition and common-folk popularity, Jesus went to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the greatest of the Jewish holidays, the Festival of Tabernacles. He used the festival as a backdrop for revealing his authority, identity and mission.*

Now at the festival the Jewish leaders were watching for Jesus and asking, “Where is he?”

Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about him. Some said, “He is a good man.”

Others replied, “No, he deceives the people.” But no one would say anything publicly about him for fear of the leaders.

Not until halfway through the festival did Jesus go up to the temple courts and begin to teach. The Jews there were amazed and asked, “How did this man get such learning without having been taught?”

At that point some of the people of Jerusalem began to ask, “Isn’t this the man they are trying to kill? Here he is, speaking publicly, and they are not saying a word to him. Have the authorities really concluded that

he is the Messiah? But we know where this man is from; when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from."

Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, "Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own authority, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me."

At this they tried to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come. Still, many in the crowd believed in him. They said, "When the Messiah comes, will he perform more signs than this man?"

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

On hearing his words, some of the people said, "Surely this man is the Prophet."

Others said, "He is the Messiah."

Still others asked, "How can the Messiah come from Galilee? Does not Scripture say that the Messiah will come from David's descendants and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?" Thus the people were divided because of Jesus. Some wanted to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him.

> *When Jesus preached, he made many claims with which people took issue. He said he was the light—but only God himself is the source of light! He was from above—but only God claims residence in heaven! Jesus was setting out the clear and fateful choice: believe in him and know God's power in your life, or stay in spiritual darkness. This message would change everything.*

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the

world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

The Pharisees challenged him, "Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid."

Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going."

Once more Jesus said to them, "I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come."

This made the Jews ask, "Will he kill himself? Is that why he says, 'Where I go, you cannot come'?"

But he continued, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins."

Even as he spoke, many believed in him.

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

"Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death."

At this they exclaimed, "Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that whoever obeys your word will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?"

Jesus replied, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and obey his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."

"You are not yet fifty years old," they said to him, "and you have seen Abraham!"

"Very truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I

am!” At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

> *There it was. Jesus told the crowd that he existed before Abraham was even born. He told the crowd that his life was without beginning. He told the crowd he was God! The crowd turned into a lynch mob. Advisers might have urged Jesus to give the religious leaders time to cool off, but Jesus would not be stopped. He was driven by a passion to show people the glory of God, and even when a close friend was ill and near death, he used that experience as another example of God’s power.*

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, and then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.”

“But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?”

Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world’s light. It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light.”

After he had said this, he went on to tell them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.”

His disciples replied, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.” Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am

glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”

But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. “Take away the stone,” he said.

“But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

“What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.”

Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”

He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

Usually, people try to avoid trouble, yet Jesus set his direction straight toward those who were plotting to kill him. Jerusalem was the site of the Passover Festival celebration. People there needed to hear his message. Time was short. Jesus soon would enter Jerusalem for the last time.

People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good — except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’”

“Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”

The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”

Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not

with God; all things are possible with God."

Then Peter spoke up, "We have left everything to follow you!"

"Truly I tell you," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields — along with persecutions — and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple courts they asked one another, "What do you think? Isn't he coming to the festival at all?" But the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who found out where Jesus was should report it so that they might arrest him.

> *How many times had Jesus instructed his followers to hold back, to not tell who he was, to wait? And they had waited. Now the waiting was over. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, he let the crowds rejoice. He knew what this week would hold, but for the moment, those who loved him could cheer and celebrate.*

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'"

They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

> “Hosanna!”[2]
>
> “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”
>
> “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!”
>
> “Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. “It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”

The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant.

“Do you hear what these children are saying?” they asked him.

“Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read,

> “‘From the lips of children and infants
> you, Lord, have called forth your praise'?”

And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.

Jesus spent much of his final week teaching at the temple. Rabbis commonly lectured in the temple or the synagogues. But this rabbi was different. This teacher changed everything by implying that the Messiah, the one greater even than David, was speaking to them. No one had talked like this before. No one had dared.

While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, “Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared:

> “‘The Lord said to my Lord:
> “Sit at my right hand
>
> until I put your enemies
> under your feet.”’

David himself calls him ‘Lord.’ How then can he be his son?”

The large crowd listened to him with delight.

The crowds liked Jesus, but the hatred of the religious leaders grew more intense. So human was Jesus that as his situation worsened, his heart was troubled. But Jesus faced his fear and refused to let it stop him from doing the will of God.

“Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!”

Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.” The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

Jesus said, “This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they

still would not believe in him.

Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human praise more than praise from God.

Then Jesus cried out, “Whoever believes in me does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me. I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.

“If anyone hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge that person. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day. For I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.”

Now the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. “But not during the festival,” they said, “or the people may riot.”

> *Behind the scenes, under the radar of politics or religious courts, a dark power was brewing and waiting. That evil power found an opening among Jesus’ intimate circle of followers. Just a touch of greed was all that power needed to accelerate the plot.*

Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. They were delighted and agreed to give him money. He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present.

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[1]**Gospel:** The message that Jesus has come to reconcile humanity to God

and that each individual can accept this undeserved gift and enter into a relationship with him; synonymous with *Good News*.

[2]**Hosanna:** A Hebrew expression meaning *Save!* which became an exclamation of praise.

26

The Hour of Darkness

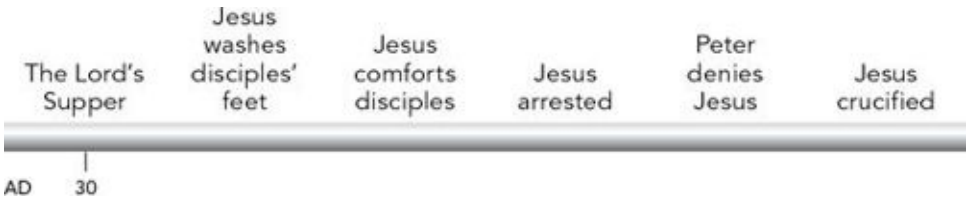
ON THE FIRST DAY of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there."

The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve.

Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.



The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying

them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?”

Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

“No,” said Peter, “you shall never wash my feet.”

Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.”

“Then, Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!”

Jesus answered, “Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.” For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, 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.”

Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, “Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me.”

His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved,[1] was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, “Ask him which one he means.”

Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?”

Jesus answered, “It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.

So Jesus told him, “What you are about to do, do quickly.” But no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.

After Judas left, Jesus gave the disciples a glimpse of what was to come. He foreshadowed the fact that he was going to be “broken” and “poured out”—he was going to take humanity’s punishment for sin on himself.

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.”

Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

Jesus warned his disciples that he would be with them only a little while longer. He went on to comfort his confused followers.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that 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. You know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father'? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

“If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever — the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

“I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.

“A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed:

“Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have

sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

"Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

> *Perhaps they sang a hymn from Psalms 115–118, the traditional psalms sung as part of the Passover meal. "The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion … Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever … Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." What were the disciples thinking and feeling as they followed Jesus to the Mount of Olives? They had probably gone to this place with him many times before for prayer and conversation. But now, shadows too dark for them to comprehend were beginning to fall on their hopes and dreams.*

Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written:

> "'I will strike the shepherd,
> and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'

But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."

"Truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."

But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown

you.” And all the other disciples said the same.

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people.

Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, “Who is it you want?”

“Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied.

“I am he,” Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground.

Again he asked them, “Who is it you want?”

“Jesus of Nazareth,” they said.

Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. If you are looking for me, then let these men go.” This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: “I have not lost one of those you gave me.”

Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant’s name was Malchus.)

Jesus commanded Peter, “Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?”

And he touched the man’s ear and healed him.

Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, who had come for him, “Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs? Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour — when darkness reigns.”

> *Soldiers of the Jewish religious establishment had come to place Jesus under arrest, and Jesus gave himself up. He could topple his foes with a word. He had the power to call on vast armies of angels to rescue him, but instead he surrendered. The disciples knew something very bad was happening, and they ran away to save their own skins. Jesus was left alone with his captors.*

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome.

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did

not find any, though many false witnesses came forward.

Finally two came forward and declared, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’”

Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” But Jesus remained silent.

The high priest said to him, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.”

“You have said so,” Jesus replied. “But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?”

“He is worthy of death,” they answered.

Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, “Prophesy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?”

> *Peter was not the timid sort. His normal reaction to trouble was to wrestle it to the ground, not to run from it. Quite naturally, then, he was the one to follow the soldiers back to the high priest’s house and wait for the outcome. Maybe he was dreaming up “Plan B” when a few people took him by surprise.*

And when some there had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, “This man was with him.”

