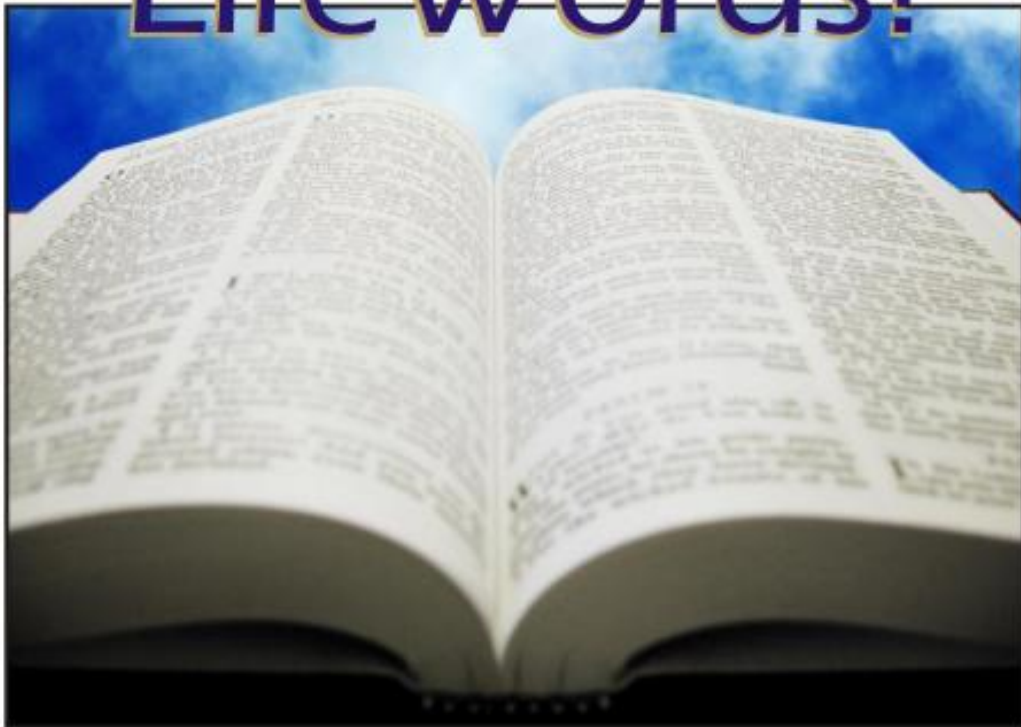


LifeWords!



Clearly Understanding the Bible

Keith Roberts

Life Words: **How To Understand The Bible**

*“They are not just idle words for you – they are your **life**.”* –Moses (Deuteronomy 32:47 NIV)

*“The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are **life**.”* –Jesus (John 6:63 NIV)

*“**He** (Moses) received **living** words to pass on to us.”* –Stephen (Acts 7:38 NIV)

*“For the word of God is **living** and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”* –Hebrews 4:12 (NIV)

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THE BIBLE: This Amazing Book

The ancient collection of writings we call “the Bible” continues to be the most amazing book ever written.

Forty writers who lived at different points in history, in different cultures, speaking different languages took 1,500 years to write this magnificent work. Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible about 1,500 B.C. and John wrote the last one, Revelation, about 100 years after Christ.

Even from the time of Moses, the Bible has impacted the world like no other writing. The most translated book in history, the Bible, either in part or whole, is available in the languages of 97% of the world's population. New translations are added each year, even new ones in English.

There are more ancient manuscripts of the Bible than of any other work from the past. When Guttenberg invented the printing press in 1456, its first job was to print the Bible. And today the Bible continues to outsell all other books; it is the best selling book of all time.

The Bible's Impact

Why does the Bible continue to outsell all other books, generation after generation? Well, because it tackles life's deepest questions, especially about God. That's why its impact keeps growing as the centuries pass.

Ancient Christians loved this book so much that they devoted themselves to studying it tirelessly. Tertullian (150-220 A.D.) read the Bible so often that he could repeat most of it from memory. Origen (185-254 A.D.) never ate or went to bed without reading something from the Bible. Eusebius (260-340 A.D.) remembered seeing a Christian, whose eyes had been burned out by Roman soldiers during a time of persecution, repeat most of the Bible from memory before a large gathering. Another believer named Beza could, at 80 years old, repeat all of Paul's writings from memory.

And this amazing impact continued into modern times. A French nobleman, Marquis DeRenty, read the Bible daily for 3 hours on his knees. Susannah, countess of Suffolk, read the Bible completely twice a year. Jeremiah Whittaker read all the letters of the New Testament every 2 weeks. And Joshua Barnes, who always carried a small pocket Bible, read it all the way through over 120 times.

Even the early history of America proves the Bible's impact. The Pony Express, a frontier mail service running from St. Joseph, Missouri to Sacramento, California, required its agents to ride a grueling 50 miles per day on horseback. They saved weight any way they could. Saddles were small, the horses often wore no horseshoes, and Pony Express riders didn't carry weapons. The mail pouches were small and thin, but postage still cost \$5.00 an ounce. And yet each of these riders carried a full-size Bible!



And in today's world, the Bible still impacts human thought. The editor of a well-known London newspaper once sent a survey poll to leaders in journalism, government, education, the arts and business. He asked them this question, "If you were in prison for 3 years and could only have 3 books to read, which 3 would you choose? Please list them in order of importance."

When his survey came back, 98% had put the Bible first on their list! Most of the people surveyed weren't church people; many of them weren't even believers. But they saw value and found peace in studying this amazing book.

The Bible's Reputation

And so for the past 2,000 years, most of the world's great thinkers, writers and leaders have recognized the Bible's unique power and reputation.

The Apostle Paul himself wrote, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17 NIV.)

George Washington said, "It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible."

Charles Dickens wrote, "The New Testament is the very best book that ever was or ever will be known in the world."

Napoleon said, "The Bible is no mere book, but a Living Creature, with a power that conquers all who oppose it."

Daniel Webster said, "If there is anything in my thoughts or style to commend, the credit is due to my parents for instilling in me an early love for the Scriptures."

Thomas Huxley wrote, "The Bible has been the Magna Charta of the poor and oppressed. The human race is not in a position to dispense with it."

Abe Lincoln said, "I believe the Bible is the best gift God has ever given to man."

Robert E. Lee was quoted as saying, "In all my perplexities and distresses, the Bible has never failed to give me light and strength."

Immanuel Kant wrote, "The existence of the Bible, as a book for the people, is the greatest benefit which the human race has ever experienced. Every attempt to belittle it is a crime against humanity."

Horace Greeley said, "It is impossible to mentally or socially enslave a Bible-reading people. The principles of the Bible are the groundwork of human freedom."

In a speech President Woodrow Wilson once said of the Bible, "I ask every man and woman in this audience that from this day on they will realize that... the destiny of America lies in their daily perusal of this great Book."

Whether great or small, rich or poor, people over the centuries have seen the impact and reputation of this amazing book... and have experienced its life-changing power.

The Bible's Power

Since its completion about 2,000 years ago, the Bible has unleashed its power into millions of lives, proving it to be a supernatural book.

Voltaire, the 18th century French philosopher, predicted that within a hundred years the Bible would be a forgotten book found only in museums. When that hundred years had passed, the Geneva Bible Society owned Voltaire's house, using it to produce more copies of this astounding book.

Robert Ingersoll, the 19th century agnostic writer said "In 15 years I'll have that book (the Bible) in the morgue." In 15 years Ingersoll was in the morgue and the Bible lived on.

The Bible lives on because it exhibits a remarkable power to change the lives of people who open its pages.

At the beginning of World War II, an atheist named Jacob de Shazer became a pilot; he was soon shot down and captured by the Japanese forces. While in prison, he saw two of his companions shot by a firing squad and watched another die of starvation. The hatred he saw around him made de Shazer think about his childhood and some of the things he had been taught. Eventually, he asked his captors for a Bible.

The guards laughed and refused. But de Shazer didn't give up; he kept on asking. Finally, a year and a half later, one guard threw a Bible at de Shazer and told him he had 3 weeks to read it. Sure enough, the guard took it away in 3 weeks. But the Bible had done its amazing work. After the war, de Shazer returned to Japan as a Christian missionary.

That kind of life-changing event has been repeated again and again. Several years ago, a man traveling through eastern Poland gave away a Bible to one of the residents of a small village. As the villager read that Bible, he was converted to Christ and passed the Bible on to another man. Through that one Bible, 200 others became believers. When the traveler, Michael Billester, revisited the village several

years later, the group gathered to hear him preach. He asked if any of the villagers could recite any Scriptures.

At that point, they asked, "Do you mean verses, or chapters?" To his amazement, they could recite whole chapters from memory; some of them could recite whole books of the Bible. Collectively, the 200 villagers could recite the whole Bible. That one Bible had been passed around from person to person and read in their assembly on Sundays. The old Bible had become so worn that its pages were almost unreadable, but the magnificent book had been transferred to their hearts.

Even in more recent times, missionaries and workers find the same hunger for God's word. I personally know people in a church group that went to Romania not many years ago to distribute food, yet they found that the people, who had recently been freed from Communism, were just as hungry to have Bibles. The group had 18,000 copies of John's gospel with them as they traveled along the Hungarian-Romanian border. They were literally mobbed by villagers along the way who discovered that they had Bibles to distribute. On one occasion, a Romanian truck driver stopped to see what was happening; when he was given a copy of John's gospel, he immediately kissed it.

And so, this astounding book has been read, studied, memorized, mass-produced, translated, loved and obeyed for thousands of years. It is the most amazing book ever written.

May your study of this God-breathed book endlessly enrich your life.

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Chapter One: *HOW DO YOU KNOW THE BIBLE IS TRUE?*

Even though the Bible has exerted a constant, inspiring impact on this world, some people still doubt its truth. They don't believe that it's actually a message from God.

Their logic goes something like this: How do we know we have exactly what was written so long ago? How could these ancient writings be passed down for thousands of years without being changed? Wouldn't mistakes in translation be inevitable? How do we know that the Bible isn't just another book, a collection of fables, myths and stories that didn't really happen? How do we know that men didn't just write their own opinions and then call it "God's word"?

Questions like these deserve careful answers. Belief in God and the Bible doesn't have to be "blind faith"; it can rest on a foundation of clear evidence.

What evidence? What are the evidences that prove the Bible is a supernatural book, a message from beyond time and space?

(1) The Text Is Accurate

The Bible, of course, wasn't originally written in English. The Old Testament, which dates back about 3,500 years, was written mostly in Hebrew, while the New Testament manuscripts are mostly in Greek. (Some passages appear in Aramaic, a language closely related to Hebrew.)

Obviously, this means two things: (1) the Bible is an extremely ancient book, and (2) the Bible has been translated into many languages again and again. So, how do we know it's accurate and that we have the same text that the original writers intended?

God's People Preserved It. Here's one way we know that it's accurate. The people who wrote, preserved, transmitted, protected, taught and translated the Scriptures were believers in God. To them, handling the Bible's texts was a religious experience; it was *God's Word*. They wouldn't dare treat it carelessly or with contempt. Were they perfect people? No, but they were careful because they considered themselves handling a sacred trust - the transmission of God's message to mankind. Therefore, we can trust their work, especially considering that God helped them in their task.

The Church Fathers Quoted It. Toward the end of the first century, as Jesus' apostles and their generation began to pass away, a group of men (sometimes called the "Church Fathers") taught, wrote about, and quoted from the Scriptures in their writings. Some of these men had known the apostles personally and continued to carry on the work of the church after the apostles' deaths. These church fathers, whose writings were left behind, quoted Scripture extensively in what they wrote. Several scholars, including Bruce Metzger, J. Harold Greenlee, Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, have said that if the New Testament disappeared tomorrow, we could reproduce it totally from the writings of these church fathers.

These early church fathers were in a position to know, since they often quoted straight from the original manuscripts. Their writings are a direct recording of what Jesus and the apostles said. By comparing our modern Bible to what these church fathers wrote, we can remove the doubt. The Bible we have today reproduces exactly what the early Biblical authors wrote.

Thousands Of Manuscripts Support It. Today's Bible stands upon more manuscripts (hand-written copies) than any other ancient book. Even people who don't believe that the Bible is God's inspired word still marvel often at the sheer number and reliability of these ancient texts.

For example, there are about 5,000 manuscripts in Greek covering all or part of the New Testament. Add the Latin manuscripts, and the total comes to about 13,000. Therefore, we have 13,000 ancient manuscripts containing all or part of the New Testament. And in addition to that, we have the writings of the Church Fathers who quoted most of the New Testament in their works. Put all that together and you have the *most reliable book to come down to us from the ancient world*.

But since we don't have the "originals", that is, the very piece of papyrus (ancient paper) that the



apostles wrote on, how do we know that the copies we have are accurate? The answer lies in this question: how much time passed between the originals and the first known copies?

In the Bible's case, this time span is remarkably short. In some cases the distance from originals to the copies is less than 200 years. That may sound like a long time, until you compare it to other ancient writings.

For example, consider Aristotle's work. We have only 5 manuscripts left of his work, and they date 1,400 years after him! The same holds true of Plato's Tetralogies : only 7 manuscripts which date 1,200 years after the originals. Or compare these others: Aristophanes -10 manuscripts that date 1,200 years after him, Euripides -9 manuscripts that are 1,500 years after him, Sophocles -100 manuscripts that are 1,400 years after his day, and Lucretius -2 manuscripts, 1,100 years after his generation. Despite such massive time gaps, scholars still accept these works as basically accurate to what the original writers intended.

When you compare the Bible's manuscript evidence to that of other classical works, it proves that no other ancient writing even comes close; the Bible easily wins as the most well attested writing from antiquity.

Josh McDowell once wrote, "If one discards the Bible as being unreliable, then he must discard almost all literature of antiquity." (For further study see McDowell's book, Evidence That Demands A Verdict - Volume 1. Published by Campus Crusade For Christ.)

(2) The Prophecies Are Supernatural

Even though the Bible's text is accurate, that doesn't mean it's a supernaturally inspired work. Is the Bible *really* a message from God, or is it just an encyclopedia of man's collected wisdom? How can this book prove itself to be supernatural?

Here's one primary way the Bible lives up to its supernatural reputation – through fulfilled prophecy. Biblical prophecy isn't "fortune-telling", where someone may predict a romance in your future or a new job on the horizon. Prophecy in the Bible predicts worldwide events hundreds, even thousands of years in advance. And Biblical prophecy predicts God's cosmic workings, not just minor facts about a person's limited life on earth.

Here are some of the Bible's most remarkable prophecies, which prove that it is a supernatural book:

The Virgin Birth. This prophecy was written by Isaiah, who lived and preached around 745-695 B.C. Isaiah spoke often about a common idea among Old Testament Jews, the coming of a special leader called "the Messiah". This term Messiah means "the Anointed One" in the Hebrew language. Isaiah wrote so much about this future savior of Israel that he's often called "the Messianic prophet". In the New Testament, John wrote that Isaiah "*saw the glory of Christ, and spoke of him*" (John 12:41 NIV).

One of the things Isaiah saw was the Messiah's birth. He wrote, "*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*" (Isaiah 7:14 NIV.) Isaiah here predicts that a child will be born to a woman who never had sexual relations, and that this child will be called "Immanuel" - a name meaning "God among us."

Notice the two-fold nature of this prediction: that the Messiah would be born of a virgin, and that he would be God - God's Son. Isaiah predicted that event about 700 years before it happened!

In the New Testament, Luke's account of this birth says, "*The virgin's name was Mary. The angel said... You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.*" (Luke 1:26-33 NIV.)

Matthew's account says, "*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' - which means, 'God with us.'*" (Matthew 1:22-23 NIV.)

This verifies what Isaiah predicted 700 years in advance. How did Isaiah know that the Messiah would be born of a virgin? How could he write about it so far in advance unless God Himself told Isaiah to do so?

Born In Bethlehem. Another remarkable prophecy came from Micah, a prophet who lived at the same time as Isaiah (about 700 years before Christ's birth.) Micah predicted the coming destruction of the Jewish state by the Babylonian Empire, but he also foresaw a later golden age when the Messiah would appear.

Micah writes, *"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."* (Micah 5:2 NIV.)

When Micah wrote this (700 years in advance), Bethlehem wasn't a great city; in fact, it never was a great city except for its honor as being the birthplace of Jesus. And yet out of this insignificant town a man would be born whose *"origins are from of old, from ancient times."* This means that the ruler coming out of Bethlehem wouldn't be just another man, but would have existed since ancient times - in other words, would be God's Son.

As it came to pass, Micah's prophecy appeared in the New Testament. When king Herod heard that a new ruler had been born to the Jews he called in the wise men, which had come from the east to worship this newborn king. He asked the wise men where the Christ (or Messiah) was to be born. They answered, *"In Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what the prophet has written..."* and then they quoted Micah's prophecy (Matthew 2:5-6 NIV). They knew that Bethlehem Ephrathah and Bethlehem in Judea were the same town, and that Micah the prophet had predicted this place as the Messiah's birthplace.

Micah knew the exact birthplace of Jesus the Messiah 700 years before it happened. How? He knew it only through revelation from the supernatural mind of God.

John The Baptist. Another amazing prophecy from Isaiah is his prediction of a special forerunner who would come before the Messiah to announce his arrival. In Isaiah 40:3 (NIV), he writes, *"A Voice of one calling: In the desert prepare the way for the LORD, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God."*

This very passage is quoted in Matthew 3:3 (NIV) where it's applied to John the Baptist, the messenger who announced the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It says, *"This is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah."* As John himself said, his ministry was to find the Messiah and announce him to the world.

One remarkable thing about Isaiah's prophecy is this: he refers to the Messiah as "LORD" (in the Hebrew it's actually "Jehovah") and "God". Isaiah expected the Messiah to be God in flesh, to be the Son of God. He also knew 700 years in advance that the Messiah would have a messenger, a forerunner, who would announce his coming.

Jesus' Preaching Ministry. Isaiah again predicted something amazing about the ministry of the Messiah - where it would begin. In Isaiah 9:1-2 (NIV), the prophet wrote, *"Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles- the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."*

This very passage is quoted in Matthew 4:13-16 (NIV), where it's applied to the beginning of Jesus' preaching ministry. He didn't begin his preaching in Jerusalem, or even in his hometown of Nazareth, but in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. This is the exact area mentioned by Isaiah as *"Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali"*, which was the ancient land inherited by two of the tribes of Israel - Zebulun and Naphtali.

And even the nature of Jesus' ministry is predicted by Isaiah later in chapter 9 when he says, *"For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."* (See Isaiah 9:6 NIV). According to Isaiah, this Messiah wouldn't just be another prophet but would be God Himself!

So when Jesus left Nazareth and moved to Capernaum to base his ministry there, he fulfilled this 700 year-old prophecy of Isaiah. How did Isaiah know where the Messiah would begin his ministry?

Jesus' Healing Ministry. Isaiah once prophesied about the Messiah's ability to heal: "*He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.*" (Isaiah 53:4 NIV.)

When Jesus came to Peter's house at Capernaum, he saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. When he healed her, word spread throughout the small village so that large crowds gathered that evening to be healed by Jesus. He healed many diseases and cast out several demons. As Matthew later wrote about this event he said, "*This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah...*" (Matthew 8:17 NIV.)

Again, Isaiah was told 700 years in advance something about the Messiah's ministry. How did he know Jesus would have a powerful healing ministry?

Jesus' Humility And Kindness. Once when Jesus found out that the Pharisees were plotting to kill him, he withdrew and didn't put up a fight or try to get even. Instead he continued to minister to large crowds by healing the sick. Matthew recorded these events by saying, "*This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah.*"

Matthew then quoted Isaiah 42:1-4 which says, "*Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory.*" (See Matthew 12:15-21 NIV.)

Here Isaiah is predicting something about the Messiah's personality. He will be a man of justice. He'll not be rude, argumentative nor one who demands his own rights. He will suffer silently for the good of the people. He won't even break a "bruised reed", that is he'll have compassion on broken people.

Again, this remarkable prediction came hundreds of years before Jesus' birth; it came through the prophet Isaiah who lived in 745-695 B.C.

Jesus' Parables. An ancient prophet named Asaph knew about one of the Messiah's most important teaching methods - the parable. In Psalm 78:2 (NIV) he wrote, "*I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.*" Asaph, one of King David's chief musicians, made this prediction around 1,000 B.C.

As Matthew records Jesus' ministry in the New Testament, he says "*Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet...*". At that point, Matthew quotes Psalm 78:2 as the prediction of Messiah's use of parables in his ministry (see Matthew 13:34-35 NIV).

This amazing prophecy predicts 1,000 years in advance a teaching method used by the Messiah himself. How did the prophet know this?

The Rejected Cornerstone. In Psalm 118:22-23 (NIV), the ancient psalmist wrote about "*The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.*"

Jesus once referred to this ancient prediction and applied it to himself. He did so to prove that his rejection by his own people, the leaders of the Jews, wasn't an accident but was foreknown by God and His prophets. After quoting these verses from the Psalm, Jesus said, "*Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.*" (Note Matthew 21:42-44 NIV.)

Here's Jesus' point: He alone is the perfect cornerstone for God's work but as the Jewish leaders reject him they'll stumble over this stone (Jesus) and be destroyed by it.

It's amazing how God imbedded that very idea in a Psalm written hundreds of years before the coming of Christ.

The Crucifixion. As you might expect, the Old Testament predicts Jesus' crucifixion often and with great detail.

Isaiah predicted several details of the crucifixion in chapter 53 of his writings. Notice some of his phrases: *"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering."* or *"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wound we are healed."* or *"the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."* (NIV.)

Again Isaiah continues to paint a picture of the crucifixion: *"he was led like a lamb to the slaughter... for the transgression of my people he was stricken... He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death... for he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."* (NIV.)

King David also predicted many of the crucifixion's details in his 22nd Psalm (NIV). He begins with Jesus' cry from the cross, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* From that beginning, David continues to reveal (1,000 years in advance) many details of the cross. He mentions the insults hurled at Jesus by the crowds, that his bones were out of joint (but not broken), that his hands and feet were pierced, that his heart turned to wax, and that his tormentors divided his garments and cast lots for them.

And a prophet named Zechariah, who lived about 500 years before Christ, predicted that the Messiah would be sold for 30 pieces of silver, that the money would be thrown into the temple, and that it would go to "the potter". If you compare Zechariah 11:12-13 to Matthew 26:15 - 27:10, you'll find that Judas betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, that he threw the money into the temple in disgust, and that the money was used to buy a burial plot at the "potter's field". (See also Jeremiah 19:1-13; 32:6-9).

These remarkable prophecies are only a few of the hundreds that fill the Old Testament. In his book, *"Evidence That Demands A Verdict"*, Josh McDowell estimates that the *Old Testament contains 300 references to the Messiah that were fulfilled in the life of Jesus*. Many of these deal with his crucifixion... and his resurrection.

The Resurrection. Not only did the Old Testament writers predict in detail the crucifixion of Jesus, they predicted his resurrection.

King David (1,000 B.C.) wrote about this resurrection when he said *"My body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay."* (Psalm 16: 9-10 NIV). On the surface this prophecy might seem to apply only to David himself. However, King David died and *did* see decay; his body became dust and is still in the grave today.

David was clearly speaking about the Messiah's resurrection 1,000 years before it happened. Note Acts 2:24-36 (NIV), where the apostle Peter preaches the first sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Peter mentions Jesus' resurrection, quotes Psalm 16, and then says *"Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. But he was a prophet... Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ..."*

Peter said that David prophesied about Jesus' resurrection, that this amazing resurrection was foreknown by God, who made it known to King David so it could be recorded 1,000 years in advance.

And even Jesus himself predicted his own resurrection in Matthew 16:21(NIV) where it says, *"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things... and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."*

On another occasion Jesus (after his resurrection) explained the Old Testament predictions about himself to some of his doubting disciples. He said, *"How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ 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.*" (Luke 24:25-27 NIV.)

Notice what it says. Jesus explained to them how the Old Testament writings predicted his life, death and resurrection. Jesus himself said that these fulfilled prophecies produce belief in him.

And so, ancient prophecies found in Scripture prove, with great force and power, that the Bible is a supernatural book.

(3) The Miracles Are Overwhelming.

Another powerful proof that the Bible is God's supernatural book comes from the miracles that surround it. God himself empowered many of the Bible's authors and central characters with supernatural abilities. Just think of the long list of those who could work miracles:

Moses parted the Red Sea, brought water from a rock, and fed hundreds of thousands of people with manna, which fell from the sky.

Joshua brought down the walls of Jericho by simply having the people march around it for 7 days and then giving a war cry on the last day.

Gideon defeated thousands of Midianites with an army of only 300, and Samson broke free from his enemies, killing 1,000 men by himself with a donkey's jawbone.

David killed Goliath the giant with only a sling and some stones. Elijah called down fire from heaven to defeat the false prophets of his day. Elisha made an iron axe head float so he could retrieve it from the water.

And when Jesus appeared on the scene, he worked more miracles than anyone. He walked on water, fed thousands with only one meal, healed the sick, cast out demons, raised the dead and was himself raised from the dead.

All of these miracles were to confirm that the authors of God's word were telling the truth. In speaking of this, the Bible says "*This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.*" (See Hebrews 2:3-4 NIV.)

In Acts 2:22 (NIV) it also says, "*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.*"

The remarkable, miraculous events you read about in Scripture also help to prove that the Bible isn't just another book. It is God's own message to man.

Conclusion

These three areas of proof: the *accurate text*, the *prophecies*, and the *miracles* all combine to remove any reasonable doubt. The Bible *is* God's holy book, His supernatural message to mankind.

Like an anvil that wears out many hammers, the Bible has outlasted and confounded its many skeptics over the centuries.

One of those skeptics was Sir William Ramsay, a highly educated young Englishman who set out in 1881 on an investigative trip to Palestine to prove the Bible wrong. Ramsay felt that if he could see the archaeological evidence first hand, he could prove the Bible to be a fraud. He traveled throughout the Bible lands and then published his findings in 1886 under the title, St. Paul The Traveler And The Roman Citizen.

The book stunned and shocked his skeptic friends. Ramsay concluded that the Bible was accurate. He became a believer and authored books filled with evidence for the truthfulness of the Bible for the next 20 years.

Jesus put it best when he said, "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*" (Matthew 24:35 NIV.)

TEST QUESTIONS - LESSON 1

1. ___ The Bible texts were preserved and handed down by (A) Kings & political leaders, (B) God's people, or (C) history teachers.

2. ___ If the New Testament disappeared tomorrow, we could reproduce it totally from (A) writings of the church fathers, (B) the Old Testament, or (C) modern science.

3. ___ In the Bible's case, the years between its originals and its copies is (A) 10,000 years, (B) 1400 years, or (C) 200 years.
4. ___ Jesus' virgin birth was predicted by (A) Isaiah, (B) his father Joseph, or (C) Herod.
5. ___ Micah the prophet predicted that Jesus would be born in (A) Nazareth, (B) Rome or (C) Bethlehem.
6. ___ Micah's prediction of Jesus' birth was (A) 700 years in advance, (B) 2 years in advance or (C) 7,000 years in advance.
7. ___ Isaiah's prediction of a forerunner for the Messiah was fulfilled in (A) the good Samaritan, (B) Judas or (C) John the Baptist.
8. ___ Isaiah predicted that the Messiah's preaching ministry would begin in (A) Rome, (B) Jerusalem or (C) Capernaum in Galilee.
9. ___ Asaph, an ancient prophet, predicted in Psalm 78 that the Messiah would teach by using (A) parables, (B) visual aids or (C) the Old Testament.
10. ___ When Psalm 118 spoke of the rejected cornerstone, Jesus applied that to (A) John the Baptist, (B) Jesus himself or (C) the fallen temple.
11. ___ Which prophet predicted many details about Jesus' crucifixion? (A) Paul, (B) Isaiah or (C) Noah.
12. ___ What Old Testament king predicted Jesus' resurrection? (A) David, (B) Peter or (C) Herod.

Chapter Two: *HOW CAN I UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE?*

Why is the Bible sometimes difficult to understand? If the Bible is God's message to

human beings, why didn't he make it so easy to understand that no one would ever stumble in trying to interpret it?

Well, the fault isn't with God or His word; it's with the nature of our world. For one thing, we live in a world corrupted by evil, which has dimmed our spiritual understanding. The Apostle Paul himself said, *"The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."* (2 Corinthians 4:4 NIV.)

Paul's phrase "the god of this age" refers to Satan, the evil one who works to dim our spiritual understanding.

And here's another reason the Bible can be hard to understand - our prejudice. Almost every person who studies the Bible has some background of religious training or, at the least, some vague knowledge of religious ideas. These preconceived ideas can cloud one's understanding of the Bible.



For example, if someone sees the word "church" in the Bible, he or she may assume that it's referring to a building with pews and stained glass windows. And yet the early "church" - that is, the group of people who belong to Christ - never met in "church buildings". Jesus' early disciples didn't build any special buildings for meeting purposes. That came almost 300 years after Christ.

Or if someone reads the word "baptism" in the Bible, he or she will interpret that word based on previous experiences. If that person's culture portrayed baptism a certain way - as something done to infants, or a ritual of sprinkling holy water, or an emotional encounter with the Holy Spirit - he or she may assume that any Bible reference to baptism is the same thing, even though it might not be.

It takes a truly courageous person to let the Bible speak for itself, rather than injecting one's own opinions or cultural prejudices. But that courageous, teachable spirit is the *one crucial attitude* that allows you to truly understand the Bible.

With that in mind, let's look at some basic principles that will help you understand God's Scriptures.

(1) Always Stay In Context

One of the basic keys to an accurate understanding of the Bible - and one of the most often violated principles - is this: *always stay in context*. But what does that mean?

"Context" means that you take into account everything about the environment surrounding the verses you want to understand. Just as fish live in water, Bible statements live in a certain context. In fact, all of life is lived in a context.

For example if I say, "I'll kill you!" - how you understand that statement depends on the context. If we're laughing and running around spraying each other with water, well that's one context. But if I have a shotgun pointed at you and a homicidal look on my face, that's another context... and a scary one!

So when the Bible reveals something, put it in context. Each verse is part of a paragraph; each paragraph is part of a chapter; each chapter is part of a book of the Bible; each book of the Bible is part of the whole, overall context of this library of inspired writings.

For example, here are some verses often taken from their context, clouding their meaning:

In Colossians 2:21(NIV) the Apostle Paul writes, *"Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"* Some have used this verse to teach that Christians should abstain from alcohol or other destructive habits. But that isn't the context.

If you look at the whole paragraph surrounding this verse, you'll find that it says you *shouldn't* submit to people who're always saying *"Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"*

And if you study the entire second chapter of Colossians, you'll see that Paul is teaching about our freedom in Christ - the fact that Christians shouldn't submit to cults or legalists who say, *"Do not handle!"* etc. And if you read *all* of Colossians, you'll find that Paul's major point is this: Christ is superior to every cult or group that tries to impose a "Do not handle!" legalism on its followers.

Do you see how important it is to stay in context? In fact, ignoring the context of a passage can actually lead you to the *opposite* meaning from the one intended.

Here's another example. In 1 Corinthians 1:17(NIV) Paul writes, *"For Christ did not send me to*

baptize, but to preach the gospel..." Some people (even so-called "scholars") have tried to use this passage to prove that Paul didn't think water baptism was important as a believer's response to Christ.

But if you carefully study the context you'll find that Paul isn't discussing the issue of water baptism. He's discussing division in the Corinthian church. The church had divided over the popularity of various teachers. To some, Paul was their favorite preacher. To others, it was Apollos. To others, Peter was their favorite.

Paul was disturbed by this trend so he wrote, "*Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say you were baptized into my name... For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.*" (See 1 Corinthians 1:13-17 NIV).

Do you see Paul's point? He wasn't even teaching about baptism, but about how people divide over favorite preachers and how they'll brag about *who* baptized them.

So you can see from these two examples that it's much easier to understand the Bible if you stay in context. But how can you always be sure you're in the proper context? One way is to ask a few basic questions. When you read a verse or section of the Bible, keep in mind these questions about the context:

Who wrote or spoke the words? Was the person who spoke approved by God, or speaking his or her own mind? To whom was this person speaking? Why were these things spoken? What was happening at the time? What did the original hearers think? What did the things spoken mean to them?

Such questions will help you determine the context. Remember: *meaning demands a context*. Once you yank a verse or idea from its context, the original meaning disappears.

(2) Let Scripture Interpret Scripture

Another special key to understanding the Bible is this: *Let Scripture interpret itself*. But what does that mean?

Sometimes when a Scripture seems hard to understand, it'll often interpret itself if you read further along. For example, Jesus once told a story about a farmer who sowed his seed in a field where he got different results with different types of soil. Some of his seed fell on the path and was eaten by birds. Some landed on rocky ground and didn't have enough moisture to survive. Some fell among thorns and couldn't grow because they were choked out. But some of the seed landed on good ground and produced a great crop.

The story is simple. But what does it mean? Why did Jesus tell it? Was he just giving a lecture on farming techniques?

Here's where the Bible interprets itself. In Luke 8:11-15, Jesus explained the parable. It wasn't about farming at all, but was about preaching the word (the "seed") and how that word finds a different reception in different hearts. We wouldn't know that, unless the Bible told us so; the Bible interpreted itself.

Here's another example; Jesus once told a story about a farmer whose enemy spread weeds into his crops. The farmer's wheat grew, but so did the weeds. His workers came and asked, "Do you want us to pull up the weeds?"

The farmer decided against that idea. He told his workers to leave it all alone until the harvest, when the weeds would be destroyed anyway.

That's another simple story, but what does it mean? Jesus explained that one also.

The farmer's field represents the world. The wheat seed stands for the sons of God and the weeds represent the sons of Satan. The harvest will come at the end of the age, when God separates the evil people from the kingdom of God. (See Matthew 13:36-43.)

Again, the Bible has interpreted itself. You wouldn't get the full meaning of Jesus' parable without the passages that interpret the story for you.

And here's another example. Jesus once said, "*Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.*" When he said this, everyone thought he was speaking about the actual temple building in

Jerusalem. We might think so too, except that the Bible interprets his words this way: *“But the temple he had spoken of was his body.”* (John 2:19-22 NIV.)

Jesus was actually speaking of his resurrection from the dead, not the destruction and repair of a physical building. How would we know that without the Bible interpreting itself?

All this shows the importance of consistent Bible study. As you study God’s writings, pieces of the puzzle begin to fall into place and you develop a mature understanding of this inspired book.

(3) Let The New Testament Interpret The Old

Another vital key to understanding the Bible properly is to grasp the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.

The Bible is a progressive revelation, which means that it moves from more simple teachings to the more complex. For example, as a child moves through a school system from the 1st grade through his senior year, he develops knowledge from the more simple to the more complex. If you need information about algebra, you’d do better to ask a senior, not a 1st grader.

In the same way, when you have difficulty understanding an Old Testament passage, you can usually find an answer in the New Testament. God often used the people we read about in the New Testament to interpret Old Testament ideas.

In one case, Jesus interpreted the Old Testament by applying its prophecies to his own life: *“And beginning with Moses and the Prophets (the Old Testament), he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”* (Luke 24:27 NIV.)

In another Scripture, Philip the evangelist overheard a man reading from Isaiah. When he asked the man if he understood, he said no. *“Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture (Isaiah) and told him the good news about Jesus.”* (Acts 8:35 NIV). Philip used the revelation about Jesus to help the man understand Isaiah.

In another case Peter interpreted an Old Testament prophecy about God’s Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. When the Holy Spirit came with power upon Jesus’ disciples and the apostles, they began to praise God in “tongues” - that is, languages they’d never studied. Some in the crowd accused them of being drunk.

Peter replied, *“These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel... ”* (Acts 2:15-16 NIV). At that point Peter interpreted a prophecy from Joel 2:28-32; he told the crowd that it predicted the church’s beginning and the Spirit’s coming. If we read only Joel’s prophecy and didn’t read Peter’s inspired interpretation of it, we wouldn’t have the whole story.

And here’s one more: when the prophet Malachi wrote about the coming Messiah, he said *“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.”* (See Malachi 4:5 NIV.)

What does that mean? Does it mean that Elijah would be reincarnated? Does it mean Elijah would rise from the dead to meet the Messiah?

We wouldn’t really know, except that we read a New Testament interpretation of those words. Jesus’ disciples pointedly asked him *“‘Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?’ Jesus replied, ‘To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come...’ Then the disciples understood that he was talking about John the Baptist.”* (Matthew 17:10-13 NIV.)

Without the New Testament interpreting that Old Testament passage in Malachi, we’d never know exactly what the prophet meant. In fact, today the Jewish people still leave a door open during Passover celebrations in case Elijah wants to appear, entering the room. Without the New Testament application by Jesus, this Old Testament idea can’t be totally understood.

And the same is true of many other Old Testament passages. One key to truly understanding the Bible is to search the Scriptures often enough to get acquainted with both testaments; and to let the New Testament interpret the Old Testament.

(4) Let The Letters Interpret The Gospels

The life and ministry of Jesus is recorded in four accounts we call “the Gospels”: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. As these four biblical books record those events, some of the things that happened are puzzling and need more interpretation. When Jesus’ apostles later began to write letters to the newly formed churches, they explained the meanings behind what happened in Jesus’ ministry.

For example, Jesus met with his disciples for a meal on the night before he died. During that meal he began something that is still practiced 2,000 years later called “The Lord’s Supper” or “The Communion”. As Jesus ate with them, he told them that the bread represented his body, which was about to be given for the world’s sins. He told them that the cup represented his blood, which was about to be shed for them.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, this special Communion that Jesus instituted was explained more fully to the church. The apostle Paul wrote about it this way: *“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?”* (1 Corinthians 10:16.) He also wrote, *“whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”* (1 Corinthians 11:26 NIV.)

