

Introduction:

Why is the Bible Important?

“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:14–17)

Why is the Bible so important? Why is it the number one best seller of all time? Why do we see quotations of the Bible every where? Why are people offended when they see those quotations?

Is it because the Bible is a book that deals with religious issues? Homer’s ancient Greek epic, the Iliad, is a classic that deals with religion and was extremely influential in Greek society. Even though it was written around the time of Isaiah, Homer’s Iliad has become nothing more than an interesting piece of ancient literature and no longer has any moral influence on the world.

Is it because the Bible is beautifully written? Read the Psalms, especially in the King James Version, and you will be drawn into the beauty of the words. But there are other beautifully written works. Shakespeare’s plays are beautifully written and we may even know a few lines here and there, but Shakespeare plays very little role in our daily lives.

There seems to be something more important going on in the Bible to give it such a vital role. The Apostle Paul in his second letter to Timothy speaks of the Bible in two ways: he speaks of the divine inspiration and the practical usefulness of the Bible. The Bible is not just some ancient author’s personal reflections on God, the Bible is God’s Word revealed to us by inspiration. The Bible is also not just a source for developing theology and a book for scholars. The Bible has practical relevance for our every day life. Let us look at just five purposes of the Bible that make it so important.

Who is God?

The Bible begins in Genesis 1:1 with the words: “In the beginning God.” The Bible is a book about God. Does one need to read the Bible to believe in God? Not at all. I came to a belief in God’s existence without having read much of the Bible. Even with

today's general biblical illiteracy, by far the majority of people believe in a god. But what kind of god?

There are many ways to think of the divine. Pantheists believe that God and creation are one with no separation between the two. Deists believe God created the world and he is separate from the world, but he walked away after creation and has no more interaction with us. Some people believe in an angry and wrathful God. Others believe in a grandfather type God that accepts everything and just winks at sin.

We need the Bible to reveal to us what God is really like. This is the message of the Bible about God: God created the world, he is separate from his creation, God continues to interact and relate to his creation, he is a God of justice that does not tolerate sin but he is also a God of love and grace that provides a way for us to be saved from our sins. You might come to a belief in God's existence during a walk in the woods, but you need to open the Bible to understand the full truth of who God really is.

Who is Jesus?

It is one thing to believe in God, it is another thing to believe in Jesus. Most people believe that Jesus existed. However, many would see him as a prophet or a teacher or even a deluded religious fanatic. Reading just the ancient secular histories that mention Jesus would not give you much information. We need to go to the Bible to see who Jesus really is.

What the Bible tells us is that Jesus did not have his beginnings in a manger in Bethlehem. Jesus existed as the Son of God or the Word from all eternity and shared with the Father and Spirit in the act of creation. Jesus was not just a man but was God incarnate, that is God made human. It is important to know that Jesus was not just God in disguise with an illusion of humanity. Jesus was fully human and was subject to all the weaknesses and emotions and temptations that we are. Jesus was God *and* human.

Jesus taught on spirituality and ethics. Jesus performed amazing miracles. Jesus presented himself as one with authority like no other person. Eventually, Jesus was arrested, tried, condemned and executed on a Roman cross. Although it looked like a tragic end to a promising ministry, Jesus actually rose from the dead on the third day. In addition, Jesus promised that one day he would return from heaven and set up God's kingdom in power and fullness. By giving us this information, the Bible makes it clear that Jesus was much more than just an insightful religious teacher.

What Does God Want From Us?

The average person might think that God's primary concern for us is that we attempt to be good people. As long as we do not hurt others and try to be nice, God will be happy. The occasional attendance at church does not hurt either.

None of that is bad, but what does God really want from us? We have seen that Jesus' death on the cross is something revealed in the Bible. The Bible says something more. The Bible actually says that the death of Jesus on the cross paid the penalty for our sins. Jesus' sacrifice was not just an example to us of extreme faithfulness, it was the means of bringing peace with God.