But he denied it. “Woman, I don’t know him,” he said.

A little later someone else saw him and said, “You also are one of them.”

“Man, I am not!” Peter replied.

About an hour later another asserted, “Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean.”

Peter replied, “Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people made their plans how to have Jesus executed. So they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. “I have sinned,” he said, “for I have betrayed innocent blood.”

“What is that to us?” they replied. “That’s your responsibility.”

So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

> *The Jewish leaders brought Jesus to Pilate, who had governed the region of Judea for Rome for four years. Historical records reveal that he was no friend of the Jews. He frequently ordered soldiers to beat and kill Jewish protestors, and he had no compunction about offending Jewish leaders by placing symbols of pagan Roman worship in Jerusalem. On this Friday morning of Passover week, the Jewish leaders asked him to judge Jesus as a subversive threat. Now Pilate was caught. If he refused to condemn Jesus, Jewish accusers would portray him as no friend of Caesar (a very dangerous public image). If he agreed to crucify Jesus, he’d be acting against his own judicial instincts and, perhaps worse, caving in to those he despised. He needed to question this prisoner himself.*

Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

“Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?”

“Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?”

Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

“You are a king, then!” said Pilate.

Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

“What is truth?” retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him. But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release ‘the king of the Jews'?”

They shouted back, “No, not him! Give us Barabbas!” Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising.

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, “Hail, king of the Jews!” And they slapped him in the face.

Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him.” When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!”

As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, “Crucify! Crucify!”

But Pilate answered, “You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.”

The Jewish leaders insisted, “We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.”

When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace. “Where do you come from?” he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. “Do you refuse to speak to me?” Pilate said. “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?”

Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not

given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."

From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar."

When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). It was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about noon.

"Here is your king," Pilate said to the Jews.

But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!"

"Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked.

"We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered.

Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.

So the soldiers took charge of Jesus.

As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross.

> *Roman crucifixion was a cruel punishment. Nailed to a wooden cross by wrists and feet, it was an excruciating, slow and very public way to die. The victim's groaning became a morning's entertainment for onlookers. Seeing the horrors of crucifixion was an effective deterrent for wrong-doers. For Jesus, this heinous death was undeserved. As he gave his life, he looked beyond it to God's bigger story of salvation that was being played out through his life and death.*

Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!"

In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the

cross, that we may see and believe."

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals — one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."

The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

> *For those made to suffer crucifixion, death itself was the only resolution. So Jesus waited that day, along with two other victims and a crowd of onlookers, for death to overcome him. Before that, however, a deeper pain was coming. A pain that*

went far beyond the nails in his feet and wrists, the labored breathing or the "crown" of thorns puncturing his brow. God poured out humanity's rightful punishment for sin upon his Son. And even the physical elements trembled.

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, *"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"* (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah."

Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

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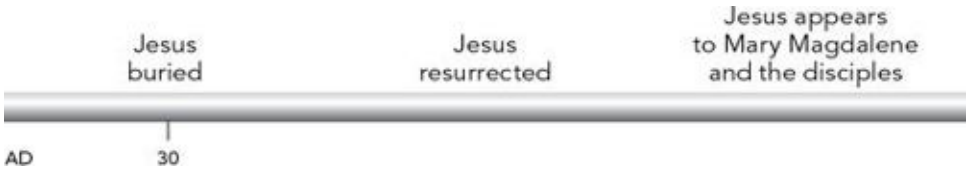
[1]**Disciple whom Jesus loved:** Probably John.

27

The Resurrection

NOW IT WAS THE DAY OF PREPARATION, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken," and, as another scripture says, "They will look on the one they have pierced."

Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.



The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. “Sir,” they said, “we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.”

“Take a guard,” Pilate answered. “Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.” So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

> *Jesus died and was buried on Friday. The next day was the Jewish Sabbath, and a guard was posted to prevent any tampering with the body. Then on the first day of the week, Sunday, those who mourned Jesus came to pay their respects.*

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?”

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

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. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

So Peter and the other disciple[1] started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

Now Mary[2] stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabbonì!" (which means "Teacher").

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.

He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

“What things?” he asked.

“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.”

He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.

He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee.

It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. “I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?”

“No,” they answered.

He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

Then the disciple whom Jesus loved[3] said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.” Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 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.”

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.

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

> *God had promised since Old Testament days that he would redeem and restore his people. He sent his Son, the Savior, who died and was raised to life so that people could be forgiven and brought into a relationship of peace and fellowship with God. What a story! But was Jesus’ resurrection the end of the saga? What else could possibly happen? Luke, the author of the Gospel by that name, answers that question in his second work — the “Acts of the Apostles,” better known simply as “Acts.”*

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[1]**The other disciple:** Probably John.

[2]**Mary:** That is, Mary Magdalene.

[3]**The disciple whom Jesus loved:** Probably John.

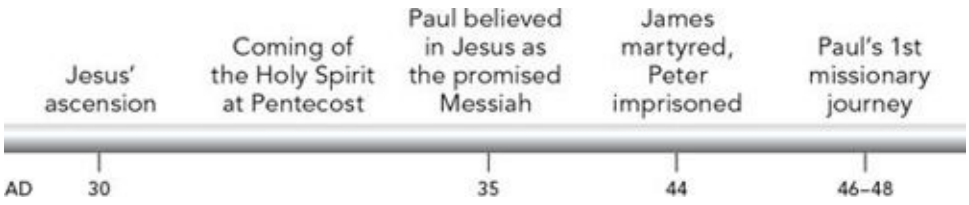
28

New Beginnings

IN MY FORMER BOOK, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”



After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

Jesus' ascension occurred 40 days after his resurrection. In the Jewish calendar, the harvest festival called Pentecost[1] came 50 days after the Sabbath of Passover week — coinciding with Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. At this eventful Pentecost celebration, the Holy Spirit appeared like flames over the disciples' heads and endued them with the Holy Spirit's power and a new sense of God-with-us. During the 10 days between Jesus' ascension to heaven and the Festival of Pentecost, the 11 disciples chose a replacement for Judas, and then spent most of their time praying and waiting for Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit to arrive. When the Holy Spirit came, the house rocked.

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,[2] Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs — we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

“‘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.’

“Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

“God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.

“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Peter replied, “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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call."

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer — at three in the afternoon. Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade. When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Fellow Israelites, why

does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

"Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you — even Jesus.

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees[3] came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is

"'the stone you builders rejected,

which has become the cornerstone.’

Salvation[4] is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. “What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. “Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.”

Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon’s Colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least

Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.

Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people all about this new life."

At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.

When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin — the full assembly of the elders of Israel — and sent to the jail for the apostles. But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside." On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to.

Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.

The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."

Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than human beings! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead — whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to

death. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: “Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. 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.”

His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

> *Growing movements create logistical nightmares. As hundreds, then thousands, said yes to following the resurrected Jesus, they gathered together, full of joy and needs. So who would run the errands, distribute food, clean the dishes and make sure everyone had name tags? For these important service jobs, the 12 apostles chose a small corps of servers, considered to be the first “deacons.” Among them was a man described as “full of God’s grace and power.” His name was Stephen.*

Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called) — Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia — who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against

God.”

So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?”

> *Stephen’s answer to this question came in the form of a Jewish history lesson about God’s great story of redemption. Then Stephen spoke of the “Righteous One,” Jesus.*

“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncir-cumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him — you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand ofGod.”

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

And Saul approved of their killing him.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city.

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man

and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord — Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here — has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him. When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Most of the new Christians were Jewish, but God's story of Good News was for everyone. Things had to change.

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do

not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along. The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.

> *Peter went on to say he realized that God doesn't show favoritism but invites people from every ethnic group and nation to accept the gospel through Jesus the Messiah. As Peter was explaining the gospel message and the first-ever Gentile audience was responding with faith and repentance, something amazing happened: the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on them just as it had been on the Jewish believers on the day of Pentecost.*
>
> *At the same time the church was growing, it was also facing persecution from Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great (who reigned when Jesus was born) and nephew of Herod Antipas (who had John the Baptist beheaded).*

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This

happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.

Then the angel said to him, “Put on your clothes and sandals.” And Peter did so. “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me,” the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.”

When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!”

“You’re out of your mind,” they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.”

But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. “Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this,” he said, and then he left for another place.