These two ideas: (1) that we *participate* in Jesus’ sacrifice during the Communion and that (2) we *proclaim* (or preach) about his sacrifice during the Communion, are ideas that Jesus didn’t teach at the original institution of the Communion service. We have to study the letters of the New Testament to find those explanations.

Here’s another example. Jesus himself predicted the resurrection of the dead by saying, *“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”* (John 5:28-29 NIV.)

As Jesus predicted the resurrection, he didn’t give much detail about how it would happen. But if you research Paul’s writings you’ll find much more detail in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. There he discusses the resurrected body and why the resurrection is a part of our redemption as God’s people. Paul also discusses the order and nature of the resurrection in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. These passages in the letters explain some of the happenings in the gospels.

So when you come across difficult passages or happenings in the gospels, search out the letters of the New Testament. They’ll help you interpret the life of Jesus.

(5) Pay Attention To Symbolic Meanings

One common mistake people make in interpreting the Bible is to get confused over the literal and the symbolic. They often want to make great symbolisms where none exist, or to make completely literal something that’s supposed to be symbolic.

Here’s a good rule of thumb to avoid those mistakes: assume that the Bible is speaking in literal language, unless the context tells you otherwise. Here’s what I mean.

Take the word “water”. The vast majority of the times you see that word in the Bible, it means “water” - the liquid we all drink and use every day. Normally, when you read the word “water” you take it to mean that liquid. When the Bible wants you to take the word “water” as a symbol, it’ll tell you so.

For example, Jesus once said *“Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.”* What did Jesus mean? Did he mean the liquid we drink would stream from inside all his believers? No, he was using the word “water” as a symbol. The next verse says, *“By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.”* (Note John 6:37-39 NIV.) In most verses the word “water” means water, but in this one it refers to the Holy Spirit.

Here’s another example. Once when Jesus was preaching to a crowd who followed him only because he fed them he said, *“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him 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 him.”* (John 6:54-56 NIV.)

What a strange teaching! If you take what Jesus said literally it doesn’t make sense. How would it be possible for *all* Jesus’ believers throughout all history to eat the flesh off his body and drink his blood?

It's absurd. And it doesn't fit the context.

The context is that Jesus had fed 5,000 of these people the day before, and they were now following him looking for a handout. They were thinking in the fleshly; he wanted them to think spiritually, so he spoke symbolically to shock them. Even some of his own disciples didn't understand his teaching, so they left him.

When Jesus asked the twelve apostles if they were also going to leave, Peter said, "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*" (John 6:68 NIV.) They got the point! Peter and the others realized that Jesus was talking about feeding off of him *spiritually* as their Master and Lord - not about feeding off his physical body.

Another classic example of this confusion over the literal and the symbolic is found in the story of Nicodemus. He was a prominent Jewish leader who came to see Jesus one night to see if he was the Messiah. As Nicodemus began to discuss religion, Jesus stopped him by saying, "*I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.*" (John 3:3 NIV.)

How should Nicodemus take that statement? Was it literal or symbolic? He even asked the question, "*How can a man be born when he is old... Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!*" At that point Jesus went on to explain the symbolism of what he meant: a man must have a *spiritual* re-birth before he can enter God's kingdom.

When Biblical statements seem absurd, look carefully at the context and you'll find clues to help you sort out the literal from the symbolic.

(6) Study All The Verses On A Subject

Unless you study all the verses on a certain subject, you only have part of the story.

For example, some people make the mistake of over simplifying what it takes to experience the new birth and enter the kingdom of God. They'll quote a passage like 1 John 4:8 (NIV)- "*Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.*" Then they'll rationalize - "as long as I'm good to my neighbors, don't kill anyone, and generally try to be good to people, I'm going to heaven."

While their statements agree with John - that God is love and we should love our fellow man - that's not *all* that the Bible says about how to please God and enter his kingdom. To find out what salvation is all about, one must study all the passages that teach about salvation.

And here's another example: some say that all it takes to go to heaven is that we believe in God. They'll even quote verses like John 3:16 (NIV) - "*whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*" - and then say that all one has to do is mentally agree that there is a God. They forget to look at *all* the passages on the subject - such as, James 2:19 (NIV) - "*You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that - and shudder.*"

So it's clear that a full understanding of the Bible's teaching on a certain subject requires a complete study. One way to accomplish this is to get a concordance - a reference book or computer program which lists all the Bible's verses by subject - and look up the subject you're studying. Concordances will list the verses by subject; if you're studying the topic of "faith" you'll find each verse on faith listed in a concordance under that heading.

(7) Don't Confuse Culture With Principle

Another major failing of many Bible students is their habit of confusing cultural practices of Bible times with eternal principles. They sometimes try to make laws out of practices that were considered optional.

For example, God told Moses to remove his sandals when he encountered God at the burning bush; "*Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.*" (Exodus 3:5 NIV). God commanded Moses to do that to show respect for His glory. But God never commanded *everyone* who worships Him to do so. In some cultures, taking off one's shoes is a sign of respect for God and fellow man. But God never made it a law for all His worshipers at all times in history.

Another example of the confusion of culture with principle is found in John chapter 13 (NIV). Here Jesus wanted to show his disciples how much he loved them, so "*he poured water into a basin and*

began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around his waist." He then said, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

From these verses, people today confuse culture with principle and demand that we should wash each other's feet in order to be pleasing to God. Is it okay to wash each other's feet as a sign of caring? Certainly. I've seen it done myself in church gatherings. But was Jesus writing a hard and fast rule concerning foot washing for all of his disciples throughout all of history? Certainly not. How do we know?

For one thing, foot washing – though somewhat rare today - existed in the common culture of the First Century. The hot, desert climate was dusty, and animal manure often dotted the streets, so when people wore sandals their feet became unclean. One might bathe and then walk to a neighbor's house to visit, finding that their feet had become dirty on that short walk. For that reason, people often washed their feet (or had a servant do it) on arrival at someone's home (see Luke 7:44).

In the case of John chapter 13, Jesus has taken on the servant's role. He shows his disciples how much he loves them by serving them. He uses this cultural habit of foot washing to show a greater principle - love one another by serving one another. Jesus' point was that he loves us without reservation, so we should love each other the same way. He taught that principle through the vehicle of foot washing.

For another thing, God never *commanded* foot washing as something to be done to inherit eternal life. He never placed the vehicle at the level of a principle or a law.

So how can you tell when you're reading in the Bible about a cultural practice instead of a law? Ask yourself a few questions. Was this practice *commanded* for *all* of God's people for all history - such as "*You shall not murder*" (Deuteronomy 5:17 NIV)? Was this practice found throughout the Bible from the Old Testament through the New Testament – as with something like prayer? Was it commanded for the church as a required part of everyone's discipleship? Was this practice found only in a few isolated cases in the Bible? If so, it's probably a cultural practice instead of a spiritual principle.

Separating cultural practices from God's spiritual laws can put you miles ahead in your understanding of the Scripture.

(8) Harmonize Everything With Christ As The Theme

One final barrier to understanding the Bible is the habit of treating it as a series of disjointed tales having no common purpose. Some people see the Bible as merely a collection of stories dealing with human nature. Others may even see the Scripture as God's revelation, but never connect with its true purpose.

Recognizing the Bible as a whole reveals its purpose - to tell the story of Christ. For example, imagine your Bible as you open it. Imagine that each page of your Bible - from Genesis to Revelation - has a faint outline of the cross printed on it, a cross that can be seen behind the words. That imagined picture gives you insight into how to truly understand this magnificent book.

And Jesus took the same approach. He once said this to a group of his enemies: "*You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*" (John 5:39 NIV.)

Notice what he said - "*the Scriptures testify about me*". He said that the only way to truly understand the Scriptures was to put him at the center of them all.

And Jesus' approach is often found in the Scriptures themselves. Peter once wrote about the Old Testament prophets and said they wanted to know "*the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.*" (1 Peter 1:11 NIV.) He said the "*Spirit of Christ*" was in the Old Testament prophets as they predicted the events of the New Testament. Since Christ *inspired* the Old Testament, he's the key to understanding it.

Jesus himself once helped some of his disciples better understand the Scriptures by using this same approach. After his resurrection he met with two disciples who didn't recognize him and didn't believe he had been resurrected from the dead. How did he convince them? The Bible says "*And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in the Scriptures concerning himself.*" (Luke 24:25-27 NIV.)

And so one major key to understanding the Bible is to put Jesus at the heart and center of it all. He is the reason for the Bible's existence. He *is* the story. Put him there, and he'll help you understand this magnificent revelation from God.

(9) Pray For Understanding

Here's one often-overlooked secret to understanding the Bible – ask God to help you get the meaning of his words. Prayer has helped more people understand the Bible than all the world's seminaries.

For example, H.A. Ironside, a well-known preacher of the early 20th Century once visited an aged Bible teacher named Alexander Fraser and was amazed at what he heard. Young Ironside listened as Fraser exposed truth after truth from the Bible – things that Ironside had never seen. He asked the old man, “*Where did you learn these things?*”

Fraser answered, “*On my knees on the mud floor of a little sod cottage in the north of Ireland. There, with my Bible open before me, I used to kneel for hours at a time and ask the Spirit of God to reveal Christ to my soul and to open the Word to my heart. He taught me more on my knees on that mud floor than I could ever have learned in all the colleges and seminaries of the world.*”

And the Bible agrees with that approach. Notice King David's prayer in Psalm 139:24 (NIV) – “*See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*” It sounds like David expects God to teach him the right way – by the word of Jehovah.



In the New Testament, Jesus called the Holy Spirit “*the Spirit of truth*” and promised his own disciples that the Spirit would “*guide (them) into all truth*” (John 16:13 NIV.) He then prayed for his Father to “*Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth*” in 17:17 (NIV).

Many of Christ's own words didn't make sense to his disciples until the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost. He kept telling them that he must suffer and die, and be raised on the third day. But that revelation didn't seem to sink in until the Spirit came. After that, Peter preached boldly the same message that he had denied and been unsure of just weeks earlier (Compare Luke 22:54-62 with Acts 2:36-41.)

And Paul the Apostle wrote to several churches about his prayers for their understanding; he told the Ephesian church that he was asking God to give them “*the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.*” (Ephesians 1:17 NIV.)

So this is the other dimension to understanding the Bible. It certainly can't replace good study habits, or the principles we've discussed above. But having a serious prayer life is required for those who truly wish to understand this remarkable book from God.

TEST QUESTIONS - LESSON 2

1. ___ What two things make the Bible difficult to understand? (A) lack of education & money, (B) shortage of Bibles & Bible study or (C) our prejudice & Satan's work to dim our understanding.
2. ___ In Bible study, the word "context" means (A) taking into account everything surrounding the verses you want to understand, (B) staying away from things we shouldn't handle or touch or (C) understanding the Bible the way others do.

3. ___ What does it mean to "let Scripture interpret Scripture"? (A) Read good books about the Bible, (B) reading the Bible itself to help understand its difficult passages or (C) asking a preacher's advice on understanding the Bible.
4. ___ What does it mean to say that the Bible is a "progressive revelation"? That it (A) has helped man's progress over the years, (B) was revealed by progressive people or (C) moves from the more simple teachings to the more complex.
5. ___ Why should we let the New Testament help us understand the Old Testament? Because (A) the Old Testament can't be understood, (B) the New Testament is a later, more complex revelation or (C) the Old Testament isn't God's word.
6. ___ What are "the Gospels" - Matthew, Mark, Luke & John - all about? They tell the story of (A) Moses receiving the law, (B) the life and ministry of Jesus or (C) the Bible itself.
7. ___ We should let the letters of the New Testament help us understand the Gospels because (A) the letters were written by Jesus' apostles to the churches to help them understand his ministry, (B) the letters took longer to write than the Gospels or (C) the letters take up more pages than the Gospels.
8. ___ How can you avoid confusing the literal with the symbolic when studying the Bible? You (A) assume the Bible is speaking literally unless the context tells you otherwise, (B) ignore the symbolic parts of the Bible or (C) make up your own meanings for the symbols.
9. ___ Why should you study all the Bible verses on a particular subject? So (A) you'll be an expert, (B) you'll impress people with your knowledge or (C) you'll get the whole story about a particular Bible subject.
10. ___ How do some people confuse culture from Bible times with eternal principles? They (A) forget to take off their sandals, (B) make laws out of practices that were considered optional or (C) confuse Moses with Jesus.
11. ___ How can we avoid confusing culture with eternal principles? By (A) asking if the principle we're studying was ever commanded by God for all His people, (B) considering everything in the Bible to be cultural or (C) considering everything in the Bible to be eternal principles.
12. ___ Why should we harmonize everything in the Bible with Christ as the theme? Because (A) it keeps Jews from understanding the Bible, (B) it helps the church grow or (C) Jesus said that all the Scriptures testified about him.

Chapter Three: *UNDERSTANDING THE BOOKS OF MOSES*

If you had never seen a Bible, you'd probably open it to the first page and begin reading at Genesis chapter one. As you glanced through the first pages and chapters of the Bible, you'd soon realize that it isn't just a book; it's actually a library containing several books (66 in all).

The first five of these books - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy - are often termed "The Books Of Moses". It's clear from the Bible itself that Moses wrote most of the material in these books; he wrote them sometime around 1,400 B.C.

Notice these verses: "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered...'" (Exodus 17:14 NIV.) "Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said... Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people." (Exodus 24:4, 7 NIV.) In 2 Chronicles 35:12 NIV, you also find this verse: "They set aside the burnt offerings... as is written in the Book of Moses." By these passages we can tell that Moses either wrote or collected the material found in the first five books of the Bible - the Books of Moses.

A main key to understanding these Books of Moses - and the Old Testament itself - is to grasp this one idea: *the Old Testament is mainly an inspired account of the history of the Jewish people and God's covenant with them, pointing toward a coming "messiah"*. That's why it's called the "Old Testament", because it was a covenant (agreement or contract) God made with ancient Israel. (The "New Testament" depicts God's new covenant, now available to all nations - not just Jews.)

Many readers get confused over the varied characters, wars, prophecies, events and dates of the Old Testament. They forget that it all ties together in a purpose: *to tell the story of God's working with the Jewish nation to bring a Messiah into the world*. Keep in mind these ideas as you study to understand Moses' books - the first 5 books of the Bible.

The Book Of Genesis

Moses' first book has inherited the English name, "Genesis" or "beginnings". It got that name from its content: the *beginning* of creation, *beginning* of man and the animals, *beginning* of evil and the *beginning* of the Jewish nation. It also includes the *beginning* of this idea - a Messiah would come in the future to reverse the evil that Satan & man injected into God's creation.

As Genesis opens, it gives an account of the beginnings of our environment. God creates the heavens and the earth. He creates light. He separates the waters from the land. He creates vegetation. He creates animals that roam the new earth. Then He says, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over... all the earth." (Genesis 1:26 NIV.)

At that point, God put man in a garden paradise called Eden. Man ruled over the animals and all of God's new creation. God looked at all His creation and saw that it was good... except for one thing. He said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." (Genesis 2:18 NIV.) With that, God created woman.

But as man and woman (now called "Adam" and "Eve") live in the garden, something new arises in man's situation. It's another beginning, but not a pleasant one.

Evil slithers into paradise. The serpent tempts Adam and Eve to ignore God's words and eat from the forbidden tree, the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:17 NIV.) When they do, the serpent (Satan) becomes their master. They replace God with Satan. Good now becomes diluted with evil. When God must banish them from the garden, they roam about in a world of evil, sickness and pain.

Since man was created in God's image, man (like God) had complete control over his own choices and his own will. Man's sin was a deliberate and free choice. Woman, and then man, chose to take on the mindset of Satan, to imitate his arrogance and rebellious behavior toward God - and it brought terrible consequences that still haunt us today.

Did you notice how many beginnings we've already seen in Genesis? It's truly God's book of beginnings. And there's more.

As man adjusts to his new life without God, we see the beginning of murder (Genesis 4:8), cities (4:17), ranching & farming (4:20), music (4:21), manufacturing (4:22), polygamy (4:19), war (4:23-24), prayer (4:26) and family (5:1).

Then you find another beginning in Genesis. It's one of the most remarkable in the book, and it begins a story that will unfold throughout the rest of the Bible.

In Genesis chapter 12, God begins a new branch of the human family by calling a man named Abram (later known as Abraham) to be the father of that new nation. He makes Abram three promises: (1) a promise of a land of his own, (2) a promise that he will become a great nation and (3) that this nation will bless all the other nations.

These promises mark the beginning both of the Arab and Jewish people, the beginning of the Nation of Israel and the beginning of God's plan to save man from the evil and destruction Satan brought into this creation.

This remarkable promise in Genesis chapter twelve is even quoted in the New Testament as a prophecy of the coming of Messiah: "The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.'" (Galatians 3:8). *Genesis even reveals the beginning of the gospel of Christ!*

From chapter twelve, Genesis tells the story of Abraham's descendants and how God works to make them a great nation. Abraham waits 25 years for the son which God promised him; the son, called Isaac, is born when Abraham is 100 years old. God's promise and Abraham's faith linked up to produce a miraculous beginning for the Nation of Israel.

As Abraham's son, Isaac, grows up and marries, he has two sons of his own called Jacob and Esau. God chooses Jacob to continue the family line and later changes his name to "Israel" - or "he struggles with God" after he wrestles an angel all night long to get God's blessing (Genesis 32:28.)

Jacob, now called Israel, has twelve sons of his own, who fight among each other and sell their younger brother, Joseph, into slavery to Egypt. By the end of Genesis, God has made this son Joseph into a great ruler in Egypt. When a terrible famine hits their home in Canaan, Joseph convinces his family to come and live with him in Egypt where the food is abundant.

So as the long series of beginnings ("Genesis") closes, God's chosen people - the 12 families of Israel - live in a foreign, pagan country. This sets up the events that unfold in the Book of Exodus.

The Book Of Exodus

The name "Exodus" comes from a term meaning "going out", similar to the word "exit". It gets this name because it records the events surrounding Moses' mission to lead the Nation of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and toward their own homeland.

The events of this second Book of Moses take place about 300 years after Joseph's death in the end of Genesis. By the time Exodus opens its account, the Jewish people have lived in Egypt for over 400 years.

Although Moses wrote Genesis by compiling oral and written accounts of that time period, he wrote Exodus mostly from personal knowledge as God led him in what to record.

Exodus opens with the story of Israel's trials in Egyptian slavery. A new king came to power who didn't know Joseph (who had lived 300 years earlier) nor his positive contributions to Egyptian life. This new king, or "Pharaoh", began to terrorize the Nation of Israel, especially by killing their male babies so the Jewish race couldn't grow any larger and threaten Egypt's power.

In response to this tragic genocide, Moses appears in the Exodus story. "Moses" means "drawn out" - a name he got because his parents hid him from the Egyptian army in a floating basket in the Nile River, where he was "drawn out" of the water and rescued by Pharaoh's own daughter. So Moses was raised in Pharaoh's palace until he was 40 years old.

Still feeling a kinship with his native people, Moses killed an abusive Egyptian slave driver, thinking that his own fellow Jews would follow him in revolt against the Egyptians (Acts 7:25). When that didn't happen, Moses fled from Egypt - the first exit in this book of exits called "Exodus".

But that wasn't the end of the story; about 40 years later, when Moses was 80, God called him to lead the Jews out of Egypt. God appeared to Moses in the desert and spoke through a burning bush that continued to burn but wasn't consumed by the fire. As you read of this event in Exodus 3:1 - 4:17, you see

Moses try to avoid going back to Egypt; he argues with God and makes excuses why he can't lead the people out. But God answers all Moses' complaints and questions. Jehovah insists, so Moses heads back to Egypt to lead the Jews to freedom.

Through a series of disasters and plagues (Exodus 7:14 - 12:42) God shook the land of Egypt so deeply that Pharaoh agreed to let the Jews go. The last disaster brought on Egypt was the death of the firstborn son in each Egyptian family. At the same time God ordained a feast called "Passover" among the Jewish families. This Passover meal, still celebrated today, acts out God's sparing of the Jewish firstborn and Israel's exit from Egypt.

The Jewish families were to take a lamb and kill it, smearing its blood on the doorframes of the houses where they would eat the lamb as part of the Passover meal. The death - the blood - of this lamb would signal to God's angel that those living inside belonged to God and were to be spared.

Here again the Old Testament points to a coming Messiah who would die for the world's sins. In this Passover feast, God previewed Christ's death; the apostle Paul said, "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." (1 Corinthians 5:7 NIV.) Even John the Baptist called Jesus "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29, 36 NIV.)

And so Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was foreshadowed by the Old Testament Passover, which protected the Jews living in Egypt from God's wrath as it was poured out on that pagan land. This Passover protection led to the most important exit of Exodus - the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt.

As the Jews exited Egypt, Moses led them across the Red Sea by God's miraculous power. Their goal was to make the trek across the Sinai desert back to the homeland that God had promised Abraham - the land called Canaan.

The rest of Exodus tells the story of how God fed and protected the Jewish people in the desert (chapters 15-17), how He gave them the laws and regulations on Mount Sinai for this new nation (chapters 19-34), how they were led by God to build a tabernacle (large tent) in which to worship God and how God's glory led the new nation while they traveled toward the promised land.

And so Exodus covers this time period - from the rise of new Pharaoh who persecuted the Jews because he didn't respect Joseph's heritage, to the exit of the Nation of Israel from Egypt and toward their own homeland.

As a new nation traveling toward their promised land, Israel needs people who can administer the laws and regulations governing its worship and daily life. We see that story unfold in the Book of Leviticus.

The Book Of Leviticus

The name "Leviticus" means "of the Levites". The Levites were one of the twelve families, or tribes, of Israel. Levi, their forefather, was one of Jacob's 12 sons.

These Levites showed remarkable moral courage when Moses caught the people worshipping a golden calf. Levi seems to be the only tribe of Israel concerned enough during that crisis to help Moses correct it. Because of that, they were appointed as priests for the new Nation of Israel. Moses said to the Levites, "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." (Exodus 32:29 NIV.)

From that day forward, the Levites were in charge of the worship life of Israel. They were the caretakers of the tabernacle (and later the more permanent building called the "temple"), and they were the musicians, teachers, scribes, officers, judges and assistants to the priests. A small percentage of them were actually qualified to be the priests who offered sacrifices to God.

As Leviticus opens, we get a picture of the sacrifices to be offered (chapters 1-7). Here Moses lists the Burnt Offering (an animal sacrifice), the Grain Offering (from a crop in the field), the Fellowship Offering (or peace offering), the Sin Offering (for unintentional sin) and the Guilt Offering (for unintentional sin against God's holy things). The Levite priests administered these offerings on behalf of the people as they brought the sacrifices to God's tabernacle. God allowed the priests to keep a portion of the offerings for their own food.

The next few chapters of Leviticus discuss the process of ordaining priests, regulations about unclean foods, laws about how to treat infectious diseases among the people, laws against eating or drinking blood, laws about sexual conduct, property laws, the punishments for breaking certain laws, the rules for priests to follow, and even a section on unacceptable sacrifices (see chapters 8-22).

As Leviticus closes, it deals with some special issues. God reveals that He has ordained some special days for the Israelites to celebrate. One is the Sabbath, the 7th day of the week, which Israel was to use as a day of rest and contemplation. They were to remember what God had done in leading them out of Egypt.

God then ordained they celebrate the Passover Feast to remember their protection by the lamb's blood from the angel of death. God also gave them a harvest celebration called the First Fruits, another harvest celebration 7 weeks later called the Feast of Weeks (also called Pentecost in the New Testament), a mid-year rest called the Feast of Trumpets, a week-long rest and worship called the Feast of Tabernacles and a yearly worship called the Day of Atonement.

God ordained this solemn Day of Atonement as a day of fasting and prayer. On that holy day the High Priest went into the "most holy place" in the tabernacle (later in the temple) and offered sacrifices for the sins of the whole nation.

This national day of repentance and sacrifice actually foreshadowed something greater which would happen in the New Testament. The writer of Hebrews says that this Day of Atonement was only temporary; that the real sacrifice by the real High Priest was accomplished when Jesus went to the cross: "When Christ came as high priest... he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption." (Hebrews 9:11-12 NIV.)

And the writer restates his case by saying that Jesus wasn't just the priest, he was also the sacrifice! "So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him." (9:28 NIV.)

And so, the Old Testament priesthood and sacrifice system foreshadowed Christ's coming and his atoning death for all of us.

As the Book of Leviticus ends, Moses includes a section on the rewards for obedience and the punishments for disobedience (see chapter 26). God included these curses and blessings as an integral part of His covenant with Israel.

The last chapter in Leviticus depicts a concept that first appeared in Exodus - the redemption of the firstborn. God had spared Israel's firstborn during the plague of death in Egypt by allowing a lamb to die in the place of each firstborn son. Fathers spread lamb's blood on the doorframes and the firstborn inside were spared. Therefore, the firstborn in each family actually belonged to God (Exodus 13). That's why the last chapter of Leviticus gives more details about how to redeem the firstborn in each family.

Even as Leviticus closes it previews something which would unfold in the New Testament. From this very concept of redemption of the firstborn, the apostle Paul writes about Christ's death for us by saying, "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Colossians 1:14 NIV.)

The Book Of Numbers

The Book of Numbers gets its name from its opening census of the Israelite nation. By the time Moses led them from Egypt and toward the Promised Land, the men alone numbered 603,550 (not including the tribe of Levi). With such a massive nation to lead, Moses found himself afflicted with all the problems and setbacks of any national leader.

That's why the early chapters of Numbers present laws and regulations dealing with family life, special religious vows, worship at the tabernacle and the Passover. After discussing these regulations, the Book of Numbers tells the story of Israel's trek toward the Promised Land, and of two main disasters which slowed their progress.

One of these disasters happened after Moses sent twelve spies into Canaan (the same land God had earlier promised to Abraham and his descendants) to evaluate the land. The spies came back with a

mixed report: ten of them were against trying to conquer the land, but two of them (Joshua and Caleb) encouraged the people to support Moses and take the land.

The negative report brought back by the 10 spies rubbed off on the people. They complained against Moses and even talked of killing him. They wanted to go back to Egypt, even though it meant certain slavery.

Their refusal to march by faith into the Promised Land angered God, so he removed that generation from his plan. He doomed them to wander in the wilderness for 40 years until they died off (except for Joshua and Caleb).

The second disaster happened to Moses himself. As this massive nation wandered in the Desert of Zin, water became scarce. The people complained and even sent a delegation to Moses, blaming him for all their wilderness troubles. Moses went to God in prayer over this issue, and Jehovah told him about a rock nearby that would release water if Moses would speak to it. Moses approached the rock and, out of anger and frustration, took his staff and struck the rock instead of speaking to it.

His violation of God's will cost Moses the Promised Land. God said to him, "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." (Numbers 20:12).

And so as the Book of Numbers chronicles the Israelites' trek toward the Promised Land, it highlights the failure of both the nation and Moses to complete the journey; they failed because they lacked faith in God.

But the Book of Numbers still holds out hope for the future; it foreshadows several events that we see unfold in the New Testament.

For example, during their wandering in the wilderness the Israelites began to blaspheme God and speak against Moses, so God sent a plague of poisonous snakes that attacked the people. The people cried out to Moses and begged him to pray for them, which he did. God told Moses to lift up a bronze snake on a pole so that anyone who was bitten could look at the bronze snake and be healed (Numbers 21:9).

In the New Testament, Jesus said this very event foreshadowed his death on the cross: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." (John 3:14-15 NIV.)

Another example of how Numbers foreshadows the New Testament is found in Numbers 24:17NIV where a pagan prophet named Balaam tries to curse Israel. Instead of cursing them, he's compelled by God to bless them. In his blessing, he says "A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel... A ruler will come out of Jacob and destroy the survivors of the city."

This prophecy of a majestic ruler who would come from the Nation of Israel to bless the whole world is fulfilled in the New Testament. Peter wrote about this ruler when he spoke of Jesus: "And we have the word of the prophets made more certain... until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." (2 Peter 1:19 NIV.) And Jesus himself confirmed the same connection by saying "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 and Morning Star." (Revelation 22:16 NIV.)

These fulfilled prophecies from Numbers show its importance in the Bible's overall message. Even in this ancient Old Testament book, which begins merely with a population census, God reveals himself. He shows the trials and failures of his people, who lack faith in the mission he gave them. However, this failure was temporary - a new, exciting day was on the horizon; a day which is about to arrive in the Book of Deuteronomy.

The Book Of Deuteronomy

Moses' last book gets its English name from a Greek word meaning "the second law". That's because of the content of Deuteronomy; God gave the law a second time, the same law which he gave Moses on Mount Sinai (recorded in Exodus and Leviticus). But why did God give the law a second time?

Because of what happened in Exodus and Numbers. The people of Israel followed Moses out of Egypt because God promised them a land of their own. When they arrived near the borders of that land, called Canaan, Moses sent in the twelve spies. But when ten of the spies gave a negative report, the

people lost their courage and refused to go. Because of their lack of faith, they were doomed to wander in the wilderness for forty years until that faithless generation passed away.

As the Book of Deuteronomy opens, that very thing has happened. The faithless generation has died off and the wandering is over. It's time to enter the Promised Land, but there's some unfinished business. The law - God's covenant with Israel - must be restated to a new generation and the covenant has to be renewed. If the Nation of Israel enters the Promised Land without understanding the sacred covenant, their enemies will defeat them easily.

Because of this need to reconfirm the covenant, the Book of Deuteronomy is actually a series of at least three sermons that Moses delivered to the people. The first of these is found in chapters 1-4, in which Moses reminds them of God's actions in their past and how faith was always rewarded. Toward the sermon's end, he gives them stern warnings designed to keep them faithful to their covenant with God.

The second sermon covers chapters 5-28, in which Moses reconfirms God's laws and regulations for the Nation of Israel as they enter the Promised Land. Chapters 5 & 6 restate the law given a generation earlier on Mount Sinai. Beginning at chapter 7, Moses mixes historical memories of the wilderness wanderings with his own warnings for this new generation to remain faithful to God. He warns them not to worship other gods and he explains the regulations that God expects them to follow as they enter the Promised Land.

One unique feature of Moses' second sermon emerges in chapter 18. He warns Israel not to seek counsel from the pagans living in Canaan; he tells them not to try to determine the future by imitating their occult practices. Then he tells them "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him." (Deuteronomy 18:15 NIV.)

Here Moses is not only speaking of the beginning of the prophet's role in Israel, but these verses were later interpreted by the Jews in New Testament times to speak of the coming Messiah - sometimes called "the Prophet". In John 6:14 NIV, people who saw Jesus' miracles said, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world."

This second sermon of Moses in Deuteronomy ends with a chilling tone in chapter 28, where Moses recounts the blessings that will follow their obedience to God and the curses that will befall them if they worship other gods. He vividly portrays the despair of those who don't obey God, by saying "In the morning you will say, 'If only it were evening!' and in the evening you will say, 'If only it were morning!' - because of the terror that will fill your hearts..." (Deuteronomy 28:67 NIV.)

With that, Deuteronomy launches into Moses' last sermon to the people as they're poised to enter Canaan. This sermon, found in chapters 29-30, is a renewal of the covenant and a restatement of its terms. It ends by recalling God's promise in the Book of Genesis to Abraham: "For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." (Deuteronomy 30:20 NIV.)

As Deuteronomy ends, Moses tells the people that Joshua will succeed him as the new leader for Israel, he recites the words of a song of encouragement and he pronounces a blessing on each of the tribes. The last chapter of Deuteronomy tells of Moses' death and "the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of Israel." (34:12 NIV.)

With that, Deuteronomy closes; and the Books of Moses come to a close.

This sweeping panorama of God's working - from the creation of the world to the death of Moses and the entrance of God's people Israel into the Promised Land - is written large in the five Books of Moses.

Study Assignments - Lesson 3

GENESIS: Read Genesis 3:1-24; 12:1-9; 50:22-26.

EXODUS: Read Exodus 1:8-22; 3:1 - 4:18; 12:1-13.

LEVITICUS: Read Leviticus 16:1-34.

NUMBERS: Read Numbers 14:1-25; 24:15-19.

DEUTERONOMY: Read Deuteronomy 5:1-22; 18:9-22.

TEST QUESTIONS - LESSON 3

1. ____ The Old Testament is mainly an inspired account of (A) the creation of the world, (B) the life of Jesus or (C) the history of the Jewish people and their covenant with God.
2. ____ All the characters, wars, prophecies and events of the Old Testament tie together in what purpose? (A) To tell the story of man, (B) to tell the story of God's working to bring a Messiah into the world, or (C) to tell the story of Egyptian slavery.
3. ____ The name "Genesis" means (A) "general studies", (B) "beginnings" or (C) "biographies".
4. ____ In Genesis chapter 12, God called Abram to be (A) the father of a new nation which would bring the Messiah, (B) a prophet to Egypt or (C) a priest in Moses' family.
5. ____ The name "Exodus" means (A) "going out", (B) "extra teachings" or (C) "beginnings".
6. ____ In Exodus, the death of the Old Testament Passover lamb foreshadowed (A) the building of a temple, (B) Jesus' sacrifice on the cross or (C) Moses' birth.
7. ____ The name "Leviticus" means (A) "reaching out", (B) "building a nation" or (C) "of the Levites".
8. ____ In Leviticus, the Day of Atonement foreshadowed (A) a day when man would live in peace, (B) Christ's coming as both our high priest and our sacrifice, or (C) the book of Genesis.
9. ____ The Book of Numbers gets its name from which fact? (A) It has more pages than Exodus, (B) it tells of Israel's arithmetic system or (C) it begins with a census of the Israelites.
10. ____ When Moses lifted up the bronze snake to heal the people of snakebite, that event predicted (A) that snakes would always harm man, (B) that medicine could be made from bronze or (C) that Jesus would be lifted up on the cross for man's sins.
11. ____ The name "Deuteronomy" comes from a Greek word, meaning (A) "the second law", (B) "the life of Moses" or (C) "wilderness".
12. ____ In Deuteronomy 18, Moses promised that God would send a prophet like himself to the people. The New Testament compares this Prophet to (A) Jesus, (B) John the Baptist or (C) Moses.

Chapter Four: *UNDERSTANDING THE PERIOD OF CONQUEST*

Joshua Through Samuel

The next five books of the Bible - Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel - cover Israel's conquest of Canaan, the land God promised them. Remember, he had promised this land to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12:7) and had promised it again to the Nation of Israel as they left Egypt (Exodus 3:16-17.)

However, because the Israelites rebelled against God and refused to take the risk of entering Canaan, God caused them to wander in the wilderness for 40 years until that unbelieving generation died.

As the Book of Joshua opens, Moses has died. The leadership of this great nation has fallen on Joshua. Israel is now ready to enter the Promised Land; the old generation of unbelievers has died off while God prepared a new generation to enter the land and conquer it. This series of five books - Joshua through 2 Samuel - begins by telling of Israel's conquest of the land under Joshua's leadership, and ends by telling how King David consolidated the land under one powerful kingdom.

Is God just reciting history in these books? No, these writings cover a Divine history about how God delivered His own people and brought the Messiah to earth. That story progresses as the Book of Joshua opens.

The Book Of Joshua

The Book of Joshua gets its title from the main character, Joshua, whose name means "Jehovah delivered." Joshua, who was born in Egypt during Israel's slavery there, became Moses' aide (Exodus 24:13) and later served as General of the Israelite army (Exodus 17:8.) God also chose this remarkable man of faith (he was one of the spies who encouraged the nation to possess Canaan in Numbers 14:6-9) to succeed Moses as leader of the Nation of Israel (Deuteronomy 31:7-8.)

The Book of Joshua covers the first twenty-five years of Israel's invasion and settling of the land of Canaan. It opens right after the death of Moses and the appointment of Joshua as the new leader, and it ends twenty-five years later as the army of Israel has occupied the land of Canaan.

Joshua's book opens with one striking fact: Israel has a law book, a written account kept by Moses of God's dealing with Israel. And God warns Joshua to pay attention to this book: "*Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified and do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.*" (Joshua 1:8-9 NIV.)

This Book of the Law which God spoke of, sometimes called "the Pentateuch", contained the first five books of the Bible - Genesis through Deuteronomy. Israel's book from God served as a constitution for this huge nation and a guidebook for life in the new Promised Land.

As the conquest of this land begins, Joshua sends spies into Canaan, especially to investigate the city of Jericho. This time the report differs vastly from the last generation's evaluation. This new generation of Israelites has learned to trust God. They're ready to conquer the land.

The first city they conquer is Jericho, which falls due to God's miraculous intervention. Then other cities fall in rapid succession during the first 11 chapters of Joshua. At that point, Israel has completely infiltrated the land of Canaan and occupied its territory. The rest of the Book of Joshua, from chapters 12 through 24, deals with how the new land was divided among the Israelite conquerors.

By the end of the Book of Joshua, God's people had taken the land, accompanied by three remarkable miracles: (1) parting of the Jordan River (Joshua 3:15-16), (2) the fall of Jericho's walls (6:20) and (3) the sun stopping in the sky (10:13).

When reading Joshua's book, some people wonder how God could condone war? How could he stand by and see this destruction? How could he not only watch it, but encourage it?

God had several reasons for his actions. First, he was using the Israelite nation to bring Christ to save the world from the corruption brought in when Adam and Eve sinned. This Christ couldn't be born in a vacuum. He had to have a history. He had to be from some nation. In order to save man, he must be a man. And that means he had to come from some branch of the human family. God chose Israel for this purpose. When God chose Israel, their mission demanded that they have a homeland and an army to carve out and protect that homeland.