Although this sacrifice was made for all humanity, there is something that must be done for us to access the benefits. We can not earn God's forgiveness, but we can accept it and embrace it by putting our faith in Jesus and making him our Lord. This is not simply believing, but truly trusting Jesus and literally placing our life in his hands. This is what the Bible tells us that God really wants from us.

What Should this Life Look Like?

It is true that we cannot earn God's love, but God does have a vision for what our life should look like. It is not about getting our ticket to heaven and then sitting idly while we wait to see God. Nor is God's vision simply that we be nice and respectable citizens.

Jesus made it very clear what this life is supposed to look like: love for God and love for people. God calls us not to just participate in religious activities but rather to embrace a dynamic relationship with him. Likewise, God does not want us to just be respectable, he wants us to be loving toward others. We are to leave our comfort zones and do what we can to help others. The sermon on the mount provides a radical vision of what the Christian life should look like. It is a life of challenge and difficulty but a life that is marked by blessing each step of the way. If we are to discover what God's plan is for our life, we must read our Bibles.

What Could the Next Life Be?

People are fairly motivated to seek their own happiness in this life. But what about for the life to come? Most people have some vague idea of an afterlife, but how much do

we know? Since most people do not come back from the dead with detailed reports, we must rely on the Bible.

The Bible presents two options for an afterlife. One option is what we call hell. Instead of thinking of hell as flames and demons with pitchforks, think of hell as the absence of God. At the judgment day, we will all finally see God in all of his magnificence and glory. For those who reject the cross of Christ, they will be forever cast out of the presence of God. Seeing what could have been and then losing it all will be a terrifying and horrible experience. This may seem unfair, and yet forcing people who have rejected God to spend eternity with God would be even less fair.

For those who accept what Jesus has done, we will be able to enjoy God's presence forever. Remove all thoughts of being a disembodied spirit floating in the clouds. The biblical picture is that of a physical resurrection where we will be placed on a new and perfect earth, a place so wonderful that even God will leave heaven to join us. Most of us can hope to live only seventy or eighty years. The Bible presents a picture of eternity, giving us a glimpse of what lies beyond and giving us a hope that enables us to make the most of today.

What if I told you that there was some information that would radically affect the quality and length of your life but I refused to share that information. You would be very frustrated and confused. You would be forever second guessing yourself, wondering if you were making the right choices. Life is too short to discover everything by trial and error. That is why God has presented his Word to us in the form of the Bible. The Scriptures reveal to us who God is, who Jesus is, what God wants from us, how to live this life and what to expect in the next life. This by no means takes all the adventure out of life. It does, however, allow us to build our lives on a solid foundation, giving us appropriate priorities and a direction in which to move. If we are going to make the most of what God has given us, we must spend significant time in his Word.

Chapter One

Old Testament

In some ways it is unfortunate that we call the first part of our Bible the *Old Testament*. It almost suggests that it is something that has lost its usefulness and has been replaced, such as the way we speak of our old fridge and our new fridge. Some people prefer to speak of it as the Older Testament, indicating its chronological relationship to the Christians scriptures without making a value judgment. Jewish people simply call it the Bible or the Tanak (an acronym for the three sections of their Bible) and scholars often refer to it as the Hebrew Bible. The Jewish Bible has a different order of the Old Testament. The first section is the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). The second section is the Prophets, consisting of the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) and the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve Minor Prophets). The third and final section is the Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ruth, Daniel, Esther and Chronicles). The Christian order of the Old Testament follows the Greek translation's order and uses the Greek titles for the books rather than the Hebrew.

The Old Testament is very important to us as Christians. The Old Testament was *the* Bible for Jesus and the early church. It was the Old Testament that Jesus and the Apostle Paul often quoted in their teaching. If you were to remove all references to the Old Testament in the New Testament, you would have a much smaller book. The stories of the Old Testament prepare us for the Gospel in the New Testament. We discover the stories of men and women used by God to see his will be done. We see messianic prophesies hundreds of years before the events took place in the life of Jesus. We find in the Old Testament, people wrestling with the problems of evil and finding hope in their faith in God. It is vitally important that we have a good knowledge of the Old Testament, an understanding of the Bible Jesus read.