In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

> *Saul and his mentor Barnabas spent a year ministering to the first largely Gentile church at Antioch, where the believers were first called "Christians." From there the Lord called them to missionary service. Saul and Barnabas, accompanied at first by John Mark — who was Barnabas's cousin and who would later write the Gospel of Mark—began traveling and proclaiming Jesus throughout Asia Minor. It was also during this time that Saul got a name change to "Paul." Because God's Spirit was leading them, Saul (Paul) and his colleagues boldly spoke about Jesus everywhere they went. Little did they know what they would have to endure for the Good News.*

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[1]**Pentecost:** The Jewish festival celebrated on the 50th day after Passover. Jesus' disciples were celebrating this festival in Jerusalem when God sent his Holy Spirit to empower them with new life and blessing.

[2]**Asia:** That is, the Roman province by the same name.

[3]**Sadducees:** An upper-class group of Jewish leaders who oversaw the

temple administration.

[4]**Salvation:** Rescue from death or destruction. In the Biblical sense, the term *salvation* expresses the release from the debt of sin owed to God and the experience of never-ending life with him in heaven. Also relevant to earthly life, *salvation* can refer to the transformation of people's daily lives when they believe in Jesus.

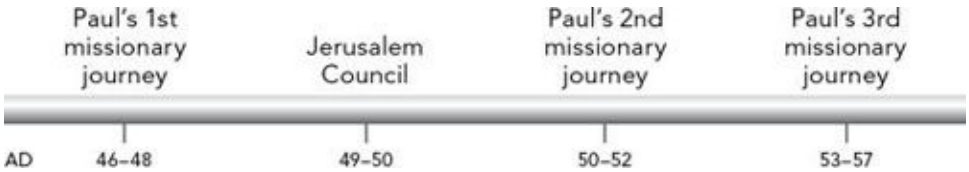
29

Paul's Mission

NOW IN THE CHURCH AT ANTIOCH there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun."



Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about,

seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pam-phylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem. From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have a word of exhortation for the people, please speak.”

Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: “Fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me!

“The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

“We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus.

“Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification[1] you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.”

As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped

abuse on him.

Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us:

“'I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. But the Jewish leaders incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. So they shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

> *When visiting a new city, Paul and Barnabas typically went first to the Jewish synagogue. Not only did they feel that doing so was God’s directed priority, but the synagogue’s building and regularly scheduled meetings provided a convenient location and designated time for proclaiming the gospel. The Good News was often met with mixed results among the Jews— some gratefully embraced the message while others rejected it out of disbelief.*
>
> *Within the mainstream Gentile community, some of the resistance to God’s Good News was motivated by pure economics: each new follower of Jesus meant one less buyer of charms and idol merchandise, which was big business in many cities. Some of the opposition was political, as each convert subtracted from the number and clout of the leading religious groups. Much of it was personal, since believing in Jesus changed people and thus threatened the status quo.*

At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed. But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the

other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders. The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, where they continued to preach the gospel.

In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: "Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

> *Paul felt the full weight of opposition as he challenged Gentiles and Jews to recognize Jesus as the long-promised Messiah and God's own Son. Shortly after being mistaken by the crowd of Gentiles in Lystra as a "god," some Jews were able to turn the tide of public opinion against the apostles. Paul was attacked by a mob, who stoned him and left him for dead. Christians*

gathered around him and prayed. Paul's strength was revived and he walked back into the city!

The next day Paul and Barnabas left for Derbe, the last city they would visit on this first missionary journey. After retracing their steps, encouraging the new churches they had founded earlier, they returned to their home base in Antioch. A year or so later, the developing Christian movement faced a critical issue. Some of the Jewish believers insisted that Gentile converts keep the Law of Moses, especially circumcision — the physical sign of God's promise to the Jews. A council of Christian leaders gathered in Jerusalem. Paul argued that Gentiles didn't need to become Jews in order to be saved, and eventually he (along with the support of Peter) persuaded the others.

After this, Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement; Barnabas wanted to reinstate John Mark to their team, but Paul didn't feel that was wise since Barnabas's young cousin had deserted them previously. Paul and Barnabas decided to part company. Silas joined Paul for the journey through Asia Minor, and Timothy joined them in Lystra. It was apparently at Troas, on the western coast of Asia Minor, that Luke — the author of both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts — joined the traveling missionaries. Also while at Troas, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia imploring them, "Come here, help us!" Believing that vision to be from God, Paul and his companions turned northwest across the Aegean Sea toward the city of Philippi, a Roman colony and leading Macedonian city. They soon were in trouble again.

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord,"

she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us.

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, “In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!” At that moment the spirit left her.

When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, “These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.”

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and your household.” Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set

a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God — he and his whole household.

When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: “Release those men.” The jailer told Paul, “The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace.”

But Paul said to the officers: “They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.”

The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.

> *If the Good News about Jesus really was the answer to humanity’s greatest questions, some people were not asking the right questions. Opposition showed up at every turn in the road. Paul’s legal trump card, his Roman citizenship, certainly helped in some situations. But still there were mobs to face (or avoid), anger to contend with and bonds to post when “disturbing the peace” was the most convenient crime to hang around Paul’s neck. None of this was easy, but Paul considered trouble an opportunity to trust God and never looked back.*

When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphip-olis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.

But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters

from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue.

> *In Berea, Paul found an eager and receptive audience, although Jewish opponents stirred up the crowds against Paul once again. So he traveled on to Athens, where he confronted a not-so-receptive audience—the philosophical thinkers of the day. Seeing an altar dedicated "to an unknown god," Paul challenged his audience to consider the living God and Creator, who has spoken eloquently through the life of the risen Messiah. A few people politely nodded, some laughed and a few believed in Jesus. Paul's mission was to find key people in each city who could lead a new community of believers, a "church," and help those in need through their deeds of mercy and love. He went to Corinth and a new Christian community was soon born.*

After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius[2] had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out

his clothes in protest and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”

Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized.

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.” So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

> *As was the customary way of communicating, Paul composed letters on scrolls to the churches he had established. These “epistles” are collected in Bibles today as part of the New Testament. Christians read them still as inspired and reliable words of instruction on how to know and live for God.*
>
> *While he was in Corinth, Paul wrote to believers in Thessalonica, probably around AD 51. Thessalonica was a bustling port city of 200,000 people (the largest population in Macedonia). With much emotion, Paul recalled the believers’ response to him and the gospel message during his recent visit there, his longing to see them again and his encouragement when he received a good report about them from Timothy. Then Paul in turn encouraged them, in the midst of their trials and persecution, explaining that the living Messiah would return someday.*

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance

inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia — your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead — Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed — God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. Instead, we were like young children among you.

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you — certainly I, Paul, did, again and again — but Satan blocked our way. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you

are our glory and joy.

So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain.

But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for

this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify[3] you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

Brothers and sisters, pray for us. Greet all God's people with a holy kiss. I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

> *If ever a place was hostile to Jesus' way of holiness, faith and joy, it was the city of Corinth. Paganism owned this cosmopolitan city with its wild night-life and upscale markets. Yet Paul's message was steady and sure: once you've explored all the human wisdom collected by the best minds in Greece, there still remain problems only Jesus can answer. Paul's debating skills and encyclopedic knowledge of Roman and religious law helped him navigate past petty charges the Jewish leaders made against him. Whether standing in the synagogue or the public square, Paul spoke what he knew: Jesus, who died and rose again, is the key to peace with God; only he fills the God-shaped vacuum in every heart.*

While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment. "This man," they charged, "is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law."

Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to them, "If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law— settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things." So he drove them off. Then the crowd there turned on Sosthenes the synagogue leader and

beat him in front of the proconsul; and Gallio showed no concern whatever.

Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchreae because of a vow he had taken. They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." Then he set sail from Ephesus. When he landed at Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch.

After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers and sisters encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.

> *Everywhere Paul traveled, he saw God's power at work in people's lives. In some places he witnessed spiritual breakthroughs when many people believed; in other places he was chased or beaten. He trusted that God would bring good out of it all. Although Paul was a tireless traveling missionary, he did settle into extended periods of ministry at a few strategic major cities. This had been the case at Antioch and Corinth. And now the apostle was about to spend more than two years at Ephesus—the leading commercial center of Asia Minor and*

the guardian of the temple of Artemis (the Greek name for the Roman goddess Diana), which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus.

Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.

Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, “In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.” Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?” Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.[4] In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis,

brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said: “You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.”

When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia, and all of them rushed into the theater together. Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater.

The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. The Jews in the crowd pushed Alexander to the front, and they shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people. But when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: “Fellow Ephesians, doesn’t all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven? Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to calm down and not do anything rash. You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess. If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly. As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of what happened today. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it.” After he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.

When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said goodbye and set out for Macedonia.