Second, the nations that Israel will displace were corrupt. God said that the land “*will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you.*” (Leviticus 18:28 NIV.) The tribes living in Canaan had become so corrupt as to practice human sacrifice - even to sacrificing their own children as burnt offerings! In God’s plan, he was using Israel to purge Canaan of unspeakable evil.

Third, remember that the world was much more barbaric in those days. When Jesus came, he taught a higher and more complete revelation. His ethics about loving one’s neighbors and enemies hadn’t been taught extensively in Joshua’s day. We can’t always judge another period in history accurately since we haven’t lived under those conditions. God knew their human limitations and he worked within them.

Whatever God’s reasons, he allowed Israel to conquer the land of Canaan and establish their own homeland. “*Then the land had rest from war.*” (Joshua 11:23 NIV.)

As Joshua led Israel into the land, and into this “rest”, he foreshadowed the actions of the coming Messiah. In the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews mentions Joshua’s conquest and compares it to what the Messiah had done.

Joshua led the people to a physical, temporary rest from their battles, while Christ leads his church out of spiritual slavery toward a special glorified rest. He says, “*For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later of another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God...*” (Hebrews 4:8-9 NIV.)

The parallels between Jesus and Joshua are striking. In fact, the name “Jesus” is actually the Greek form of the Hebrew word “Joshua”. Both mean, “Jehovah delivered”. Jehovah did indeed deliver both the Jews under Joshua and the church under Jesus.

But being delivered and staying delivered are two different things, which brings us to the struggles found in the Book of Judges.

The Book Of Judges

The Book of Judges gets its name from a Hebrew word “*shophet*” (or “judges”), referring to Israel’s leaders during the first 300 years of life in Canaan. These leaders were more than just trial judges; they served as military commanders, civil administrators and judges in national legal matters. Since Israel had no strong central leader after Joshua’s death, this system arose to fill that need until the nation received a king in Samuel’s day.

Even under these judges, chaos marked this 300-year period in Israel’s history. The nation suffered from exhausting cycles of national decay, disaster, repentance and then religious revival – only to start the whole process over again. As Israel continually broke the covenant with God, their enemies would attack and almost drive them from the Promised Land. Because of their sin, it took them this entire 300 years to wrest control of the Promised Land from the pagans who already lived there.

Notice how the Book of Judges captures the times: “*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... They forsook the LORD... They followed and worshipped various gods of the peoples around them... In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders... Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them... They were in great distress... Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders.*” (Judges 2:10-16 NIV.)

The last verse of Judges sums up the disaster of these times: “*In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.*” (21:25 NIV.) During those three centuries of madness, God showed Israel the importance of spiritual leadership and their covenant with Jehovah.

As you read the Book of Judges, you’ll notice that its story opens up just after Joshua’s death. With both Moses and Joshua now gone, the Nation of Israel faces a leadership crisis. A whole generation had grown up with strong spiritual leadership at the nation’s helm, but now it was different. With no strong national leader, the people began to drift into the paganism they saw around them.

This drift into an unfaithful spiritual life made the nation ripe for destruction at the hands of its enemies. As that happened, God rescued his people by raising up judges - men and women who could represent God to the people and who could fill part of the vacuum of leadership left when Moses and Joshua died.

One common phrase in Judges is this: *“But when they cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a deliverer.”* (See Judges 3:9 NIV.) These deliverers, or judges, were a key to saving the nation from paganism until God was ready for Israel to have kings as leaders.

Many of these judges became famous as faith-filled leaders. A woman named Deborah led Israel to victory over Jabin, king of Canaan (Judges 4 & 5.) A judge named Gideon took only 300 men and crushed the army of Midian, which was so large *“it was impossible to number the men and their camels”* (6:5 NIV.) Samson, the strongest man in the Bible, delivered Israel from the Philistine army (chapters 13-16.)

These judges were instrumental in pulling Israel through this dangerous time. They certainly weren't perfect, but they helped bring the nation back to God when needed. They led the nation in battle to preserve the family line from Abraham to the Messiah's day. They actually were like Christ in a way; they delivered a sin-burdened people from destruction by giving themselves to God. They helped the Nation of Israel return to its purpose of bringing the Messiah to save the world.

The Book Of Ruth

This same purpose of bringing the Messiah into the world appears quietly in the next Biblical book, a short writing called “the Book of Ruth”. This love story is named after its main character, Ruth, and takes place during the time of the judges. It sets a sharp contrast to the Book of Judges because it's a love story on the human scale, rather than a historical look at wars, kings, etc.

As the story opens, a Hebrew woman named Naomi and her husband move from Bethlehem to Moab to live because famine has hit their hometown. But while in Moab, Naomi's husband and her sons die, leaving her with only 2 daughters-in-law who're both Moabites, not Jews.

Later when Naomi hears that the famine in Bethlehem has ended, she makes plans to go home. One of the daughters-in-law, named Ruth, is determined to go back with her. She says, *“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 will be my God.”* (Ruth 1:16 NIV.)

Even though she's an outsider, Ruth goes to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law and begins the task of trying to fit in. She's not only learning a new religion but a new social system. As widows, Ruth and Naomi are allowed by the Old Testament law to gather leftover crops from the fields. What the harvesters dropped or overlooked would remain in the fields for the poor to gather.

In one of the fields Ruth and Naomi find a friendly reception from a landowner and distant relative of Naomi's named Boaz, who allows them more freedom than usual to harvest his grain. Boaz, who is touched by Ruth's devotion to her mother-in-law, eventually falls in love with Ruth and, after clearing away some legal details, asks her to marry him. She agrees and they soon have a son named Obed.

Besides being a touching love story, the Book of Ruth makes a powerful point. Ruth is an outsider. And yet, she's accepted into God's nation. She joins the national family tree in a remarkable way.

Her son, Obed, was the grandfather of the great King David. And David's family line eventually produced Jesus. This outsider, Ruth, had been allowed by God's grace to produce offspring who brought the Messiah into the world! Not only does this prove that God accepts anyone who seeks him, but it shows that the Gentile nations would one day be part of God's eternal plan.

The Book Of 1 Samuel

These final two books in the Period of Conquest carry the name of the last great judge of Israel, called Samuel. In the Hebrew language, his name sounds like the words for “heard of God”. Samuel's mother had prayed tearfully to have a child, so when God answered her prayers she named him “heard of God”.

Samuel's ministry, which took place about 1,000 B.C., spanned the gap between two historical times: (1) the period of the judges when “Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” and (2) the

period of the kings. That story (how the Nation of Israel crossed this historical bridge between the judges and the kings) unfolds in the two Books of Samuel.

Just as big doors swing on little hinges, Samuel helped turn Israel from her past toward her future. Samuel was remarkable for several reasons. His birth came as a result of unceasing prayer by his mother (1 Samuel 1:12-20.) His name itself means, “heard of God”. And he himself was a great man of prayer; even God considered Samuel one of the two greatest prayer intercessors of the Old Testament (Psalm 99:6-7 & Jeremiah 15:1.)

Not only that, Samuel was the first significant prophet since the days of Moses; he organized schools to train other prophets (1 Samuel 19:20; 2 Kings 2:3,5 & 4:38.) At a crucial time in Israel’s conquest of Canaan, Samuel became the moral conscience of the nation.

As the Book of 1 Samuel opens, a woman named Hannah prays to God out of frustration because she can’t have children. She even promises God that if he will give her a child, she’ll give the child back to Jehovah, presenting him for God’s service all his life. Her prayers are heard and Samuel is born.

Samuel’s prophetic gift shows up even while he’s a child. As a fulfillment of his mother’s promise to God, Samuel lives in the tabernacle area and is trained by Eli the priest. One night God awakens the boy with a voice calling his name, “Samuel!” At first, Samuel thinks Eli is calling him, so he reports to his room. But Eli hadn’t called him. He sends the boy back to bed, but the voice comes again. Finally, after it happens once again, Eli realizes that God is speaking to this young boy; he tells Samuel to go back and listen to the voice.

That direct voice from God came in stark contrast to the ungodly times swirling around Samuel. God rarely spoke to people in Samuel’s day; *“In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.”* (1 Samuel 3:1 NIV.) So when God spoke to Samuel, a new age in the life of Israel opened up. From then on, the *“LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground.”* (1 Samuel 3:19 NIV.)

As Samuel’s life unfolded, God continued to speak to him and guide the nation through his ministry. The first major incident showing Samuel’s powerful leadership happened when the Philistines attacked and defeated Israel. It had happened before, but this attack especially horrified the Israelites - the Philistines *captured the Ark of the Covenant*, Israel’s most sacred artifact from Moses’ day.

But when the Philistines captured the Ark, they soon realized it came with a curse. Their god, an idol called Dagon, couldn’t even remain upright in the Ark’s presence; Dagon kept falling to the ground when it was in the same room with the Ark. Besides that, the Philistine people were afflicted with tumors and an infestation of rats. The Philistines finally sent the Ark back to Israelite territory but, not long afterwards, they attacked Israel again. This time Samuel entered the picture.

He called an assembly at a site called Mizpah and rallied Israel to fight. As Samuel prayed and offered sacrifices, Israel fought and won against the invaders. The Bible records it this way: *“Throughout Samuel’s lifetime, the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines.”* (1 Samuel 7:13 NIV.) Samuel’s spiritual authority had been decisively proven. That’s why he was so hurt at what happened later.

As Samuel’s career neared an end, the Nation of Israel asked him to find them a king. They said, *“You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.”* (1 Samuel 8:5 NIV.)

Although Israel’s foolish request for a king distressed Samuel, he prayed to God for an answer. God unexpectedly allowed Samuel to appoint a king over Israel. Why? Because the nation continued to prove its unwillingness to cherish God’s covenant, so he gave them a series of kings who would become hard-driving dictators over the nation.

As Saul, the first of these kings, began his career, two events soon dominated his reign, eventually destroying him. One event was his disobedience to God’s instructions concerning a battle with the Amalekites. God commanded Saul to completely destroy this pagan tribe and their riches. Instead, Saul kept some of the livestock and spared the Amalekite king’s life. Because Saul couldn’t be trusted, God tore the kingdom from his grip and secretly had David anointed as the new king (1 Samuel 15-16 NIV).

The second toxic event in Saul's reign happened when the young anointed man named David helped deliver Israel from her ancient enemies, the Philistines.

Here's how it happened. As Israel and the Philistines gathered for battle, one man named Goliath caused a stalemate between the two armies. Goliath, who stood 9 feet tall, so intimidated the Israelite army that they froze in place behind their own lines and wouldn't attack.

When the young shepherd named David came to the battle lines to visit his brothers, he couldn't believe his eyes. The mighty warriors of Israel had allowed one man to intimidate the whole army, bringing them to a stumbling halt. David was indignant. He said, "*Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?*" (1 Samuel 17:26 NIV.) From that moment, David set out to defeat Goliath and the Philistines; with God's help he won the battle (1 Samuel 17.)

This event aroused Saul's jealousy of David and set in motion a feud that eventually destroyed Saul. The rest of Samuel's first book chronicles the stormy relationship between Saul and David. Saul becomes vindictive and hateful toward David; he tries to kill him several times. Yet David always maintains his respect for Israel's king. He even spares Saul's life when he could have easily taken it.

As the Book of 1 Samuel ends, Saul loses the war with the Philistines. God has rejected Saul as king because he was unfaithful to the covenant and because he tried to kill David, God's chosen successor to the throne. The story ends tragically with Saul's defeat by the Philistines and his suicide on the battlefield. This sets the stage for the events of 2 Samuel, as David begins his consolidation of the Nation of Israel under one strong empire.

The Book Of 2 Samuel

As the second Book of Samuel opens, David hears the news of Saul's defeat in battle and his suicide. This propels him into a period of mourning, not just for Saul but also for Saul's deceased son Jonathan, who was David's closest friend.

After the mourning ends, David is anointed king over the southern section of the Promised Land, which was called Judah. At this point, war breaks out between the family of Saul and the forces of David. This bloody civil war eventually decides the political direction of Israel; David becomes king of both Judah in the south and Israel in the north.

In 2 Samuel 5:3, leaders of the entire nation meet at Hebron to anoint the 30 year-old David as king of the entire Nation of Israel. David had reigned as king of Judah for seven and a half years, and now he would reign as king over the whole nation for 33 years.

David's anointing by the leaders verifies a stark contrast between Saul and David: Saul was the king anointed after the people rebelliously demanded a human leader, but David came to the throne as the king that God himself had anointed. Saul was man's idea of a great king, but David was a king after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14).

As the king after God's own heart, David begins immediately after his anointing to achieve success as a leader. He first conquers the city of Jerusalem and makes it his capitol. He then defeats the Philistines and brings the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem. After conquering his enemies and consolidating his power, David becomes concerned that the Nation of Israel hasn't yet built a temple for Jehovah God. His concern sparks a prophecy from God about the future of his kingdom.

A prophet named Nathan tells David that God isn't ready for the temple to be built yet. He then delivers this message to David: "*The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you... I will raise up your offspring to succeed you... I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son... your throne will be established forever.*" (2 Samuel 7:11-16 NIV.)

This prophecy eventually found its fulfillment in the New Testament. Jesus himself asked the Pharisees, "*What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?*"

The Pharisees quickly answered, "*The son of David.*" This shows that people who studied the Old Testament Scriptures in Jesus' day expected the Messiah to be one of David's offspring.

Jesus further questioned them, “*How is it then that David, speaking by the Holy Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’?*” Jesus then quoted Psalm 110:1 to prove that David called the coming Messiah by the title of “Lord”.

Jesus then asked, “*If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?*” (Matthew 22:41-46 NIV.)

This completely stumped the experts. The Messiah, who would be Lord, would also be the son of David. How could this be? It came to pass in Jesus, who was both Messiah and the son of David (Matthew 1:1, 6 NIV.)

So this prophecy given by Nathan back in David’s day predicted that the Messiah would be a son of David, but also predicted that this son would reign on the throne of David forever, that this lineage of kings would last forever. Certainly, it hasn’t lasted in the physical sense. But Jesus now reigns as king over all things, especially for the church (Ephesians 1:20-23.) And he now reigns with the Father until all his enemies are placed under his feet (1 Corinthians 15:24-27.)

This shows the deeper significance of king David’s reign as it’s portrayed in 2 Samuel. The reign of David previews the reign of the Messiah. That story threads throughout 2 Samuel.

As 2 Samuel progresses to a close, it easily divides itself into three main subjects. The first is the rise of David to power in chapters 1-10. The next subject is David’s sin and fall from favor in chapters 11-20. The last subject summarizes David’s final days as king and his praise for God’s mighty working throughout his life in chapters 21-24.

As 2 Samuel ends, David still reigns as king. He’s also still struggling to overcome serious mistakes he has made in failing to listen to God’s leading. As this book ends, and as the Period of Conquest ends, a new era waits to unfold before the Nation of Israel. The Period of the Kings, which begins with the great king Solomon, readies itself to take the stage of Divine history.

Study Assignments - Lesson 4

JOSHUA: Read Joshua 1:1-9; 6:1-27.

JUDGES: Read Judges 2:6-23; 6:1 - 7:25.

RUTH: Read Ruth 1:1 - 2:12 & 4:13-22.

1 SAMUEL: Read 1 Samuel 1:1-28; 3:1-14; 9:17 - 10:1; 16:1-13.

2 SAMUEL: Read 2 Samuel 5:1-5; 7:4-29; 12:1-23; 23:1-7.

TEST QUESTIONS - LESSON 4

1. ___ The Book of Joshua gets its name from which fact? (A) Moses didn’t want it named after him, (B) it’s named after Joshua, the main character or (C) Joshua was the Promised Land.

2. ___ The first city conquered in the Book of Joshua is (A) Boston, (B) ancient Babylon or (C) Jericho.

3. ___ Why was Israel led by various judges during the Book of Judges? (A) There was no strong central leadership after both Moses and Joshua died, (B) there were too many lawyers in their day or (C) Moses elected the judges.

4. ___ What was the purpose of these judges in the Book of Judges? (A) To help Moses give the 10 Commandments, (B) to rescue the nation from its enemies and lead Israel back to God or (C) to spy out the land and give Joshua a report.

5. ___ Where did the Book of Ruth get its name? (A) From the name of a town, (B) from the main character of the book, Ruth or (C) from the marriage ceremony of Naomi.

6. ___ What does the Book of Ruth have to do with Jesus? (A) Ruth was the great-grandmother of king David and therefore an ancestor of Jesus himself, (B) Ruth tells the story of Jesus or (C) Ruth spoke about Jesus to Naomi.
7. ___ The Book of 1 Samuel gets its name from (A) the main character, Samuel, (B) the army of Israel or (C) the Priest Eli's home town.
8. ___ When the boy Samuel heard God's voice, he thought (A) he should move to Moab, (B) it was Eli who was calling him or (C) he was going crazy.
9. ___ When the people of Israel demanded a king, Samuel was (A) very happy, (B) the best candidate or (C) extremely disappointed.
10. ___ God took Saul's kingdom away from him because (A) he disobeyed God's orders and then he tried to kill David, (B) he wasn't tall enough or (C) Samuel had died.
11. ___ When God told David that someone from his family would always be King, he meant (A) that David would have many offspring, (B) that one of David's offspring would be the Messiah or (C) Saul would never be king again.

**Chapter Five: *UNDERSTANDING THE PERIOD OF THE KINGS
Kings and Chronicles***

The Bible's next four books tell the fascinating story of Israel's kings. This epic begins with king David's consolidation of the kingdom under his rule and ends with the destruction of that kingdom about 400 years later by the Babylonians.

These four books divide easily into two sets of companion books: 1st and 2nd Kings and 1st and 2nd Chronicles. The two books called 1 & 2 Kings cover the Israel's kingdom history from the last days David's reign to the destruction of God's temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The other two books called 1 & 2 Chronicles cover much of the same history, but they begin with an extensive genealogy of Israel and retell much of David's story before his death. They also end with the destruction of the temple.

1 Kings

This first record book of Israel's kings opens with a dispute about who will sit on the throne. As David nears death, one of his sons named Adonijah tries to set himself up as king. Neither David nor God himself had intended for Adonijah to rule, so David has his son Solomon officially anointed as king. David then calls Solomon in for last minute advice and counsel, helping him consolidate his power.

But as Solomon begins to reign, an event during his worship to God at a place called Gibeon sets the tone for his dynasty. After sacrificing 1,000 animals, Solomon had a dream that night about his kingdom. God came to him in the dream and said, *"Ask for whatever you want me to give you."*

Solomon answered, *"But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties... So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong."* (1 Kings 3:5-9 NIV.)

Because Solomon asked for wisdom instead of great wealth or the death of his enemies, God showered him with more wisdom than any other man. With this, Solomon set himself apart from the mediocre pagan kings of his day. His throne became the wealthiest and most powerful of any other king in Israel.

As his story unfolds in 1 Kings, Solomon uses his great wisdom and dedication to God in a quest to build Jehovah's temple. Chapters 3 & 4 tell of Solomon's wisdom and his luxurious life in the palace, but by chapters 5 through 9, the main theme changes to Solomon's success in building God a spectacular temple in Jerusalem. The book adds extra emphasis to Solomon's prestige by telling about the Queen of Sheba, who visited Solomon's kingdom and was overwhelmed by his amazing lifestyle.

But Solomon's life soon took a nasty turn. By the end of his reign he had married 1,000 wives, many of whom were princesses of the pagan kings around Israel. By intermarrying with the pagans, Solomon had imported into Israel the seeds of her own destruction. *"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."* (1 Kings 11:4 NIV.)



Even the wisest man in the world fails when God isn't the center his life; Solomon's excesses and his misuse of power brought his kingdom to a crisis, which unfolded right after his own death.

After Solomon's death Rehoboam, his son and heir to the throne, immediately faced a revolution led by a man named Jeroboam. Rehoboam, Solomon's son, tried to stop the revolt by intimidation, but Jeroboam and his followers rebelled and began to fortify the northern areas of Israel as their own territory.

With this revolt, Israel was never the same again, splitting into two nations; only two tribes (referred to as "Judah") remained in the south under Rehoboam, and ten tribes set up their own government and worship in the north (referred to as "Israel".) Rehoboam had lost the kingdom, with ten out of twelve tribes rejecting his leadership and falling away from their covenant with God. This bitter division lasted until the end of the period of the kings, culminating with the destruction of Jerusalem.

With Rehoboam ruling as king in Judah and Jeroboam ruling in Israel, the book of 1 Kings begins to unfold a dual record of these competing dynasties.

Rehoboam's reign in Judah, in the south, lasted about 17 years and was a terrible influence on God's people. He worshipped idols and led Judah in the wrong direction.

His son Abijah followed him on the throne, lasted for about three years, and also led Judah further into paganism.

At that point, Asa became king of Judah. He ruled for about forty years and had a generally positive influence on Judah. He tried to rid his nation of the influence of idolatry and paganism.

In 1 Kings chapter 15, the scene now shifts to a history of the kings of the rebellious tribes in the north, now called Israel. The first king discussed is Nadab, who followed Jeroboam as ruler. Nadab lasted only two years and, like the other kings of Israel, he was primarily an idol-worshipper.

The next king of Israel was Baasha, who ruled for about 24 years and *“did evil in the eyes of the LORD, walking in the ways of Jeroboam and in his sin, which he had caused Israel to commit.”* (1 Kings 15:34 NIV.) Old Testament writers often use the term “Jeroboam’s sin” and apply it to wicked kings, because Jeroboam led the northern tribes in rebellion to God and set up false worship outside the temple area. Once he led the north away from the ordained temple worship, there was only one place to go - paganism.

After Baasha ruled as king, Elah took the throne. He ruled only two years. The only memorable happening in his wicked reign was his assassination by one of his officials, Zimri, who then became king of Israel; he lasted seven days. The people of Israel rose up against him and appointed an army commander named Omri king in his place. When Zimri saw that his kingdom was lost, he killed himself by setting fire to the palace around him.

Omri ruled for 12 years, but *“did evil in the eyes of the LORD and sinned more than all those before him.”* (1 Kings 16:25 NIV.) After he died, his son Ahab took over. Things got even worse.

Ahab’s name became a byword for wickedness. He ruled in Israel for about 22 years and led the nation closer to destruction. His idol worship surpassed all those before him, but his main fault was in marrying a princess of the Sidonians named Jezebel. She not only worshipped idols named Baal and Asherah, but she set out to convert all Israel to this paganism. That’s when the emphasis changes in the book of 1 Kings.

Instead of continuing to recite the lives of the kings, the writer of 1 Kings now shifts to a discussion of the prophets and how they challenged the wickedness of Israel’s kings. In 1 Kings 17, a powerful prophet named Elijah makes his appearance. He prays to God for justice and the Lord sends a drought that lasts 3 1/2 years! During that drought and the resulting famine, King Ahab sent people to hunt down Elijah. Not only that, but Ahab’s wife, Jezebel, had most of Jehovah’s prophets assassinated while she installed her own prophets to promote Baal worship.

At that point, God led Elijah into a public showdown with the pagan prophets. Sacrifices were prepared. The people gathered to witness whether Jehovah had more power than Baal or not. Elijah allowed Baal’s prophets to go first. They prayed to Baal to send fire on the altar and consume the sacrifice; they cried out to Baal all day, yet nothing happened. That evening Elijah prayed a simple prayer and Jehovah sent fire from heaven, consuming the sacrifice and proving to all the people that Jehovah is God, rather than Baal.

From then on, Jezebel persisted in trying to kill Elijah the prophet, while Ahab her husband sank deeper into his evil. He lived in constant conflict with God’s prophets and was often at war with the nations around him.

God judged both Ahab and Jezebel: Ahab died in a battle that God warned him not to fight and Jezebel was later assassinated by Jehu, a later king in Israel. The writer of 1 Kings slows down to take extra time with Ahab’s story because it shows the moral and spiritual decline of Israel and the king’s unwillingness to hear God’s prophets.

After Ahab’s death, the book of 1 Kings closes with Jehoshaphat as king in Judah to the south and Ahaziah as king in Israel to the north. The second book of Kings picks up the story at that point.

2 Kings

As 2 Kings opens, Ahaziah inherits the throne in Israel from his evil father Ahab. Like his father, Ahaziah worshipped idols rather than Jehovah. Once when he fell and injured himself, he sent messengers to the pagan god Baal-Zebub to find out if he would survive. That angered Jehovah God, who responded

through his prophet Elijah: *“Is it because there is no God in Israel for you to consult that you have sent messengers to Baal-Zebub... You will certainly die!”* (2 Kings 1:16 NIV.) Ahaziah did indeed die, and the scene in 2 Kings then shifts to a portrayal of the two most powerful prophets of the day - Elijah and Elisha.

At this point Elijah’s career begins to close while Elisha, his assistant, is being groomed by God to take over the prophetic calling. As Israel and Judah descend into paganism and unfaithfulness to their covenant with Jehovah, God raises up strong and uncompromising prophets to be the moral conscience of the nation.

The mantle of this prophetic ministry is literally passed down from Elijah to Elisha in 2 Kings chapter 2. Then the story of Elisha takes center stage as the writer tells of his powers and miracles, which he got when he received a *“double portion”* of Elijah’s spirit at his death (2 Kings 2:9 NIV.)

This double portion empowered Elisha to part the Jordan River, heal a poisoned water supply, multiply a widow’s cooking oil supply, raise a young boy from the dead, cleanse a poisoned pot of food, feed 100 people with only a little bread, heal an Aramean nobleman of leprosy, cause an iron axe head to float in the river, and blind an army sent to capture him. These powers made a point. God had ordained Elisha as a preacher of righteousness in an age of compromise with paganism.

As the story in 2 Kings progresses, it moves from Elisha’s life back to a history of the kings. It picks up with a brief history of Jehoshaphat’s son, Jehoram. Jehoshaphat himself had ruled in Judah for 25 years, but most of his story is told in 2 Chronicles.

Jehoshaphat’s son, Jehoram, ruled in Judah for about eight years and led his nation away from God. His son, Ahaziah, followed him and ruled only one year, also failing to follow Jehovah’s ways.

At this point, the story shifts to the kings of Israel in the north. Remember, the story of the kings is actually an account of 2 different dynasties: Judah’s kings in the south and Israel’s kings in the north. The writer of 1 and 2 Kings covers one dynasty’s history for a while and then shifts to the other.

As he now shifts to a history of Israel’s kings, he takes up the story with the 28-year reign of Jehu, whom God picked to bring justice to Israel’s palace. Jehu went through the wicked family of Ahab like an axe through a rotten stump. He killed both Joram, king of Israel, and Ahaziah, king of Judah. He then killed Jezebel, the evil wife of Ahab. He killed all the rest of Ahab’s relatives and executed all the pagan prophets of Baal. Even though Jehu wasn’t careful to keep all of Jehovah’s ways, he at least struck a decisive blow to cleanse the nation from paganism.

Part of Jehu’s legacy was the fact that his assassination of Judah’s King Ahaziah allowed a good king, Joash, to ascend to power in the south. Joash reigned in Judah for about 40 years. His rule was mostly good for Judah, especially the fact that he had the temple repaired and tried to return the nation to true worship of Jehovah.

Half way through Joash’s reign in the south, a king named Jehoahaz came to power on Israel’s throne in the north. He reigned 17 years and was a terrible influence on Israel. Jehoash succeeded him and ruled for 16 years, bringing even more trouble on the nation of Israel.

After only two years of Jehoash’s reign in the north, another king named Amaziah came to power in the south. These two kings went to war against each other, pitting Israel in the north against Judah in the south. While Jehoash exerted a pagan influence in the north, Amaziah *“did what was right in the eyes of the LORD”* (2 Kings 14:3 NIV.) Despite the good he did, his enemies eventually assassinated Amaziah. He was followed on the throne by his 16 year-old son Uzziah (also called Azariah), who ruled Judah for 52 years with good results.

While Uzziah ruled in the south, Jeroboam II came to power in the north and ruled for 41 terrible years. After Jeroboam’s death, Israel had six wicked kings in rapid succession: Zechariah - six months, Shallum - one month, Menahem - ten years, Pekahiah - two years, Pekah - 20 years, and Hoshea - nine years. As these kings led Israel deeper into paganism and idolatry, apocalypse finally descended on the nation.

In 721 B.C., while Hoshea was king, the Assyrians invaded Israel. They arrested Hoshea, destroyed the nation, and scattered the people across the middle east by deporting them into captivity.

At this point, the writer of 2 Kings is careful to point out the reasons for this national disaster: *“All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the LORD their God... They worshipped other gods... They worshipped idols, though the LORD had said, ‘You shall not do this’... They forsook all the commands of the LORD their God... So the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence.”* (See chapter 17:7-23 NIV.)

From this time forward, the northern ten tribes of Israel ceased to exist as a nation.

When the Assyrians deported the tribes of Israel, they replaced them with pagans from several nations they had conquered. This cost the northern tribes their religious heritage - never again would they enjoy a covenant with Jehovah as they had during Moses’ day.

With the total destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel, the writer of 2 Kings now turns his attention to telling the remaining history of the southern tribes of Judah. About the time of Israel’s destruction, a king named Hezekiah came to power in Judah just in time to save the remaining two tribes from Assyria’s rampage.

As Assyria’s army nears, Hezekiah calls on Isaiah the prophet to help him pray for the deliverance of Judah and its capitol city of Jerusalem. God hears their prayers and saves the city from Assyria’s planned invasion by sending an angel who destroys 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in one night. When the king of Assyria, Sennacherib, realizes what has happened, he breaks camp and abandons his siege of Jerusalem. The city is saved, and so are the two remaining tribes of Judah.

For the next century following Hezekiah’s death, Judah experienced a rocky ride with a succession of seven different kings. Manasseh, an extremely evil king, ruled 55 years, and was followed by Amon, whose corrupt regime ruled for two years. But at that point, an energetic young reformer named Josiah took the throne for 31 years and brought Judah much of the distance back to a faithful relationship with Jehovah.

However, at Josiah’s death, Judah’s situation deteriorates rapidly. The next four kings fail miserably as moral leaders: Jehoahaz - three months, Jehoiakim - 11 years, Jehoiachin - three months, and Zedekiah - 11 years. The utter moral and spiritual bankruptcy in Judah leads to one of the central events of Old Testament history - the destruction of Jerusalem and the resulting Babylonian Captivity.

As Judah’s last king, Zedekiah, rules, the awesome Babylonian army attacks and destroys the city of Jerusalem along with the holy temple of Jehovah. The Jewish nation’s rich relationship with Jehovah had now been drained of its power by the forces of paganism and idol worship. Pagan warriors overran the city, the temple was destroyed, the royal house and line of King David disintegrated and the Jewish people were deported to become prisoners of war in the Babylonian Empire.

In 586 BC, about 400 years after king David, the period of the kings ended in utter failure. With that, the story of 2 Kings closes.

1 Chronicles

As you read these books entitled “Chronicles”, you soon realize that they cover much of the same material as 1 and 2 Kings, which brings up an important question. Why tell the same story twice?

Although Kings and Chronicles share much material in common, there are major differences. Kings tells the story of the Jewish kings in both the northern tribes of Israel and the southern tribes of Judah. However, Chronicles tells only the story of the southern tribes of Judah.

And here’s another difference. The books of 1 and 2 Kings cover all the various kings, while 1 and 2 Chronicles focuses only on the family of David. Chronicles emphasizes the dynasty of David and how that royal house fits into God’s Divine history.

Since that’s true, 1 Chronicles opens with a long genealogical account of David’s family from Adam to David himself, and then continues with other accounts of the tribes of Israel and their ancestors.

From there, the account progresses to the story of David’s ascension to the throne and his conquest of Jerusalem. The story then moves forward to tell of the great exploits of King David as he conquers God’s enemies and consolidates his kingdom. Much of this same material appears in 2 Samuel, but it’s retold here to highlight David’s place in Israel’s history and his greatness as a forefather of the coming Messiah.

As 1 Chronicles moves to its conclusion in chapter 29, the writer chronicles David's life and victories, his groundwork in raising money for the building of God's temple, his choice of Solomon to succeed him, and finally David's death at the end of the book.

2 Chronicles

As the second book of Chronicles opens, it begins with the story of Solomon's reign. Solomon, one of David's sons, was one of the greatest kings in Judah; he proved himself to be one of the wisest kings ever to rule, especially during the early years of his career.

In 2 Chronicles, the writer records Solomon's great wisdom, his building of the temple of Jehovah in Jerusalem, and his dedication and opening of that temple. The story then moves to show that Solomon's wisdom was recognized worldwide; his regime marked a great golden age in the history of Judah's kings.

From that point the writer begins to reveal the problems Judah experienced, such as the rebellion of the northern tribes and split which resulted after Solomon's death. The book of 2 Chronicles then launches into a recounting of David's family - the kings of Judah.

After Solomon, his son Rehoboam reigned 17 years with mostly destructive results. Abijah replaced him and then misled Judah for three years. The next two kings ruled with good results: Asa for 41 years and Jehoshaphat for 25 years. Then three kings in a row brought national decline to Judah: Jehoram for eight years, Ahaziah for one year and Athaliah for six years.

At that point, a young boy named Joash inherited the throne; he was only seven years old when he began and yet he reigned for 40 years. He started well, even repairing the temple so Judah could worship Jehovah properly. However, Joash fell away from God in the latter part of his reign as king. He was wounded in battle and later assassinated by his own officials.

With the death of Joash, a new king called Amaziah came to the throne and ruled for 25 years with a generally good influence. Uzziah then reigned for 52 years, followed by Jotham for 16 years, both generally doing a good job as king. But Jotham was succeeded by Ahaz, one of the most wicked kings Judah ever tolerated. He even offered human sacrifices in practice of his pagan religion.

After Ahaz died, his son Hezekiah ruled for 29 years. He was a reformer who did more to restore the nation's religious purity than any other king in Judah. He reopened and purified the temple, reinstated the Passover and brought a general religious revival to Judah.

After Hezekiah's death, spiritual life in Judah deteriorated through the next two regimes: Manasseh for 55 years and Amon for two years. But at that low point, another bright spot appeared; Josiah became king and immediately began widespread religious reforms in the land. He reigned for 31 years and was a great blessing to Judah's spiritual health.

Yet after Josiah's death, the nation declined again under the reigns of Jehoahaz (three months), Jehoiakim (11 years), Jehoiachin (three months) and Zedekiah (11 years). During Zedekiah's reign, the Babylonian army marched against Judah and its capitol city of Jerusalem. The city and temple were destroyed, and the nation was deported into captivity in Babylon.

The Purpose Of Kings And Chronicles

With all these dates, names and historical situations, it's easy to lose track of the general message of these fascinating books. Together these writings cover about 400 years of the Nation of Israel's history in the promised land. These books open with the nation enjoying success and victory, but they end with the nation in ruin and slavery.

All this history makes a point. As long as the Nation of Israel kept her covenant agreements with Jehovah, her people were blessed, productive and happy. But when the nation wandered from God's will, disaster soon followed.

It's the same in every case, whether an individual or a nation. When God is pushed away, Satan's dark forces take over. But when faith in God reigns in human hearts, God himself rescues his people from the evil one. That's the main story of Kings and Chronicles.

Study Assignments - Lesson 5

1 KINGS: Read 1 Kings 3:1-28.

2 KINGS: Read 2 Kings 1:1-17; 25:1-21.

1 CHRONICLES: Read 1 Chronicles 17:1-27.

2 CHRONICLES: Read 2 Chronicles 29:1-11; 32:1-23.

TEST QUESTIONS - LESSON 5

1. ___ The stories found in the books of Kings and Chronicles end with what major event?
(A) Moses' resurrection, (B) the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem or (C) the birth of Jesus.
2. ___ The book of 1 Kings gets its name from the fact that (A) it gives a history of the Nation of Israel's kings, (B) it is the king of all books of the Bible or (C) it was written by a king.
3. ___ King Solomon pleased God because he asked for (A) the death of his enemies, (B) wisdom or (C) to step down from the throne.
4. ___ Both Rehoboam and Jeroboam became kings because (A) they split the Nation of Israel into 2 nations, (B) their names rhymed or (C) it took 2 kings to make 1 kingdom in those days.
5. ___ Who was Jezebel? (A) King Ahab's evil wife who tried to kill Elijah the prophet, (B) a prophet in northern Israel or (C) the man who wrote 1 Kings.
6. ___ When Elijah the prophet was getting ready to die and go to heaven, he asked his assistant what he wanted his master to do for him. The assistant, Elisha, asked: (A) for a double portion of his spirit, (B) to become king in Israel or (C) to die with him.
7. ___ The northern 10 tribes, called "Israel", disappeared because (A) the Assyrian army invaded their land and deported them into slavery, (B) their wives couldn't bear children or (C) their story didn't appear in history books.
8. ___ The southern 2 tribes, called "Judah", had to leave Jerusalem because (A) they didn't record all the books of the Bible, (B) the Babylonian army invaded the city, destroyed the temple and took them into captivity or (C) the water supply in Jerusalem ran out.
9. ___ What is one way in which Chronicles is different from Kings? (A) One is in the Old Testament and one is in the New Testament, (B) Chronicles tells of King David's family while Kings tells the story of all the kings or (C) Chronicles is a history of the Babylonian Empire.
- 10 ___ Another way Chronicles is different from Kings is (A) Chronicles tells the story of only the kings of the southern 2 tribes of Judah, (B) Chronicles is a fantasy while Kings is a history or (C) Chronicles was written in Greek while Kings was written in Hebrew.

11. ___ The books of Kings and Chronicles open with the Nation of Israel enjoying success and victory, but close with (A) the life of Jesus, (B) the Nation of Israel in ruin and slavery or (C) passages from Revelation.
12. ___ The books of Kings and Chronicles teach this basic lesson: (A) history is fun, (B) when we disobey God, then Satan's dark forces take over or (C) sometimes the Bible tells the same story twice.