Books of Moses

The first five books of the Bible go by numerous names. Jews refer to these books as the Torah, which means law or instruction (this is what Jesus refers to when he speaks of the *law* and the prophets). The Jews see the Torah as the holiest and most important books of the Bible. Christians speak of these books as the Pentateuch since they are five in number. Often they are spoken of as the books of Moses since tradition suggests Moses as the author. While these books do indicate that Moses

wrote down things and the New Testament also speaks of Mosaic authorship (although the New Testament does not specify that Moses wrote Genesis), it is clear that Moses did not write the entire Pentateuch. Deuteronomy 34 describes Moses' death and burial, something that he is not likely to have written himself. It is better to speak of these books as being closely connected with the ministry of Moses.

Genesis

Genesis is a very important book that gives an overview of God's dealings with humanity. The Book of Genesis was quoted extensively by Jesus in his teachings.

The first section of Genesis begins with the creation of the world. The emphasis is not on providing a scientific explanation for creation but for demonstrating that the world is not an accident, but is the result of God's careful design. Notice that at each stage God labeled creation as good. Unfortunately, things quickly deteriorated. Adam and Eve rebelled against God and were removed from the garden. Murder and violence began to appear and things became so bad that God took desperate action. Of all the people in the world, there was one man who had pleased God. God called Noah and his family to collect two of each animal (seven of each clean animal for the sake of sacrifices) and to build an ark to survive the flood. Humanity did not learn its lesson and began to rebel once more at the tower of Babel. God confused the people by giving different languages and humankind was spread across the world. At this point it looks as if God's plan to create a good world had been a dismissal failure.

The second section of Genesis introduces God's rescue mission for humanity. God's plan seemed strange at best. God called Abram out of Ur (modern Iraq) to travel to the Promised Land and become the father of great nations. Abram was old and his wife was barren and the likelihood of just one child, never mind a nation, looked quite slim. Abram received not just a name change to Abraham, but the promised child Isaac (after Abraham's attempt to short cut God's plan by fathering Ishmael from Hagar).

Isaac does not play a major role in the story, other than proof of God's faithfulness. Isaac fathered twin boys: Esau and Jacob. Esau technically was the oldest as he emerged first and received the status of heir. Jacob, who was known for having more brains than integrity, tricked Esau out of both his birthright and his blessing. Jacob's lack of morality did not stop God from seeking him out and after a powerful encounter with God, received a new name: Israel.

Israel had twelve sons and these became the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel named after them. The story recounts the disqualifications of the oldest sons until Judah was left as the one on whom God's promise would work through. However, it is not Judah who receives the most treatment. There is a lengthy story about the eleventh son, Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers and was given up for dead by his family. God used the brothers' deceit to bring about great good as Joseph rose through the ranks of the Egyptian government so that he could provide for both the people of Egypt and the people of Israel.

The central theme of the second half of Genesis is that God's plan will be accomplished even in the most unlikely circumstances. A human plan would include the firstborn of important families with high moral standards and strong personal integrity. God usually bypassed the expected firstborn and worked through a bunch of scoundrels and misfits. There is great hope that God can also work through us.

For a selection of readings in Genesis, read:

Genesis 1:1-2:3

Genesis 3:1-24

Genesis 15:1-6

Genesis 32:22-32

Genesis 50:15-21

What comfort do you find in God's creation?

What kind of people does God use today? Is it different than what we find in Genesis?

How does God bring about good out of evil in your experience?

Chapter Two

Exodus

The five books of the Torah are called the books of Moses, this is the first to include Moses as a major character.