> *Near the end of Paul's two-plus years in Ephesus, he wrote a very direct letter to the Christians in Corinth. Although this wasn't the first letter he had written them, we know it as "First Corinthians" because it's the first of two letters from Paul to the Corinthians found in the New Testament. In the city of Corinth, followers of Jesus had to work hard at keeping the faith. Idol worship was popular, as Corinth was home to at least a dozen pagan temples. At one time more than a thousand temple prostitutes "officiated" at Aphrodite's temple alone. Living out the truth was not easy. And, unfortunately, rather than facing the challenges of their culture as a united "body," the believers at Corinth were splintered into factions. Paul's letter spoke eloquently to issues they faced, concluding with a reminder that Jesus has triumphed over death.*

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ — their Lord and ours:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas[5]"; still another, "I follow Christ."

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?

Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly — mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere human beings?

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe — as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building.

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future — all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people — not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.

What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside.

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are

outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

My dear friends, flee from idolatry. I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.

Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.

Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body — whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact

God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.[6]

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them — yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is

no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed — in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that

meets at their house. All the brothers and sisters here send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand.

If anyone does not love the Lord, let that person be cursed! Come, Lord!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.

My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen.

> *How does a person please God? Many religions teach that one must appease God/gods with offerings or superstitious rituals. Yet God's story abolishes our religious to-do lists. Faith in Jesus is God's way for us, and delight in Jesus is what God asks of us. When religious people become followers of Jesus, they are freed from sin and legalistic rituals.*
>
> *The Christians in Galatia were coming under the influence of Jewish Christians who believed that a number of the ceremonial practices of Judaism remained obligatory for followers of Jesus. Paul wrote to the churches in this part of Asia Minor to warn them that they were in reality deserting God and turning to a false gospel. He forcefully proclaimed that people cannot be saved by performing good works in general or by adhering to the Law of Moses in particular. We must come to God trusting in Jesus alone. Only then will we experience freedom.*

Paul, an apostle — sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead — and all the brothers and sisters with me,

To the churches in Galatia:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel —

which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? Have you experienced so much in vain — if it really was in vain? So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?

All who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because "the righteous will live by faith."

Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

> *Paul had never visited the church in Rome, which included both Jewish and Gentile Christians, though Gentiles comprised the majority. Around AD 57, he wrote them an amazing letter to stabilize their understanding of God's story of Jesus the Messiah and to give them courage under pressure. This brilliant letter mapped out foundational truths of Christianity and answered tough questions about sin, grace, the Jewish law and the never-ending power of God's love.*

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God — the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that

brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed — a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption[7] that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement,[8] through the shedding of his blood — to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished — he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about — but not before God. What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

“Blessed are those
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the one
whose sin the Lord will never count against them.”

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation — but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, *"Abba,*[9] Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and coheirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

"For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God — this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this

world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Since I have been longing for many years to visit you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord's people there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this contribution, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.

I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favorably received by the Lord's people there, so that I may come to you with joy, by God's will, and in your company be refreshed. The God of peace be with you all. Amen.

After traveling through Macedonia and encouraging many people there, Paul set his sights on Jerusalem. He felt urgently compelled by God to return there, even though he had an inkling that hardship awaited him. Luke the physician was traveling with Paul at this time and recorded in the book of Acts a breathtaking first-person account of their final shared experiences.

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[1]**Justified, justification:** The process by which one is made acceptable in the sight of God. Justification occurs through faith that Jesus died to pay the price for human sin; thus, Jesus himself justifies each person who believes in him.

[2]**Claudius:** The emperor of Rome.

[3]**Sanctify, sanctification:** The process of growing continually closer to God and taking on his characteristics. Sanctification is essential to the Christian life as evidence of and an effect of the spiritual reality of justification.

[4]**Drachmas:** A drachma was a silver coin worth about a day's wages.

[5]**Cephas:**That is, Peter.

[6]**One abnormally born:** That is, Paul was not part of the original group of apostles and had not lived with Christ as the others had.

[7]**Redemption:** The release of humanity from the debt owed to God for disobedience and the resulting restoration of a relationship with him.

[8]**Atonement:** To make amends to God for wrongdoing (sin) through a sacrifice. In the Old Testament, crops or livestock were offered or sacrificed for atonement; in the New Testament, the death of Jesus was the sacrifice that pays for the sins of his people.

[9]**Abba:** Aramaic for Father.

30

Paul's Final Days

WE WENT ON AHEAD to the ship and sailed for Assos, where we were going to take Paul aboard. He had made this arrangement because he was going there on foot. When he met us at Assos, we took him aboard and went on to Mitylene. The next day we set sail from there and arrived off Chios. The day after that we crossed over to Samos, and on the following day arrived at Miletus. Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost.

From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. When they arrived, he said to them: "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.



"And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.

"Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about

preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and sisters and stayed with them for a day. Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'"

When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

After this, we started on our way up to Jerusalem.

> *In the face of a warning as strong as the prophetic word through Agabus, most people would seek shelter far from the anticipated danger. Yet Paul had a calling and would not flinch. His sense of personal safety was vested in God alone. Arriving in Jerusalem, Paul was warmly received by the believers there, and they were excited to hear what God had done among the Gentiles through Paul's ministry. Paul then*

went to the temple, and his enemies saw their chance. Paul took the opportunity to tell his story once again—that Jesus was alive and had appeared to him in a miraculous vision on the Damascus road.

Some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, “Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place.” (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.)

The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.

The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd that followed kept shouting, “Get rid of him!”

As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, “May I say something to you?”

“Do you speak Greek?” he replied. “Aren’t you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the wilderness some time ago?”

Paul answered, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people.”

After receiving the commander’s permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them

in Aramaic: “Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense.”

When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet.

Then Paul said: “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

“About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’

“‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked.

“‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

“‘What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked.

“‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

“A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him.

“Then he said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.’

“When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking to me. ‘Quick!’ he said. ‘Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your

testimony about me.’

“‘Lord,’ I replied, ‘these people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’

“Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, “Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!”

As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the commander ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and interrogated in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been found guilty?”

When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. “What are you going to do?” he asked. “This man is a Roman citizen.”

The commander went to Paul and asked, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?”

“Yes, I am,” he answered.

Then the commander said, “I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship.”

“But I was born a citizen,” Paul replied.

Those who were about to interrogate him withdrew immediately. The commander himself was alarmed when he realized that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains.

The commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews. So the next day he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the members of the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them.

Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, “My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.” At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on

the mouth. Then Paul said to him, “God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!”

Those who were standing near Paul said, “How dare you insult God’s high priest!”

Paul replied, “Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: ‘Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.’”

Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, “My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead.” When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things.)

There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. “We find nothing wrong with this man,” they said. “What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?” The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.

The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.”

The next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. More than forty men were involved in this plot. They went to the chief priests and the elders and said, “We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul. Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here.”

But when the son of Paul’s sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul.

Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, “Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him.” So he took him to the

commander.

The centurion said, “Paul, the prisoner, sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you.”

The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, “What is it you want to tell me?”

He said: “Some Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin tomorrow on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about him. Don’t give in to them, because more than forty of them are waiting in ambush for him. They have taken an oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are ready now, waiting for your consent to their request.”

The commander dismissed the young man with this warning: “Don’t tell anyone that you have reported this to me.”

Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, “Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. Provide horses for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix.”

He wrote a letter as follows:

Claudius Lysias,

To His Excellency, Governor Felix:

Greetings.

This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen. I wanted to know why they were accusing him, so I brought him to their Sanhedrin. I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment. When I was informed of a plot to be carried out against the man, I sent him to you at once. I also ordered his accusers to present to you their case against him.

So the soldiers, carrying out their orders, took Paul with them during

the night and brought him as far as Antipatris. The next day they let the cavalry go on with him, while they returned to the barracks. When the cavalry arrived in Caesarea, they delivered the letter to the governor and handed Paul over to him. The governor read the letter and asked what province he was from. Learning that he was from Cilicia, he said, “I will hear your case when your accusers get here.” Then he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in Herod’s palace.