Chapter Six: *UNDERSTANDING ISRAEL'S RETURN FROM EXILE*
Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther

At the end of the period of the kings, the entire Nation of Israel had been overrun. The northern ten tribes, called Israel, fell to the Assyrians around 721 BC. Then the two southern tribes, called Judah, had already been captured in about 586 BC, when the Babylonians razed Jerusalem to the ground and destroyed God's temple.

At that point, the Babylonians took what was left of the Nation of Israel into captivity in Babylon as prisoners of war. The Jews' worst nightmare had overtaken them. The pagans around them had wiped out their beloved city of Jerusalem. The temple of Jehovah, the most sacred place in all Judaism, went up in flames. Because they broke their covenant with Jehovah, God's people were deported as prisoners to the capitol of pagan idolatry - Babylon.

One of the most touching portraits of their grief appears in Psalm 137 (NIV) - *"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?"*

The prophet Jeremiah, who lived during those horrible days, even wondered if God was completely through with Israel. He said, *"Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may return; renew our days as of old unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure."* (Lamentations 5:21-22 NIV.)



With this Babylonian Captivity, Old Testament Israel's darkest hour closed in.

But that dark hour didn't last forever; the prophet Jeremiah had predicted that the captivity would last only 70 years (Daniel 9:2). So in about 536 BC, Cyrus the Persian king (who had overthrown the Babylonian regime) released the Jews and allowed them to return home to Jerusalem. This return happened in three stages: in 536 BC under a leader named Zerubbabel, in 457 BC with Ezra's leadership, and in 444 BC under Nehemiah.

This time period, in which the Jews moved from the holocaust of captivity to the bright optimism of the return, is the subject of the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther.

The Book Of Ezra

This book gets its name from Ezra, a priest who led a group of Jews back to Jerusalem from captivity in 457 BC. Ezra's book tells the story of the Nation of Israel's return from Babylonian exile back to their homeland, of the rebuilding of the temple and the Jews' renewal of their covenant with Jehovah.

As Ezra opens his account of these events, he tells how Cyrus king of Persia published a decree releasing the Jews to return to Jerusalem. Two of Israel's prophets had once predicted this return, long before it happened: Jeremiah predicted that the captivity would last only 70 years (Jeremiah 25:11), but an even more astounding prophecy came from Isaiah, who wrote that a king named Cyrus would let God's people go from captivity back to their homeland in Jerusalem - he predicted it before Israel ever went into Babylon (Isaiah died 150 years before Cyrus was king!).

Ezra's account of this return continues by listing the families who traveled back to Jerusalem and an inventory of the goods they carried with them. After they arrived and set up housekeeping, the Jews began right away to restore their religious life. Jeshua the priest and Zerubbabel the political leader rallied the people to begin building an altar, which would serve as a place of sacrifice to Jehovah.

With the sacrifice system of worship restored, the leaders began raising money to rebuild the temple; this rebuilding began in the second year of their return to the land.

But this reconstruction effort was bittersweet. When the foundation for the temple was laid, the people rejoiced and shouted. At the same time, some of the older people who had seen the former temple of Solomon wept for the loss of its stunning splendor. Ezra writes, *"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."* (Ezra 3:13 NIV.)

But as the bittersweet excitement of this rebuilding effort grew, problems soon appeared. Enemies of the Jews began plotting to stop the reconstruction. They first offered to help, hoping to sabotage the project. When that didn't work, they sent a letter to Artaxerxes, the Persian king, telling him that the Jews planned to rebuild Jerusalem as a center for revolt against his empire. The Persian king believed these lies and ordered the rebuilding stopped. The temple sat unfinished for the next 15 years.

After this 15-year period, God raised up two great prophets named Haggai and Zechariah who encouraged the people to resume rebuilding the temple. With the encouragement of Jeshua the priest and Zerubbabel, who was recognized as a political leader, the people started working on the structure again.

This caught the eye of their enemies, who demanded an explanation: *“Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and restore its structure?”* (Ezra 5:3 NIV.) The Jews explained that they had once received permission to rebuild it from King Cyrus.

Their enemies immediately wrote a letter to the reigning Persian king, Darius (Artaxerxes had since died), asking if this was true. The king’s archives were searched and they found the Decree of Cyrus. This allowed the Jews to rebuild their temple, protected by King Darius while they did so.

After the temple was completed, the Jews celebrated the ancient Passover. The Nation of Israel had truly restored, by God’s grace, her religious life in the Promised Land.

In chapter seven of the Book of Ezra, the writer Ezra tells of his own trip to Jerusalem from Babylon, which was now ruled by Persia. Ezra, a priest, had specialized in studying the Law of Moses and was acutely interested in seeing that law restored in Jerusalem. His passion was to see the Jews live faithfully to the covenant with Jehovah. He knew their former violation of the covenant had thrust them into Babylonian Captivity and cost them the temple and the city of Jerusalem itself; he passionately wanted to prevent that from happening again.

Ezra’s concerns reached a climax when he discovered that some of the returning Jewish men had married pagan women, thus repeating the same mistakes that brought Jerusalem to destruction a generation before. Ezra was stunned. He wrote, *“When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled.”* (Ezra 9:3 NIV.)

What follows is one of the most touching and impressive prayers in all of Scripture. Ezra prays for God to forgive a nation so foolish as to repeat the same offenses their forefathers had. It had cost them the whole kingdom. Ezra prays that God will have mercy and overlook their sin.

Ezra’s prayer not only touched God but rallied the people. They joined him in his prayer. They agreed to ban the paganism that had destroyed their ancestors. They sat down and went case by case through all the marriages that were suspect. Unlike their forefathers, they were determined to see God’s will done.

As Ezra’s book ends, the future brightens. The temple has been completed and the Nation of Israel occupies her own land again. And even more impressive - Israel’s moral convictions and faithfulness to God have returned.

The Book Of Nehemiah

The next Biblical book, called Nehemiah, is named after a leader who helped the Jews rebuild Jerusalem during this critical time of the return from exile.

During the first 20 years of the Nation of Israel’s return to the Promised Land (about 536-516 BC), the Jews had resettled Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple. But they had left one major job unfinished.

As the Book of Nehemiah opens, he tells how he learned of this unfinished project. Nehemiah’s brother had returned from Jerusalem to Persia (where Nehemiah served as a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes). He reported to Nehemiah, *“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.”* (Nehemiah 1:3 NIV.)

This news, that the city walls in Jerusalem still hadn’t been repaired, worried Nehemiah. He wrote, *“When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.”* (Nehemiah 1:4 NIV.)

Nehemiah’s deep concern for the city of Jerusalem sets the tone for the rest of the book. He made it his goal to restore the city walls, so that Jerusalem could stand protected against her enemies. Nehemiah, like Ezra, wanted desperately to see the Jews please Jehovah and maintain their covenant with Him.

After four months of praying and seeking God, Nehemiah got his chance to help the Jews rebuild Jerusalem’s walls. It happened one day when Nehemiah was working in the palace as cupbearer to the

king. King Artaxerxes noticed that Nehemiah seemed depressed, so he asked what was wrong. Nehemiah replied, *“Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”* (Nehemiah 2:3 NIV.)

When the king realized how important this was to Nehemiah, he allowed him to travel back to Jerusalem; he also gave Nehemiah permission to use the king’s name to speed his trip, and even allowed him to use the king’s forest for building materials.

As soon as he arrived and settled in Jerusalem, Nehemiah made a secret inspection tour of the city at night, confirming his worst fears. The city walls lay in ruins and the gates were charred ashes. Even though the temple had been rebuilt and the Jews now occupied the city, Jerusalem had little protection from military invasion.

Nehemiah met right away with the city leaders. He told them of his concern, and of the gracious way King Artaxerxes had provided for his trip and had given materials for the rebuilding effort. With that, the city leaders replied, *“Let us start rebuilding.”* (Nehemiah 2:18.)

But this historic rebuilding effort immediately drew opposition from Jerusalem’s enemies. They ridiculed the effort and said, *“What is this you are doing? ...Are you rebelling against the king?”* (Nehemiah 2:19 NIV.)

Nehemiah quickly handled their objections, but this opposition set the tone for the rest of Nehemiah’s work in Jerusalem. He persisted in the rebuilding effort, but God’s enemies regularly plotted to block the reconstruction. Nehemiah’s book relates the story of how God brought victory despite this conflict.

As chapter three of Nehemiah’s book opens, he tells the story of the actual rebuilding. He names each gate and rebuilding site, and lists the people responsible for restoring each one.

But by chapter four, the opposition heats up again; two pagan rulers, Sanballat and Tobiah, ridicule the effort. Tobiah says, *“What they are building- if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!”* (Nehemiah 4:3 NIV.)

Instead of stopping the work, this ridicule made Nehemiah pray harder. He and the Jews prayed and kept building; the enemies continued to ridicule the project and to stir up trouble for the reconstruction effort. The conflict became so serious that Nehemiah even organized an armed guard with swords, spears and bows to protect the construction workers. He was determined to complete God’s work no matter what the opposition.

Despite all this opposition, they finished the wall in 52 days. Nehemiah writes, *“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.”* (Nehemiah 6:16 NIV.) As soon as the wall was finished, the gates were replaced; Nehemiah’s mission to refortify Jerusalem succeeded.

At this point in the Book of Nehemiah, he begins to tell another story - of the moral rebuilding effort in Jerusalem. He chronicles the story of Ezra the priest (who had come to Jerusalem 13 years before Nehemiah) and how he publicly read the Book of the Law to the people. This sparked a widespread revival among the people, *“For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.”* (Nehemiah 8:9 NIV.)

This renaissance of Biblical preaching brought an enormous spiritual revival. All of Nehemiah chapter nine tells about the nation’s prayer of repentance and confession. The people not only confess, but they publicly renew their covenant vows with Jehovah. As Nehemiah’s writing ends, the city has been restored physically, but has also begun a spiritual restoration that even included the purification of the temple and the priesthood. This heart-felt renaissance of true worship in Jerusalem brought the nation back to its spiritual roots and provided a foundation for the Messiah’s coming 500 years later.

Having been faithful to this mission, Nehemiah ends with these words: *“Remember me with favor, O my God.”* (Nehemiah 13:31 NIV.)

The Book of Esther

The Book of Esther gets its title from Esther, a young Jewish woman who became Queen of Persia in 578 BC. But how does her story fit into those of Ezra and Nehemiah?

In total, the return of Israel from Babylonian exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem took about 100 years. The temple was rebuilt in about 536-516 BC. Esther appeared as queen in Persia 40 years later in 478 BC. Then Ezra went to Jerusalem around 457 BC and Nehemiah in about 444 BC to help rebuild the walls of the city.

So Esther was queen in Persia about 40 years after the temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt, but about 30 years before Nehemiah was cupbearer in the Persian court. Her courage in helping to rescue her fellow Jews during a persecution in Persia would set the stage for Nehemiah's work 30 years later. Nehemiah, a Jew, found the Persian king willing to help him because Esther, a Jew, had influenced the court years earlier. Notice how Esther won such favor with the king.

As the Book of Esther opens, King Xerxes of Persia hosts seven-day banquet for his nobles. According to history, this was a preparation for war; Xerxes planned to attack the Greeks, which he did at the towns of Thermopylae and Salamis in 480 BC. He lost this historic battle to the Greeks and returned home in defeat.

At this point Xerxes replaced his queen, Vashti, because she earlier had refused to come to his banquet and display her beauty for the assembled nobles. This is where Esther enters the picture.

Xerxes commanded a kingdom-wide search for the most beautiful virgin who could be found, to replace his former queen Vashti. That virgin would then become Xerxes' wife, the new Queen of Persia. As all the eligible young women were being brought to the palace, Esther's striking beauty got her noticed and she was included in the royal beauty pageant.

Neither Xerxes nor his palace leaders knew that Esther was a Jew. Her family had been brought to Persia in the days when the Babylonian Empire destroyed Jerusalem and deported the Jewish people. Her father and mother had died, so her cousin, Mordecai, raised her from childhood.

When this young Jewish virgin entered the palace, she immediately won favor with the whole court because of her wisdom and pleasing personality. She also won Xerxes' heart, so he chose her as Queen of Persia.

From there, the story of Esther takes a few dangerous turns. First of all, her cousin Mordecai discovers a plot to assassinate Xerxes, so he reports it to Queen Esther. She informs Xerxes (making sure he knows that Mordecai deserves the credit) so the king punishes the would-be assassins with death.

But then Mordecai himself courts danger. He refuses to bow down to a cruel official named Haman. Day after day the other officials try to persuade Mordecai to bow down to Haman, but he refuses. This, of course, enrages Haman; he vows to destroy not only Mordecai, but also the whole Jewish population of Persia.

Haman sets his plan in motion by winning King Xerxes over to the idea that the Jews are a rebellious influence and should be wiped out. He even makes a special donation of 375 tons of silver to the treasury to influence the king's decision. His plan works, and King Xerxes issues a decree to destroy the Jews on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar.

When Mordecai, Esther's cousin, and the other Jews found out about the decree, they mourned, fasted and wept while wearing sackcloth and ashes (symbols of intense grief). Then Mordecai sent word to Esther, telling her of the decree and asking her to go before King Xerxes and plead for his mercy on the Jews. But going before the king unannounced could be dangerous.

To go before Xerxes with this request, Esther would risk her life. Because of Persian law; to protect against assassination, no one could approach the king's inner court without being summoned. If Esther merely walked into the inner court, and the king didn't extend the gold scepter welcoming her, she would be executed.

When Esther hesitated to go before the king, Mordecai sent her a message: *"If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"* (Esther 4:14 NIV.)

This stirring comment convinced Esther to take the risk. When she stood before King Xerxes in the inner court, he extended the golden scepter and promised her anything she desired - even to half of his

kingdom. Esther responded by saying that she wanted the king and Haman (the man who had convinced the king to destroy the Jews) to come to a banquet she had prepared. The king agreed.

At this banquet the king again offered her anything she wanted, which included half the kingdom. Esther said *“let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king’s question.”* (Esther 5:8 NIV.)

That night Haman went home bragging about his new position in the kingdom; he’d been raised above all the other nobles and was now dining privately with the king and queen. He was thrilled with his social success - except that Mordecai still refused to bow to him. His wife and friends suggested that he build a 75 foot high scaffold and ask the king at the banquet tomorrow to hang Mordecai on it.

But that night before the banquet King Xerxes couldn’t sleep, so he asked for something to read - the records of his reign’s successes. In one record, he found the incident where Mordecai had saved the king’s life by revealing an assassination plot. He asked, *“What honor has Mordecai received for this?”* (Esther 6:3 NIV.) When the servants told him that Mordecai had not been honored, the king asked if there was anyone in the palace who could give some ideas about how to honor Mordecai’s bravery.

Amazingly, at that point Haman had just entered the court to ask about hanging Mordecai on the scaffold he had built. The king called for Haman and asked his advice: *“What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?”* (Esther 6:6 NIV.) Haman thought the king was talking about *him*, so he went on to describe how the honored man should be led through the city streets on the king’s own horse in a noble procession. The king loved Haman’s idea; then, to Haman’s shock, ordered him to do that for Mordecai!

After Haman had “honored” Mordecai, he went to his home horrified and humiliated. Not long after that, he was summoned again to the palace in time for the banquet with the king and Esther. At the banquet, the king again promised to grant Esther any request. Esther replied, *“O King, if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life - this is my petition. And spare my people - this is my request. For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation.”* (Esther 7:3-4 NIV.)

King Xerxes said, *“Who is he? Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?”*

Esther’s reply was, *“The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman.”* (Esther 7:6 NIV.)

With this news, King Xerxes had Haman executed on his own gallows. God spared the Jews through the position and courage of Queen Esther.

Her work in saving the Jews meant that the rebuilding effort in Jerusalem under Ezra and Nehemiah could continue. The Messiah’s ancestors were preserved so that He could be born in Bethlehem several centuries in the future.

These stories of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther show us how to understand the Old Testament clearly. These writings aren’t just a collection of disjointed stories. They’re the stories of a people, a nation that began with Abraham. They’re the stories of a people chosen by God to bring a special person - the Messiah - into this world to deliver it from sin and evil. This fascinating saga shows us how God worked with people to bring a special Person who would reverse the evil brought into the world by people. This Messiah would undo what Satan and man had done to this once-perfect world. The story of the Jews is the story of Jesus, and of his entrance into our world.

Study Assignments - Lesson 6

EZRA: Read Ezra 9:1 - 10:1.

NEHEMIAH: Read Nehemiah 1:1-11; 6:15.

ESTHER: Read Esther 2:1-18; 7:1-10.

TEST QUESTIONS - LESSON 6

1. ____ In 536 BC, Cyrus the Persian king (A) was killed by Samson, (B) released the Jews and allowed them to go home to Jerusalem or (C) married Sarah.

2. ___ The Book of Ezra gets its name from (A) the Exodus, (B) the Persian records or (C) a priest named Ezra who led Jews back home to Jerusalem.
3. ___ Why did some of the Jews cry out loud when the new temple's foundation was laid? (A) They were afraid of being attacked, (B) some of them had seen Solomon's former temple and remembered its splendor or (C) they dreaded the hard work ahead.
4. ___ The Jews had to stop rebuilding the temple because (A) their enemies told the Persian king that the Jews planned to revolt against Persia, (B) they ran out of building materials or (C) the weather stopped them.
5. ___ Ezra the priest tore his clothes and pulled hair from his head and beard because (A) he was angry with the Persian king, (B) he found out that some Jewish men had married pagan women or (C) he found out that there was a plot to kill Esther.
6. ___ The Book of Nehemiah gets its name from (A) the Hebrew name for Jerusalem, (B) the main character, Nehemiah, who was cupbearer to Artaxerxes, or (C) a Persian book for construction engineers.
7. ___ Nehemiah wept, fasted and prayed when he found out that (A) Jerusalem's walls hadn't been rebuilt and the gates were burned with fire, (B) that Ezra was also upset or (C) the Jews were coming back to Persia.
8. ___ When Nehemiah approached the Persian king and asked permission to visit Jerusalem, the king (A) refused, since Ezra was already there, (B) let him go and even gave him timber from the king's forest or (C) told him to ask again in 40 days.
9. ___ With Nehemiah's leadership the Jews rebuilt Jerusalem's walls in (A) 1 afternoon, (B) 52 days or (C) 40 years.
10. ___ How do we know that Ezra's teaching of the Law after the wall was rebuilt sparked a revival? (A) All the Jews wanted to go back to Persia, (B) all the people wept as they heard the Law read by Ezra, or (C) they asked Ezra to be their king.
11. ___ Esther became Queen of Persia because (A) Xerxes replaced his former queen, Vashti, because she refused to obey him, (B) the Persians elected a new queen every year or (C) Xerxes was not married.
12. ___ The evil Haman tried to have all the Jews in Persia killed because (A) Mordecai refused to bow down to him, (B) they were bad for his farming business or (C) he thought they owned too much property in Persia.

Chapter Seven: UNDERSTANDING THE WISDOM BOOKS
Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Solomon

With this section, we get a major change in the Bible's content. Up to this point, we've studied the *historical* books of the Old Testament, which told of the world's creation, the fall of man into evil, the call of Abraham and the emergence and history of the Jewish people as the

nation who would bring the Messiah.

Now we see a different kind of writing yet with the same general themes. It's called by most commentators "wisdom literature". So what is wisdom literature?



The Bible's wisdom writings give God's insights into the major questions of life: *Why do good people suffer? How can I understand myself? Why am I here on earth? Where is God when I suffer and find no relief? What's the purpose of life? Why can't money, fame and selfish indulgence make me happy? What is God really like? How can I keep a strong faith during hardships?* – and many more like them.

These and other tough questions, which set the tone for the wisdom books, get satisfying answers, in various ways, in these fascinating writings.

The Book Of Job

The first of these wisdom books, called the Book of Job, is named after its main character, Job, who was a wealthy, powerful desert sheik in very ancient times. In fact, many scholars consider this the most ancient book in the Bible. Its events take place at the time of Abraham or before. That's fitting, because this ancient book deals with one of man's oldest questions - *why do bad things happen to good people?*

As the writer of Job gets ready to tackle that issue, he opens the book with a quick biographical sketch of the man Job. Not only was Job the wealthiest man around, owning thousands of head of livestock and employing hundreds of servants, but he was also "*the greatest man among all the people of the East.*" (Job 1:3 NIV.) In addition, Job was "*blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.*" (Job 1:1 NIV.)

For Job, life couldn't have been better. He was wealthy, respected, powerful, at peace with God, and enjoyed a happy family life. He certainly wasn't perfect but he was close. And he had no major interruptions to his charmed life - at least, until the scene in this book shifted to a meeting in heaven.

As the angels presented themselves before God in heaven, the Lord singled out one specific angel called "accuser" or Satan. When God asked him where he had been, Satan replied, "*roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it.*"

God quickly replied, "*Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.*" (Job 1:8 NIV.)

Satan answered with a chilling reply, "*Does Job fear God for nothing?*" (Job 1:9 NIV.) From that point on, Satan accused Job of being a hypocrite. He explained to God that Job only worshiped Him out of fear of losing his wealth and power. He doesn't really love God from his heart, but merely uses him as a means to a blessed life. He ends his attack by saying, "*But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.*" (Job 1:11 NIV.)

With that, God agreed to let Job be tested by Satan; Job's nightmare began. In one day, he lost his thousands of donkeys and oxen to an invading Sabean army, lost his sheep herds and servants to "fire of God" which fell from heaven, lost his camels and servants to Chaldean raiding parties, and then lost all his children in a storm.

But instead of cursing God as Satan had predicted, Job worshipped Him. He didn't sin, nor did he charge God with wrongdoing. Job's humble attitude in the heat of disaster pleased God, but it caused Satan to mount another assault on Job.

This time it was Job's health. Satan believed that Job would crumble if his health failed so, with God's permission, Satan afflicted Job with painful sores from the top of his head to the

soles of his feet. Job's physical agony drove him to scrape himself with a piece of broken pottery as he sat dejected on an ash heap.

The final blow came when Job's unsympathetic wife badgered him to "*Curse God and die!*" (Job 2:10 NIV.) But even with all this horror, Job maintained his integrity - he wouldn't curse God and he didn't blame God for his tragic situation.

At his lowest point, three of Job's friends arrive to comfort him. Even from a distance these three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, couldn't believe it was Job. They were dumbstruck when they first saw him up close; "*Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.*" (Job 2:13 NIV.)

After those seven silent days, "*Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. He said, 'May the day of my birth perish...'*" (Job 3:1-3 NIV.) With this statement, Job began to mourn over his losses, agonizing as the pain throbbed throughout his body.

From that point on, the Book of Job hosts a series of discussions and debates about the problem of human suffering. Job's friends try to make sense of his circumstances. They probe and ponder the question of why suffering exists and why it has descended on Job. But their answers don't convince Job.

For example, one of the friends, named Eliphaz, thinks Job's suffering came because he committed some horrible sin. He says, "*Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it.*" (Job 4:7-8 NIV.) He's telling Job that the innocent and upright don't suffer like this therefore Job must be a secret sinner.

At this, Job defends his honor. He protests by saying that Eliphaz isn't a true friend. He also claims to be innocent and says to Eliphaz, "*Would I lie to your face? Relent and do not be unjust; reconsider, for my integrity is at stake. Is there any wickedness on my lips? Can my mouth not discern malice?*" (Job 6:28-30 NIV.)

But then Bildad, another friend, speaks. He thinks Job's problem is his pride; he won't repent and ask God to forgive him. He says, "*Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right? When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin. But if you will look to God and plead with the Almighty, if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself and restore you to your rightful place.*" (Job 8:3-6 NIV.)

Job answers Bildad by agreeing with him up to a point, but then shines light through the holes in his argument. Certainly, he says, God restores the repentant sinner. But since all humans are sinners, why don't all people suffer like Job? Notice Job's logic: "*Indeed, I know that this is true. But how can a mortal be righteous before God? Though one wished to dispute with Him, he could not answer Him one time out of a thousand.*" (Job 9:2-3 NIV.)

At this, Job's third friend, Zophar, takes a crack at explaining Job's suffering. He says that Job's problem is this - he's comparing himself to God. Zophar explains: "*You say to God, 'My beliefs are flawless and I am pure in your sight.'*"

"*Oh, how I wish that God would speak, that he would open his lips against you... Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sin... Yet if you devote your heart to him and stretch out your hands to him... then you will lift up your face without shame...*" (Job 11:4-15 NIV.)

Job's answer to Zophar and the other friends is this: "*Doubtless you are the people, and wisdom will die with you!*" (Job 12:2 NIV.) Job's anger and pain push him to lose patience with the shallow answers his friends have offered. He sarcastically suggests that when they die, all wisdom will vanish from the earth.

From this point on, the same cycle continues throughout the Book of Job. Each of the three friends speaks in turn, trying to build a case to explain why Job is suffering. Their arguments revolve around the same basic ideas: *God is always just, therefore if a man is suffering, he must have done something evil to bring it on.* As each friend takes a turn, Job offers his reply, which usually follows this pattern: *I'm not a evil man, so God must be mistaken in letting me suffer like this.*

But as the Book of Job progresses to chapter 32, a new speaker appears - Elihu, who seems to be a younger man listening to his elders try to fathom this great mystery. As he listens, he becomes angry. He's angry at Job *"for justifying himself rather than God"* (Job 32:2 NIV) and he's angry at the three friends *"because they found no way to refute Job, and yet had condemned him"* (Job 32:3 NIV.) Elihu then offers his own solution.

What's his answer? That God is transcendent - beyond our human understanding. He puts it this way: *"The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power; in his justice and great righteousness, he does not oppress."* (Job 37:23 NIV.) Elihu's speech sets the stage for God Himself to appear.

When God does appear, He speaks to Job through a storm. He says: *"Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?"* (Job 38:1-3 NIV.)

With this awesome statement, God begins to reveal Himself to Job. His revelation to Job consists of one basic idea - when a man tries to out-reason God, he fades into insignificance. (Like the slogan I once saw on a poster - "Two Foundation Facts Of Human Enlightenment: (1) There is a God, (2) You are not Him.")

With God's revelation, Job learns that lesson. God drives home the point with this chilling question, *"Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor, and clothe yourself in honor and majesty."* (Job 40:8-10 NIV.)

As the Book of Job ends, the lesson becomes obvious. Job repents of his rash statements and God restores him to more wealth, power and family happiness than he ever had before. And God also scolds the three friends for giving Job the wrong answers.

So what about the deep questions of human suffering? Two concepts emerge from this book. One concept suggests that Satan is the root cause of all human suffering. He brought it to this world when he tricked Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

The second concept is even more unsettling. Sometimes only God Himself knows why we suffer. It's a mystery. And He won't tell us until we're ready for it. Since suffering is a Divine mystery, the only way to cope with a tragic Job-like situation is to trust God.

Either way, we walk through suffering by faith, not by sight.

The Psalms

The next book of wisdom, called The Psalms, contains some of the best-loved writings of all the world's literature. The name "Psalms" comes from the Greek word for songs, but the original Hebrew title for the Psalms is "Book of Praises".

For most people, the beauty of the Psalms is summed up in the 23rd Psalm: *"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want..."*

Why do so much beauty and passion flow from these remarkable writings? Because the Psalms are actually a collection of poems and prayers put to music; they're the Nation of Israel's worship songs. These songs stir our deepest emotions because they focus on God and on man's

mysterious relationship to God in worship. And they focus on prayer, which gives them a special heart and passion.

Who wrote these amazing Psalms? Most of them were written by King David and probably were collected by David and his choir leader, Asaph, along with the sons of Korah, who were David's official musicians. This collaboration between King David, one of the greatest musicians in the Bible, and his fellow musicians in Israel has produced some of the most amazing devotional literature of all time. These songs, inspired by God Himself, exhibit such genius that they still touch us today, even though we have only the words and not the music itself.

The Book of Psalms, which includes 150 songs, contains several topics as subject matter. Some of the Psalms give instruction in wisdom (Psalm 1.) Some are praise songs (Ps. 8 & 100.) Others include thanksgiving songs (30 & 116,) songs of repentance (32 & 143,) songs of trust in God (3 & 86,) and distress songs (4 & 88.)

But one of the most remarkable categories of psalms is a grouping called "Messianic Psalms". These psalms prophesy; they predict the coming of a special leader and king from Israel called the Messiah, or "anointed one". This special feature of the Psalms shows why Jesus, the Messiah, often quoted the Book of Psalms during his ministry on earth, and why he said, "*Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.*" (Matthew 24:44 NIV.)

Notice how many times the Psalms predict the Messiah's coming and ministry: Psalm 2 predicts that he would rule as king over all nations; Psalm 8 predicts he would restore mankind to the head of creation (see Hebrews 2:5-9;) Psalm 16 foretells his resurrection from the dead; Psalm 22 pictures his suffering and crucifixion; Psalm 110 predicts his rule as king and high priest; Psalm 118 foretells Jesus' rejection by Israel's leaders; and Psalm 132 shows that Messiah would rule on King David's throne forever.

So the power of Psalms comes from the special nature of this amazing collection of writings. The Book of Psalms assembles poetic music, prayer, wisdom, touching worship, and predictions of the coming Messiah, into the most beloved anthology of sacred writing known to man.

As the Psalmist said: "*Praise the LORD, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples. For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever. Praise the LORD.*" (Psalm 117:1-2 NIV.)

The Book of Proverbs

The Bible's next great book of wisdom is called "Proverbs". Its name came from the term "proverb", which means a short, catchy saying that teaches a bit of wisdom. We use proverbs almost every day; you've probably heard people say things like "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" or "waste not, want not". These sayings stick to the brain, teaching the timeless values needed for living life successfully.

In the Bible, the Book of Proverbs carries even more weight because of their principle author and collector, King Solomon. Most people know of Solomon's great wisdom; he was the wisest man in the Old Testament. Notice how the Bible reports on his impressive insights:

"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 men of the East... He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Men of all nations came to listen to

Solomon's wisdom... " (1 Kings 4:29-34 NIV.)

This makes the Book of Proverbs an exciting opportunity; the reader can actually take a "course in wisdom" from the wisest man of ancient times. That's the purpose of the Book of Proverbs - to transmit wisdom to the reader.

Notice how the book begins: "*The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel; for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair...*" (Proverbs 1:1-3 NIV.)

From that point, Solomon launches into a description of wisdom, and how it can benefit those who set their minds on having it. And he speaks of how devastating the lack of wisdom can be - of how destructive life becomes without the anchor-point of wisdom. He warns his son to seek wisdom at all cost. He wants to convince his son about the value of wisdom by telling how it will bring wealth, long life and protection.

Solomon sees wisdom as the greatest goal of life. He says, "*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you. Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm.*" (Proverbs 4:23-26 NIV.)

As Solomon encourages the reader to seek this wise way of living, he warns against foolishness. In Proverbs, the "fool" is a person who doesn't see the value of wisdom, so he destroys his own life by self-inflicted stupidity. Solomon warns against this foolish behavior - such as, adultery, co-signing loans for friends, lying, crime, violence, prostitution and all the other self-destructive ways people choose to live.

In a unique and creative way, Solomon imagines "wisdom" and "foolishness" as two women trying to recruit new followers. The imaginary woman called "wisdom" says: "*Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding... The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*" (Proverbs 9:6, 10 NIV.)

But the woman that Solomon names "foolishness" is loud and undisciplined: "*Let all who are simple come in here! she says to those who lack judgment... But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of the grave.*" (Proverbs 9:13-18 NIV.)

As the Book of Proverbs reaches chapter ten, Solomon begins to list the most important proverbs from his vast collection. These proverbs are designed to communicate wisdom, so that the reader will walk in the path of success and not the way of foolishness.

Notice some of his nuggets of wisdom: "*When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.*" (Chapter 10:19 NIV.) "*The wise in heart accept commands, but a chattering fool comes to ruin.*" (10:8 NIV.) "*The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.*" (12:15 NIV.) "*Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.*" (20:1 NIV.)

These remarkable sayings continue from chapter ten to chapter thirty, giving an amazing course in wisdom from the inspired mind of the wisest man of the ancient world. As chapter thirty opens, sayings from a man named Agur and a king named Lemuel appear. These proverbs lead to a special closing chapter - the Wife of Noble Character, which is a tribute to feminine wisdom. Here Solomon shows how, in a special way, women can apply the powers of wisdom.

The Book of Proverbs is especially powerful because it teaches a wisdom that's practical - it can be applied by anyone from beginner to scholar. And it can be applied in everyday situations, not just in the great halls of learning.

And Solomon anchors his teachings of wisdom on unchanging, eternal principles: "*The*

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

That's why Solomon's eternal principles echo throughout Jesus' life in the New Testament. In fact, New Testament writers like Paul considered Jesus the summation of wisdom: *"that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."* (Colossians 2:2-3 NIV.)

This long-range view of wisdom becomes takes on even more meaning when you study Solomon's journey from the wisdom of his youth to the doubts of old age, which he covers in the wisdom book called Ecclesiastes.

The Book of Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes, one of the most unusual books in the Bible, tackles some of life's toughest questions, which makes it resonate with modern readers more than almost any other Old Testament book. Some call it the most "modern" book in the Bible.

The Book of Ecclesiastes gets its title from a Hebrew word (Kohelah) which means "the preacher" or "the teacher". Its teachings come from Solomon, but this isn't the usual treatment of wisdom you'd expect from the wisest man of ancient times.

For example, the book begins like this: *"Meaningless! Meaningless! says the Teacher. Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."* (Eccl. 1:2 NIV.) How come the wisest man in the Old Testament embraces the pessimism of "everything is meaningless?"

Here are a few clues. For one thing, Solomon wrote Proverbs as a young, eager king, but he wrote Ecclesiastes in his old age after he'd seen and done everything his heart desired. For another thing, although Solomon knew how to be wise, he didn't always practice his own preaching. There's a vast difference in *knowing* something and *doing* it.

Notice how Solomon failed in his later years: *"As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD... So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely... The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD..."* (1 Kings 11:4-9 NIV.) Instead of living out the wisdom he was so famous for, Solomon cost Israel her once-united kingdom by abandoning his relationship with God.

This loss, and the cynicism brought on by Solomon's paganism, tints the entire Book of Ecclesiastes. The tragedy seeps through on each page; Solomon tried to live without God, but it didn't work. Life without God is meaningless.

Notice the emptiness Solomon discovered in foolish ways of living that didn't satisfy. Devotion to career can be meaningless: *"What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever."* (Eccl. 1:3-4 NIV.)

Sometimes, even wisdom is meaningless: *"Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief."* (Eccl. 1:17-18 NIV.)

And Solomon lists other pursuits that didn't fully satisfy him: pleasure and parties, great building projects, wealth, entertainment, career and hard work, politics - none of these things (without God) brought Solomon any peace. They were all "meaningless".

But just as soon as you think Solomon has totally despaired of life, he turns back to the basics. In chapter five, he says, *"Guard your steps when you go to the house of God... Therefore*

stand in awe of God." (Eccl. 5:1, 7 NIV.) Then in chapter seven, he gives another short course in wisdom, saying that wisdom is better than foolishness. Wisdom - if one includes God in the equation - can be a blessing even to the man who suspects that human life on earth is meaningless.

As Solomon ends his attack on the meaninglessness of life, he leaves the reader with hope in two areas. If the reader does these two things, life won't be meaningless. The first is this: *"When times are good, be happy; when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other."* (Eccl. 7:14 NIV.) This concept - rejoice, because life is short and unpredictable - caused the Jews to read Ecclesiastes aloud on the Jewish feast days during a great celebration. This book doesn't seem cheerful enough to read at a celebration, until you get the point: *enjoy life while you have it, and don't worry about its imperfections.*

The second way to a meaningful life comes when one resists the temptation to shut God out. Not only did Solomon say, *"Stand in awe of God"*, but he said, *"Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come..."* (Eccl. 12:1 NIV.)

As Ecclesiastes ends, Solomon recovers his footing. He's still an older man, more sober and reserved about life's meaning, but he understands where the fulfillment exists. In a dynamic but peaceful relationship with God - that's where life takes on special meaning.

The Song Of Songs

One of the least-known books of the Bible is called "Song of Songs" or "Solomon's Song of Songs". This obscure book doesn't deal with large movements of Divine history or with great theological questions. It does, however, take up the issues of one of life's most compelling situations - romantic love.

Song of Songs is primarily a love poem, which seems to have been Solomon's favorite of his 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:29-34.) This love song is somewhat hard to follow the first time through, because the characters in the song keep changing. The flow changes back and forth among three main speakers: the Beloved, the Friends and the Lover.

Despite this minor confusion, Song of Songs stands as the world's greatest love poem. It's such a great tribute to human romantic love that God chose to place it in the Bible. It speaks proudly of the power of such romantic love: *"Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the does of the field: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires"* (Song 3:5) or *"Place me like a seal over your heart... for love is as strong as death... Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned."* (Song 8:6-7 NIV.)

This love song proves that the power, majesty and impact of romantic love come from God. He created us male and female. He intended for man and wife to live in this majestic relationship, so that *"a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."* (Genesis 2:24 NIV.) God ordained both marriage and the romantic love that can fill it.

But some people might object. After all, Solomon had a thousand wives (1 Kings 11:3.) How could he write such a great love poem about marriage - about one man and one woman becoming one flesh?

For one thing, Solomon's thousand wives cost him his kingdom (1 Kings 11:4-12.) He, more than anyone else, knew the bitter failure of his polygamy. Besides that, a careful study of the Bible shows that God's original intent (before evil entered the world) was for one man and one woman to become one flesh (see Genesis 2:24.) The practice of polygamy came after man's fall from the Garden of Eden. And later, the Jewish Nation realized that this practice wasn't

God's will; by Jesus' day, it had almost vanished from the Nation of Israel.