Although Genesis and Exodus are separated by centuries, one clearly leads into the next. Genesis ends with Joseph as the acting head of Egypt under Pharaoh's authority and the Hebrews being held in high esteem. By the time of Exodus, the reigning Pharaoh knew nothing of Joseph and saw the Hebrews as, at best free slave labour, and at worst a nuisance to be cut down. One of Pharaoh's attempts to keep the Hebrew population under control was to kill the male infants. Baby Moses was almost a victim of this wicked plan but in God's planning ended up being raised by Pharaoh's daughter, receiving the best of Egyptian education and training.

The Hebrews spent years calling out to their God, looking desperately for help, but were greeted only by deafening silence. Meanwhile, the adult Moses was awakening to the injustice of his people's situation and found himself on the run for his life. Giving up on life in Egypt, Moses settled down with a wife and a quiet career as a shepherd. God disturbed Moses' comfort by speaking to him at the burning bush and commissioning him to lead his people out of slavery. Moses attempted to get out of the call with every excuse from not being a good public speaker to not knowing God's name. God appointed Moses' brother Aaron as his spokesman to help with the public speaking. Regarding the name, God revealed his name as "I Am." A form of the Hebrew for "I Am" became the personal name for God as the tetragrammaton or four letters: YHWH (often pronounced Yahweh or Jehovah). In our English Bibles, the appearance of an all capital "Lord" is not Hebrew for Lord but is the personal name YHWH. It is written as "Lord" to follow the Jewish custom of reading "Lord" rather than the true word out of reverence for the divine name.

After some opposition from both the Egyptians and Hebrews, Moses and Aaron eventually led their people out of slavery. This occurred through a series of plagues, in which the God of Israel demonstrated his superiority over the Egyptian gods and Pharaoh who was their earthly representative. We can cheer on Moses through all the plagues except the last which brought about the death of the first born male child, including a great number of Egyptian babies. It must be remembered that this took place only after Pharaoh had systematically murdered many Hebrew babies

during the time of Moses' childhood. Although this is unfortunate, it is an example of reaping what one sows. The Hebrew children were protected from this final plague by the performing of the first Passover in which they applied the blood of the slaughtered lamb to their door posts. This is a powerful foreshadowing of the blood of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, who causes the wrath of God to pass over us despite our sin.

Once the Hebrews were free from the Egyptians by passing through the Red Sea, they found themselves at Mount Sinai, also known as Mount Horeb. There they officially enter into a covenant with God and receive the Law, including the famous Ten Commandments. Detailed plans for the building of the Tabernacle are also given. These passages can seem boring at the time, but they are a reminder of the importance of careful preparation to come into God's presence.

For a selection of readings in Exodus, read:

Exodus 3:1-14

Exodus 12:1-13

Exodus 14:1-31

Exodus 20:1-21

Exodus 32:1-35

What name do you use to address God? Why?

Have you ever felt like you were between a rock and a hard place? How did God rescue you?

Why do you think the Israelites were so quick to worship an idol such as the golden calf so soon after being rescued by God and receiving his Law? Have you ever done anything like this?

Chapter Three

Leviticus

When people decide to read the Bible from cover to cover, getting through Genesis and Exodus is often easy enough. It is when people get to Leviticus that they begin to get bogged down. However, there are many important parts to this book that we can still discover.

The most important thing about Leviticus is to get past seeing it as a book of boring rules and rituals. The various feasts and celebrations built into the Hebrew year were a way to keep God front and centre. Sacrifices were there to demonstrate devotion to God but also to provide a sense of forgiveness and relief after repentance. The Day of Atonement is particularly important for Christians. This was the holiest day of the year and it is still celebrated as Yom Kippur. Two goats were presented to the high priest. One goat was killed to pay the price of the sin of the people. The second goat received the people's sins by the laying on of hands. For Christians, Jesus is both goats: the one who takes away the sins and the one who dies for the sins.

Among the laws found in Leviticus is the "eye for an eye" law. This may seem harsh to us but in its original context it was compassionate. The tendency was for one conflict to spiral out of control and end up as a blood feud. This law fixes the severity of the punishment so that it can only be as great as the crime itself.