> *Paul’s arrest resulted from anything but criminal behavior, and the years he spent waiting for Roman justice would have broken most people. None of the officials he faced could find legal fault with him (the charge was sedition), yet no one would release him for fear of political repercussions. The Roman governor Felix held Paul in custody at Caesarea for two years, sending for him frequently in hope that Paul would offer him a bribe. Finally Felix was recalled to Rome for failing, among other things, to control local insurrection.*
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> *The Jewish leaders immediately asked the new governor, Festus, to transfer Paul from Caesarea to Jerusalem. Paul, a Roman citizen, was forced to exercise his right of appeal to Caesar in order to avoid the grave danger of going to Jerusalem. Next, Paul appeared before King Herod Agrippa II. Agrippa and Festus agreed that Paul wasn’t guilty of any crime. But Paul had made an appeal to Caesar, so the Roman Imperial Court would finally get the privilege of disposing of his case.*
>
> *Paul’s defense before these authorities was more a continuation of his life work than a defendant’s plea for justice. Paul tried to show them how important faith in Jesus was — for them and everyone! They refused to respond and placed Paul on a ship to Rome.*

When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment. We boarded a ship from Adramyttium about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia, and we put out

to sea. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us.

The next day we landed at Sidon; and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs. From there we put out to sea again and passed to the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us. When we had sailed across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board. We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arriving off Cnidus. When the wind did not allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the lee of Crete, opposite Salmone. We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea.

Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Day of Atonement. So Paul warned them, “Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also.” But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. Since the harbor was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbor in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest.

When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, swept down from the island. The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure, so the men hoisted it aboard. Then they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Because they were afraid they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. On the third day, they threw the ship’s tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.

After they had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: “Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.’ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island.”

On the fourteenth night we were still being driven across the Adriatic[1] Sea, when about midnight the sailors sensed they were approaching land. They took soundings and found that the water was a hundred and twenty feet deep. A short time later they took soundings again and found it was ninety feet deep. Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight. In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.” So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away.

Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. “For the last fourteen days,” he said, “you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food — you haven’t eaten anything. Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head.” After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. Altogether there were 276 of us on board. When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea.

When daylight came, they did not recognize the land, but they saw a bay with a sandy beach, where they decided to run the ship aground if they could. Cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea and at the same time untied the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and made for the beach. But the ship struck a sandbar and ran aground. The bow stuck fast and would not move, and

the stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf.

The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. But the centurion wanted to spare Paul's life and kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. The rest were to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land safely.

Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta. The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, "This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, the goddess Justice has not allowed him to live." But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead; but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god.

There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and showed us generous hospitality for three days. His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured. They honored us in many ways; and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed.

After three months we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island — it was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux. We put in at Syracuse and stayed there three days. From there we set sail and arrived at Rhegium. The next day the south wind came up, and on the following day we reached Puteoli. There we found some brothers and sisters who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome. The brothers and sisters there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged. When we got to Rome, Paul was

allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him.

Three days later he called together the local Jewish leaders. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: “My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. The Jews objected, so I was compelled to make an appeal to Caesar. I certainly did not intend to bring any charge against my own people. For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.”

They replied, “We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of our people who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect.”

They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: “The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet:

> “‘Go to this people and say,
> “You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
> you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.”
> For this people’s heart has become calloused;
> they hardly hear with their ears,
> and they have closed their eyes.
> Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
> hear with their ears,
> understand with their hearts

and turn, and I would heal them.’

“Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!”

For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ — with all boldness and without hindrance!

While Paul was under house arrest in Rome, awaiting his trial before Caesar, he penned a letter to his beloved friends in Ephesus. This letter was probably intended to be circulated and read in several churches in addition to the one at Ephesus. It was a passionate review of God’s love through Jesus and a call for all believers to live in unity. As Paul’s life was nearing an end, his heart overflowed with joy and praise at God’s wonderful story of redemption in Jesus the Messiah.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To God’s holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will — to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment — to bring

unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands) — remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and

without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one

faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church — for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery — but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” — which is the first commandment with a promise — “so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.”

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Peace to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.

It appears that Paul was released from house arrest in Rome in AD 62 and embarked on a final missionary journey to Asia Minor, Crete, Greece and perhaps Spain. He was imprisoned

again in Rome, but this time he languished in a cold dungeon, chained like a common criminal. Paul was martyred during the reign of the emperor Nero in AD 67 or 68. During his final days, he wrote one last letter—a personal letter to Timothy, his coworker and "son in the faith." To distinguish it from Paul's earlier letter to Timothy, this letter is known as "Second Timothy" in the New Testament. Here, the beloved apostle pours out his heart with a mixture of loneliness, tenacious faith and concern for his fellow believers during this time of persecution under Nero.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, in keeping with the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, my dear son:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I thank God, whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God. He has saved us and called us to a holy life — not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am

convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others. Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer. Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor's crown except by competing according to the rules. The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained.

You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings — what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his

appearing.

Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.

> *Paul wasn't the only apostle to be martyred. Tradition says that John, the author of a lofty and mysterious vision called "Revelation," was the oldest and last surviving member of Jesus' original disciples. By the time he wrote this book, it's likely that the other disciples had been killed (according to tradition, Peter was crucified upside down) or had wandered into regions where news of them was lost to distance and time. John was exiled to the island of Patmos, where he wrote of the vision and revelation he received.*

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[1]**Adriatic:** In ancient times the name referred to an area extending well south of Italy.

31

The End of Time

THE REVELATION FROM JESUS CHRIST, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father — to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.



“Look, he is coming with the clouds,”
and “every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him";
and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.”

So shall it be! Amen.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

“Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

> *This blazing Living One, the risen Lord Jesus, then dictated letters to seven individual churches throughout Asia Minor, warning of problems and pitfalls in their faith. The letters imply that we live in a morally accountable universe, and those accounts will be “called in” at the end of history. God, firmly in control of his story, has set a day when patience will give*

way to a final judgment.

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

“These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

“To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

“These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

“Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

“These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm — neither hot nor cold — I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

“Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

“To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

> *Now John’s Revelation takes a turn from an exhortation of the seven churches to a series of mysterious and symbolic scenes. The curtains of heaven are rolled back, and John gets a glimpse of spiritual realities—including the final days of history when the utterly astounding glory of God and his plan for the world will be revealed.*

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.

Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

"'Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,'
who was, and is, and is to come."

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

"You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being."

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven

spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. And they sang a new song, saying:

> "You are worthy to take the scroll
>
> and to open its seals,
>
> because you were slain,
>
> and with your blood you purchased for God
>
> persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.
>
> You have made them to be a kingdom and priests
>
> to serve our God,
>
> and they will reign on the earth."

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying:

> "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
>
> to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
>
> and honor and glory and praise!"

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:

> "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
>
> be praise and honor and glory and power,
>
> for ever and ever!"

The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Then a voice came from the throne, saying:

"Praise our God,
all you his servants,

you who fear him,
both great and small!"

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

"Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and be glad

and give him glory!

For the wedding of the Lamb has come,

and his bride has made herself ready.

Fine linen, bright and clean,

was given her to wear."

(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people.)

Then the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" And he added, "These are the true words of God."

At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, "Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For it is the Spirit of prophecy who bears testimony to Jesus."

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The

armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. “He will rule them with an iron scepter.” He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:

KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

Soon after this story opened in the book of Genesis, God’s battle against evil became evident in the Garden of Eden. Here at the end, the final battle will be engaged. When it’s over, all the oppression, injustice and grief caused by Satan’s side will be wrapped up and consigned to a place far from God’s home. All the world’s destruction and brokenness will give way to Jesus’ promise of a new creation, a new environment, a new city of peace and freedom. It is here that Christians will forever enjoy the glory and holiness of God himself. This is very good news to God’s children, but it will be a time of unspeakable horror for those who turn away from God.

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people,

and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars — they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. The angel measured the wall using human measurement, and it was 144 cubits thick. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth turquoise, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the

city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass.

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

The angel said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God who inspires the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place."

"Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll."

I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. But he said to me, "Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your fellow prophets and with all who keep the words of this scroll. Worship God!"

Then he told me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this scroll, because the time is near. Let the one who does wrong continue to do wrong; let the vile person continue to be vile; let the one who does right continue to do right; and let the holy person continue to be holy."

"Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to

each person according to what they have done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.”

The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let the one who hears say, “Come!” Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll. And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this scroll.

He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.”

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.

Epilogue

THE STORY HAS COME TO AN END, and God's message rings loud and clear:

I have opened the door; I have made a way — come to me and have life!

The Good News has gone out to the world. Jesus has come to provide salvation for us all! All of God's story has led up to this ultimate news that we can experience and share with others. It has survived for thousands of years, marching forth to all cultures and peoples, leaving behind an incredible wake of transformation and change. Many have tried to put out its fire, but God's words have proven to be true, "My word … will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

And now God's triumphant Word has found its way to you. You've read *The Story*. You've heard the truth. You've come face to face with the most important message you will ever hear: Jesus, God's Son, came, lived, died and rose again.