So God, through Solomon, projects His Divine approval of human romantic love within marriage.

However, some commentators have seen other themes in the Song of Songs. Some interpret it as a love poem from God to the Jewish people, recalling how he loved them and brought them out of Egypt. And some compare the love expressed in this song to the love Jesus has for the church, his Bride (see Ephesians 5:22-33.)

Certainly, Song of Songs can illustrate and teach about these great themes. But we shouldn't overlook the basic power of this poem. God gives his approval to human sexuality expressed in romantic, wedded love.

These great wisdom books shine with a guiding beacon overlooked by too many modern readers. "*Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.*" (Proverbs 4:7 NIV.)

So no one ever has enough wisdom. No mile-marker in life gives you the luxury of saying, "now I have all the wisdom I need".

And the New Testament encourages Jesus' disciples alike to continue to seek wisdom (James 1:5) and to be life-long searchers after insight. After all, Christ is the one "*in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*" (Colossians 2:3 NIV.)

Study Assignments - Lesson 7

JOB: Read Job 1:1-22; 40:1-10; 42:1-6.

PSALMS: Read Psalm 1; Psalm 22; Psalm 23; Psalm 148.

PROVERBS: Read Proverbs 1:1-7; 4:5-27; 10:1-32.

ECCLESIASTES: Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-18; 3:1-8; 5:1-7.

TEST QUESTIONS - LESSON 7

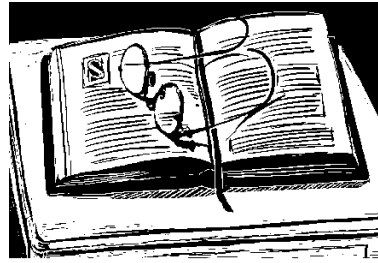
1. ___ What is "wisdom literature" in the Bible? (A) A study of Persia's kings, (B) writings that give God's insights into the major questions of life or (C) an ancient list of libraries.
2. ___ Where did the Book of Job get its name? (A) From the land where Eliphaz lived, (B) from the book's main character, Job or (C) from an ancient list of wisdom books.
3. ___ When Satan accused Job before God, what did he say? (A) That Job had been terribly evil, (B) that Job had left his wife or (C) that Job only served God because God blessed him in everything.
4. ___ Why did Job's three friends think he was suffering so much? (A) He had some secret sins he hadn't repented of, (B) God had made a mistake or (C) Job just had tough luck.
5. ___ How did God reveal Himself to Job? (A) In a burning bush, (B) on the mountaintop or (C) in a storm.

6. ___ Where did the Book of Psalms get its name? (A) From the Greek word for “songs”, (B) from David’s first wife or (C) from the oriental palm tree.
7. ___ Who wrote and collected the Psalms? (A) Hallel, (B) Solomon or (C) King David and his choir leader.
8. ___ Why are some Psalms called “Messianic Psalms”? (A) Because they predict the coming of the Messiah, (B) because they were written by Moses or (C) because that was a musical term to describe them.
9. ___ Where did the Book of Proverbs get its name? (A) From its author, (B) from the fact that it’s a collection of proverbs about wisdom or (C) from the Hebrew name for wisdom books.
10. ___ What’s the purpose of Proverbs? (A) To teach wisdom in short, catchy sayings, (B) to portray the history of Israel’s songs or (C) as a love poem to Solomon’s wife.
11. ___ Why does the writer of Ecclesiastes complain that life is meaningless? (A) Because he couldn’t understand the Proverbs, (B) because he tried everything in life and found it empty without God or (C) because he had a problem with depression.
12. ___ Why did God inspire Solomon to write his Song of Songs? (A) So he could add it to the Psalms, (B) so David would have a special song to play on his harp or (C) as a love poem paying tribute to romantic love within marriage.

Chapter Eight: *UNDERSTANDING ISRAEL’S MAJOR PROPHETS*
Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel

This next major section of Scripture contains messages by specially gifted servants of God called “prophets”. The word “prophet” is translated from several Hebrew words, which have two basic meanings: (1) a “seer” (one who “sees” things others can’t see, usually by

visions) and (2) a “speaker for God”. The prophets could see and hear messages from God, which they delivered to the Jewish people in sermons and writings.



To understand the prophets, look at their messages in the floodlight of two major historic events in the Old Testament: (1) the destruction of the northern 10 tribes (called “Israel”) by the Assyrians in 721 BC and (2) the destruction of the southern 2 tribes (called “Judah”) by the Babylonians in 586 BC. These two tragic holocausts act as flagpoles on which the prophets’ messages fly.

The Book Of Isaiah

Isaiah, whose name means “Jehovah saves”, lived in the Southern Kingdom, called Judah, and prophesied during the years 745-695 BC. When Isaiah was a young man, Assyria invaded the Northern Kingdom or “Israel”, and took most of Isaiah’s fellow Jews to the north into slavery (around 734-721 BC).

A few years later, the same Assyrian army marched toward Isaiah’s homeland, the Southern Kingdom in Judah. They destroyed 46 cities on their way to Jerusalem, Isaiah’s home, which they tried to destroy near the end of his life (701 BC).

So Isaiah lived his whole life under a choking threat - the total destruction of his people by the Assyrian Empire. When the Assyrians finally arrived at Jerusalem in Isaiah’s later years, he rose to the occasion as God’s prophet. By intercessory prayer, Isaiah and the king, Hezekiah, cried out to Jehovah; God spared the beloved Jerusalem by sending an angel who destroyed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in one night (Isaiah 36-37).

But even though God spared the city of Jerusalem, Isaiah and his people lived with the haunting threat of Assyrian invasion for most of his life. This threat, plus the rising power of the Egyptian and Babylonian Empires on the horizon, colored Isaiah’s writings and prophecies; God gave him special insights into the fate of the Jewish Nation and the coming of the Messiah.

As Isaiah’s prophecy opens, he sets the stage for the reader by saying: “*The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw...*” (Isaiah 1:1NIV.) Isaiah’s vision, concerning his home area of Judah and Jerusalem, takes a massive sixty-six chapters to unfold. While confusing to some readers, Isaiah’s book actually covers two main messages.

One message prophesies the coming destruction on God’s people because of their rebellion and sin, and is a prediction of their hopeless despair. But the other message holds out hope: a coming Messiah will establish God’s kingdom of righteousness.

This book of prophecy divides itself into these categories:

I. Judgment - 1:1 - 35:10.

- A. Prophecies About Judah & Jerusalem - 1:1 - 12:6.
- B. Prophecies Of Judgment & Salvation - 13:1 - 23:18.
- C. Redemption Of Israel By Judgment On The Nations - 24:1 - 27:13.
- D. Warnings Against Treaties With Egypt - 28:1 - 35:10.

II. Historical Break - 36:1 - 39:8.

- A. Assyria’s Attempt To Destroy Jerusalem - 36:1 - 37:38.
- B. King Hezekiah’s Answer To Prayer - 38:1-22.
- C. Babylonian Visitors To Jerusalem - 39:1-8.

III. Salvation - 40:1 - 66:24.

- A. Deliverance From Captivity - 40:1 - 48:22.
- B. The Servant Of The Lord & His Sufferings - 49:1 - 57:21.
- C. Future Glory For God’s People - 58:1 - 66:24.

Although this very simple list doesn't convey the power and scope of Isaiah's writings, it does give a general sense of the subjects he covers. His message included both destruction and hope: destruction because the Nation of Israel had torn her covenant with Jehovah by sinning against Him; and hope because God was making a way for the nation to be restored back to Him, through the Messiah.

So part of Isaiah's prophecy explains the nation's sin and their coming destruction by the pagans: "*Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him...I will turn my hand against you; I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities.*" (Isaiah 1:4, 25 NIV.)

But another part of Isaiah's prophecy pictures a coming Messiah and His future kingdom. In fact, this idea is so powerful in Isaiah that he's often called the "Messianic Prophet." Even the apostle John says in the New Testament that Isaiah "*saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.*" (John 12:41 NIV.) Isaiah, more than most of the Old Testament prophets, saw the details of Messiah's coming.

For example, look at Isaiah's prophecies of the Messiah:

- (1) He would be born of a virgin - Is. 7:14.
- (2) A special prophet would announce His ministry - Is. 40:3-5.
- (3) The Messiah's ministry would center in Galilee - Is. 9:1-2.
- (4) He would be God-in-flesh - Is. 9:6-7.
- (5) His sufferings would save mankind - Is. 53:4-6.
- (6) He would not defend Himself in man's court - Is. 53:7-8.
- (7) He would be buried with the rich - Is. 53:9.

These prophecies, and many others found in Isaiah, show the prophet's major concern with the destruction of Jerusalem, but also with the coming of a great king called the Messiah. So the Book of Isaiah remains relevant today because it warns of rebellion against God, but also because it proves that Jesus was, and is, the Messiah.

The Book Of Jeremiah

About 100 years after Isaiah, God called another prophet, named Jeremiah, into Judah's national life. Jeremiah, whose name means, "Jehovah establishes", was the son of a priest (Jeremiah 1:1) and stood out as a courageous preacher (Jeremiah 19 & 20). He also wrote poetry (the Book of Lamentations) and advised Judah's kings (see Jeremiah 38:14).

Jeremiah is sometimes named "the weeping prophet" because he lived and preached at a terrible time in Jewish history. While other prophets had seen the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, they hadn't witnessed the town of Jerusalem's destruction. But Jeremiah wasn't so fortunate.

During Jeremiah's day, three international world powers fought for dominance; Assyria had dominated the scene since Isaiah's day, but both Egypt and Babylon were challenging Assyria for control of the Middle East. Just after Jeremiah became a prophet, Judah's king, Josiah, died in battle fighting the Egyptians at Megiddo.

But just when it seemed that Egypt would gain the upper hand, Babylon rose up in the east and conquered Assyria's capitol city of Nineveh. Babylon then marched on Egypt and destroyed her armies at the Battle of Carchemish in 605 (about twenty years after Jeremiah became a prophet). This cleared the way. Jerusalem was next on Babylon's hit list of cities to conquer.

In 586 BC, during Jeremiah's ministry, the Babylonian army captured and burned Jerusalem and carried hordes of God's people into captivity. The prophet describes it this way: *"...Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard, 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... (He) carried into exile some of the poorest people and those who remained in the city, along with the rest of the craftsmen and those who had gone over to the king of Babylon."* (Jeremiah 52:12-15 NIV.)

So Jeremiah had the tragic task of preaching an unpopular message to a dying civilization. He stood in the whirlwind of Israel's darkest holocaust and preached sermons that many didn't want to hear.

God told Jeremiah to preach several basic themes:

- (1) Judah should surrender, because Babylon will conquer it anyway (27:1-11.)
- (2) The Jews should make their homes in Babylon, because their captivity will last 70 years (29:1-14.)
- (3) Because of their rebellion, judgment on Judah is certain (15:1-4.)
- (4) Despite the captivity, God will restore Judah to her glory (33:6-11.)
- (5) A new king, called the Messiah, will come one day to establish God's righteous kingdom (23:5-8 & 33:14-17.)

These prophecies accomplished two goals; first, they warned the unfaithful of Jerusalem's population to repent, which left them without excuse when the destruction came. Second, they gave hope to God's faithful people for the future. And in the long-range future, Messiah would come to save the Jewish people, and the world, from the power of evil.

Jeremiah's life and career ended in Egypt, where the Babylonians gave him safe passage to escape the hardships of a destroyed Jerusalem. Even though Jeremiah didn't save his people through the prophecies God gave him, his work still stands today as a monument to God's faithfulness and to Jeremiah's obedient heart. His prophecies came true; he succeeded in the long range because he was faithful even in tragic hardships.

The Book Of Lamentations

This Book of Lamentations gets its name from the term "lament", which is a form of funeral poetry designed to honor the deceased person.

But Jeremiah wrote this lament for a city, the city of Jerusalem, which was destroyed by the Babylonians (see Jeremiah 52). Here Jeremiah expresses his crippling sorrow at the destruction and death of his beloved Jerusalem. Everything the Jewish people cherished had been ground into the dust by Babylon. The temple was gone, the religious life of priestly sacrifice had ended, the houses and shops of Jerusalem stood desolate and the whole nation had collapsed into slavery.

Jeremiah's bitter grieving seeps out in verses like this: *"How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! (Lamentations 1:1)... "My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within, my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, because children and infants faint in the streets of the city. They say to their mothers, 'Where is bread and wine?' as they faint like wounded men in the streets of the city, as their lives ebb away in their mothers' arms."* (Lamentations 2:11-12 NIV.)

These haunting verses chill the heart, gazing on Jerusalem's death through Jeremiah's eyes. Without a doubt, this was the greatest tragedy of the prophet's life.

From the Book of Lamentations, Jeremiah preaches a powerful principle. He shows that

when Satan packages sin it seems attractive, but when evil produces its final fruit, the result is bitter, brutal and often violent. Sin is sugar coated poison; Jeremiah in his Book of Lamentations unveils the corpse after the poison has taken effect.

The Book Of Ezekiel

About ten years before the destruction of Jerusalem, the Babylonians carried off 10,000 Jewish exiles into concentration camps in Babylon. Ezekiel, a young man, was one of those prisoners. As Jeremiah was ending his preaching career in Jerusalem, Ezekiel began to see visions from God in Babylon. For the next twenty years, Ezekiel's job was to preach to the captives, helping them understand why they had been destroyed and how God would work amid the tragic wreckage of their captivity.

One of the main themes of Ezekiel's book of prophecy is - "*they will know that I am the LORD.*" This phrase occurs over sixty times in this forty-eight-chapter book.

The message rings clear: despite the hardship and judgment, God still rules from His throne. He's still in charge and knows exactly what He's doing. The Jewish nation's unfaithfulness has brought this disaster, but God is still God. And He still rules among the nations.

This message about God centers around three main divisions in Ezekiel's writings:

- (1) The city of Jerusalem will be destroyed because of rebellion - chapters 1-24.
- (2) God will judge the pagan nations also - chapters 25-32.
- (3) Israel will be reestablished one day in a great Golden Age - chapters 33-48.

Notice how Ezekiel incorporates these three messages. First of all, he predicts the fall of Jerusalem in graphic ways. He's ordered by God to draw up a replica of the city and pretend, like a child playing with his toys, to attack the city. As the prophet preaches Jerusalem's fall with vivid public displays, he speaks God's words: "*Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself am against you, Jerusalem, and I will inflict punishment on you in the sight of the nations. Because of all your detestable idols, I will do to you what I have never done before and will never do again... I will inflict punishment on you and will scatter all your survivors to the winds.*" (Ezekiel 5:8-10 NIV.)

Second, to those nations that rejoiced at the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel shows how God promises judgment at the hands of the same Babylonian army which destroyed Judah: "*Because you have clapped your hands and stamped your feet, rejoicing with all the malice of your heart against the land of Israel, therefore I will stretch out my hand against you and give you as plunder to the nations...I will destroy you and you will know that I am the LORD.*" (Ezekiel 25:6-7 NIV.)

Finally, the prophet Ezekiel shows God's unfailing love for Israel and His plans to restore her in the Messiah. In chapter 10, Ezekiel had shown God's glory departing from the temple, signifying the Lord's abandonment of His sinful people. But in chapter 43, he pictures the glory returning to the temple, promising God's return to Israel and a restoration of her favor with Jehovah.

But then Ezekiel goes further. He tells of a restored Israel under the rule of king David: "*I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered...I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them.*" (Ezekiel 34:22-24 NIV.)

It's obvious from history that David, who was long dead in Ezekiel's day, never again

ruled on Israel's throne. In fact, Israel never really had an earthly Jewish king again after the Babylonian captivity. So what did Ezekiel mean?

The key emerges in Luke 1:29-33 (NIV), where the angel Gabriel announces to Mary the fact that she will have a special son: "*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 the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.*"

Jesus, the new "David", still reigns today over the kingdom of God. He is the only fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy (Revelation 17:14.)

So at the end of Ezekiel's writings, he gives hope to the Jews in Babylon's concentration camps. They're still part of God's long-range plan. The Lord isn't through with them yet, because they'll play a role in bringing Messiah to planet earth to save humanity from Satan's death grip.

For over twenty years Ezekiel had been faithful and dependable. He preached God's message despite the hardship and heartbreak. His writings still stir us today, and point the way to God's Messiah.

The Book Of Daniel

While Jeremiah was preaching in the besieged city of Jerusalem and Ezekiel prophesied to the captives in Babylon, a young prophet named Daniel had entered the king's service in the Babylonian palace as a slave.

This Daniel, a young man from a high ranking family in Judah, was taken to Babylon and placed with other "*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.*" (Daniel 1:3-4 NIV.)

From this beginning, Daniel soon proved himself. He excelled and was promoted to a high rank in the Babylonian and Persian governments. At one point, this Jewish prisoner of war became the third highest ruler in the whole kingdom! (Daniel 5:29.)

Part of Daniel's favor with the kings of Babylon came because of his supernatural ability to interpret dreams and to prophesy. In one case he not only interpreted king Nebuchadnezzar's dream, but also described the king's dream to him even though the ruler alone knew the dream. This allowed Daniel to rise through the ranks of professional wise men and gain great influence over the Babylonian throne.

Daniel's writings depict court life during the reigns of four pagan kings. He chronicles supernatural happenings and special prophecies given to him as he moved in the highest circles of power, working for several kings of the two main superpowers of his generation. During these times, when the Jewish Nation was in captivity, God showed Himself to be awesome in His power among the pagan nations of Daniel's day.

During the reign of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 1-4), Daniel chronicles several supernatural events, including his special interpretation of the king's puzzling dream. The king had dreamed something that disturbed him so he called, as usual, for his wise men to interpret the dream. But this time he refused to tell them the dream itself. He demanded that they tell him the content of his dream and then interpret it for him. If the wise men couldn't do so, they would all be executed.

Obviously, the wise men and advisors of Nebuchadnezzar's court couldn't comply. But Daniel could. God had given him a special revelation of the king's dream, a revelation which

even predicted something that would happen in New Testament times!

The king had dreamed of a large statue made up of four elements: a head of pure gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, and legs of iron including feet of iron and clay. During the dream, a stone rolled down the mountain and shattered the clay feet, destroying the statue.

Daniel then interpreted this unusual dream for the king. The four parts of the statue represented four worldwide kingdoms, beginning with Babylon. The next, according to history, were the Persian Empire, the Greek Empire and then the Roman Empire. During the days of those kings - the Roman Empire - God would establish His own kingdom, one which would never be destroyed: *"In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, not will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever."*(Daniel 2:44-45 NIV.)

This remarkable prophecy shows that God's kingdom would be established during the Roman Empire. That's the same empire during which Jesus was born, taught, died, was raised from the dead, and established his kingdom in the church. How did Daniel know all that would happen during an empire that would exist centuries after his own death?

Throughout the reigns of the other kings in Daniel's day - Belshazzar in chapters 5, 7 & 8, Darius in chapters 6 & 9, and Cyrus the Persian in chapters 10-12 - this great prophet continued to predict God's mighty action in the future of all the nations, especially the Jewish people.

He even predicted the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70 (Daniel 9:27, 11:31 & 12:11) and was quoted by Jesus, as the Lord himself spoke of that incident in Matthew 24:15-16.

And so these four Major Prophets helped the remnant of God's people keep the faith. By hearing from Jehovah, and then delivering His message to the people, these four men helped carry the nation through its dark holocaust – and gave them a vision of the coming Messiah.

TEST QUESTIONS - LESSON 8

1. ___ A prophet is someone who (A) lives in a Jewish country, (B) sees messages from God and then speaks or writes them, or (C) someone who is pro-God.
2. ___ Isaiah lived in (A) Babylon, (B) an Island or (C) Jerusalem.
3. ___ The high point of Isaiah's career was (A) when he was elected to Jerusalem's senate, (B) when he and Hezekiah prayed and God's angel destroyed 185,000 Assyrian troops, or (C) when he trained the prophet Jeremiah.
4. ___ What was one of Isaiah's prediction about the Messiah? (A) He would be born of a virgin mother, (B) he would be born in Babylon, or (C) he would teach about Isaiah's prophecies.
5. ___ Why was Jeremiah called "the weeping prophet"? (A) Because his wife left him, (B) because he was too emotional, or (C) because he lived at a terrible time in Jewish history - the destruction of Jerusalem.

6. ___ Why did Jeremiah preach that Judah should surrender to Babylon? (A) They could later use it as a trick to win the war, (B) because Jeremiah was a traitor to the Jewish nation or (C) because God told him that Babylon will conquer it anyway.
7. ___ The Book of Lamentations is a funeral poem. Who was the subject of that poem? (A) the dead, destroyed city of Jerusalem, (B) Isaiah, who had died, or (B) Josiah, the Israelite king.
8. ___ Ezekiel did his preaching from the city of (A) Babylon, (B) Nazareth, or (C) Nineveh.
9. ___ Ezekiel predicted that king David would reign on Israel's throne again. What did Ezekiel mean by this? (A) David might come back from the dead, (B) another king named David would be born later, or (C) Jesus Christ, a descendant of David, would rule on the throne of God's people.
10. ___ Daniel did his preaching from (A) the Babylonian palace, (B) the river Chebar or (C) the city of Jerusalem.
11. ___ Daniel won the confidence of King Nebuchadnezzar by (A) paying him a bribe, (B) finding him a new wife, or (C) describing and interpreting a dream the king had of a four-part statue.
12. ___ In chapter 2:36-49, Daniel interpreted the king's dream as predicting four world-wide empires. He also prophesied that during that fourth empire a great event would happen; what was it? (A) that Nebuchadnezzar would die, (B) that God would establish His own kingdom which would never be destroyed, or (C) that Daniel would go back to Jerusalem.

Chapter Nine: UNDERSTANDING ISRAEL'S MINOR PROPHETS

Hosea through Malachi

During the last chapter, we got acquainted with the four major prophets of the Old Testament, at least those who wrote down their revelations. (Other prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha, preached prophetic messages from God, but didn't write them down.)

Now we look at the twelve "Minor Prophets" found in the last portion of the Old Testament. These Minor Prophets aren't called minor because their revelations lack the importance of the Major Prophets, but because their writings are much shorter.

Just as with the Major Prophets, the Minor Prophets can't be understood until you see their messages in the spotlight of two major events in the Old Testament: (1) the destruction of Israel (the northern ten tribes) by the Assyrians in 721 BC and (2) the destruction of Judah (the southern two tribes) and its capitol city of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC. As we've said before, these two tragic holocausts act as flagpoles on which the prophets' messages fly.

The Minor Prophets In Chronological Order

As you read the Minor Prophets in Scripture, you'll find that they're not listed in the order in which they lived and preached. This can be confusing, especially if you're trying to understand these twelve Minor Prophets in their historical context.

Here's a brief analysis of these twelve prophets that puts them in the order in which they lived. It also arranges their writings around these two main events just covered above: (1) the Assyrian invasion of Israel in 721 BC and (2) the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Pre-Assyrian Period: These Minor Prophets preached long before Assyria became a threat to Israel:

1. **Obadiah** - He prophesied against the nation of Edom (Esau's descendants) because it refused to help Jerusalem fight off her enemies. (About 845 BC.)
2. **Joel** - He prophesied a locust plague on unrepentant Judah. (About 830-755 BC.)
3. **Jonah** - He preached judgment against Nineveh, the capitol city of Assyria, which God had threatened to destroy because of its evil. (About 780 BC.)

Assyrian Period: These prophets predicted the Assyrian invasion of Israel and preached about its meaning. (This period also included Isaiah.)

4. **Amos** - He was a farmer who preached judgment by the Assyrians on a lazy and materialistic Israel (Northern Kingdom). (About 755 BC.)
5. **Hosea** - He married an adulterous woman to show God's disappointment with a spiritually adulterous Northern Kingdom of Israel, which worshipped pagan idols. (About 785-725 BC.)
6. **Micah** - He warned about the destruction of parts of Judah in the south and all of Israel in the north at the hands of Assyria because of idol worship. (About 735-700 BC.)

Babylonian Period: These men preached about the judgment that the Babylonian Empire was about to bring on the Middle East by conquering it. (This period also included Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel.)

7. **Nahum** - This prophet preached to Assyria, warning that Babylon was about to destroy the Assyrian Empire. (663-612 BC.)
8. **Zephaniah** - He preached about the coming Babylonian invasion of Judah and Jerusalem. (635 BC.)
9. **Habakkuk** - His writings portray a discussion with God about the coming Babylonian invasion of Judah, and about the justice of the whole operation. (625-606 BC.)

Post-Captivity Period: These prophets lived and preached after the Babylonian captivity of Judah was over, which means they prophesied during a period of rebuilding and restoration.

10. Haggai - His theme to the returned people of Judah is "rebuild the temple!" Through Haggai, God calls the people to restore Jerusalem. (520 BC.)

11. Zechariah - This prophet also encourages the people to rebuild the temple, plus he speaks often of the coming Messiah. (520 BC.)

12. Malachi - Writing sometime after Haggai and Zechariah, this prophet tries to stir interest in holy living, now that the temple and sacrifices have been reestablished. (445-432 BC.)

Help In Understanding The Prophets

Since prophetic books can sometimes be confusing when first studied, here are some basic guidelines to help understand these writings.

- (1) **Keep in mind the conditions of the day when the prophet lived.** This means you should look at the political, moral and religious situation surrounding the prophet's life. Why did God call him to speak that particular message for his own day?
- (2) **Remember that God is a God of history.** This means that God actively works in the nations. He's concerned about what man is doing, so He works to bring moral justice among the nations.
- (3) **Look for the Messianic hope.** Most prophets in Scripture refer to a coming person, called the Messiah, who would bring a future golden age to Israel and establish a remarkable kingdom. This concept is one of the main foundations of Biblical prophecy.

“Two tragic holocausts act as flagpoles on which the prophets' messages fly.”

The Message Of The Prophets In Biblical Order

After seeing the messages of the twelve Minor Prophets in chronological order, let's now look at each prophet's book in greater detail. We'll follow the order in which they appear in Scripture. If you're confused at times, refer back to the chart on the "Minor Prophets In Chronological Order."

The Book Of Hosea

This book gets its name from the author, a prophet called Hosea, whose name means "salvation". Hosea lived during the Assyrian Period, a time of frightening instability in Israel. Assyria was on the march, and Israel had staggered politically; several Israelite kings ruled in rapid succession, some of them for only a month before being assassinated. Times were dark, and Assyria would soon invade and capture all of Israel. (For more on the historical setting of Hosea, read 2 Kings 15:8 - 17:41.)

What was Hosea's message in all this turmoil? His main theme is adultery - spiritual adultery. In fact, God commanded Hosea to marry an adulterous woman to drive home the point, so he married Gomer and began to have children by her.

Then Hosea began to prophesy over unfaithful Israel: *"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, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.'"*

(Hosea 4:1-2 NIV.)

Look at Hosea's unvarnished message. Israel is inviting destruction because of her unfaithfulness to God; she has broken her "marriage vows" to Him.

One bright spot of Hosea's writings appears in the New Testament, in Matthew 2:14-15 NIV. When Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt to protect Jesus' tender young life, the Bible characterizes it this way: *"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.'"* (Quoted from Hosea 11:1 NIV.)

Even in the darkest prophecies of Hosea about the destruction of Israel, God placed this ray of hope - the Messiah would come to rescue Israel's future and save mankind from the power of evil.

The Book Of Joel

The Book of Joel wears the name of its prophet-author, whose name means "Jehovah is God". Joel's prophecy doesn't easily fall into any historic date because he doesn't mention either the Assyrian or Babylonian invasions. Therefore, Joel usually gets placed in the Pre-Assyrian Period, which puts him a great while earlier than most of the Minor Prophets. Although many scholars disagree about the dating of Joel's writing, the best guess puts his writings sometime around 830-755 BC.

Joel's main theme centers on a coming locust plague, which would wipe out the entire economy of Judah and Jerusalem. Because locusts will eat all the vegetation, Judah can't help but fall victim to wild fires and drought.

But Joel's purpose isn't just to warn Judah of a coming plague. His prophecy drives home the fact of God's anger with His people. And he also calls God's people to repent and cry out to Jehovah to spare them: *"'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.' Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate..."* (Joel 2:12 NIV.)

Joel doesn't give much detail about Judah's sins, but his message can't be ignored: God's people have turned their backs on Him and descended into depravity, so His judgment will ride in on the back of a locust plague; repent, so God can spare the nation.

One of Joel's more remarkable predictions appears again in the New Testament book of Acts. In Joel 2:28-32, he predicted a new golden age, which would appear in the Messiah's day. That prediction comes to fulfillment in Acts 2:14-21, where Jesus' apostles receive the Holy Spirit's power and the ability to speak in tongues (languages which they had never studied.)

When the apostles were accused of simply being drunk, Peter said, *"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.'"* (Acts 2:16-17 NIV.)

With that, Joel had predicted one of the most awesome events brought about by the Messiah - the coming of the Holy Spirit. This famous prediction fits neatly into the theme of Joel's writings: repent and seek God so He can pour out a blessing on His people.

The Book Of Amos

This book gets its name from the prophet Amos, which means "burden-bearer". Amos was actually a farmer, but God called him into the prophetic ministry so he could warn Israel (and surrounding nations) about the coming doom at the hands of Assyria (see Amos 7:14-15.) He prophesied around 755 BC as the nation of Israel was coming apart politically and morally.

Amos gets rather graphic in his portrayal of Israel's fate. In one place he says the day of Jehovah's judgment will be "*as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him.*" (Amos 5:19 NIV.) In other words, there's no escaping God's wrath. Israel's sins have caught up to her, and punishment is near; she can run, but she can't hide.

These graphic pictures pulsate through Amos' writings. He uses visions to reinforce his message to Israel; he speaks of the LORD roaring from Zion and thundering from Jerusalem. He calls the spoiled women of Israel "*cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, 'Bring us some drinks!'*" (Amos 4:1 NIV.) His visions include a locust plague, a fire, a plumb line that measures Israel, and a basket of ripe fruit. His word pictures paint the portrait of a decayed nation about to be destroyed.

But like many other prophets, Amos also predicts the restoration of King David's reign and a rebuilding of Israel's greatness. His prediction in chapter 9:11-12 appears later in Acts 15:16-18 NIV, as the apostles quote it to show that Amos predicted the inclusion of Gentiles into the early church: "*The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: 'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent... that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name...' It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.*"

Not only had Amos preached to his crumbling generation, but he prophesied about the Messiah's age and its impact on all the nations.

START HERE

The Book Of Obadiah

This short book of prophecy is named for Obadiah ("servant of Jehovah"), a prophet of the Pre-Assyrian Period. His book is probably the oldest of the Minor Prophets (around 845 BC), although some scholars date the book much closer to the end of the Old Testament (around 580 BC).

This dating problem comes because Obadiah mentions an invasion of Jerusalem (it happened five times), but doesn't give any details about which one he's discussing. Even though we aren't sure which one he means, his message is plain.

Obadiah's theme is "the violence of silence". He preaches against the small nation of Edom because she stood by and watched as Jerusalem was invaded; Edom refused to help her own cousins, the Jews.

The nation of Edom came from the descendants of Esau, while Judah and Jerusalem were the descendants of Jacob. These two brothers, Jacob and Esau, had fought each other for most of their lives (see Genesis 25:21-34 & 27:1-45), and the hard feelings continued even to Obadiah's day. Nevertheless, God expected them to heal the wounds and help each other.

Obadiah's preaching launches an attack against Edom (Esau) because the Edomites had refused to help their kinsmen, the Jews, when Jerusalem was invaded. He says, "*Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever. On the day you stood aloof while strangers carried off his wealth and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you were like one of them.*" (Obadiah, verses 10-11 NIV.)

Because of Edom's sin, the nation would pass from existence: "*There will be no survivors from the house of Esau. The LORD has spoken.*" (Verse 18 NIV.) Certainly, the nation of Edom doesn't exist today; Obadiah's prophecy proved to be true. And Obadiah's prediction of a Messianic kingdom has also come true: "*Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to govern the*

mountains of Esau. And the kingdom will be the LORD'S" (Verse 21 NIV.)

The Book Of Jonah

Jonah, whose name means "dove", gives this writing its title - the Book of Jonah. He's considered a Pre-Assyrian prophet because he preached in the days (around 780 BC) before Assyria became powerful enough to invade Israel.

In Jonah's day, Israel prospered and seemed to have a bright future. Even though Assyria continued to grow as a world power, she had stumbled when one of her most powerful kings, Shalmaneser III, died; Assyria had also spent much of her wealth fighting in Armenia.

So things looked promising in Jonah's day. Israel seemed to be relieved from the worry of Assyrian invasion. Assyria itself was struggling through a trying time and looked like a nation in decline.

Just then, God told Jonah to travel to Nineveh, the capitol city of Assyria, and preach. He was to preach repentance, so that the Assyrian nation could be spared from God's judgment. Jonah was horrified. He knew that if he preached in Nineveh and the people repented, God would forgive them. They would be spared, but then Israel would be under their threat again.

Instead of preaching, Jonah ran. Instead of traveling to Nineveh (500 miles to the east of his home), he booked a ship to Tarshish in Spain (2,000 miles to the west). He wanted to get as far away as possible from God's will.

But Jonah's plan backfired. The Lord brought such a terrible storm to Jonah's hired ship that the sailors had to throw Jonah overboard to save the vessel. That's when he encountered the situation that made Jonah famous - he was swallowed by a great fish (which God prepared just for that purpose). After three days of agony and terror inside the fish's stomach, Jonah was vomited out on dry land. He survived. And he went to Nineveh.

His sermons in Nineveh were simple: *"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."* (Jonah 3:4 NIV.) But Jonah's simple sermons proved powerful: *"The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth."* (3:5 NIV.) Even the king of Nineveh got involved; he fasted and humbled himself before God.

When God saw the Assyrians' repentance and humility, He forgave them and did not bring on them the judgment he had planned. Yet God's forgiveness angered Jonah: *"But Jonah became angry. He prayed to the LORD, 'O, LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God...'"* (Jonah 4:1-2 NIV.)

Jonah didn't want the Assyrians to repent. He didn't want God to spare them, because he knew they could be a threat later. His selfish concerns blocked his view of the real issue - God's compassion on a heathen, pagan nation who didn't deserve forgiveness.

God had been concerned about the city because it had *"more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well."* He added: *"Should I not be concerned about that great city?"* (Jonah 4:11 NIV.)

With that, the Book of Jonah ends. The message is unusual for the prophetic writings: God cares about the lost, heathen world; man should care also. Jonah didn't care, but God did. And God found a way, using Jonah the reluctant prophet, to save a city with a hundred and twenty thousand children and many others besides.

The Book of Jonah stands out as a beautiful gem predicting God's future grace through Jesus Christ to all the nations. In fact, Jesus himself used Jonah's experience inside the great fish

to teach a lesson.

He said, *"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here."* (Matthew 12:40-41 NIV.)

The Book Of Micah

Micah, whose name means, "who is like Jehovah", lived about the same time as Isaiah and preached about the coming destruction of both Israel and Judah by the Assyrians. During Micah's life the Assyrians invaded the northern ten tribes of Israel, captured them, and then marched against Judah to the south. The Assyrian army captured 46 cities in the south and came to the very gates of Jerusalem. King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah cried out to God, who then saved the city by His power (for more details, read 2 Kings 15:32 - 20:21 & 2 Chronicles 27:1 - 32:33).

In Micah's prophecy, he condemns the two capitol cities of the divided Jewish Nation: Samaria, the capitol of Israel to the north, and then Jerusalem, the capitol of Judah in the south. Micah preaches about the sins of God's people. He speaks of the morally decayed nation in these terms: *"For her wound is incurable; it has come to Judah. It has reached the very gate of my people, even to Jerusalem itself."* (Micah 1:9 NIV.)

One of Micah's main themes is the failure of leadership among God's people. He blames the prophets for not preaching the truth, the judges for taking bribes, and the priests for teaching only for money.

In his stinging rebuke he says, *"Therefore because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets."* (Micah 3:12 NIV.)

But Micah's bright side is his prediction of true spiritual leadership in the future. In a stunningly accurate and detailed prediction of the Messiah's coming, he says *"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."* (Micah 5:2 NIV.)

In the New Testament, Matthew's gospel directly quotes this remarkable prediction by Micah (Matthew 2:5-6). In Matthew's account of Jesus' birth, he says that when the wise men from the east visited King Herod, they spoke of a new king being born to the Jews. Herod was stunned (this would threaten his throne) and asked where this child would be born.

The wise men answered *"In Bethlehem in Judea...for this is what the prophet has written..."*. Then they quote directly from Micah 5:2. The whole world knows that Jesus was born in Bethlehem; how did Micah know it seven hundred years in advance? He knew it because of God's Holy Spirit, who revealed it to this remarkable prophet.

The Book Of Nahum

Nahum, whose name means "consolation", preached during the Babylonian Period after the Assyrians had destroyed the northern tribes of Israel. He's the most poetic of the Minor Prophets, and he had the unique experience of preaching the message which Jonah would have enjoyed - the destruction of the city of Nineveh.

Nahum's message is a simple prediction: Because Nineveh (the capitol city of Assyria) has been so bloodthirsty, it will be destroyed by God's wrath. History tell us that the city of

Nineveh fell to the Babylonian army in 612 BC.

Nahum's prophecy outlines easily into four main ideas:

(1) The Judge - 1:1-7.

"The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies."

(2) The Verdict - 1:8-9.

"The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble... but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh."

(3) The Sentence - 1:10-15.

"The LORD has given a command concerning Nineveh...I will prepare your grave, for you are vile."

(4) The Execution - 2:1 - 3:19.