One of the confusing aspects of Hebrew thought is the meaning of clean and unclean. Christians often see this as being equivalent to righteous and sinful. That is not accurate. Clean and unclean was more about the preparation for coming into God's presence. God was seen as very holy and one did not just casually come before him. While sin could make one unclean, other natural and non-sinful activities could also make one unclean. The point is that one planned and prepared to come into the presence of God.

For a selection of readings in Leviticus, read:

Leviticus 10:1-7

Leviticus 16:1-10

Leviticus 19:1-10

Leviticus 24:17-23

Leviticus 26:1-13

What does God's holiness mean to you?

How do you make yourself feel forgiven after repentance? Or do you?

Do you ever feel "unclean" coming into God's presence? Why?

Chapter Four

Numbers

Numbers rivals Leviticus for the difficulty the average reader has in getting through it. Not only are there rules and rituals, there is also a census at the beginning and at the end of the book. At the same time there are some important stories that Christians need to know.

The book of Numbers receives its name from the practice of taking a census. Unfortunately, the people of Israel completely missed the purpose of the census. The counting of the people was meant to demonstrate God's faithfulness and to be a sign of how God had prospered them in the time after the relatively small group from Jacob's family entered into Egypt centuries before. However, the people looked at their numbers as encouragement to rely on their own power rather than God's power.

The book of Numbers is a story of journeys. It begins at Mount Sinai, where they had been during the time of Leviticus. They journeyed from Sinai to Kadesh. This should have been their greatest moment as they drew near to the borders of the Promised Land. Twelve spies, one from each tribe, were sent to gather information. Ten of the spies came back with a negative report, claiming it was impossible for them to take the land. Only Caleb and Joshua encouraged the people to be obedient to God's plan. The people listened to the ten spies and God punished them with forty years of wandering. The people changed their mind and attempted to take the land, only to discover that God had removed his blessing and they were horribly defeated.

The famous forty years of wandering takes place all around the area of Kadesh. After that faithless generation had passed away, the people of Israel travelled to the plains of Moab to once again attempt to enter the Promised Land. It was at this time that Aaron, Moses' brother, died. The Israelites had some military victories and even possessed some land across the Jordan from the Promised Land (Transjordan), in which two and a half tribes settled.

The people of the surrounding nations began to see Israel as a threat. Some tried to attack Israel and others such as the king of Moab, hired the pagan prophet Balaam as a spiritual assault on Israel. Despite attacks from outsiders and rebellion from within, nothing could stop God's plan for the people of Israel to take the Promised Land.

For a selection of readings in Numbers, read:

Numbers 6:22-27

Numbers 13:17-14:12

Numbers 17:1-13

Numbers 21:4-9

Numbers 22:21-41

What kind of journey have you found yourself on since becoming a Christian?

Have you ever encountered strong opposition to your faith?

Do you sometimes have trouble believing God's promises?

Chapter Five

Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy literally means the second Law. It is not really a second Law, as there is little that is original in the book, but rather is a second reading of the Law. The first reading of the Law was forty years earlier at Mount Sinai. As the new generation of Israelites was about to enter the Promised Land, Moses reminded them of the Law that was given to their parents.

The message of Deuteronomy is very important: God does not have grandchildren. It was not good enough that the previous generation had received the Law. The new generation needed to be reminded of what God had done and what he expected.

There are a number of important themes found in Deuteronomy. One is the uniqueness of God. There is one God and one place to worship God. The Shema (Hebrew for “hear”) found in Deuteronomy 6:4 is the basis of Jewish monotheism to this day. The importance of love is also important in Deuteronomy. Jesus’ command to love God as the summary of the Law comes from Deuteronomy 6:5. There is a strong emphasis on obedience as well. Deuteronomy stresses the idea of curses for disobedience and blessings for obedience. This is part of the truth but the book of Job reminds us that things are much more complicated than that.