So now the question remains …

What will *you* do with *The Story?*

Will you turn away and dismiss it as an interesting tale? Will you block out the light that shines so brightly? Or will you take a step down the narrow path that leads to unimaginable glory? Jesus tells us, "Enter through the narrow gate … small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." Will you be one of the few?

The chapter bearing your name is about to be written.

Discussion Questions

1 Creation: The Beginning of Life as We Know It

1. In what ways was life in the original creation different from life as we know it today?
2. Why did God create humans in his own image? What does this mean?
3. What was the root cause of Adam and Eve's sin against God?
4. Why did God put the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden?
5. Why did God bring the flood upon the earth?
6. What does this act of judgment tell you about God?

2 God Builds a Nation

1. Abraham left his homeland and family to follow God. What did God say his reward would be?
2. What might God be asking you to give up to follow him?
3. What made Abraham righteous in God's sight? How is this fact relevant to your life?
4. Why did God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac? What did Abraham — and Isaac — learn from this experience?
5. Because Jacob had shrewdly acquired Esau's birthright and stolen their father's blessing, Jacob feared his brother's revenge. How did Jacob prepare for his meeting with Esau?
6. What attitude did Jacob have when he wrestled with the "man" who Jacob eventually realized was actually God?

3 Joseph: From Slave to Deputy Pharaoh

1. Why did Joseph's brothers want to get rid of him?
2. Why does God allow hurtful things to happen to people?
3. What were the positive effects of Joseph's being sold into slavery?

4. What does Joseph's statement to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good," tell you about God?
5. In what ways have you seen God work through the most bleak and hopeless situations to cause a greater good?
6. Why can God be trusted at all times?

4 Deliverance

1. What was significant about Moses' birth?
2. How did God display his concern and love for his people after hearing their cries and groaning?
3. In what ways was Moses qualified to lead the people? In what ways did he feel he was not qualified?
4. Have you ever felt unqualified or unable to do something, as Moses did? How did you handle it?
5. *The Story* notes several amazing miracles in the deliverance of the people from Egypt. Do you believe God performs miracles today? Why or why not?
6. What can you learn about the character of God from the story of the Israelites' deliverance from slavery?

5 New Commands and a New Covenant

1. How were the people to prepare themselves to meet with God?
2. What does this story of the giving of these new commands tell you about the character of God?
3. What was the purpose of the Ten Commandments?
4. How can God be both the merciful forgiver of sin and the punisher of the guilty?
5. The Israelites became impatient and finally made a golden idol in the shape of a calf for themselves. What are some false gods/idols worshiped in our society today?
6. The Lord spoke to Moses "as one speaks to a friend." What steps can you take to gain a deeper understanding of who God is?

6 Wandering

1. What do you think was the root cause of most of the Israelites'

problems? Why?
2. How did God respond to the people's lack of faith?
3. Why is God so radically opposed to sin?
4. What do you learn from Moses' leadership throughout this difficult period? How did he display frustration and faith?
5. Have you ever felt as if you were "wandering in the wilderness" — spiritually or emotionally? Explain.
6. How can having faith in what God has promised help you in difficult times?

7 The Battle Begins

1. How could Joshua be "strong and courageous" in such intimidating situations?
2. What do you learn about God from the story of the salvation of Rahab the prostitute?
3. What do the string of amazing battle victories the people experienced as they entered the land reveal about who is really in charge of history?
4. Why did God order the Israelites to go to war against others? How was this war justified?
5. How did Joshua challenge the people in his final speech?
6. Why do you think God lavished blessings on Joshua and all the Israelites, who, like Joshua, trusted God?
7. What practical steps can you take to gain a deeper faith in God?

8 A Few Good Men … and Women

1. What does God's choice of Deborah as judge during this time reveal about God's view of women?
2. Why does God often use weak and uncertain people like Gideon to do his work?
3. If you ever feel uncertain about your gifts and abilities, how could the story of Gideon encourage and strengthen you?
4. What reasons can you give for why the Israelites kept repeating their downward cycle of sin?
5. What was the root cause of Samson's fall? What was the result?

6. What are the strongest temptations that you face? How do you fight such temptations?

9 The Faith of a Foreign Woman

1. What does Ruth's story reveal about the love of God?
2. What does Ruth's story reveal about how God views all people groups? What does that mean for you?
3. Both Ruth and Naomi suffered tremendous loss. Why does a good and gracious God allow tragedy to come upon those who love him?
4. When difficult times come, what causes you to continue to hope in God?
5. Ruth left her home to follow Naomi and to follow God. How is God asking you to follow him?
6. In what way do Ruth's actions and responses challenge you? Encourage you?
7. What steps can you take to become a more selfless, loving person?

10 Standing Tall, Falling Hard

1. What do you learn about prayer from Hannah?
2. How did Samuel show his faith in God?
3. Why was it wrong for the Israelites to ask for a king?
4. What factors led to King Saul's demise?
5. How did Saul respond when confronted with his sin? How do you respond when confronted with your own shortcomings?
6. What instances of God's grace do you see in this chapter?

11 From Shepherd to King

1. Why was David chosen to be the next king of Israel?
2. What obstacles did David face to become the king he was anointed to be?
3. How was David able to face a giant when so many others gave way to fear?
4. Why did David spare Saul when he had the chance to be free of Saul's attempts to kill him? What would you have done?
5. David had a single goal (that the God of Israel would be glorified)

because he had a single love (the God of Israel). What can you do to cultivate a heart like David's?

12 The Trials of a King

1. What were some factors that led to David's sin with Bathsheba?
2. Both Saul and David sinned against God, yet how did their responses differ? What was the result of their responses?
3. How did David's sins affect the future of his family?
4. David was allowed to plan the temple, but God told him that his son would be the one to actually build it. How do think David felt about that? How did David respond?
5. Do you, like David, give God credit and praise for your successes and accomplishments?

13 The King Who Had It All

1. Why was Solomon's request for wisdom and discernment so pleasing to the Lord?
2. How is wisdom different from mere knowledge and intellect?
3. Why is it vital to become wise?
4. What can you do to gain more wisdom?
5. How did pride and lust contribute to Solomon's fall?
6. What can you do to guard yourself against these sins?

14 A Kingdom Torn in Two

1. What caused the kingdom of Israel to be divided?
2. How did Rehoboam and Jeroboam both make mistakes?
3. What observations do you make about God's character and what is important to God, based on this chapter?
4. Why is it important to always remain loyal to God?
5. When have you strayed from God? What caused the straying?
6. In what ways has God been kind to you even when you didn't deserve it?

15 God's Messengers

1. What do you learn about faith from Elijah's ups (victory over the prophets of Baal) and his downs (depression in the desert)?
2. God revealed himself to Elijah in a gentle whisper. What does this tell you about God's character and methods of communication?
3. What steps can you take to hear the gentle whisper of God?
4. In what ways did the prophet Elisha live a life of faith?
5. Identify the ways God was faithful to Elisha.
6. How has God been faithful to you?
7. What specific message of social justice and spiritual faithfulness do you think the prophets Amos and Hosea would proclaim today?

16 The Beginning of the End (of the Kingdom of Israel)

1. Why did Hezekiah experience so many difficulties? Does obedience to God guarantee prosperity?
2. When Hezekiah received an intimidating letter from his enemies, he "went up to the temple of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD." When have you reacted to an attack or urgent problem with a similar attitude?
3. What were some of the main themes in Isaiah's prophecies?
4. How could God be merciful to his people in light of their actions toward him?
5. How has God shown mercy to you?
6. Isaiah foretold the rise and fall of nations. Is God still in control of world events in our day?

17 The Kingdoms' Fall

1. Why did disaster come upon God's people?
2. What negative effects of sin have you seen in your life?
3. What were some of the main themes of the prophets' messages during this time?
4. Can you relate to Jeremiah as the "weeping prophet" who felt deeply the burden of God's people's sin?
5. How does God's promise of restoration for his people still give you hope today?

18 Daniel in Exile

1. In what ways do you see Daniel exhibit his faith in God?
2. What enabled Daniel's three friends to stand against the king's orders?
3. Why did God choose to punish Nebuchadnezzar the way that he did? What was the result of this punishment?
4. Why did Daniel prosper under the kings of Babylon and Persia?
5. What can you learn about prayer from Daniel?
6. What steps can you take to become more devoted to prayer?

19 The Return Home

1. Why did God rescue the Israelites again?
2. In what ways have you seen or experienced the rescuing power of God?
3. What did the Israelites do to deserve the mercy they received?
4. What reason does God have for being merciful to you?
5. The Jews returned home to rebuild the temple, the dwelling place of God on earth. Why was it important for them to do this?
6. Where does God dwell on earth today?