"O, king of Assyria...Your people are scattered on the mountains...Nothing can heal your wound; your injury is fatal." NIV

Nahum's main theme still holds true today; nations that ignore God's moral code of behavior will see tragic outpourings of Divine wrath. Nineveh wasn't the first, nor was it the last, nation to be punished - in the here and now - by God Himself.

As Proverbs puts it, *"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people."* (14:34 NIV.)

The Book Of Habakkuk

This book is named after the prophet Habakkuk, whose name means "embrace". He was a prophet of the Babylonian Period who faced the destruction of his homeland at the hands of a brutal Babylonian army.

But Habakkuk's book of prophecy, written around 625-606 BC, doesn't just deal with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians; it deals with a deeper topic. This prophet questions the "why" behind God's judgements.

He begins his book by asking God why He hasn't judged the wicked people of Judah and Jerusalem: *"How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? ... Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?"*(Habakkuk 1:2-3 NIV.)

But Habakkuk's question about God's justice doesn't bring the expected response. God shocks the prophet by revealing that He plans to judge and destroy Jerusalem by using the pagan Babylonian army! He says, *"I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the earth to seize dwelling places not their own."* (1:6 NIV.)

Puzzled, Habakkuk grapples with God's proposal. But how can God use a nation more evil than Judah to judge Judah? He questions, *"Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?"* (1:13 NIV.)

How can this be right? How can God use a more wicked nation to judge a less wicked one?

God answers him plainly. The Babylonians will not escape judgment. He says, *"See, he (Babylon) is puffed up; his desires are not upright - but the righteous will live by faith - indeed,*

his wine betrays him; he is arrogant and never at rest...Now it is your turn! Drink and be exposed! The cup from the LORD'S right hand is coming around to you, and disgrace will cover your glory.” (Habakkuk 2:4-5 & 16 NIV.)

God tells Habakkuk that Babylon will indeed drink the cup of God's wrath; they won't escape judgment. His ray of hope is found in Habakkuk 2:4; *“but the righteous will live by faith.”*

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul quoted this very verse to establish the foundation for a person's discipleship to Jesus; faith is the key. If the righteous survive at all, it will be by their faith, their trust. Faith, not living a perfect life, puts one in a father/child relationship with the Lord.

As Habakkuk closes his book, the last chapter praises God for His awesome power and justice. God will judge Judah by using the Babylonian army, but then also judge the Babylonians for their wickedness and cruelty. God's justice never makes a mistake. It may sometimes move slowly, but it always brings a perfect solution.

Habakkuk does, however, have one slight worry. How will God's own faithful people fare in all this destruction and judgment? He resolves this question by the end of his writings by saying, *“The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.”* (Habakkuk 3:19 NIV.)

As Habakkuk's book (which is actually a prayer set to music) ends, he has recovered his faith in God's intricate but fair judgments.

The Book Of Zephaniah

Zephaniah, whose name means “treasure”, had the typical prophetic job of predicting disaster and explaining the reasons why. He prophesied around 625 BC, about fifty years before the fall of Judah to the Babylonian army.

The “Day of Jehovah” stands out as one of this prophet's major themes. He describes a day of judgment and destruction which would come because the Jewish nation had abandoned its worship of the one, true God and begun to worship pagan idols.

His prophecy begins with some frightening words from God: *“I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the LORD.”* (Zeph. 1:2 NIV.) He then begins to list the causes, especially their pagan idolatry: *“I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal, the names of the pagan and idolatrous priests- those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host...”(Zeph. 1:4-5 NIV.)*

The severity of God's message through Zephaniah goes back to their betrayal of the very purpose for their existence. God had called the Jewish Nation out of Egypt to become a witness to a revolutionary view of God. God is one. God isn't inside time or space. God isn't part of creation, He's the Creator. He's the great “I Am” of the burning bush.

This teaching was a radical departure from the paganism of their day. The pagan nations worshipped many gods. Anything in nature that had unusual powers, like a hawk or a snake, became an object of worship. But the Jews were called to a higher worship.

Now, in Zephaniah's day, they're betraying that purpose and falling back into the disgusting idolatry and paganism of the barbarians around them. And it's Zephaniah's job to warn them that the “Day of Jehovah” is coming upon them (at the hands of the Babylonians).

When the destruction comes, God says *“At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think, ‘The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad.’”* (Zeph. 1:12 NIV.)

But despite the certain destruction, Zephaniah does have a positive message for Judah. After the destruction is over, God will save a remnant and bring about the nation's restored fortunes. This restoration is interpreted several ways, but there are two which are especially important. One, the nation was restored during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah (see Chapter 6).

But another is the fact that God planned to restore Judah's fortunes in at a later time and in a special manner. This Messianic Kingdom, as its called, would be established in the days of the Roman Empire (see Daniel under Chapter 8) and would progress from there to bless the entire world.

So Zephaniah's message ends on a hopeful thought; God certainly will judge Judah's pagan idolatry, but He will also prepare a bright future for her in His Son's kingdom: *"At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes."* (Zeph. 3:20 NIV.)

The Book Of Haggai

The final three Minor Prophets all lived and preached in the Post-Captivity Period, which means they lived after the Jews had been released from their seventy-year Babylonian captivity to return home.

Haggai, whose name means "festive", preached about sixteen years after the captivity was ended. He's mentioned in Ezra 5:1 & 6:14 as one of the prophets who preached to the returned Jews in Jerusalem. His main mission was to encourage them to rebuild the house of God - a place to worship, called the temple.

After sixteen years of freedom back in their homeland, the Jews still hadn't rebuilt the temple. So Haggai challenged them by saying, *"These people say 'the time has not yet come for the LORD'S house to be built.' 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?'"* (Haggai 1:2-3 NIV.)

From there the prophet challenges them to think about their situation. They had planted many crops, but they hadn't harvested much. They had food, but just enough to survive. They had clothing, but not enough to stay warm. They earned wages, but only to *"put them in a purse with holes in it."* (Haggai 1:6 NIV.) In other words, they aren't prospering because they've neglected to build God's temple.

The people took Haggai's message to heart; in just over two weeks, they began to build, and by 516 BC they had completed the temple (Ezra 6:15 NIV.)

As they were building the temple, God gave Haggai a special prophecy concerning this new structure: *"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...'"* (Haggai 2:9 NIV.)

The new temple certainly did surpass the old one. Even though it began small, by Jesus' day the temple, which had been constantly upgraded over the years, was one of the marvels of the ancient world (Matthew 24:1). Its latter glory had surpassed the former glory of Solomon's day.

But more than that, the temple was the stage for much of Jesus' teachings. He cleansed it of the moneychangers and said it was to be a house of prayer (Matthew 21:12-16). Since Jesus is God's Son, God's own presence had walked the floors of that amazing structure. Jesus himself had fulfilled Haggai's prophecy.

The Book Of Zechariah

Zechariah, whose name means “Jehovah remembers”, preached and wrote at the same time as Haggai, about 520 BC. Starting about two months after Haggai, Zechariah also preached about the rebuilding of God’s temple. He did so to encourage Judah about the nation’s glorious future and destiny.

Since Zechariah’s prophetic mission is to get the people of Judah to see their glorious destiny, he predicts many New Testament events. He also speaks often of the Messiah and how He will die.

Notice how many New Testament ideas are found in Zechariah:

He predicted the coming of one named “the Branch” - *“Listen, O high priest Joshua and your associates... who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch.”* (Zech. 3:8 (also 6:12) NIV.) The word “branch” translates to the word “Nazarene” in the New Testament - *“So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: ‘He will be called a Nazarene.’”* (Matthew 2:23 NIV.)

Zechariah also predicted that the Messiah would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey’s colt (Zech. 9:9 & Matthew 21:4), that he would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Zech. 11:12 & Matthew 26:15), that he would be pierced (Zech. 12:10 & John 19:37), that he would be the shepherd who was killed, scattering his sheep (Zech. 13:7 & Matthew 26:31) and that he would be a righteous king who would rule the whole world (Zech. 9:10).

It’s easy to see Zechariah’s purpose in these passages; he’s giving the Jews hope for the future as they rebuild Jerusalem and await the coming Messiah. He points to a future golden age which will include God’s people in a righteous Messianic kingdom.

Near the end of his writings, Zechariah says, *“They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The LORD is our God.’”* (Zech. 13:9 NIV.)

The Book Of Malachi

Malachi, whose name means “my messenger”, wrote the last book of the Minor Prophets. He lived about 100 years after the Jews had returned from Babylonian captivity, which means the temple had been rebuilt and the priesthood had been restored. Ezra had returned to Jerusalem in about 457 B.C. to help restore the people’s obedience to the law and Nehemiah had returned in 445 B.C. to organize an effort to rebuild Jerusalem’s broken walls and gates.

In Malachi’s day everything seemed to be in place for God’s people to be blessed. They were back in the homeland. They’d rebuilt the temple and the city walls. They’d accepted much of Malachi’s teachings and had been cured of idol worship. Yet something was still terribly wrong.

They’re blindly going through the motions of worship, but their hearts are cold toward God. They have a dead, listless religion. Malachi strikes at the heart of their deceased worship by prodding them with statements from God, which draw out painful questions.

For example, when God says He loves them they ask, *“How have you loved us?”* (Malachi 1:2 NIV.) God answers by reminding them of the past; He rescued them, putting them in their own land.

Then when God accuses them of showing contempt for His name and defiling the offerings, they ask, *“How have we defiled you?”* (1:7 NIV.) He explains by exposing their practice of bringing sick and defective animals to His temple as sacrifices.

He even says, “*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...*” (1:10 NIV.)

And God has similar rebukes for the priests who don’t honor His name (2:1-2), for unfaithful husbands who quickly divorce their wives for any reason (2:11-16), for those who blame God for the evil around them (2:17), for worshippers who withhold their tithes of money to the temple (3:8-12), and for those who serve God only when it prospers them (3:13-15).

Because of their dead faith and hypocritical religion, Malachi rebukes the sleepy nation and warns them that Messiah is coming in the near future. And then he makes one of the most remarkable prophecies in the Minor Prophets.

God, through the prophet, predicts: “*See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.*” (4:5-6 NIV.)

As we’ve seen before, the Bible interprets itself; Jesus himself interpreted Malachi’s words. Speaking about John the Baptist, Jesus said, “*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. He who has ears, let him hear.*” (Matthew 11:13-15 NIV.)

The “Elijah” (John the Baptist) did indeed come, and so did the Messiah. As these books of the Minor Prophets close the Old Testament revelation, it’s fitting that the last two verses end by predicting the coming of Messiah himself, Jesus Christ.

TEST QUESTIONS - LESSON 9

- 1.____ The Minor Prophets are called “minor” because (A) they were all very small men, (B) their writings are much shorter than the Major Prophets, or (C) their writings weren’t very important.
- 2.____ When the prophet Joel predicted a locust plague on God’s nation, he told them they could avoid it by (A) moving to another country, (B) repenting with fasting, weeping and mourning, or (C) poisoning the locusts.
- 3.____ When Amos predicted that God would restore King David’s fallen kingdom, what did he mean? (A) That David would be raised from the dead, (B) that David would be fondly remembered by his people, or (C) that the coming Messiah, who would establish Christianity and include even Gentiles, would be the son of David.
- 4.____ Obadiah rebuked the nation of Edom for what sin? (A) For standing by and not helping their cousins, the Jews, when Jerusalem was attacked, (B) for not studying their Bibles, or (C) for attacking the Babylonians.
- 5.____ Why did Jonah run from God when He called him to be a prophet? (A) He was afraid to speak in public, (B) he already had a good job, or (C) he didn’t want the Assyrians to repent and be saved.

6. ___ What town did Micah predict would be the birthplace of the Messiah? (A) Bethlehem, (B) Jordan, (C) or Nineveh.
7. ___ Nahum predicted that God would destroy which pagan city? (A) Nineveh, (B) Samaria, or (C) Bethlehem.
8. ___ The prophet Habakkuk wanted God to punish Jerusalem for her sins, but he got concerned when he found out that God was going to (A) use the Babylonian army to do it, because the Babylonians were more wicked than the Jews, or (B) destroy the city at night, or (C) postpone it for another two hundred years.
9. ___ What was Haggai's main message? (A) Don't trust the Edomites, (B) build the temple!, or (C) don't try to escape from the captivity.
10. ___ When Zechariah predicted that a certain person would be sold for thirty pieces of silver, who was he talking about? (A) His own brother, (B) his wife, or (C) the Messiah, Jesus.
11. ___ Malachi predicted that an "Elijah" figure would come just before the Messiah. Who was that person? (A) One of Elijah's sons, (B) John the Baptist, or (C) one of Malachi's sons.
12. ___ What two major events in Israel's history help you understand the writings of the prophets? (A) Abraham's life and Moses' killing of the Egyptian, (B) Elijah's death and Elisha's preaching, or (C) the Assyrian invasion of Israel and the Babylonian invasion of Judah and Jerusalem.

Chapter Ten: UNDERSTANDING THE GOSPELS

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

The first four books of the New Testament, called "The Gospels" or "The Gospel Accounts," all tell the same story - the life of Jesus the Messiah. Four different disciples of Jesus

wrote these accounts, yet they tell the same general story. Why? Why do we need four different biographies of the Messiah? Because of the scope and power of the story.

The power of this story resides in the word "gospel" which means "good news" - news that God's Messiah has finally come, just as the Old Testament prophets predicted.

The coming of Christ is the greatest, most important happening in all of human history. His coming fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. It signaled the end of the old system and the beginning of the age of grace - as the Bible itself says, *"For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."* (John 1:17 NIV.)

Since Jesus was the greatest man who ever lived, his story is too powerful to tell in just one account. For example, in London's National Gallery, there's a painting of King Charles I, which shows him from the front, left side and right side. Why three views of the same man?

History says that Van Dyck painted it for Bernini, the sculptor, who used it to produce a bust of the king's likeness. The sculptor needed more than one view to produce a representation closer to the real thing.

So we have four gospel accounts because Jesus' amazing life can't be covered in just one. In fact, these four gospels don't actually cover everything Jesus did. John himself writes, *"Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that is the Christ, the Son of God... Jesus did many other things as well. If one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world not have room for the books that would be written."* (John 20:30-31 & NIV.)



*are
Jesus
every
would
21:25*

Notice what John said - *"that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God"* - this is the purpose of the gospel accounts. They tell the story of Jesus from four different angles to encourage the reader to believe that Jesus is the same Messiah predicted in the Old Testament. Let's see how these four writers approach the subject.

Differences In The Four Accounts

The following chart shows the differences in these four gospel accounts. Notice how each writer covers a different set of events, and yet some events are covered by all four:

| | <u>MATTHEW</u> | <u>MARK</u> | <u>LUKE</u> | <u>JOHN</u> |
|---|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1. <u>Jesus Before Birth.</u> | | | | 1:1-3 |
| 2. <u>Jesus' Birth & Childhood.</u> | 1&2 | | 1 & 2 | |
| 3. <u>His Baptism.</u> | 3:13-17 | 1:9-11 | 3:21-22 | |
| 4. <u>His Temptation.</u> | 4:1-11 | 1:12-13 | 4:1-13 | |
| 5. <u>His First Miracle.</u> | | | | 2:1-11 |
| 6. <u>Early Judean Ministry.</u> | | | | 2:13 - 4:3 |

| | | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------|-------|--------------|-------|
| 7. <u>His Last Week.</u> | 21-27 | 11-15 | 19:29 - 24:1 | 12-19 |
| 8. <u>After Resurrection.</u> | 28 | 16 | 24 | 20-21 |

As you can see from the chart, these gospel writers told the same story, but each one included some events the others didn't cover. Why? Because each writer had a different purpose and audience. Look closer at the individual gospel accounts and the special emphasis each writer chose.

The Book Of Matthew

The gospel of Matthew contains the story of Jesus' life, told by a Jewish tax collector named Matthew. Matthew doesn't tell us much about himself in his own book, but his fellow-writer, Luke, does give a brief picture of Matthew (also known as Levi) in Luke 5:27-31. As a tax collector, Matthew would've been an outcast in his own day - a Jewish man who worked for the Romans and taxed other Jews, sending their hard earned money to Rome. He wasn't very popular, yet Jesus called him to be a disciple, anyhow. And he used this social outcast to write the story of his own life!

Matthew's account of the life of Jesus has a special emphasis. Matthew wrote it to convince Jews that Jesus was their long-awaited Messiah. We know this because of the special features of Matthew's writings.

First, he opens his account of Jesus' life with a long genealogy. He traces Jesus' family line all the way from Abraham through King David to Joseph, Mary's husband. This family tree would've been extremely important to Jewish readers. They would've been curious – can this potential Messiah trace his ancestry back to the great leaders of Israel? Certainly he had to be of Abraham's seed in order to be a true Jew, and he had to be of King David's line in order to claim title as the Messiah.

A second special feature of Matthew's account is his frequent quoting of the Old Testament. Obviously, if he's trying to convince Jews that Jesus is their Messiah, he'll need to prove it by using the Law and Prophets. Matthew's quoting of the Old Testament results in some of clearest links between the ancient prophecies about Christ, and the life of Jesus, proving that he was the Messiah.

Notice how many times Matthew quotes the Old Testament to prove that Jesus is the Messiah:

He quotes Micah the prophet to prove that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, which was indeed Jesus' birthplace (Matthew 2:3-6). He quotes Hosea to show that the Messiah would spend a brief time in Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15). He uses a passage from Jeremiah to show that mourning and grieving would accompany an effort to kill the infant Messiah (Matthew 2:18).

He quotes Isaiah to prove that the Messiah would have a special prophet to announce his arrival (Matthew 3:1-3). He again uses Isaiah's writings to show that the Messiah would begin his ministry in Galilee, not in Jerusalem (Matthew 4:12-16).

Then Matthew presents Jesus' early teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, showing that the Messiah harmonized his own ministry with the Old Testament: *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."* (Matthew 5:17 NIV (see also 5:1 - 7:28)).

After that, Matthew continues to present Jesus' life as a fulfillment of the Old Testament. He quotes Isaiah to show that the Messiah would have the power to heal (Matthew 8:14-17). He reports that Jesus himself quoted the prophet Hosea to show that the Messiah's ministry would feature mercy and compassion (Matthew 9:10-13.) He also shows that Jesus quoted Micah to prove that the Messiah's ministry would bring conflict, even among members of one's own family (Matthew 10:34-38).

Again the Book of Matthew quotes Isaiah to link Jesus' compassionate ministry to the Old Testament prophet's prediction of a caring Messiah (Matthew 12:15-21). Then Jesus himself, as recorded in Matthew, uses the Old Testament to show that the Messiah was expected to teach in parables, as Jesus did (Matthew 13:13-15 & 34-35). Jesus also quoted Isaiah to prove that the Old Testament prophets even predicted the types of people who would reject the Messiah (Matthew 15:7-9).

Later in his account, Matthew quotes from Isaiah, Jeremiah and the Psalms to prove that Jesus' triumphant entry into the temple at the end of his life was foretold by the prophets (see Matthew 21:4-16.)

He also quotes from the Psalms to show that Jesus' rejection by the leaders of Israel was foreknown and predicted by the Old Testament writers (Matthew 21:42.)

Then Jesus himself questions the Jewish leaders about the Messiah. He asks, "*What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?*" (Matthew 22:42 NIV.) When they answer that the Messiah will be the son of David, Jesus asks another question.

"How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'?" He questions them further. How can King David call his own son "Lord"? Because the Messiah will be both the son of David and the Son of God. Jesus then quotes Psalm 110:1 to prove his point (Matthew 22:43-46 NIV.)

This interlacing of the Old Testament prophecies with the life of Jesus continues through all of Matthew's gospel account. Even to the end of Jesus' life on earth, Matthew still applies the Old Testament to the Messiah's life.

When Jesus foretold that his own disciples would betray him, he used a passage from Zechariah to speak about it (Matthew 26:31.) Matthew quotes Jeremiah and Zechariah to tell of Jesus' betrayal for 30 pieces of silver (Matthew 27:3-10.) Even as Jesus cried out in agony on the cross, Matthew records the incident in the light of Old Testament prophecy (Matthew 27:46.)

And so Matthew in his gospel account presents Jesus as the King of the Jews; he's the Messiah who came in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.

The Book Of Mark

There's a striking difference between Matthew's gospel account and Mark's. Matthew writes for a Jewish audience, so he includes the special features we've just studied. But Mark seems to be writing for a Gentile, probably Roman, audience. His God-given purpose tints the entire scope and layout of the book.

Mark's family had an early involvement with Christianity. Mark's mother, Mary (not the same as Jesus' mother), opened her home for the disciples in the early days of the church (Acts 12:12), and her house was the first place Peter visited the night he escaped from prison (Acts 12:12-17). Mark himself went on mission trips with Paul and Barnabus (Acts 12:25), but proved to be unhelpful at times (Acts 15:37-38). He later became an experienced and productive missionary (2 Timothy 4:11).

Mark probably got most of his details about Jesus' life from the apostle Peter. He may

have been a convert of Peter's (Peter calls him his "son" in 1 Peter 5:13). According to Papias, an early Christian writer who lived in 70-155 A.D., Mark was Peter's assistant who recorded the old apostle's stories about Jesus' life. Those stories became the Book of Mark, which was probably written and distributed in Rome about 60 or 70 A.D.

Since Mark's gospel was written for a Gentile audience and contained the recollections of Peter the fisherman, it's a concise and powerful book. It tells more about what Jesus *did* than about what he *said*.

Instead of proving that Jesus is the Messiah by quoting Old Testament Scriptures, Mark proves it by showing Jesus' *power*. In Mark's gospel, the Son of God comes with supernatural power over nature and over the evil that haunts planet earth.

Even in chapter 1, Mark tells of Jesus' power to drive out evil spirits and heal the sick. Right away, Jesus casts out demons, heals Peter's mother-in-law of a fever, heals whole villages, cures a man of leprosy and makes a paralyzed man walk (Mark 1:21 - 2:12.)

As a result, Mark records this: "*This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'*" (Mark 2:12 NIV.)

As the crowds began to learn of Jesus' powers, they followed him everywhere. Mark writes, "*For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, 'You are the Son of God.'*" (Mark 3:10-11 NIV.)

Notice Mark's point: Jesus' supernatural powers over sickness and evil spirits caused people to believe. The crowds came to believe in him as Messiah because of his miraculous abilities; even the demons confessed him as the Son of God!

From that point, Mark's account continues to gain momentum in telling the story of Jesus' amazing powers. His powers caused so many crowds to gather that he and his disciples sometimes weren't even able to eat a meal (Mark 3:20.) This great popularity caused his family to think he was insane and his enemies to credit his miraculous powers to the Devil (Mark 3:21-22.)

How does Jesus (according to Mark's account) deal with his enemies' accusations? He says, "*How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.*" (Mark 3:23-24 NIV.)

Note how Mark features Jesus answering his critics. His awesome powers were bound to bring criticism, and when it came, Mark shows how Jesus handled it. Even some of Mark's readers will be skeptical of this great power, so he handles the skeptics through Jesus' words.

As the momentum builds, Mark showcases more miracles: Jesus calming the storm (4:35-41), the healing of an insane, demon-possessed man (5:1-20), the healing of a woman who had bled for 12 years (5:21-34), Jesus raising a young child from the dead (5:21-43), Jesus feeding 5,000 people with one lunch and then walking on the Sea of Galilee (6:30-52), Jesus casting an evil spirit out of the daughter of a Greek woman (to show that Gentiles will soon be accepted into the kingdom of God) (7:24-30), the healing of a man who couldn't hear nor talk (7:31-37), Jesus feeding another crowd of 4,000 people with only one meal (8:1-10), Jesus healing a blind man (8:22-26), Jesus' transfiguration and then casting out a demon from a young boy (9:1-32), the healing of another blind man (10:46-52), and Jesus withering a fruitless fig tree with his voice (11:20-25.)

Even as Mark tells the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, supernatural power abounds. At his death, Jesus cried out and the temple curtain (a gigantic drapery 30 feet long and 90 feet high) was torn - from top to bottom! When an awestruck Roman army Centurion saw how Jesus

died he said, *"Surely this man was the Son of God!"* (Mark 15:39 NIV.)

This is certainly the purpose of Mark's gospel account. He means to show that Jesus was God's Messiah because he exhibited the miraculous powers of God Himself. No man could do the things Jesus did unless he was the Son of God.

The Book Of Luke

This third gospel account differs in flavor and emphasis from both Matthew's and Mark's writings. Luke, a Gentile physician who later traveled with the Apostle Paul on mission trips (Acts 16:10-24), wrote the Book of Luke around A.D. 60 and the Book of Acts probably in the next couple of years.

Luke brings a special education and emphasis to the gospel account. He's a careful historian. Like a good doctor, he makes sure he gets the important details just as they happened. His purpose was to write an accurate history of the life of Jesus; notice how he begins this book:

"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:1-4 NIV.)

What an amazing beginning; how different it is from the other gospel writers! Instead of beginning with a genealogy as Matthew did, or with rapid-fire story telling as Mark did, Luke begins with careful historical investigation. He addresses his writing to a man named Theophilus, who was a new Christian and probably a government official of some kind (that's why Luke refers to him as "most excellent", a term of respect).

After his introduction, Luke starts the story of Jesus by setting the historical context. He begins with *"In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah..."* (Luke 1:5 NIV). Luke continues by opening major sections of his writing with phrases like *"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world... the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria."* (Luke 2:1-2) or *"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar- when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene- during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert."* (Luke 3:1-2 NIV.)

No one could ever accuse Luke of not being specific! He gives all the necessary details to show that the Messiah - the Son of God - came to earth at a specific place and time in human history. This orderly, educated and systematic approach would certainly appeal to the Greek minds Luke wants to reach, but his approach also has a special and profound purpose.

Luke wants to show that the Son of God is also the "son of man" - that Jesus was not only 100% God but was 100% man. He shows Jesus' kinship with humanity by describing at length his human birth and even gives some detail about Jesus' childhood (Luke 2:1-52). He presents Jesus as a real flesh-and-blood human being, not just a ghostly religious icon. And he also shows that Jesus' human nature stirred in him a special compassion for hurting people.

Notice how Luke interlaces Jesus' compassion for humanity through all his writings. In his first sermon at Nazareth, Jesus read, *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of*

the Lord's favor.” After reading this marvelous quote from Isaiah, he then applied it to himself: *“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”* (Luke 4:18-21 NIV.)

Jesus then began to live this mission of compassion. He drove out evil spirits (Luke 4:31-37), healed whole crowds (4:38-41), touched unclean lepers and healed them (5:12-13), healed a paralyzed man (5:17-26), and ate meals with the outcasts of society (5:29-30.)

When the religious leaders of the day saw Jesus ministering to the outcasts, they said, *“Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?”* Jesus answered, *“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”* (Luke 5:31-32 NIV.)

From that point on, Jesus has a spiritual and philosophical battle with the Pharisees and other religious leaders of his day. They look down on the “scum”, the immoral people around them; they can’t imagine why Jesus shows compassion on the tax collectors, sinners and other outcasts.

Jesus’ compassion shows itself on a trip from Galilee to Jerusalem. To make the trip, he and his disciples had to pass through Samaria. The Samaritans and Jews didn’t get along; there was racial and religious strife between them. The Samaritans wouldn’t let Jesus come through their villages because he was a Jew headed for Jerusalem. Jesus’ disciples wanted to call down fire from heaven to destroy them. How did Jesus react?

“But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village.” (Luke 9:54-55 NIV.) Instead of destroying his enemies, he forgave them. Instead of demanding retribution, he quietly made a detour and went on his way. He even rebuked his own disciples for their wrong spirit.

Jesus’ compassionate nature continued to confound not only his disciples but also his critics. When his ministry kept drawing crowds of outcasts, the religious leaders muttered, *“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”* (Luke 15:1-2 NIV.) Jesus answered them with a series of parables to explain his approach to ministry.

He first told of a shepherd who had a hundred sheep but lost one of them. What did he do, forget the single sheep and concentrate on the rest? No, he persisted until he found the lost sheep.

Jesus then told of a woman who had ten coins but lost one. How did she react? She lit a lamp and searched carefully until she found it.

He then told of a lost son; the young man took the inheritance that was coming to him and left his father’s house. He moved to a far country and wasted everything in wild living. At the end of his money and desperate for help, the boy went back home to ask his father’s forgiveness. When he got home, the father rejoiced and hosted a party for the young man. But the boy’s older brother was jealous, not happy at all that his “outcast” brother had come home (Luke 15:1-31.)

These parables hit home. Jesus had come to seek out and save the lost (Luke 19:10), but his critics didn’t care about the outcasts; they wanted them to disappear. Luke again shows the compassion of Jesus, the Messiah who isn’t too proud to be seen with the lowest of the low.

And so Luke’s historically detailed and beautiful portrait of Jesus presents the Messiah with whom we can relate. He cares. And he doesn’t just care for the cream of society, but also for those who have nothing. He came and gave himself - his very life’s blood - for even the most wicked sinner.

The Book of John

The Book of John came from the pen of one of Jesus' closest disciples. John was often mentioned as one of the three in Jesus' inner circle, "*Peter, John and James*" (Luke 9:28 NIV.) He also wore the title "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*" (John 13:23 NIV), which showed his special intimacy with Jesus.

John wrote his gospel account of Jesus' life much later than the other biographers of Jesus; he probably wrote the Book of John around 80 or 90 A.D. Because of this, he doesn't just retrace the efforts of Matthew, Mark and Luke, but tells Jesus' story from a special standpoint.

Instead of beginning his account with the birth of Jesus, genealogies, the temptation of Jesus, or his childhood, John begins this way: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*" (John 1:1, 14 NIV.)

With this, John emphasizes the Deity of Christ, the fact that the Messiah is the Son of God - that he's literally God-in-flesh. By using the term "*Word*", he isn't referring to the Bible; the Bible can't be God, yet John writes, "*the Word was God*".

Instead, John uses the term "*Word*" in its classical Greek meaning. This Greek term "LOGOS", which translates into English as "word", means the Mind that created all things (notice our word "logic" from that same Greek term). John literally says that the Supreme Mind, the "Logic" which created the entire universe, once came to earth and walked in a human body! God became a man. He saw the world through human eyes. He experienced all the trials and troubles that His creatures suffer. He died for His own creation and then was raised from the dead to prove his Deity, His Divine nature.

This is John's emphasis. This is why John's gospel contains more about what Jesus (God-in-flesh) *said* than about what he *did*. Wouldn't that be logical? Since God came to earth and talked human language, it would be natural to want to know what He has to say.

But John's account of Jesus' life also contains much about his miracles. Notice how John states his purpose for this book: "*Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*" (John 20:30-31 NIV.)

To John, the chain of purpose is simple: miracles cause belief that Jesus is the Son of God... and this belief on Jesus causes one to have eternal life. This is why John wrote his gospel. In fact, his gospel account uses the word "belief" fifty five times. He wants the reader to believe that Jesus is the Son of God after reading this account of his life.

The Life of Jesus

Since all four gospels present the life of Jesus and proclaim him as the long-awaited Messiah, each account contains elements of the following outline of his life.

1. Pre-Birth Information And Events.

Matthew, Luke & John.

2. Christ's Life Before His Ministry.

Matthew & Luke.

3. The Beginning Of John The Baptist's Ministry.

Matthew, Mark & Luke.

4. The Beginning Of Christ's Ministry.

Matthew, Mark, Luke & John.

5. Christ's Ministry: From The First To Second Passover.

Matthew, Mark, Luke & John.

6. Christ's Ministry: From The Second To Third Passover.

Matthew, Mark, Luke & John.

7. Christ's Ministry: Third Passover To Arrival In Jerusalem.

Matthew, Mark, Luke & John.

8. The Last Week: Fourth Passover And His Crucifixion.

Matthew, Mark, Luke & John.

9. Christ's Resurrection And His Ministry Afterwards.

Matthew, Mark, Luke & John.

And so these are the gospel accounts, written by four different men to tell the world about the good news: the Messiah has come, has died for the sins of us all, and has been raised from the dead. Those who believe and obey this message have life eternal.

TEST QUESTIONS - LESSON 10

1. ___ What is the main story of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? (A) Each writer tells the story of his family's Jewish roots, (B) each man's autobiography or (C) the life of Jesus, the Messiah.
2. ___ Why does each gospel writer tell the same story? (A) Because each one stole material from the other, (B) because each one wanted a best-selling book or (C) because Jesus' story is too big to tell in just one account.
3. ___ What was Matthew's occupation? (A) Tax Collector, (B) Roman soldier or (C) farmer.
4. ___ Why did Matthew quote so much Old Testament prophecy in his gospel account? (A) He wanted to prove he knew the Scriptures, (B) he wanted to prove to the Jews that Jesus was their long-awaited Messiah, or (C) he hoped to be considered a writer of the Old Testament.
5. ___ Why did Matthew include so much about Jesus' genealogy, his family tree? (A) Because he wanted more names to give his book credibility, (B) because one's family tree was extremely important to Jewish readers, who expected the Messiah to trace his family line back to Israel's great leaders, or (C) because he wanted to build dramatic tension before beginning his story.
6. ___ Why is Mark's gospel account shorter, faster and concentrates on what Jesus *did* more than what he *said*? (A) Because he's writing for a Gentile or Roman audience, (B) because he wasn't as educated as Matthew or (C) because he was younger.
7. ___ Why does Mark include so much information about Jesus' supernatural powers? (A) Because no other gospel writer covers the subject, (B) because Mark didn't get to see any of the miracles or (C) because he wants the reader to believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

8. ___ What was Luke's profession? (A) Roman soldier, (B) Doctor or (C) Egyptian slave.
9. ___ Why does Luke's gospel account begin with so much historical detail? (A) Because he wanted to write an accurate history of the life of Jesus, (B) he borrowed it from Mark, or (C) he didn't have enough material so he added several stories.
10. ___ How does Luke show that Jesus was not only the Son of God but the "son of man", how does he show Jesus' humanity? (A) He shows Jesus' sins, (B) he shows how Jesus had compassion on people by healing them and casting out demons or (C) he tells more about Jesus' friends than about Jesus himself.
11. ___ Why does John begin his gospel story in such a different way - that is, "*In the beginning was the Word...*", etc.? (A) He wants to get more attention for his story, (B) he wants to emphasize the Bible or (C) he wants to emphasize the Deity of Christ - the fact that Jesus is the Son of God.
12. ___ According to John 20:30-31, what was his purpose in writing about Jesus' life and miracles? (A) So people will believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing they'll have eternal life, (B) so John's gospel will tell stories which Matthew doesn't tell or (C) so he can record things which Luke left out.

Chapter Eleven: UNDERSTANDING THE WRITINGS OF THE EARLY CHURCH - Part 1

After Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead, he spent the next 40 days giving his disciples final instructions about their future. In his new resurrected body he appeared and

disappeared by walking through solid walls, yet he still could eat fish with his disciples to prove that he wasn't a ghost but was completely alive – spirit, soul and body (John 20:19-20 & Luke 24:36-43).

In this resurrected form, Jesus continued to teach his disciples; he had a job for them to accomplish. He expected the disciples (called the “church”) to take up his mission, since he intended to return to his Father. Jesus wouldn't stay on earth forever, but would ascend to the Father in heaven. After this ascension, the church would have a compelling mission - to take the good news about Jesus to the entire world.

As he ascended and left his disciples behind, he said *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8 NIV.)

As his witnesses, they would face tremendous opposition, persecution, and even death. And as new converts were added to the church, the disciples would face the massive job of instructing these beginners in the teachings of Jesus. Such new disciples would need to be taught how to live as Christ had lived, especially in a hostile world. And they would need ongoing encouragement to keep them from giving up in the face of opposition.

To fill these needs, God inspired certain apostles and disciples to write to local groups of believers - called “churches” (from the Greek word EKKLESIA meaning “an assembly”) - about such issues. These writings were usually in the form of letters sent to individuals or entire churches. These “Books of the New Testament” supply Christians today with inspired insights into God's will and the early church's way of life. The first of these is called “Acts.”

The Book Of Acts

The Book of Acts gets its name from the fact that it covers the early history - the acts or actions - of the disciples Jesus left behind. Luke, the physician who also wrote the Gospel of Luke, recorded the events found in Acts. Notice how he begins: *“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.”* (Acts 1:1-2 NIV.)

Here Luke writes to the same Theophilus as in the Gospel of Luke, but this time, instead of writing about the life of Jesus, he's writing about how Jesus' first disciples took his message to the world.

Luke's account in Acts, which was written around 63 A.D., covers the first 30 years of the church's life and progress. In this short period of time, the early church grew so rapidly that it made a massive impact on the Jewish and Roman world.

Right after Jesus ascended back to heaven, the church numbered only 120 people (Acts 1:15), but just one generation later it had spread throughout the known civilized world and changed the face of history (Colossians 1:6). This spectacular growth emerges as one of the main stories of Luke's Book of Acts.

As Acts opens, Jesus gives the disciples final instructions before he ascends back to heaven. He tells them to wait for *“the gift my Father promised”*, a gift that would empower them to win the whole world. He later states it more specifically: *“For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”* (Acts 1:4-5 NIV.)

This exciting news promised them a special power and presence from God to aid them in preaching the gospel. With the Father in heaven and Jesus ascending there to rule with Him, the Holy Spirit (who is also God) would come to earth and reside in the church!

God proved it when the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles so they could miraculously speak in languages they'd never studied. This remarkable manifestation of God's spirit stunned the massive crowd gathered in Jerusalem's temple area to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost.

This launched Peter into the first gospel sermon; he told them – the very people who stood there listening – that they had crucified the Messiah. He also preached about Jesus' resurrection. Jesus, the very man they had crucified, wasn't dead. He had come back!

With that, many in the crowd were cut to the heart and cried aloud, "*Brothers, what shall we do?*"

Peter answered them by saying, "*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*" (Acts 2:37-38 NIV.)