Up until this point, Moses had been the hero of the story. Unfortunately, Moses is not permitted to enter the Promised Land. Moses’ ministry concluded with his encouragement of the people to obey and his appointment of Joshua as his successor. Moses died without seeing the full results of his work and God alone was at his funeral.

Many years later in the time of King Josiah, a book was discovered in the Temple. The discovery and reading of this book created a spiritual revival in Judea. Scholars believe that it was the book of Deuteronomy that had become lost for centuries that was discovered. You can read about this in 2 Kings 22-23.

For a selection of readings in Deuteronomy, read:

Deuteronomy 5:1-22

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Deuteronomy 17:14-20

Deuteronomy 18:14-22

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

How important is it to pass on the story of what God has done to future generations?
Why?

Does God curse disobedience and bless obedience today? How?

Why is Moses' death before entering the Promised Land an encouragement for us in
our own work for God?

Chapter Six

Historical Books

The Jewish order to the Old Testament is different than that of our Christian order. The Hebrew Bible is divided into the Torah, Prophets and Writings. The books that we include in our historical section are divided between the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) and the Writings (Ruth, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther and Chronicles). The historical books tell the story of Israel's entrance into the Promised Land, their disobedience, exile and restoration after the seventy years of exile. Deuteronomy ends with Moses' assertion that Israel will be disobedient and that God will exile them as means of correction but also with the promise of restoration.

Joshua

In the book of Joshua we rapidly move from the topic of law to the topic of war as the Israelites finally cross over into the Promised Land.

Moses was not able to enter the Promised Land but his successor Joshua was able to. "Joshua" (Hebrew form of the Greek Jesus) means "Lord's Salvation." The crossing of the Jordan River was a momentous occasion as the Israelites finally entered the land that God gave to Abraham centuries before.

The first great battle was that of Jericho. In some ways, the hardest part of the battle was being obedient to God's strange plan but in the end God was faithful and the Israelites took this seemingly impenetrable city. Fresh from the excitement of their great victory, the Israelites experienced a horrible defeat. The reason was that Achan had taken some of the forbidden loot. This was a difficult lesson in full obedience. The Gibeonites tricked the Israelites into making a covenant in which they were saved but entered into slavery.

After the victories in the south and the north, the two and a half tribes returned to their families across the Jordan. They immediately erected an altar. The rest of the tribes heard of this and marshaled their troops to destroy the two and a half tribes in punishment for breaking the law of having only one place of worship. In the end, it

was all a big misunderstanding as the two and half tribes erected the altar not to offer sacrifices but as a monument of remembrance for what God had done.

The most difficult part of Joshua is the warfare. It is not just that there is fighting but entire cities were wiped out, men, women and children. Was God's plan really genocide? Three things must be noted. First of all, the Canaanites were not innocent. The Bible tells us that God waited until their sin reached a certain point before he allowed the Israelites to enter the land. Secondly, there was a place of mercy as we see in the cases of Rahab of Jericho and the Gibeonites. Finally, the plan was always the land and never genocide. The Israelites did not do this with pagan people outside the land. The emphasis was not on the people dying but the people fleeing the land in fear. The Israelites did not pursue them as they were only interested in the land. We still likely struggle with this and yet we must let God be God and remember that was a plan for a past age and that God no longer sanctions any holy war.

For a selection of readings in Joshua, read:

Joshua 1:1-9

Joshua 6:1-20

Joshua 7:1-26

Joshua 22:10-34

Joshua 24:14-27

Do you ever feel as if God wants you to do something strange? Do you do it?

Do you ever feel as if you are hiding something from God?

Have you made the decision for your family to serve the Lord?

Chapter Seven

Judges

Judges were a class of leaders that filled the gap between the time of Moses and Joshua and the time of the kings. They were a combination of military commander, charismatic leader and legal authority.

Although Judges is very different in style from Joshua, the two are closely connected. While at times sounding victorious, Joshua does reveal that the Israelites were not completely obedient in clearing the land of the Canaanites. Judges tells the story of what happens as a result of Israel's disobedience.