20 The Queen of Beauty and Courage

1. What does this chapter of *The Story* teach about God's work behind the scenes of history?
2. How did Mordecai respond when faced with disaster?
3. What character qualities do you observe in Queen Esther?
4. When was the last time you faced a threatening situation? What was your reaction?
5. In what ways have you experienced God's faithfulness in your life?
6. What steps can you take to show that you trust in the faithfulness of God?

21 Rebuilding the Walls

1. What was Ezra's role when he arrived in Jerusalem?
2. In what ways do you see God's faithfulness in this chapter?

3. Why was Nehemiah able to rebuild the city walls amidst such severe opposition?
4. What can you do to gain a greater dependence on God in difficult circumstances?
5. According to the prophet Malachi, what did the Israelites do (or not do) that displeased the Lord? Why were these things so evil?
6. Are there areas of your life displeasing to the Lord? What can you do to make your relationship right again?

22 The Birth of the King

1. Why did God send Jesus into the world?
2. What can you learn from Mary's reaction to her surprising and somewhat disturbing news?
3. Why was Jesus born into such humble circumstances?
4. What does this chapter reveal about who Jesus is?
5. What impact has the birth of Christ had on your life?
6. Why should you be thankful that God sent his Son into the world?

23 Jesus' Ministry Begins

1. What purposes did Jesus' baptism and temptation serve?
2. How would you sum up the main message that Jesus had for the people?
3. Why did so many people have a deep hatred for Jesus?
4. Jesus said that we must be "born again" to enter the kingdom of God. What does it mean to be born again?
5. What kind of people did Jesus typically reach out to? What kind of people did he oppose? Why?
6. Jesus stated that "whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." What do you think this statement means?

24 No Ordinary Man

1. Why might Jesus have used parables as a way to teach people?
2. What can you learn from Jesus' parables that you can use in your

own life?
3. If you would have heard Jesus' sermon, what do you think you would have done? Would you have followed him?
4. Why did Jesus' teaching bother some of the religious leaders?
5. Jesus explained that he is the "bread of life" — the source of sustenance and satisfaction. What can you do to gain a deeper satisfaction in your relationship with Jesus?

25 Jesus, the Son of God

1. How would you respond to someone who asked, "Who is Jesus?"
2. What was Jesus' primary mission during his life?
3. What character qualities do you see in Jesus?
4. What changes do you need to make to bring your life into conformity with Jesus' values and priorities?
5. In what ways did Jesus' words and actions reveal the fact that he is equal with God?
6. How would you respond to the question, "How can you be sure that Jesus is God?"
7. What can you do to gain a deeper love for Jesus? Why is this important?

26 The Hour of Darkness

1. What did Jesus predict at the last supper with his disciples?
2. Why did Jesus have to die?
3. How did Jesus' followers respond to the tragic events?
4. What implications does Jesus' death on the cross for the sins of humanity have for your life?
5. What can you learn about God's love through these events?
6. In what way has Jesus' life and death affected the way you live your life from day to day?

27 The Resurrection

1. After Jesus died, why did some of his followers come to the tomb? What does this tell you about friendship and loyalty among Jesus' companions?

2. Do you believe that Jesus rose from the dead? Why?
3. When Jesus appeared to people after his resurrection, how do you think their lives were changed?
4. What does Jesus' resurrection from the dead reveal about God's power over death and sin?
5. What difference can or does it make in your life knowing that Jesus is alive today?
6. Before Jesus ascended to heaven, he commanded his followers to "go and make disciples of all nations." If you are a believer, when was the last time you talked to someone else about your faith in Jesus?

28 New Beginnings

1. Why was Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost so effective?
2. Why did the Jewish religious leaders dislike the early Christians?
3. What examples of Christian love and fellowship do you see in this chapter?
4. What factors helped the Good News of Jesus Christ to spread quickly?
5. How were the early Christians able to remain faithful even in the midst of extremely difficult circumstances?
6. What practical steps can you take to increase your faith?
7. How do you explain the drastic change in Saul's (Paul's) life?

29 Paul's Mission

1. After Paul found the Lord, what was Paul's passion and mission in life?
2. What is your passion and mission in life?
3. When in a new city, why did Paul invariably begin his outreach at the Jewish synagogue?
4. How would you define "the gospel"?
5. What impact does the gospel have on your life?
6. What would have happened to Christianity if the Jewish believers who insisted that Gentiles become Jews prevailed?
7. What does Paul's letter to the Romans reveal to us about salvation?

30 Paul's Final Days

1. How was Paul able to endure the pain and trials that he suffered for his beliefs?
2. What can you learn from Paul's life about how to face difficult circumstances?
3. Why was Paul willing to walk into the face of danger?
4. What character qualities do you see in Paul?
5. What practical steps can you take to cultivate character qualities that resemble Paul's?
6. How would you sum up Paul's message?

31 The End of Time

1. What was John's response when he saw Jesus in the vision? Why did he respond this way?
2. What were the warnings Jesus gave to the churches? In what way do these warnings apply to your life?
3. What do you learn about God from his actions and descriptions in this chapter?
4. What does this chapter reveal about what heaven will be like?
5. Why is it important to think about and set your hope on heaven?
6. What steps can you take to set your hope more fully on what you know about eternity from this chapter?

Characters

Adam: The first man, husband of Eve. Created by God out of dust. Adam sinned when he ate fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Eve: The first woman, wife of Adam. Created by God from Adam's rib. Eve sinned when she ate fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Noah: At God's command, Noah built an ark to save himself, his family and the animals from a flood sent to wipe out humanity.

Abraham: The founding father of Israel. He was a model of faith in God, who promised him the land of Canaan and the legacy of being the father of a great nation.

Sarah: The wife of Abraham. She was infertile, but God enabled her to give birth to Isaac in her old age.

Isaac: One of the patriarchs of Israel. His birth was miraculous because his mother, Sarah, had been infertile and was 90 years old. His children were Jacob and Esau.

Rebekah: A member of Abraham's extended family. She married Isaac and had twin boys: Jacob and Esau.

Jacob: Also called "Israel," Jacob was another patriarch of the Israelite nation. He had 12 sons, whose descendants formed the 12 tribes of Israel.

Leah: Unloved wife of Jacob and sister of Rachel. She struggled with her situation, but came to trust in God as she gave birth to six sons and a daughter.

Rachel: Beloved wife of Jacob and sister of Leah. Her infertility caused strife between her and her sister. However, God eventually blessed her with two sons: Joseph and Benjamin.

Joseph: Jacob's favorite son. His jealous brothers sold him into slavery, but he rose to prominence in Egypt and brought his family to live there during a famine.

Moses: Used by God to deliver the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Moses was God's spokesman to the people and gave them the Law.

Joshua: Succeeded Moses and led the Israelites' conquest of Canaan.

Deborah: One of Israel's judges (leaders who brought deliverance from foreign oppressors). She ordered Barak to move against Sisera's army but predicted that Sisera himself would be killed by a woman.

Gideon: One of Israel's judges. Using unorthodox tactics commanded by God, he reluctantly led the Israelites to victory against their Midianite oppressors.

Samson: One of Israel's judges. God gave him superhuman strength. He had a lifelong rivalry with the Philistines, whom he defeated at the cost of his own life.

Ruth: A Moabite woman during the time of the judges. After her Israelite husband died, she left her homeland to return to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, Naomi. She became the great-grandmother of King David.

Samuel: A great prophet and the last judge of Israel. He anointed Saul and David as Israel's kings.

Saul: The first king of Israel. His repeated disobedience to God during his reign led to its ignominious end. He was succeeded by David, whom he repeatedly tried to kill.

David: The second king of Israel, father of Solomon. David was devoted to God, and Israel flourished under him, but his reign was marred by his adultery with Bathsheba.

Nathan: A prophet during David's rule. Nathan supported David but confronted him about his adultery with Bathsheba.

Bathsheba: David committed adultery with her and then murdered her husband, Uriah. Bathsheba then married David, and later she

gave birth to Solomon.

Solomon: Son of David. He was the third king of Israel and the world's wisest man. He built an extraordinary temple but then strayed into idolatry. After his reign, the kingdom divided.

Rehoboam: Son of Solomon. He was the first king of Judah during the Divided Kingdom era. His oppressive policies prompted the northern tribes, led by Jeroboam, to rebel.

Jeroboam: The first king of Israel during the Divided Kingdom era. In fulfillment of God's predicted punishment of Solomon's idolatry, Jeroboam rebelled against Rehoboam and split the kingdom.