With those words the gospel had been preached and Peter had given the details about how they could accept this gospel. That same day 3,000 people repented, accepted Jesus as the Messiah, and were baptized into Christ. The church was off to a supernatural beginning.

From that point, the Book of Acts chronicles the rapid growth of this new group called the church. As Jesus' disciples continued to teach the gospel, thousands were converted to Christianity; they repented of (or turned away from) past sins, came to faith that Jesus is Lord and Messiah, and submitted to water baptism as a reenactment of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection.

But this constant preaching about Jesus soon began to irritate religious establishment of the day, which sparked a persecution Jesus' disciples in Jerusalem. A disciple named Stephen even lost his stoned to death by religious leaders who couldn't answer his preaching. This scattered the church, as disciples escaped from Jerusalem and spread throughout the Judean area.



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During that scattering, a disciple named Philip went north into Samaria and began preaching the gospel of Jesus; large numbers of Samaritans believed and became Christians. Then even more remarkable things began to happen. A Jewish Pharisee named Saul, who was one of the religious leaders persecuting the church, had a miraculous encounter with the resurrected Jesus. Saul, who later changed his name to Paul, became a follower of Jesus and astounded the whole church by becoming a powerful preacher of the gospel (Acts 9:1-30). He went on to write most of the New Testament letters.

As Acts continues, we see another remarkable conversion to Christ. A Roman soldier named Cornelius became the first Gentile (non-Jew) to become a Christian (Acts 10:1-48). This set the stage for the worldwide spread of Christianity; it became more than just another Jewish cult following a charismatic Rabbi. With Cornelius, the church caught more of the vision to fulfill Jesus' command to reach the whole world.

Soon after the conversion of Cornelius, the scene shifts in the Book of Acts from an emphasis on the Jerusalem church to another church north of Jerusalem in the town of Antioch. The church at Antioch had several gifted evangelists and teachers (including the apostle Paul) who received a vision telling them to preach the gospel to the Gentile world - even the Roman provinces to their west. By Acts chapter 13, this is the focus of Luke's account. He tells how Paul, Barnabus and others set out on mission trips to the west in order to win Gentile pagans and establish new churches.

Paul himself made at least three main trips back and forth between Antioch (or sometimes Jerusalem) and the provinces to the west. Even Luke accompanied him on some of

these trips (Acts 20:6). As Paul and various companions traveled the Greek and Roman world, they spread the gospel and established new churches everywhere. The gospel was well on its way to spreading worldwide, as Jesus had commanded in Acts 1:8. By the time the Book of Acts closes its record, Paul has made it all the way to Rome. He's a prisoner of the Romans (who arrested him based on complaints by the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem), but arrives in Rome ready to spread the gospel to that capitol city of the ancient world.

It's hard to overestimate the importance of the gospel's arrival in Rome. It was the key to a worldwide mission to the cultures beyond the Judaism of Jerusalem. By the time Paul wrote Philippians he said, *"Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ."* (Philippians 1:12-13 NIV.)

When Paul wrote that passage from a Roman prison cell, he made it clear that his stay in Rome was a fulfillment of Jesus' purpose for the gospel; even the palace guard and Caesar's household had come under the gospel's influence! (Philippians 4:22.)

The Book of Acts ends with Paul under house arrest, as Luke records the apostle's undying purpose: *"For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ."* (Acts 28:30-31 NIV.)

With this rapid spread of the church throughout the world, a need arose for intense spiritual training among the local churches and their leaders. The rest of the New Testament contains letters written by apostles and church leaders to fill this need. God inspired these men by his Holy Spirit to write to churches and individuals about the true meaning and practice of Christianity.

The Book Of Romans

One of these writings, called the Book of Romans, is actually a letter from the apostle Paul to the Christians at Rome. He wrote this letter around 57-58 A.D., before he had ever visited the city or met with the church there. When he wrote the Roman letter, he was still on one of his mission trips in a Greek city called Corinth. He planned to leave for Jerusalem soon, but he hoped and prayed to be able to visit the church at Rome in the near future (see Romans 1:9-13).

Since the Roman Empire had no postal service, except for official business, Paul sent this letter to the Roman church by a Christian woman named Phoebe, who was sailing for Rome (Romans 16:1-2).

But more important than the details of Paul's letter is this question: why did Paul write to the Roman church? What was the purpose of his letter?

Paul wrote to the church at Rome because he planned to visit there and fully explain this "gospel" he was teaching. In Romans 1:11-13 (NIV) he writes, *"I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong- that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith... in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles."*

So by his letter, it's clear that Paul wants to visit Rome so he can have a "harvest" - he wants to make sure the Christians at Rome understand that they're major players in spreading the gospel throughout the Western Roman Empire. Paul knows that if Christianity can survive and flourish in Rome, the gospel will then spread to the whole world.

Since this is his desire, he writes a full explanation of the gospel so the Roman Christians

will grasp it and teach it to others. That's why this letter to the Romans is the most detailed explanation of the gospel of Christ found anywhere in Scripture.

Paul begins by saying *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last..."* (Romans 1:16-17 NIV.)

From that point Paul explains why everyone needs the gospel, whether they're a Jew, a pagan Gentile or even a virtuous, moral person (note Romans 1:18 - 3:26). He says that *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."* (Romans 3:23-24 NIV.)

This leaves no one out. All people, no matter how moral, have sinned. Because of their violations of God's moral law, all people need Jesus. They need the gospel (the good news of Jesus' death for our sins and his resurrection from the dead), since it's the only means to a harmonized relationship with God.

This teaching - that God saves people who place their faith in Jesus' crucifixion and his resurrection rather than trusting in their own goodness - becomes the main theme of Romans: *"But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known... This righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."* (Romans 3:21-23 NIV.) Chapter by chapter, Paul then describes in detail how that gospel saves a person.

Then in chapter twelve he explains that the gospel demands changes in the saved person's life. He depicts how the gospel radically alters one's life in this world: *"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices... Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."* (Romans 12:1-2 NIV.)

Then Paul ends his inspired written seminar on the gospel with these words: *"Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ... so that all nations might believe and obey him - to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen."* (Romans 16:25-27 NIV.)

The Book Of 1 Corinthians

Like Romans, this letter by the apostle Paul gets its name from the town where the letter was headed. He wrote at least two letters to this church in a city called Corinth, therefore they're labeled "1 Corinthians" and "2 Corinthians".

Most New Testament letters were written to fill a need or to answer questions. The letter to the Corinthian church was no different. This church had so many problems that they could've been an example of how *not* to function as a church.

For one thing, the church at Corinth was divided into small, bickering factions. This led to lawsuits among the believers, abuses of the Communion service, marriage problems, controversy about the role of women in the church, abuses of spiritual gifts, arguments about eating food offered to pagan idols, chaos in the public church meetings, false teaching about the resurrection, and even immorality such as incest in some of the church families. Obviously, Paul's letter to this church would be lengthy and aggressive.

Paul himself had helped establish this church on one of his mission trips sometime around A.D. 52-53 (note Acts 18:1-18). He started his mission there by trying to teach the gospel in a Jewish synagogue in Corinth, a Greek city of 400,000 population located just west of

Athens. In Paul's day it had become a major trading city in the Roman Empire, and was known for its wild, pagan lifestyle.

As Paul preached in the synagogue, the leaders became abusive, so he went next door to the home of a believer and began winning many Corinthians to Jesus. He preached in Corinth for a year and a half; the Bible says "*many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized.*" (Acts 18:8 NIV.)

But about 3 years after he left Corinth, a delegation of leaders from the church there came to visit Paul at Ephesus, where he was preaching in that city. These leaders told Paul about the problems in the Corinthian church, so he wrote this letter, called 1 Corinthians, around A.D. 57. In the letter he deals extensively with their warped concept of the Christian life.

He starts by scolding them for the disunity in the church there. Then he gets to the root of their problem. Like the Greek culture around them, they worshipped human intellect and thrived on debates and other intellectual pursuits. Human wisdom ranked at the top of their list of desirable qualities.

But Paul writes that human wisdom didn't bring them the saving power of the gospel: "*Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God... When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom... I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified...so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.*" (1 Corinthians 1:22-24 & 2:1-5 NIV.)

Paul's remedy for their problem is simple: the gospel saved you, so emphasize the gospel - and its implications - in your attempt to live for Christ. He follows this theme throughout the rest of his letter.

In following this theme, Paul lists their various spiritual problems and gives the gospel solutions. He deals with divisions in the church (1 Corinthians 3:1-23), their blind acceptance of false apostles (4:1-21), sexual immorality in the church (5:1-13), lawsuits among the believers (6:1-8), Christians living like the pagans (6:9-20), marriage difficulties and questions (7:1-40), controversies about food offered to idols (8:1-13), Paul's strained relationship with the church at Corinth (9:1-27), their tendencies toward pagan idolatry (10:1-33), chaos in the church's public meetings (11:1-34), abuses of spiritual gifts (12:1 - 14:40), and misunderstandings about Jesus' resurrection (15:1-58).

One of his main concerns is that they understand and remain loyal to the gospel. He even defines what he means by the word "gospel": "*Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you have received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved... 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...*" (1 Corinthians 15:1-4 NIV.)

Paul knows that this gospel is the center and hub of Christian teaching. He wants this troubled church to realign itself with the power of Christ's gospel, the only thing which can save sinners.

However, despite their spiritual immaturity and their gross failings as Christians, Paul knows they'll overcome these setbacks and grow as Christians. In his last words to them he says, "*Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. Do everything in love...The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen.*" (1 Corinthians 16:13-14, 23-24 NIV.)

Thus Paul ends his letter to this struggling church on a high note; yet he would later write to them again about an even more sensitive matter.

The Book Of 2 Corinthians

Not long after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, he almost lost his life when a riot broke out in the town of Ephesus (Acts chapter 19). Leaving Ephesus, Paul went across the Aegean Sea into Macedonia where he worked with young churches needing encouragement.

During this time, Paul still hadn't heard from the church at Corinth. How had they received his letter? Had his letter done any good? Paul finally got answers to these pressing questions when he met with a young preacher named Titus, who had just come from Corinth. Titus told him that his first letter had reformed things in Corinth (2 Corinthians 7:5-10), but there was still a serious problem; many of the church leaders there didn't believe that Paul was an authorized apostle of Christ. Jesus had originally chosen twelve men, called "apostles" (meaning "special messengers"), to be his special representatives (Luke 6:12-16), but he later added others to that number (Acts 1:26 & 1 Corinthians 15:7).

This news, that the Corinthian Christians doubted his apostleship, spurred Paul to send Titus ahead to Corinth with a letter to the church there. Paul had already planned to visit Corinth in the near future (1 Corinthians 16:3), but he wanted to strengthen his relationship with this church before he arrived. He wanted to regain their confidence in his ministry as a apostle of Christ.

Therefore, Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church, which Titus delivered, deals mostly with this sensitive issue. He defends his calling as a true apostle of Jesus Christ. Throughout 2 Corinthians he brings up arguments to prove that Jesus chose him for this special role as an apostle.

He begins by defending his change in plans. He had promised to visit them, but then decided that the timing wasn't right: *"I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth... So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you."* (2 Corinthians 1:23 & 2:1). This change in plans had given some people at Corinth the impression that Paul wasn't dependable. To handle that issue, he carefully outlines his reasons for postponing his visit to Corinth.

He continues his defense by showing the real nature of his ministry. Paul was often followed on his trips by Jewish Christians who claimed that he didn't bind enough of the Old Testament Law on new Christians. He always defended his teachings by stating that Christianity was actually a completely different covenant than the Old Testament system. And this is the same approach he takes in 2 Corinthians 2:12 - 3:18: *"He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant - not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."* (3:6 NIV.)

Then Paul defends his apostleship by reminding them of the great sufferings he had endured; if he was a false apostle, why would he stand still for such abuse and suffering? In one of the most touching passages of 2 Corinthians he says, *"Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger...through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, yet possessing everything."* (6:3-10 NIV.)

But Paul's final defense demands that they respect his authority as an apostle. If they want face-to-face proof, he will give it. He plans to visit them and discipline those who still resist God's will.

He says, *"This will be my third visit to you...I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: on my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you...Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves."* (2 Corinthians 13:1-5 NIV.)

With this authoritative ending, Paul sets the record straight; Christ speaks through him and expects the church to follow his orders. For the church today, those orders are in written form. Nevertheless, we today still must "examine ourselves" and "test ourselves" against God's word to make sure we're in the faith.

The Book Of Galatians

This letter was written by the apostle Paul sometime around A.D. 50 to churches in a region called Galatia (now in modern Turkey). Several towns in Galatia had Christian churches, which were mostly established by Paul and his co-workers on their first mission trip to the Gentile world (see Acts 13:1 - 14:28.) These Gentiles had warmly received the gospel when Paul preached there, so several churches were established throughout the region.

Paul moved on in his work of spreading the gospel, but now, about 5 years later, he finds it necessary to write a letter to these churches. Something tragic had happened, which made it crucial that Paul write to shock them awake spiritually. These Galatian churches were in danger of falling away from the gospel and losing their reward in heaven.

Notice how Paul addresses these churches: *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by 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."* (Galatians 1:6-7 NIV.)

What did Paul mean? What was happening in the Galatian churches that perverted the original gospel Paul had preached to them?

The problem in Galatia grew out of similar problems faced by other early churches, a condition brought on by the church's Jewish background. Since Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, everything surrounding his ministry was Jewish. His ministry began as a mission to the Jewish Nation. He was a Jew, all his apostles were Jews, the vast majority of his disciples were Jewish and he fulfilled the Jewish Scriptures to prove himself to be the Messiah. Even though Jesus had a worldwide mission (Matthew 28:18-20), many of his early followers saw the church as something strictly Jewish. They had trouble letting go of that concept.

Many of these Jewish disciples wanted all of Jesus' Gentile disciples to convert to Judaism, too. In fact, some were even teaching that a Gentile disciple of Jesus couldn't go to heaven unless he or she converted to Judaism. They were saying, *"Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."* (Acts 15:1 NIV.) (Circumcision was the Jewish initiation rite by which men and their families placed themselves under Jewish law.)

This teaching - that a Gentile Christian must convert to Judaism to be saved - had invaded the churches of Galatia. And that's why Paul wrote his stinging letter about this perversion of the gospel and sent it to the Galatians.

Notice how he deals with the issue. First, he defends his authority as an apostle, just as he

does in 2 Corinthians. This is because the false teachers who tried to enforce Jewish law on Gentile Christians did so by attempting to discredit Paul himself. So he begins his letter to the Galatians by proving his authority as Jesus' apostle in chapters 1:11 - 2:21.

Next he teaches them about the relationship between law and gospel: *"Clearly no one is justified before God by the law... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us... So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law."* (Galatians 3:11-13, 24-25 NIV.)

Then, to motivate the Galatians to action, he boldly warns them: *"Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all... You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace."* (Galatians 5:2-4 NIV.)

So in his letter, Paul emphasizes the new era; God saves people by His grace, not by the law. In the gospel, God freed us from the bondage of a law system which required perfection. Paul wants the Galatian churches to hang on to their freedom in Christ: *"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."* (Galatians 5:1 NIV.)

In this letter, as in all his writings, Paul emphasized the supremacy of the gospel; nothing else saves us but the gospel of Jesus.

Study Assignments - Lesson 11

ACTS - Read Acts 1:1-12.

ROMANS - Read Romans 3:20-26 & 6:1-7.

1 CORINTHIANS - Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-25 & 15:1-8.

2 CORINTHIANS - Read 2 Corinthians 13:1-14.

GALATIANS - Read Galatians 1:6-10 & 5:1-6.

TEST QUESTIONS - LESSON 11

1. ___ When Jesus spoke to his disciples after his resurrection, what power did he say would help them carry his message to the world? (A) The power of their memories of him, (B) the power of their Jewish culture or (C) the Holy Spirit.
2. ___ What does the word "church" mean? (A) A large cathedral or building, (B) an "assembly" of Jesus' disciples or (C) an organization that helps people.
3. ___ Where does the Book of Acts get its name? (A) From the author, (B) from the fact that it is a history of the acts, or actions, of the apostles or (C) from the acts of the Roman Senate in Jesus' day.
4. ___ What two things did Peter tell his listeners to do for salvation in Acts chapter 2 when they asked, *"Brothers, what shall we do?"*? (A) Repent and be baptized, (B) live better lives and give alms to the poor or (C) go to the temple and offer sacrifices.
5. ___ Why did Paul write so much about the gospel in his letter to the Romans? (A) They had never heard it before, (B) he knew the Roman church could help him spread the

gospel to the whole western world if they understood it better or (C) he wanted to impress the church with his knowledge.

6. ___ Why did Paul say “*I am not ashamed of the gospel*”? (A) Because some people said he was ashamed of it, (B) because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, or (C) because he was trying to convince himself that he shouldn’t be ashamed of it.
7. ___ Where did the Book of 1 Corinthians get its name? (A) From the author’s name, (B) from a famous poem of the day or (C) from the fact that it was Paul’s first letter to the church at a town called Corinth.
8. ___ Why did Paul write his first letter to the church at Corinth? (A) Because the church had serious problems with division and sin, (B) because he wanted their permission for a visit or (C) because he had written to the other churches and felt they would be jealous if he didn’t write to them also.
9. ___ Why did Paul write his second letter to the church at Corinth? (A) Because the first one got lost, (B) because he needed more money from them or (C) because many of the church leaders there didn’t believe that Paul was an authorized apostle of Jesus.
10. ___ What’s one argument that Paul used to prove that he was an apostle? (A) He was a boyhood friend of Jesus, (B) he had endured great suffering; if he were a false apostle, he wouldn’t stand for such abuse and suffering or (C) his father had been an apostle.
11. ___ Why did Paul write such a stinging letter to the Galatian churches? (A) They refused to send him financial help, (B) they were leaving the gospel to convert to Judaism or (C) Paul disliked this church and all the people who attended there.
12. ___ How were the Galatian churches “falling from grace”? (A) They were trying to leave their denomination, (B) they were trying to be justified by the law of Moses or (C) they had quit reading their Bibles.

This section of the New Testament contains several more letters written by the apostles and early church leaders to instruct the young churches which were springing up throughout the Roman Empire in the first century.

The first three of these letters were all written by Paul the apostle, during an imprisonment for preaching the gospel. He wrote these from Rome around A.D. 61-63.

The Book Of Ephesians

Paul addressed the first of these prison letters to the church at Ephesus, the fourth largest city in the Roman world, with a population of 250,000. Ephesus also reigned as one of the main capitols of pagan idol worship. It was home to a gigantic temple to the goddess Diana, which made it a religious Mecca and commercial trading center.



The full story of Paul's work in Ephesus and his founding of the church there is covered in Acts chapter 19, where his open conflict with the city's paganism stands out as the main feature of his work there. As large crowds of pagan idol-worshippers were converted to Christianity, they burned 2 million dollars worth of scrolls which they had used to practice sorcery. Not long afterwards, a riot led by the silversmiths, who profited from the town's idolatry, broke out against Paul and other Christians there. After a 2 year stay in Ephesus, Paul moved on to start other churches.

All of this sets the tone for Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. He writes to them because the new Christians there will face two deadly challenges: (1) the paganism around them will try to win them back, and (2) Jewish believers will attempt to convince these Gentile Christians that they must convert to Judaism to complete their Christianity.

In short, Paul wants to give them a crash course in spiritual warfare and teach them about the true nature of God's church. If they truly understand the nature of God's church, they won't be easily tempted to go back to counterfeit religion.

He does this by emphasizing prayer and their need to pray (see Ephesians 1:15-23; 3:14-21; 6:18-20), by showing them that the church is already made up of both Jews and Gentiles who should live in unity (2:11-22), and by teaching them how fight as good soldiers in the spiritual combat going on around them (6:10-20).

In one of the great passages of Ephesians, he writes, *"Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."* (6:10-12 NIV.)

With this, Paul lets them know that they're at war, not with humans but with spirit beings. As Christ's church, they must stand firm in prayer and holiness against all the evil forces at work in Ephesus.

The Book Of Philippians

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to a church which he had founded about 10 years before (see Acts 16:12-40) in Philippi, a major Roman Colony and the battlefield where the Roman Empire had actually been consolidated.

As Paul writes to this church, there seems to be no major problem that brings this letter forth. Although it had been 10 years since Paul established this church, they had remembered his hardships and had sent money to help him do mission work (Philippians 4:18). They had even sent one of their members, a minister named Epaphroditus, to assist Paul in his work (2:25-30). So Paul's letter seems to be a response to their helpfulness and a report on his condition while

he's in a Roman prison.

Strangely enough, he begins this letter from death row by telling the Philippian church how much he'll gain from his situation: *"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body."* (Philippians 1:21-24 NIV.)

With this courageous attitude, Paul writes to them about the joy of the Christian life. In fact, the word "rejoice" is one of the most common terms in this letter. Despite the fact that he's in prison and may die there, Paul wants this church to learn to rejoice.

In some of the most encouraging passages in the Bible Paul says, *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."* (Philippians 4:4-7 NIV.)

In this letter (especially since it was written from death row) Paul proves that a Christian's happiness isn't dependent on circumstances, but on one's relationship to Jesus. As he closes, he writes *"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation...I can do everything through him who gives me strength."* (Philippians 4:12-13 NIV.)

The Book Of Colossians

Paul addressed his next prison letter to the church in a town called Colossae, which was just a hundred miles east of Ephesus. This church, located in an area called Phrygia, had been established during some of the mission work recorded in Acts 16:6 & 18:23). Like the other churches of that area, the Colossian church sprang up in an environment of paganism and idol worship that threatened its spiritual health and the spread of the gospel. Which leads us to the reason Paul wrote this letter.

A man named Epaphras, who seems to be the founding minister of the church there, had come to visit Paul with bad news (Colossians 1:7). The church at Colossae was in a war for its spiritual life. A cult had arisen there that threatened the health of the church and its teachings. This cult is usually called by commentators "the Colossian Heresy".

What was the Colossian Heresy? It seems to have been a mixture of Jewish legalism and Greek philosophy, which emphasized rule-keeping (Colossians 2:20-23), angel worship (2:18), visions (2:18-19) and human philosophy (2:8). This led the cult's followers to seek a "higher experience" in order to get special revelations from "spirit guides" or even angels. This seeking of higher knowledge was supposed to lead the worshiper into a special inside track with God. In this scheme of things, Jesus was only one of many possible spiritual mentors.

How does Paul combat this counterfeit teaching in his letter? He emphasizes the supremacy of Christ over all else: *"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation...He is before all things, and in him all things hold together...For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things... by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross...For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ..."* (Colossians 1:15-20, 2:9-10 NIV.)

So the great overpowering theme of Colossians is this message about Christ's supremacy; Jesus Christ was God-in-flesh, God came to earth to live in a man's body and was raised from the dead to reign in heaven above all others, whether humans, demons, angels or spirits. No one else can bring a sinful human being into a right relationship with God.

When the Colossian church understood the true nature of Jesus Christ, they would be free from the corrupting influence of the cults.

The Book Of 1 Thessalonians

The Book of 1 Thessalonians is another letter written by Paul to a young church. Paul himself had established this church in Thessalonica, the leading city of a Greek province called Macedonia. The city stood in sight of Mount Olympus, birthplace of the Greek gods and one of the most sacred sites in Greek thought. Thessalonica also enjoyed a prime position on the great Roman Military Highway from Rome to the Far East.

Paul's stay there had been brief; a riot broke out in response to his preaching, so he was forced out of town after only 3 weeks. Paul left in a hurry, but waited in Athens and then Corinth for word from Timothy about the survival of the church in Thessalonica (note Acts 17:1 - 18:5).

Timothy later found Paul and reported that the church had survived, although several members had died. This puzzled the new Christians in Thessalonica. Since some of their own had now died, would they ever see them again? By dying, had these loved ones missed the coming of Jesus and the resurrection? Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians primarily to answer these questions.

Paul begins by telling these new Christians how thankful he is to God for them. He then reassures them that his work there will still bear fruit: *"You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted at Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition."* (1 Thessalonians 2:1-2 NIV.)

He also reassures them that he hasn't abandoned them: *"But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought) out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you... so that no one would be unsettled by these trials."* (1 Thessalonians 2:17 - 3:3 NIV.)

Then Paul answers their questions about Christians who die before Jesus returns. In one of the most detailed descriptions of the Second Coming of Christ, Paul writes: *"We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him...we who are still alive... will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep... 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."* (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 NIV.)

With these teachings Paul reassures the Thessalonian church that they haven't missed Jesus' return. He tells them about the future; when Jesus returns, all those who have died as his disciples will be brought back with him to receive their bodies from the graves and be glorified. All those Christians who are still alive on earth will be changed instantly to be like Christ and his glorified church.

As Paul tells them this great news, he ends with some final instructions: *"Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."* (1 Thessalonians 5:11 NIV.)

The Book Of 2 Thessalonians

A few months later Paul wrote another letter to the Thessalonian church. In this letter, he corrects more false impressions among the Christians there. Paul had taught them about the Second Coming of Christ, but some misconceptions had come up as a result.

First, some of the Christians at Thessalonica thought that Jesus was coming right away.

Paul corrected their misunderstandings as he wrote: *"Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come."* (2 Thessalonians 1-2 NIV.) He then tells them that a great rebellion must come first, and that a person called "the man of lawlessness" will *"exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God."* (2:3-4 NIV.) With this, Paul tells them that the historical timing wasn't right for Jesus to return in their day.

Secondly, some of the Christians at Thessalonica had quit working because they thought Jesus was coming any minute. They waited and waited, and finally had to ask the church for financial help so they could survive. They wouldn't work, but expected the church to support them until Jesus came.

About this strange behavior, Paul wrote: *"keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us...For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat.'"* (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 10 NIV.)

And so with Paul's two letters to the Thessalonian church, he corrects their false impressions and encourages them with a glorious preview of Jesus' Second Coming. With that knowledge, they can withstand all the trials headed their way.

The Book Of 1 Timothy

The apostle Paul addressed his next four letters to individual Christians - two missionary preachers and a Christian brother who had befriended Paul. His first individual letter was sent to a young preacher named Timothy.

Timothy was a talented young man from Lystra whom Paul recruited to help him do mission work (see Acts 16:1-5). Paul and Timothy grew close over the years, almost like a father and son team; Paul calls him *"my true son in the faith"* in 1 Timothy 1:2.

Paul wrote this letter to Timothy to help him with some special problems. He had assigned Timothy to the church at Ephesus so that he could oversee the growth and development of that congregation. Paul had established the church in Ephesus sometime around 54-57 A.D., had later written a letter to them (The Book Of Ephesians) around 62 A.D., and now was writing to Timothy, who was leading the church there around 65 A.D.

Why did Paul need to write to Timothy? Because the church at Ephesus was growing rapidly. It had become one of the success stories of the Gentile church; in fact, this church grew in its first 50 years to the point that many Ephesian pagan temples were almost abandoned in favor of Christianity. Timothy needed to train strong, visionary leaders to move this church forward without sacrificing Jesus' teachings.

Besides that, this church was made up mostly of Gentiles. They needed to understand their relationship to the Jewish roots of Christianity; Paul wanted Timothy to teach and demand unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians

So Timothy's job was to provide the training, motivation and guidance which would set the church on a path to further growth. Paul wrote to him about ways to accomplish these goals.

He opens the letter by warning Timothy about the various false teachings that threaten the church: *"As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies."* (1 Timothy 1:3-4 NIV.) He seems to be warning him about the two main false influences in the church of their day: pagan idolatry and Jewish legalism.

Then Paul instructs Timothy about certain situations that'll arise out of the corporate worship of the church. He instructs Timothy about public worship (2:1-15), how to appoint bishops and deacons to lead the church (3:1-16), how to minister to widows (5:1-16), how to treat the elders (also called bishops) (5:17-20), how to instruct Christians who're also slaves (6:1-2) and how to avoid the love of money (6:3-10).

As Paul closes his letter, he encourages Timothy to be a good spiritual soldier: *"Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses... Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care... Grace be with you."* (1 Timothy 6:12, 20-21 NIV.)

So this is the heart of Paul's first letter to Timothy; he encourages this young spiritual warrior to be strong and excel in the work God has placed in his life.

The Book Of 2 Timothy

Paul's second letter to Timothy is much more emotional and personal. At the time of his letter, both Paul and Timothy were caught up in a cruel time in the history of the early church. Nero, a Roman Emperor in Paul's day, began a horrifying persecution of the church because he needed someone to blame for a gigantic fire which broke out in Rome around A.D. 64, nearly destroying the entire city. Many Romans believed that Nero himself had the fire set so he could rebuild the slums of Rome. But whether he caused the fire or not, it's clear that he benefited from it, and that he publicly blamed Christians for the massive flames.

This touched off a vicious persecution of the church. Nero himself had Christians strapped inside animal skins and then thrown to wild dogs and lions in the Roman Coliseum. He tied them to stakes in his gardens, poured tar on them, and had them set afire to light his cocktail parties. These, and other unspeakable tortures, were done to people simply because they professed belief in Jesus as the Christ.

When Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy, he had been arrested in this widespread persecution and was awaiting execution, probably in a Roman prison. The Bible itself never tells us the details, but historical tradition says that both Paul and Peter died during this holocaust against the church.

Because of the dangerous times, Paul's letter to Timothy stresses courage and faithfulness to Jesus until the end. He says, *"Fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join me in suffering for the gospel..."* (2 Timothy 1:6-8 NIV.)

He knew it would take courage for Timothy to carry on God's work when Paul himself was gone, and he knew it would take courage for Timothy to preach the gospel in such a hostile time.

And Paul also knew his own life was growing shorter. He said, *"For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. 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..."* (2 Timothy 4:6-8 NIV.)

This great apostle of Jesus lived his life and carried on his ministry with unending courage; in his letter he encourages this young preacher Timothy to do the same.

The Book Of Titus

Titus was another young preacher who helped Paul minister to the scattered churches

established during Paul's mission travels. Just as he referred fondly to Timothy, Paul called Titus "*my true son in our common faith*" (Titus 1:4 NIV.) He also labeled him "*my partner and fellow worker*" (2 Corinthians 8:23 NIV.)

From the few places in Scripture where Titus is mentioned, it's clear that he was a remarkable and courageous preacher. When Paul needed a strong but tactful leader to help the Corinthian church through its many problems, he sent Titus (2 Corinthians 7:13-15 & 8:6-24). Another time, about 7 or 8 years later, when Paul needed a strong minister to guide the unruly churches on the island of Crete, he enlisted Titus.

As Paul's letter to Titus opens, he says "*The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town.*" (Titus 1:5 NIV.) Paul and Titus had visited the churches on the island of Crete, probably just after Paul's first imprisonment in Rome. When Paul moved on, he left the churches of Crete in the capable hands of Titus.

Since the Cretans were widely known for their wild behavior and unruly attitudes (Titus 1:12-13), Paul's letter to Titus gives the young preacher instructions and encouragement for this tough job.

In the letter Paul instructs Titus on the appointment of elders (Titus 1:5-16) (also called overseers or bishops), how to teach healthy doctrines to all age groups and professions (2:1-15), and how to avoid seeing the church mired down in sin and rebellion (3:1-11). He especially warns Titus about letting the churches on Crete get bogged down in controversies and arguments that destroy Christian unity.

It's a tribute to Titus that Paul would consider him so capable that he could be left in such a chaotic situation on Crete. Evidently, Titus did a superb job of following through on Paul's instructions. Because of faithful people like Titus, God's church still progresses today.

The Book Of Philemon

This short letter by Paul was addressed to Philemon, a wealthy friend of his in the church at Colossae (note the Book of Colossians). Philemon was a leader in the church there, which met in his home (Philemon verse 2). In those days all the churches met in homes; church buildings didn't exist for about the first 300 years of Christianity.

Paul's letter to Philemon is personal, remarkable and touching. It seems that Philemon had a slave named Onesimus. This slave stole money from Philemon and then ran away to Rome. While in Rome, Onesimus the slave found Paul in prison there. Onesimus probably already knew him. Since Paul was good friends with Philemon, the master, and it's likely that Paul had visited his home often.

Paul wrote this letter to Philemon to convince him to take back Onesimus the slave and to forgive him. Paul had evidently converted Onesimus to Christianity (Philemon verse 16) and had convinced him to return home and continue to serve his master Philemon. Paul even volunteers to replace the money which Onesimus took (Philemon verse 18).

In a bold move, Paul actually sends Onesimus back home with the letter in his hands; he says, "*I am sending him - who is my very heart - back to you...no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother... So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.*" (Philemon verses 12, 16-17 NIV.)

And so with this short letter, we get a peek into the human dramas of ancient Christianity. And we're again taught the gospel message; God has forgiven you, therefore forgive others.

The Book Of Hebrews

The Book of Hebrews begins like a sermon but ends like a letter. It mentions no author nor does it specify who received this letter. It's entitled "Hebrews" because it clearly was written to Hebrew (Jewish) Christians to prevent them from leaving their faith and going back into Judaism. Most of the Book of Hebrews deals with the merits of Judaism versus Christianity.

We're not sure who wrote this book; many ancient scholars thought Paul wrote it, but modern commentators don't always agree. Why? Mainly because the style of writing doesn't seem to resemble Paul's, and because the writer of Hebrews portrays himself as a second-generation Christian who didn't get his information first-hand (Hebrews 2:3). Paul probably wouldn't have referred to himself that way.

No matter who wrote it, the stamp of God's Spirit is unmistakable. This caused the ancient church to consider it inspired of God, and they considered its message crucial for all Christians everywhere.

The main theme of Hebrews grows out of the historical times in which it appeared. From its beginning, the church found itself persecuted, first by Jewish religious leaders and then by the Roman government. This persecution was especially severe on those Jews who decided to follow Jesus as the Messiah. They were abused by their own race because they appeared to be traitors to the Law of Moses; they left Jewish traditions behind and followed a man who was crucified because he didn't follow those traditions. And they were also persecuted by the Roman government because, as Christians, they refused to worship Caesar.

This means that Christians often found themselves in a cruel dilemma; if they renounced Jesus and worshipped Caesar, they could live in peace. If they happened to be Jewish, they could also live in peace by giving up Christ and returning to their orthodox Judaism. The Book of Hebrews was written to explain that giving up Jesus and returning to Judaism would be spiritual suicide.

The writer of Hebrews begins his arguments by contrasting Jesus to the Old Testament system. Since the Jews of Jesus' day worshipped angels, the writer begins in chapter 1 by teaching that Jesus is superior to any angel. He teaches that Jesus is "*the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being... So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.*" (Hebrews 1:3-4 NIV.)

The writer then proves his point by appealing to Old Testament Scripture. He quotes several passages that clearly teach that angels are merely created servants. They're even servants to human beings; "*Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?*" (1:14 NIV.)

From there the writer continues to show that Jesus, since he's the Son of God, stands in a superior position to all the Old Testament system: He's superior to Moses himself (3:1-6), to the high priests (4:14 - 5:10) and to the entire priesthood (7:1 - 10:18).

Having established Jesus' superiority to the Old Testament system, the writer then makes his appeal for the Hebrew Christians of his day to remain loyal to the Son of God. He calls on them to "*Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecutions... and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property because you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence...*" (10:32-35 NIV.)

Then the writer recounts for these Jewish Christians the great stories of faith from the Old Testament (11:1-40). He proves that even those people living under an inferior covenant lived

out their lives in faith; they believed in God and knew that He would care for them.

He then calls on the Hebrew Christians of his day to remain faithful and not give in to pressure. He says, *“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...And so Jesus suffered outside the city gate to make people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.”* (12:2, 13:12-13 NIV.)

With these words the writer encourages his readers to stand fast. They’re looking forward to a home in the Heavenly City, not a home here in Jerusalem. And they have that home in heaven because Jesus gave himself for them all.

Study Assignments - Lesson 12

EPHESIANS - Read Ephesians 6:10-18.

PHILIPPIANS - Read Philippians 2:5-11.

COLOSSIANS - Read Colossians 1:15-23.

1 THESSALONIANS - Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

2 THESSALONIANS - Read 2 Thessalonians 3:11-15.

1 TIMOTHY - Read 1 Timothy 1:15-17.

2 TIMOTHY - Read 2 Timothy 4:6-8.

TITUS - Read Titus 3:3-8.

PHILEMON - Read Philemon verses 8-16.

HEBREWS - Read Hebrews 1:1-4.

TEST QUESTIONS - LESSON 12

1. ___ When Paul preached in Ephesus, why did the silversmiths of the town lead a riot against him? (A) Because Paul was a racist, (B) because Paul’s preaching turned people away from pagan idols and took away the silversmiths’ earnings or (C) because they wanted Paul to keep preaching there.
2. ___ Why does the Book of Ephesians teach so much about spiritual warfare? (A) Because Paul wants the church there to know that they’re at war with spirit beings, (B) because Paul wants the church to rebel against Roman authority or (C) because that was Paul’s major field of study in seminary.
3. ___ Where was Paul when he wrote Philippians? (A) In Philippi, (B) at home, or (C) on death row in a Roman prison.
4. ___ Paul wrote Colossians to handle a false teaching called the Colossian Heresy. What was it? (A) A teaching that Paul was the Messiah, (B) an idea taught by Alexander the Great or (C) a mixture of Jewish legalism and Greek philosophy.
5. ___ In 1 Thessalonians, what did Paul say would happen to Christians who’ve died before Jesus returns? (A) They are lost in hell, (B) they’ll return with Jesus, be resurrected and be with Him forever or (C) their ghosts wander around the earth until he returns.