There is a very definite cycle presented in Judges: 1) the people suffer and call out to God, 2) God responds and sends a saviour, 3) life becomes easier and the people fall back into disobedience, 4) God responds to the people's disobedience by allowing suffering.

Notice that the various judges do not receive the same length of treatment in this book. Some receive only a few verses giving us next to no information and others receive chapters of accounts of their adventures. What is important is not how famous they are but how God used them. In God's eyes, Ibzan is just as important as Samson.

It is also important to notice how different each judge is. God does not have just one model of who he can use and his choice often has their share of weaknesses. Deborah is the only female judge and the fact that she is given one of the most positive accounts should challenge us on how God uses women in leadership. Gideon is one of the most famous judges and receives one of the longest treatments. God demonstrated his power by getting Gideon to make the army smaller so that there would be no doubt as to who was responsible. Unfortunately, Gideon did not end well and fell into idolatry and his son became one of the worst leaders of Israel. Jephthah was victorious in battle but made a rash vow that led to great pain. Samson is perhaps the most famous judge in the Bible. In many ways, Samson was a surprising choice for God to use. Samson was a womanizer and a drunkard and he made many mistakes. It took some horrible events to change Samson and ironically Samson only got to the point where he could truly see once he was physically blinded.

Samson ended up having his greatest victory at the time of his own death. It is a useful exercise to compare the leadership styles of Deborah and Samson.

The book of Judges ends with some stories of how bad things had gotten in Israel. Often skeptics will look to the story of the Levite in Judges 19 who allowed his concubine to be gang raped and murdered as an example of how bad the Bible is and why it should not be followed. However, there is nothing in Judges that suggests that God approved such action. Narration of an event is not the same as approval. The point of such a gruesome story is to set the stage of how bad things had become in Israel as a result of their disobedience to God.

For a selection of readings in Judges, read:

Judges 2:10-19

Judges 4:1-24

Judges 7:1-25

Judges 16:1-31

Have you ever found yourself being disobedient, obedient and back to disobedient?
How can you break that cycle?

What made Deborah such a great leader?

Ruth

Ruth is one of only two books in the Bible named after a woman.

Although Ruth seems to be a quaint love story, it is actually quite radical. Ruth is not an Israelite but a Moabite, a people normally hated by the Israelites. Ruth is a story of faithfulness that is contrasted with the unfaithfulness of Judges. Ruth was faithful after the death of her husband to her mother-in-law Naomi and pledged to be faithful to the God and people of Israel. Naomi was faithful to Ruth, even though she was no longer bound to her with the death of her son. Boaz was faithful to look out for Ruth's physical needs and was faithful to his own obligation to marry Ruth, even

though marrying a Moabite would be frowned upon. The result of all this faithfulness was that Boaz and Ruth become the great grandparents of David.

Read from Ruth:

Ruth 1:1-18

Has God ever called you to do something that might make you unpopular with your friends or family?

Chapter Eight

1 & 2 Samuel

Samuel was originally one book but was divided because of the length of scrolls. Samuel is not the author, as he dies before the end of 1 Samuel, but the entire book lives in the shadow of Samuel's ministry.

The people of Israel demanded a king, for the same reason many children ask for things, because everyone else had one. God gave them what they asked for and in the process taught them the danger of demanding their own way. In this process, God used Samuel who was a priest, prophet and the last of the judges.

Samuel anointed Saul as Israel's first king. Saul looked the part as he was tall and looked like royalty. Unfortunately, his inner self did not match his outward appearance. Although Saul began as a strong king, he lacked the patience, character and integrity to truly follow God. Saul committed disobedience after disobedience until God finally rejected Saul and chose another.

Samuel was called to anoint a new king, even though Saul still sat on the throne. Samuel went to the house of Jesse to choose one of his sons, but God rejected all that Jesse brought before Samuel. Finally, Jesse presented David, one who on the outside did not look like he deserved consideration and yet it was he that God accepted as the next king of Israel.