Ahab: A king of Israel, husband of Jezebel. He was weak as a king, opposed Elijah and died after being wounded by a random arrow in battle.

Jezebel: Queen of Israel and Ahab's wife. She encouraged idolatry in the kingdom and threatened Elijah's life after he challenged the prophets of Baal.

Elijah: A prophet of Israel during the Divided Kingdom era. His chief opponents were Ahab, Jezebel and the prophets of Baal. Instead of dying, he ascended to heaven in a whirlwind.

Elisha: Elijah's successor. Astonishing miracles characterized his ministry. The king he appointed, Jehu, killed Jezebel and the remaining prophets of Baal.

Amos: A shepherd and prophet in Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. He foretold disaster for the nation because the people refused to return to God.

Hosea: A prophet in Israel just after Amos. God had Hosea marry an adulterous woman named Gomer. The drama of their relationship mirrored Israel's unfaithfulness to God.

Hoshea: The last king of Israel. The king of Assyria arrested him and invaded the whole land of Israel because Hoshea had stopped paying him tribute.

Hezekiah: A king of Judah. He reigned at the same time as Hoshea

but trusted in God and was able to resist Assyria's army.

Isaiah: A prophet in Judah. He supported Hezekiah's struggle against Assyria and foretold both the exile of Judah to Babylon and its return.

Jeremiah: A prophet to Judah just before the Babylonian captivity. He foretold the exile and a return after 70 years; he also witnessed Jerusalem's destruction.

Nebuchadnezzar: The king of Babylon who invaded Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem. He plundered Solomon's temple, destroyed Jerusalem and removed Judah's population to Babylon.

Zedekiah: The last king of Judah. He rebelled against Babylon. Following his capture, his sons were killed before his eyes and then his eyes were put out. He was taken to Babylon where he died.

Ezekiel: A prophet to Judah before and during the Babylonian captivity. He prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and the eventual return from exile.

Daniel: A prophet during the exile and a high-ranking administrator under both the Babylonians and Persians. He prophesied about the future of Babylon and the empires that would follow. God delivered him from his enemies' dramatic opposition.

Cyrus: The king of Persia who overthrew Babylon. He permitted the exiles to return to Judah and ordered the temple to be rebuilt.

Zerubbabel: A member of Judah's royal family who led the first group of exiles back to Judah and eventually led the successful effort to rebuild the temple.

Ezra: A priest who led the second group of exiles back to Judah and renewed the people's faithfulness to God's Word.

Haggai: A prophet during the return from the exile. Haggai motivated the people to rebuild the temple.

Zechariah: A prophet during the return from the exile. Like Haggai, he motivated the people to rebuild the temple. He also prophesied the restoration and prosperity of God's people.

Esther: The Jewish queen of the Persian Empire during the reign of Xerxes. She exposed a plot to kill the Jews.

Mordecai: Esther's cousin. Mordecai raised Esther, guided her when she became queen and uncovered a conspiracy to assassinate the king.

Nehemiah: Appointed governor of Judah by the king of Persia, he directed the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem, countering opposition from the rulers of surrounding regions.

Malachi: The last prophet of the Old Testament era. He preached judgment and repentance to Judah, and prophesied the return, in a sense, of Elijah — fulfilled by John the Baptist.

Mary: The mother of Jesus. Jesus' birth was miraculous because Mary was still a virgin when she conceived. She was also present at Jesus' crucifixion.

Joseph: Jesus' adoptive father. At the command of an angel in a dream, he married Mary despite the scandal of her out-of-wed-lock pregnancy.

Jesus: The promised Messiah and Son of God. He carried out a three-year ministry of preaching and miracle-working, traveling with his disciples. He was executed by crucifixion but rose to life three days later.

John the Baptist: The prophet who prepared the Jews for Jesus' ministry. He preached repentance and baptized people in the Jordan River. John was imprisoned and later beheaded for criticizing Herod.

Peter: One of Jesus' disciples. Peter was outspoken and fiercely devoted to Jesus, though during Jesus' trial Peter denied knowing him. After Jesus' resurrection, Peter was the key leader of the church in Jerusalem.

James and John: Two brothers who were disciples of Jesus. They were part of Jesus' inner circle and were close friends of Jesus. They both continued to work to spread the Good News after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Mary and Martha: Sisters and supporters of Jesus and his ministry. Their brother was Lazarus.

Lazarus: Friend and supporter of Jesus. He died of an illness, but Jesus raised him back to life after four days.

Judas Iscariot: The disciple who betrayed Jesus. He led the temple guards to Jesus the night before his crucifixion. Judas later committed suicide.

Pilate: The Roman governor who sentenced Jesus to death.

Stephen: The first Christian martyr. The Jewish authorities stoned Stephen for allegedly speaking against the Law of Moses and the temple. His death sparked a rash of persecution against the church.

Barnabas: One of Paul's missionary partners. When Paul began to follow Jesus, Barnabas was one of his first supporters. He accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey.

Paul: Paul persecuted the church until he became a believer when Jesus dramatically appeared to him. He became a missionary and the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul wrote much of the New Testament.

Chart of References

1 **Creation: The Beginning of Life as We Know It:** Genesis 1–4; 6–9

2 **God Builds a Nation:** Genesis 12–13; 15–17; 21–22; 32–33; 35; Romans 4; Hebrews 11

3 **Joseph: From Slave to Deputy Pharaoh:** Genesis 37; 39; 41–48; 50

4 **Deliverance:** Exodus 1–7; 10–17

5 **New Commands and a New Covenant:** Exodus 19–20; 24–25; 32–34; 40

6 **Wandering:** Numbers 10–14; 20–21; 25; 27; Deuteronomy 1–2; 4; 6; 8–9; 29–32; 34

7 **The Battle Begins:** Joshua 1–2; 6; 8; 10–11; 23–24

8 **A Few Good Men … and Women:** Judges 2–4; 6–8; 13–16

9 **The Faith of a Foreign Woman:** Ruth 1–4

10 **Standing Tall, Falling Hard:** 1 Samuel 1–4; 8–13; 15

11 **From Shepherd to King:** 1 Samuel 16–18; 24; 31; 2 Samuel 6; 22; 1 Chronicles 17; Psalm 59

12 **The Trials of a King:** 2 Samuel 11–12; 18–19; 1 Chronicles 22; 29; Psalms 23; 32; 51

13 **The King Who Had It All:** 1 Kings 1–8; 10–11; 2 Chronicles 5–7; Proverbs 1–3; 6; 20–21

14 **A Kingdom Torn in Two:** 1 Kings 12–16

15 **God's Messengers:** 1 Kings 17–19; 2 Kings 2; 4; 6; Hosea 4–5; 8–9; 14; Amos 1; 3–5; 9

16 **The Beginning of the End:** 2 Kings 17–19; Isaiah 3; 6; 13–14; 49;

53

17 The Kingdoms' Fall: 2 Kings 21; 23–25; 2 Chronicles 33; 36; Jeremiah 1–2; 4–5; 13; 21; Lamentations 1–3; 5; Ezekiel 1–2; 6–7; 36–37

18 Daniel in Exile: Daniel 1–3; 6; Jeremiah 29–31

19 The Return Home: Ezra 1–6; Haggai 1–2; Zechariah 1; 8

20 The Queen of Beauty and Courage: Esther 1–9

21 Rebuilding the Walls: Ezra 7; Nehemiah 1–2; 4; 6–8; Malachi 1–4

22 The Birth of the King: Matthew 1–2; Luke 1–2; John 1

23 Jesus' Ministry Begins: Matthew 3–4; 11; Mark 1–3; Luke 8; John 1–4

24 No Ordinary Man: Matthew 5–7; 9; 14; Mark 4–6; Luke 10; 15; John 6

25 Jesus, the Son of God: Matthew 17; 21; Mark 8–12; 14; Luke 9; 22; John 7–8; 11–12

26 The Hour of Darkness: Matthew 26–27; Mark 14–15; Luke 22–23; John 13–14; 16–19

27 The Resurrection: Matthew 27–28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 19–21

28 New Beginnings: Acts 1–10; 12

29 Paul's Mission: Acts 13–14; 16–20; Romans 1; 3–6; 8; 12; 15; 1 Corinthians 1; 3; 5–6; 10; 12–13; 15–16; Galatians 1; 3; 5–6; 1 Thessalonians 1–5

30 Paul's Final Days: Acts 20–23; 27–28, Ephesians 1–6; 2 Timothy 1–4

31 The End of Time: Revelation 1–5; 19–22

The Story
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