6. ___ Why did Paul have to write 2 Thessalonians; what was the main problem dealt with by his letter? (A) They didn't receive the first letter, (B) Paul needed to raise some money from them or (C) some of the Christians at Thessalonica had quit working because they thought Jesus was coming at any minute.
7. ___ When Paul wrote to Timothy in his letter called 1 Timothy, why had he left Timothy in Ephesus? (A) It was Timothy's home town, (B) he wanted Timothy to stay there in Ephesus so that he could command certain men not to teach false doctrines or (C) Timothy was unwilling to leave Ephesus.
8. ___ Why is Paul's second letter to Timothy much more emotional and personal? (A) Because Paul had been placed on death row by the Romans, and probably wouldn't survive, (B) because Paul and Timothy had just had a heated argument or (C) because Paul knew Timothy had quit preaching.
9. ___ As Paul's letter to Titus opens, why does he say he left Titus in Crete? (A) So he could straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, (B) because he couldn't afford to take Titus with him or (C) because Titus needed a break from mission work.
10. ___ Why did Paul write a letter to Philemon? (A) Because Philemon was his cousin, (B) because he needed another preacher to help do mission work or (C) because he was sending back Onesimus, Philemon's slave, who had run away from home.
11. ___ Where does the Book of Hebrews get its name? (A) From the fact that it was written to Hebrew Christians, (B) from the fact that the writer was a Hebrew or (C) from a popular story of the day written by Homer.
12. ___ Why does the writer of Hebrews quote so much Old Testament Scripture? (A) Because his readers would be impressed by his knowledge of Scripture, (B) because there were no libraries in their day where they could read it for themselves or (C) because he's proving that Jesus is superior to the Old Testament system.

Up to this point, almost all the writings of the early church that we've studied were authored by the apostle Paul, as he was inspired by the Holy Spirit. This last section of the early church's writings includes a variety of authors, also inspired by God's Spirit, who were either apostles or teachers in the first century church.

The Book Of James

The Book of James is a letter written to "*the twelve tribes scattered among the nations*" (James 1:1 NIV.) This means he was writing mostly to Jewish Christians who were scattered all over the world because of severe persecution.

The author of the book was James, probably the same James who was brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:19). He wasn't a believer on Jesus during the Lord's earthly ministry (John 7:5), but became convinced of his brother's claims to be the Messiah after he saw him resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:7).

James was exceptional in his spiritual life. He was nicknamed "James the Just" because of his concern for morality. He also had a reputation as a man of prayer; some people said his knees looked like a camel's knees because he spent so much time kneeling.

His letter to the scattered churches certainly reflects his noble character. It says much about the importance of prayer (see James 1:5-8; 4:1-6 & 5:13-18) and it deals decisively with the issues of justice as it should be practiced in the Christian life (1:26 - 2:13).

James knows these issues will be crucial because he knows that the church of his day faces terrible suffering. Therefore, he opens his letter to the churches with a section on how to survive these severe trials. He says, "*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance...If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God...But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt...*" (James 1:2-6 NIV.)

From that point, James encourages his readers to be sure they aren't just hearers of the word of God, but also doers (James 1:19-27). He teaches them that the church shouldn't practice favoritism and discrimination (2:1-13 & 5:1-6) but should live out an active faith; in fact, he says that faith without action is dead (2:14-26). He also warns them to control gossip and slander (3:1-12), to truly submit to God (4:1-17), and to pursue an active prayer life (5:13-18).

In one of his most encouraging passages about the Christian life he writes, "*Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well...The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*" (5:13-16 NIV.)

And so James, the Lord's own brother, wrote to encourage the suffering churches of his day to stand fast in God, to pray and to live a life worthy of the gospel.

The Book Of 1 Peter

Peter, a partner in a Galilean commercial fishing enterprise, was one of Jesus' first disciples and was one of the Twelve Apostles. The gospels present him as a bold character, but one who often spoke too soon. He was active in Jesus' earthly ministry, yet he gave in to pressure, denying that he even knew Jesus during the night before the crucifixion (Mark 14:66-72).

After his resurrection, Jesus forgave and restored Peter, who became a major leader in the early church (Acts 2:14-41).

The Book Of 1 Peter is Peter's first letter to the churches scattered throughout Asia Minor (1 Peter 1:1), which were many of the congregations started by Paul the apostle. Peter wrote this letter from Rome (he nicknames it "*Babylon*" in 1 Peter 5:13), encouraging the churches to remain strong despite persecution by Emperor Nero and the Roman government. He probably wrote it around 64-67 AD, possibly after Paul had been executed by the Romans. It seems logical that Peter would write to the churches established by Paul to encourage them to stand fast in the wake of Paul's death.

In his letter, Peter speaks about the fact that they've had to "*suffer grief in all kinds of trials*" and that they shouldn't "*be surprised at the painful trial you're suffering...But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ...*" (1 Peter 1:6; 4:12-13 NIV.) This is the theme of his entire letter; he's trying to help these churches cope with the fiery trial descending upon them.

To help them cope, Peter explains that they have an inheritance that transcends this world and goes beyond the Rome or any human dictator. He says they have a "*new a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power...*" (1 Peter 1:3-5 NIV.)



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He tells them that this should result in a happy, joyous spirit among them, even though they're suffering. At least they're suffering for a good cause; they're being singled out and persecuted because they follow Jesus.

From that point, Peter instructs them to be holy in their daily walk (1:13-25), to crave spiritual growth (2:1-3) and to recognize that they're a chosen people suffering for a Divine purpose. Strangely enough, he tells them to submit to earthly rulers (as long as that doesn't force them to violate Jesus' commands) (2:13-25). He then gives advice about family life (3:1-7), tells them about the true purpose of their suffering (3:8-22) and commands them to live for God, not for self (4:1-19).

As he closes, he tells them to "*Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him...*" (5:6-9 NIV.).

Because of men like Peter, the church survived those horrible days. Instead of stamping out Christianity, the Roman persecutions actually made the church stronger and spread it all over the world.

The Book Of 2 Peter

Peter addressed his second letter, probably written just before his death, to the church in general, warning them of another threat to the survival of Christianity. This time, Peter wasn't writing about persecution by the Roman government, but about the infiltration of false teachers into the life of the church. This second thread was just as deadly as the first; if Satan couldn't intimidate the church by direct physical attack, he'd lead unsuspecting Christians astray by convincing them to leave the truth of the gospel.

As Peter starts this warning letter, he cautions the readers to make sure they're standing firm; he wants them to "*participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*" He tells them to "*make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to*

perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.” (2 Peter 1:4-7 NIV.)

He knows that this pursuit of spiritual growth will make them *“all the more eager to make your calling and election sure.”* (1:10 NIV.) This way, they can avoid being seduced by false teachers who want to lead them into a perverse form of Christianity.

The main feature of the destructive heresies brought in by these false teachers seems to have been the teaching that a Christian can live an immoral life and still please Jesus. Peter says that these teachers are greedy and *“will exploit you with stories they have made up.”* He also characterizes them as *“those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority. Bold and arrogant, these men are not afraid to slander celestial beings;”* (2:3, 10 NIV.)

After warning his readers to avoid these corrupt teachers, Peter explains the Christian’s ultimate motivation; we know we must report to Jesus in the end. He says *“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives...”* (3:10-11 NIV.)

With these words Peter warned these churches under fire to live holy lives and stay away from the immoral corruption around them. Most of them did, and most of these early Christians now live in Paradise with Jesus.

The Book Of 1 John

The next three letters in the Bible came through John, an early disciple who was, like Peter, a commercial fisherman (Matthew 4:21-22.) John was nicknamed “the disciple whom Jesus loved” because he and Jesus had an especially close relationship (John 21:20 NIV.) He’s the same man who wrote the Gospel of John.

When John wrote this letter called 1 John, he was an old man living in Ephesus. He wrote the letter sometime around AD 90, after many of the apostles were dead and the church had survived the first wave of Roman persecution. John lived in Ephesus and guided the churches from there because Ephesus had become one of the larger Gentile congregations.

Why did he write this letter? To deal with certain false teachings and heresies which had infiltrated the churches of his day. As the churches grew in strength and number, corruptions of the gospel story crept into the teaching ministries of some congregations.

One of the most common of these heresies was called Gnosticism. This pagan philosophy, which got its name from the Greek word meaning “to know,” emphasized inner knowledge and secret wisdom. It also taught that the human body is evil and the human spirit is pure, therefore the spirit couldn’t be affected by the body’s misbehavior.

Since the Gnostics believed that human flesh was inherently evil, they arrived at two different conclusions as a result: (1) some taught that, since the body is evil, a person could live a totally immoral life in the physical body and it wouldn’t change their status with God, but (2) others taught that since the body is evil, it must be denied and punished so it won’t get its own way.

For Christians, these teachings tore at the very heart of the gospel. The Gnostics taught that, since the body is evil, Jesus couldn’t have been the Son of God. They assumed that God would never come and live inside this corrupt human flesh. Therefore, they taught that Jesus either (1) wasn’t really God-in-flesh, but was a “super angel” or they taught (2) that Jesus was

God, but he never really inhabited a human body and was only a spirit which seemed to have a body.

These Gnostic teachings slashed at the core meaning of the gospel. The gospel itself teaches that God became man at the miraculous birth of Jesus the Messiah, and that this same Messiah died for the sins of the world and was raised from the dead. If, as the Gnostics said, these things didn't really happen, then Christians aren't really saved.

In his letter, John makes a direct, frontal assault on these perverse teachings. He opens by saying, *"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched - this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it...And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ."* (1 John 1:1-3 NIV.)

Here John emphasizes the eyewitness testimony given by the apostles; they saw Jesus first-hand and knew that he (1) was a real, live human being and that (2) he proved himself to be the Son of God.

From this point, John reassures his Christian readers that they're saved because they have believed in the truth of this gospel. He tells them that as long as they *"walk in the light, as he (Jesus) is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."* (1 John 1:7 NIV.)

For the rest of this letter he continues to warn and reassure them. Striking precision blows at the main Gnostic teachings, John reminds his readers *"If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives."* (1:10 NIV.) He also says that Jesus *"is the atoning sacrifice for our sins"* (2:2 NIV.) and that *"anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness."* (2:9 NIV.)

John reminds them not to fall in love with this temporary world, and warns them that many *"antichrists"* have come - he says the antichrist is anyone who *"denies the Father and the Son"* (2:18, 22 NIV.)

He also reminds his readers that they're truly children of God and that they should make every effort to love one another. He also warns them: *"Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."* (4:1 NIV.) He goes on to say *"Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist..."* (4:2-3 NIV.)

As John ends his defense of the gospel and his assault on Gnostic false doctrine, he says *"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life."* (5:13 NIV.) This is our confidence. That God *did* come in the flesh and that He died for our sins and was raised from the dead. This gives us assurance of eternal life. John's letter reminds us to cling to that eternal life until the end.

The Book Of 2 John

John's second letter is short and much more personal. He writes to *"the chosen lady and her children"*, which many commentators think refers to a church. Whether this "lady" is a church or a person, John writes about the same Gnostic threats to the gospel which he had addressed in 1 John.

He gives the readers two basic reminders: (1) the primary duty of Christians to each other is that they must love one another, and (2) many false teachers have gone out into the churches and are denying that Jesus came in the flesh.

John writes, *“Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.”* (2 John 7 NIV.)

His remedy is simple: *“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, (that Jesus is the Messiah) do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.”* (2 John 10-11 NIV.)

John is adamant that the gospel is the only way one can have eternal life, therefore each Christian should hold fast to that saving message.

The Book Of 3John

John’s third letter is deeply touching because it shows the human cost of false teaching. In this letter, John writes to a dear friend of his, named Gaius, who finds himself under attack by a dictatorial false teacher named Diotrephes.

It seems that Gaius had welcomed some of John’s friends and co-workers who were traveling through his area. Diotrephes, who had gained control of that church, wouldn’t welcome them and even cast people out of the church who did.

What’s shocking is this; Diotrephes also wanted to have nothing to do with John, the beloved old apostle. John writes, *“I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us.”* (3 John 9-10 NIV.)

It’s clear that John has plans to visit and correct the situation: *“I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.”* (verse 14 NIV.) We don’t know how this worked itself out, but John’s letter makes us more aware of the human toll of false teaching, and of the sinfulness of dictatorial church leaders.

The Book Of Jude

Jude’s letter is another short attack on the false doctrines of the first century, and it’s another writing by one of Jesus’ own brothers (see Mark 6:3). Jude probably wrote this general letter to the churches around 90 to 100 AD. Since he reminds his readers of things the apostles had taught in the past (Jude 17), this seems to indicate that his readers were second generation Christians who lived in the last part of that century.

His letter is a stinging attack on *“godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.”* (verse 4 NIV.) These false teachers had twisted the gospel’s emphasis on grace into a license to sin. They taught that, since we’re forgiven by Jesus’ sacrifice, it doesn’t matter how we live. They thought that the more immoral a Christian is, the more grace it brings from God (compare Romans 6:1-4).

Jude’s remedy for all this is to show his readers the disasters that happened to such people in the past. He reminds them of the unfaithful Jews who died in the desert after leaving Egypt (verse 5), of angels who didn’t obey God (verse 6), of Sodom and Gomorrah (verse 7), and also of Cain, Balaam and Korah (verse 11).

Jude then compares the false teachers of his day to those disasters of the past: *“These men are grumblers and faultfinders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their advantage.”* (Verse 16 NIV.)

As his letter closes, Jude gives his readers instructions on how to combat this false doctrine. He says, *“But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.”* (Verse 20 NIV.)

In one of the most inspiring endings in Scripture he writes, “*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy - to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forever more! Amen.*” (Verses 24-25 NIV.)

The Book Of Revelation

The Book of Revelation is one of the most misquoted, misunderstood and misused books of the Bible. It really shouldn't be that way. This book isn't simple, but it is understandable. God wrote it for a reason. He meant for us to be encouraged and emboldened by reading this fascinating work.

The confusion comes because interpreters have usually tried to explain the Book of Revelation in one of several ways: (1) Some consider the events predicted in Revelation to have already taken place in the past, (2) others think Revelation's predictions are all yet to be fulfilled in the future, and (3) even others think that its prophecies are being unfolded all the way throughout history, from the first century to the end of time.

Despite all this difference of opinion, the real meaning of Revelation unfolds when we answer 2 basic questions: (1) what did Revelation *mean* to those who first read it, and (2) what is Revelation supposed to *mean* for Christians today? Revelation isn't some spiritual crossword puzzle meant to confuse us, it's a spiritual meal designed to strengthen us. It was intended to encourage the church, not confuse it.

To get at the real meaning of Revelation, we have to understand what was happening when it was written. The apostle John had been banished to an island called Patmos sometime around 95 AD. This was during a bloody persecution of the church by Emperor Domitian.

John had already survived the persecution under Emperor Nero (64-67 AD), was now living through Domitian's reign, and would soon see another rule of terror under Emperor Trajan in 98 AD. In fact, these waves of Roman persecution would continue throughout the first 300 years of the church's existence.

This is the environment of Revelation. The Book of Revelation is a series of visions given by Jesus to John during his imprisonment on the island of Patmos by the Romans. These visions explain the spiritual reasons for persecution and give courage to the church by showing that God Himself will intervene to destroy the evil around them. The Roman government has bitten off more than it can chew. It has chosen a fight to the death with Jesus' kingdom. And Jesus *will* win... he *did* win.

Here's proof: the Kingdom of God is still here today, but the Roman Empire exists only in books and museums. This is Revelation's resounding note, and it helps us understand the complicated visionary message of this wonderful book.

As the vision given to John opens, his statements show that the primary message was to the suffering church of his day: “*The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.*” (Revelation 1:1 NIV.) Many things would “*soon take place*”, including more persecution and an all-out spiritual war between God's people and Satan.

That's why John writes “*Blessed is the one who reads 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.*” (1:3 NIV.) His phrase “*the time is near*” clearly refers to their day; the time for an unfolding spiritual war between Satan and Jesus had come. The principles needed to win that war are timeless; we still use them today. But the special persecutions and events of their day are covered in his term “*the time is near*”. That's why he also uses the same time frame later in the book:

“Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near.” (22:10 NIV.) (Compare that statement to Daniel 8:26).

After setting the stage with his promise that these things will “soon take place”, John begins an description of the one giving him the revelation; *“someone ‘like a son of man,’ dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire...In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.”* (1:13-16 NIV.)

This awesome figure is Jesus. But he isn’t the meek and mild Jesus who was crucified by the Romans. This Jesus comes in judgment; he’s on earth to bring justice to his church by making war on his enemies.

At this point in the revelation, Jesus gives John special messages to 7 churches in Asia where the hottest points of the persecution will begin. These messages deal with each church individually, preparing them for the terrible persecutions and trying times that will come with the spiritual war between Jesus and Satan. Some of the churches are encouraged to keep moving forward as they have been doing, but others are commanded to repent (2:1 - 3:22).

Then visions about the coming spiritual war unfold rapidly. John sees the throne of heaven where judgment is being planned. The judgment of God is ready, but it’s bound up in a 7-fold scroll which no one can open. In his vision, John gets concerned. Who is worthy to open this awesome scroll? Just then, Jesus appears in heaven as a lamb that has just been killed. When Jesus is found worthy, all of heaven erupts in praise. The 7 seals of the scrolls begin to open, and judgment on God’s enemies begins (4:1 - 8:5).

When the 7th seal is opened, 7 trumpets begin to sound, one at a time. These trumpets announce terrible judgments on the earth, judgments that come because the world has followed Satan and has assaulted the church.

When the 7th trumpet sounds, loud voices of praise erupt in heaven: *“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.”* Then John records: *“God’s temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm.”* (11:15-19 NIV.)

As this 7th trumpet sounds, war breaks out between God and Satan: *“And there was war in heaven...The great dragon was hurled down - that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.”* (12:7-9 NIV.)

As the rest of Revelation unfolds, this war between God and Satan plays itself out on the stage of history. Satan uses corrupt government (called “the beast”) and false religion as his weapons (chapters 12-13). But Jesus fights back with natural disasters and physical judgments against a world aligned with Satan’s will (chapters 14-19).

As this war peaks, Jesus comes riding into battle portrayed as a conquering general: *“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 makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire...He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God... Our of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations... He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has the name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.”* (19:11-16 NIV.)

With Jesus’ victorious entrance, the devil and his angels are locked away in the Abyss for 1,000 years. After that, the devil is released to again deceive the nations to follow him. When

that fails, *“the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and for ever.”* (20:10 NIV.) (This is the same lake of fire which Jesus mentioned in Matthew 25:41 when he said that people who aren’t saved will be cast into *“the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”*)

As Revelation ends, victory belongs to Jesus and his faithful disciples who overcame the devil *“by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”* (12:11 NIV.)

With the conquest of Satan, there appears a new heavens and a new earth. A city called *“the new Jerusalem”* descends out of heaven and comes to earth. From the throne of God a loud voice says *“Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.”* (21:3 NIV.)

Think what this would mean to Christians in John’s day who were living under extreme, violent persecution. God, through Revelation, is assuring His people that He sees every wrong being done to them. He will destroy Satan and his forces, and He will comfort and receive His people into eternal joy.

Whatever approach you take to understanding the visions in the Book of Revelation, the central theme is still the same: God will come to the rescue of his persecuted people, and will eventually destroy all evil.

This reassurance is still there as the book closes: *“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.”*

Study Assignments - Lesson 13

JAMES - Read James 4:1-8.

1 PETER - Read 1 Peter 1:3-9.

2 PETER - Read 2 Peter 3:1-13.

1 JOHN - Read 1 John 2:15-17.

2 JOHN - Read 2 John verses 4-7.

3 JOHN - Read 3 John verses 2-8.

JUDE - Read Jude verses 17-25.

REVELATION - Read Revelation 1:9-20; 20:11-15.

TEST QUESTIONS - LESSON 13

1. ___ Why were the Jewish Christians to whom James wrote scattered all over the world?
(A) Their jobs took them around the world, (B) because of severe persecution or (C) they didn’t want to remain home and be involved in church activities.
2. ___ What does James tell his readers to do if they’re in trouble? (A) Petition the government to get relief, (B) find comfort in family life or (C) pray.
3. ___ Why did Peter write his first letter to the churches? (A) To help them cope with the fiery trial which had descended on them, (B) to explain why he was chosen as an apostle or (C) to update them on his fishing business.

4. ___ In 1 Peter, why is it so important for his readers to understand their new birth and their inheritance? (A) Because Paul didn't teach them about it, (B) because these things will help them cope, since they transcend this world and go beyond the reach of Rome or any human dictator, or (C) because they can't reproduce without knowing about birth.
5. ___ In Peter's second letter he isn't writing about persecution by the Romans, but about (A) James the Lord's brother, (B) the death of Paul or (C) the infiltration of false teachers into the life of the church.
6. ___ In 2 Peter, what was the main feature of the destructive heresies brought in by the false teachers? (A) That a Christian can live an immoral life and still please Jesus, (B) that the Old Testament isn't part of the Bible or (C) that Paul wasn't an apostle.
7. ___ In 1 John, the writer is warning his readers about Gnosticism. The Gnostics taught that, since the body is evil, (A) Jesus couldn't be the Son of God because God would never inhabit a human body, (B) the body should be killed or (C) no philosophy made a difference anyway.
8. ___ In 2 John, he writes to "*the chosen lady and her children.*" This probably refers to (A) his wife, (B) his mother-in-law or (C) a church.
9. ___ In 3 John, what problem is John writing about? (A) That more money needs to be collected for the apostles, (B) that a dictatorial false teacher named Diotrephes had taken over the church and was refusing to fellowship John and his friend, Gaius or (C) that Jesus hadn't come back yet.
10. ___ Jude's letter is a stinging attack on (A) the Roman government, (B) those who crucified his brother, Jesus or (C) godless men who change the grace of God into a license to sin.
11. ___ What is the main environment of the Book of Revelation? (A) The Roman persecution of the church under ruthless Roman Emperors, (B) the crossing of the Red Sea or (C) the constant work of getting Jesus' words into written form.
12. ___ In Revelation, who is "King of Kings and Lord of Lords"? (A) Satan, (B) Jesus or (C) the Beast.

Chapter Fourteen: CONCLUSION: Putting It All Together

If you've studied all the other thirteen lessons of this course, and if you've answered the questions for each chapter on the test form, you're certainly an above-average student of the

Bible. You now know more about the Bible than many people who just read it occasionally. You've put in several hours of study, which will determine much about your future with God.

In our study together, we've seen how God created the world, the Garden of Eden, and the human race. We've also seen how the devil brought evil into the world and destroyed human perfection. From that point, the Bible told us of God's plan to bring a Messiah, through the agency of the Jewish Nation, to save man from his sins. We saw that story unfold throughout the Old Testament and find its completion in the life of Jesus in the New Testament. We saw how the church was called to carry this message to the world: that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Savior of the world. We also studied how people responded to that message and how it changed their lives.

The Heart Of The Bible

Which brings us to the true heart of the Bible. It isn't just a book of information, historical stories and religious facts. God wrote His book to change lives - your life. It's a personal communication from God to you.

He wants to tell you something, to communicate a special message to you. He wants you to understand that if you accept this message, you can be sure that you have eternal life, that you'll live with God in Heaven forever.

As John the apostle said, "*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.*" (1 John 5:13 NIV.)

Is it true that a person can *really* know that he or she has eternal life? *How* can a person know that?

Well, you can *know* that you have eternal life because of the gospel - the story of Jesus, who came as God-in-flesh, died and was buried for your sins, and who rose from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

And the heart of the gospel is this: Jesus did that for you, *personally*.

Since he's God-in-flesh, he personally knew you before you ever existed. Your birth didn't surprise him. While he hung on that cross, he knew you as an individual; he knew your name, birth date, family tree, secret sins - everything! He even knew all the sins you would commit, even the worst thing you've ever done or ever will do. Knowing everything about you, he still willingly gave up his life for you!

Notice how this proves his love for you. For example, have you ever been accused of something you didn't do? How did it make you feel? Jesus, even though he lived a perfect life, was accused of sins he never committed and then was executed as a common criminal. In addition to the physical pain, he was willing to suffer horrible spiritual and psychological pain just for you.

Think of it this way. What if God came to you and said that He was going to place the guilt of your whole neighborhood on you? Besides feeling guilty for your own moral failures, you'd also feel the guilt of all those other people, too. Or what if He placed the guilt of your whole town on you? Or the guilt of all the child-molesters in the world? Of all the rapists? Of all the murderers who've carried out terrible, pre-mediated killings of innocent children? Of Hitler, Stalin and all the brutal dictators of the world? What if God placed all the guilt of all the whole human race on you for 30 seconds!?

If God did that, you wouldn't survive. Guilt is too powerful; it even causes some people to kill themselves just because of one or two sins that they've personally committed. You couldn't stand the psychological torture of the world's guilt, but Jesus could.

He gave himself over to that torture, which included the guilt of *your* sins, because he loves you and wanted to save you from sin, from being cast into the lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels. His agony was so intense that the Bible says *"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission."* (Hebrews 5:7 NIV.) It also says that *"being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground."* (Luke 22:44 NIV.)

The Heart Of The Gospel

And then the physical agony began. The governor's soldiers *"twisted a crown of thorns and set it on his head...They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again...After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him."* (Matthew 27:27-31 NIV.)

Even as they executed him, Jesus never wavered from his mission to save you. *"When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, 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.'...Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' When he had said this, he breathed his last."* (Luke 23:32-46 NIV.)

If that had been the end of the story, it wouldn't be that remarkable. Just another revolutionary prophet executed by the Romans for causing trouble. But that certainly wasn't the end of the story.

After Jesus was taken down from the cross and buried, some of his disciples went to the tomb on the third day to re-wrap his body. They were met by an angel who said, *"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!"* (Luke 24:5-6 NIV.)

From that day forward, Jesus has been *alive!* After three days in the tomb, his Divine spirit returned to earth and re-energized his body. That body was brought back to life and glorified, which means it was refitted to travel into heaven. He's the *only* human being who has ever taken his body with him to heaven in a glorified condition. And he did that for you. He has led the way. What happened to Jesus will also happen to every Christian on the last day. We will live forever with Jesus in our glorified bodies just like his! (See 1 John 3:2 & Philippians 3:21.)

And so, Jesus' resurrection becomes ours because his agony on the cross was on our behalf.

Why Jesus Had To Do It

But why did Jesus have to go through such agony for us? And why did God *have* to give his own Son so that we could have eternal life?

Well, the Bible says that it was because of sin, our sin. The word "sin" actually means "to miss the target"; it's a word that sums up our moral failure. God created man to be His perfect reflection (Genesis 1:26), but mankind gave in to Satan's deception and rebelled against the Father in heaven and, like the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31), left the Divine family. Since that first rebellion, the human race has resisted God with all their might. We did it too, as soon as we were old enough to have a mind of our own. And that brings us to a serious problem.

The problem, and the reason that so many humans will be cast into that lake of fire with the devil and his angels, is that God can't co-exist with evil. He literally can't stand to be in the presence of sin or evil. Just like the sun would vaporize any space ship coming near it, God's Holy Presence will surely vaporize evil (and those who practice it.)

The Bible says, about God Himself, that “*Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.*” (Habakkuk 1:13 NIV.) Isaiah also wrote about man’s alienation from God when he said, “*Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you...*” (Isaiah 59:1-2 NIV.)

In the New Testament, Paul wrote the same things: “*We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one...All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one...There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...*” (Romans 3:9-12, 22-23 NIV.)

Since all this is true, it’s impossible for any sinful creature to enter heaven. As soon as evil entered heaven, the contamination would have to be destroyed. So God and sin can’t coexist in the same place. Therefore, you can’t go to heaven until you deal with *this terrible problem*: God is perfect and ultimate in His holiness, yet we’re sinful and can’t approach Him. This fatal impasse can be solved only one way - the gospel.

How it happens

Once a person sins, he or she is alienated from God. When you enter the ranks of those who’ve acted in rebellion to God, you become disqualified for heaven. Since all of us have sinned, all of us are disqualified. And since all of us have sinned and become alienated from God, we can’t even approach Him to try making things right. That’s why it took Jesus, who was 100% God and 100% man.

As a human being, Jesus lived a perfect life. That means that Jesus, as a flawless representative of the human race, can approach God to solve the problem. And it means that his perfect life can count for yours, if you’re willing to abandon yours. Then, as God-in-flesh, Jesus gave himself to be punished for your sins (since he had no sins of his own to pay for). That punishment can stand for yours, if you’re willing to submit to him as Lord.

Paul put it this way: “*You see, at just the right time, when we were powerless, Christ died for the ungodly...But God demonstrates his 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, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more... shall we be saved through his life!*” (Romans 5:6-10 NIV.)

In this way, the gospel takes care of both problems. Jesus’ perfect life substitutes for our sinful life, and his death (on our behalf) on the cross satisfies God’s perfect justice. That way, no sin ever goes unpunished.

But instead being punished myself, my sins are transferred from me to Jesus. He pays the price that I could never pay. Since his spirit is eternal, he suffers hell itself in 6 hours on the cross, so that I don’t have to suffer hell for eternity. He frees me from sin, so that I can go to heaven and live in God’s house forever. And the same is true of you, if you wish to accept it. Which brings us to the final point; how does one accept all of this?

How The Gospel Can Work For You

In any beneficial transaction there’s always a process of acceptance. If I give you a gift of 1 million dollars, you’ll still have to endorse the back of the check and deposit it into your account. You wouldn’t be *earning* the money, just merely accepting it by signing your name.

And you'd be glad to do so. The financial power of a million dollars would draw a quick response.

The same is true of the gospel. God's love for you, as expressed in the gospel, draws out a response, just like a magnet drawing metal to itself. The gospel draws out a faith-response, which means that the gospel motivates you to place a life-changing amount of faith in Jesus as a person. It means yielding to him as Lord, as the new master of your life.

For example, if I board a commercial airplane to fly to New Orleans, I must trust the pilot. If I should say to the Captain, *"I'll only fly on this plane after you teach me everything you know about flying,"* he would laugh me off the plane. He might say, *"You'll never know as much about flying as I do, so sit down, buckle up, and trust me to get you there."*

The same would be true of your surgeon. If you need brain surgery, you'll have to trust the people who have skills beyond your own. You'll have to, by faith, submit to their expertise if you want to get well.

So the gospel draws that kind of response from you. You have to "put your whole weight down" on Jesus as Lord. It won't work any other way. You must place all your faith and trust in him so that his actions in the gospel can be substituted for your sinful life.

Jesus himself said, *"I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be (the Messiah) you will indeed die in your sins."* (John 8:24 NIV.)

Paul put it this way: *"But now a righteousness from God, apart from law... This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."* (Romans 3:21-22 NIV.) What a fantastic fact! Righteousness, or rightness before God, doesn't come through our efforts (we're all sinners) but it comes through faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Put your entire weight down on him, and you're able to stand confidently before God in the Judgment.

Faith is *"being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see"* according to Hebrews 11:1 (NIV.) This means that, by studying the Word of God, you become certain, convinced and totally persuaded that Christ is the Messiah and that he has saved you from your sins.

The central focus and heartbeat of your salvation is your faith. *"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."* (Romans 10:9-10 NIV.)

So you can choose to have faith, right now, in what Christ did in his life, death and resurrection to save you. And you can maintain that faith by continuing to read and meditate on the Word of God.

Changing Directions

But that isn't the whole story. Once you place your faith in Jesus, other things happen. The gospel draws more response out of you. As you place yourself under Jesus' lordship, your life changes. You stop doing the things that drew you into a life of sin in the first place.

The Bible calls this life-change "repentance." For example, when Peter preached the first gospel sermon, he told the crowd that they had killed the true Messiah. And that Messiah, Jesus, had come back from the dead.

At that, the stunned crowd cried out, *"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."* (Acts 2:37-38 NIV.) They had to repent - to stop living the way they had been living - to



escape the Messiah's wrath.

Later, Paul described repentance in one of his sermons: *"I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds."* (Acts 26:20 NIV.) Do you see the connection? Repentance means a change in your *"deeds"* - in your actions.

Following Jesus and placing your faith in him is more than just mental agreement with the facts of the gospel. Walking with Jesus by faith means a radical life-change. Notice the radical change in the lives of these Christians to whom Paul wrote: *"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."*

Now notice the astounding thing Paul says next: *"And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."* (1 Corinthians 6:9-11 NIV.) These Christians had truly repented of their past, depraved lives. The gospel had cleansed them and freed them from Satan's bondage.

And so the gospel calls you to invest all your trust in Jesus' work, and then to change the direction of your life from self-will to yielding to the Lord's will - which the Bible calls repentance.

Buried With Jesus

But there's another beautiful event associated with making the gospel work for you. Paul hints at this event when he writes about Jesus returning from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels: *"He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."* (2 Thessalonians 1:8 NIV.)

He says that people who don't *"obey the gospel"* won't be saved. So what does it mean to *"obey the gospel"*; since the gospel is Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, how could one obey it? How can you obey an event?

Several years ago I lived in a town which had a regular re-enactment of a famous Civil War battle. The purpose was to honor those who had died in the battle and to help us remember how tragic it is to settle disagreements by going to war. As the battle was re-enacted, it looked like the real thing. Cannons blazed. Soldiers in full, authentic uniform charged and fired blanks at each other. The whole thing looked real, but it was only a re-enactment.

In a similar way, God calls you to honor the gospel by re-enacting (*"obeying"*) it. How do you do that? Well, since the gospel is the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, you could die, be buried and be raised again - you could re-enact it. But if you reenact it by being buried in the ground you won't survive. So God provided a harmless way to reenact a death, burial and resurrection.

God provided water baptism. Baptism is one of those events which takes place on two planes of existence. It's a physical event - going under the water and rising again. And it's a spiritual event in which the believer is merged with Christ's death and resurrection.

Notice how Paul described it: *"Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."*

"If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of

sin might be done away with... ” (Romans 6:3-6 NIV.)

Did you notice how many times Paul mentioned that, at baptism, one is both buried and raised *with* Jesus? And he said it again later.

In Galatians, he put it this way: *“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”* (3:26-27 NIV.) Notice how he uses another metaphor - “clothed” or completely merged with Christ.

Again, the subject came up in Paul’s letter to the Colossian church: *“In him (Christ) you were also circumcised...having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God...Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why...do you submit to its rules?...Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above...”* (Colossians 2:11-12, 20 & 3:1 NIV.)

Even Peter linked water baptism with the resurrection of Jesus: *“In it (the ark) only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also - not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”* (1 Peter 3:20-21 NIV.)

Notice that Peter is careful to say that the water itself (*“removal of dirt from the body”*) doesn’t save us. We’re saved by Jesus’ resurrection, which is another way of saying that it’s the gospel that saves us. Nevertheless, Peter teaches us that water baptism is indeed a faith-reenactment of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection. Submission to that gospel in faith is what saves us.

Signing The Check

Before Paul the apostle became a Christian, he met the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19). This miraculous meeting transformed his life. He finally understood the true impact of Jesus’ life, and of the gospel. Ananias, a preacher, was sent by God to help Paul (then called “Saul”) reenact the gospel.

Seeing that Paul understood the gospel, and that he sincerely believed on Jesus, Ananias said, *“And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.”* (Acts 22:16 NIV.)

You now know all you need to be saved. You know everything you need to reenact the gospel and become sure that you have eternal life.

Won’t you do that now? If you’re ready, contact the people who are listed below, or contact me at the address in the front of this study guide.

May God bless you in His eternal love.

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Teacher's Grading Key

Below you'll find the answers listed to the tests that appear at the end of each chapter:

LESSON 1

Question / Answer

1=B, 2=A, 3=B, 4=A, 5=C, 6=A, 7=C, 8=C, 9=A, 10=B, 11=B, 12=A

LESSON 2

Question / Answer

1=C, 2=A, 3=B, 4=C, 5=B, 6=B, 7=A, 8=A, 9=C, 10=B, 11=A, 12=C

LESSON 3

Question / Answer

1=C, 2=B, 3=B, 4=A, 5=A, 6=B, 7=C, 8=B, 9=C, 10=C, 11=A, 12=A

LESSON 4

Question / Answer

1=B, 2=C, 3=A, 4=B, 5=B, 6=A, 7=A, 8=B, 9=C, 10=A, 11=B

LESSON 5

Question / Answer

1=B, 2=A, 3=B, 4=A, 5=A, 6=A, 7=A, 8=B, 9=B, 10=A, 11=B, 12=B

LESSON 6

Question / Answer

1=B, 2=C, 3=B, 4=A, 5=B, 6=B, 7=A, 8=B, 9=B, 10=B, 11=A, 12=A

LESSON 7

Question / Answer

1=B, 2=B, 3=C, 4=A, 5=C, 6=A, 7=C, 8=A, 9=B, 10=A, 11=B, 12=C

LESSON 8

Question / Answer

1=B, 2=C, 3=B, 4=A, 5=C, 6=C, 7=A, 8=A, 9=C, 10=A, 11=C, 12=B

LESSON 9

Question / Answer

1=B, 2=B, 3=C, 4=A, 5=C, 6=A, 7=A, 8=A, 9=B, 10=C, 11=B, 12=C

LESSON 10

Question / Answer

1=C, 2=C, 3=A, 4=B, 5=B, 6=A, 7=C, 8=B, 9=A, 10=B, 11=C, 12=A

LESSON 11

Question / Answer

1=C, 2=B, 3=B, 4=A, 5=B, 6=B, 7=C, 8=A, 9=C, 10=B, 11=B, 12=B

LESSON 12

Question / Answer

1=B, 2=A, 3=C, 4=C, 5=B, 6=C, 7=B, 8=A, 9=A, 10=C, 11=A, 12=C

LESSON 13

Question / Answer

1=B, 2=C, 3=A, 4=B, 5=C, 6=A, 7=A, 8=C, 9=B, 10=C, 11=A, 12=B