David's reign would have to wait as Saul was still technically the king. But David had opportunities to prove himself. In the battle against Goliath, David armed only with a slingshot and his faith in God, proved himself in battle. David quickly rose through the ranks but also began to arouse jealousy in King Saul. In this, David became good friends with Saul's son Jonathan, who should have been the next king. Jonathan chose his loyalty to his friend over his personal rights to the throne.

Eventually, Saul's jealousy of David broke out into violence. Saul actively pursued David and sought his death but David would not fight and only hid from his persecutor. Saul made a few half-hearted repentances toward David but his jealousy always overtook his meager efforts. David had a number of opportunities to kill Saul and take the throne by force but David always respected Saul's position as the God chosen king and was content to wait for Saul's natural death.

Saul was eventually killed in battle and David became king, initially only of his own tribe of Judah. Soon, the rest of Israel embraced David as their king. This disagreement between the northern and southern tribes previewed the eventual division of the kingdom. David moved his throne to Jerusalem which he captured from the Jebusites.

David was a good king and it was by his standard that all the later kings of Judah would be judged. But David made his share of mistakes. One of the greatest mistakes was his adultery with Bathsheba and his attempted coverup by killing her husband Uriah. David repented (see Psalm 51) but there were consequences such as the death of the child conceived. Although David was a success on the battlefield, he was a failure in the home. His family life fell apart and one of his sons even tried to take the kingdom by force. Still, David held a special place with God and he was known as a man after God's own heart.

For a selection of readings in 1 & 2 Samuel, read:

1 Samuel 3:1-21

1 Samuel 16:1-13

1 Samuel 17:17-51

2 Samuel 6:16-23

2 Samuel 11:1-27

Have you ever felt as if God was speaking to you? How did he do it?

What giants are you facing in your life right now?

How could God call David a man after his own heart after the way he sinned with Bathsheba and Uriah? (See Psalm 51)

Chapter Nine

1 & 2 Kings

Like Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings were originally one book. They tell the story of the kings of Israel and Judah.

Solomon is a king that is almost as famous as David. Unfortunately, Solomon was not near the man of God that his father was. David committed his share of sins but his loyalty to God was never in question. Solomon's loyalty to God can be questioned as he married foreign wives against the law of God and worshipped their gods. Solomon asked for and received wisdom from God but did not use that wisdom appropriately. Ironically, the reign of Solomon is marked by a great lack of wisdom. The seeds were planted during Solomon's reign that led to the eventual division of the kingdom.

Solomon's son Rehoboam ruled very unjustly and the people were prepared to rebel. Rehoboam was able to hold on to the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin (collectively called Judah), while the northern ten tribes turned to a man named Jeroboam and became known as Israel. God gave Jeroboam the chance to have a lasting dynasty as he promised David, if only Jeroboam was faithful to God. Jeroboam rebelled against God and as a result the northern kingdom of Israel went from dynasty to dynasty.

The separation of David and Solomon's kingdom into Israel and Judah became permanent. Both Israel and Judah were generally faithless toward God. Judah had a few faithful and good kings but Israel had none. Please note that the term "Jews" refers to someone from the kingdom of Judah and not any Israelite. The pattern of Kings is to treat one king (whether northern or southern) and then to treat the next king (whether northern or southern) who began to reign. It can become confusing and it may be helpful to make a chart as to which king was from what kingdom. A general (though not absolute) principle is that the longer a king reigned, the better they were and the shorter a king reigned, the worse they were.

Some of the most interesting parts of Kings are the Elijah and Elisha cycles. Elijah was a prophet who operated in Israel during the reign of the very evil king Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Elijah's purpose was to prove that the Lord was God. Elijah had a great victory against the prophets of Baal (a Canaanite god) on Mount Carmel but fell into a depression and fled to Mount Horeb (Sinai). Elijah made Elisha his successor before leaving for heaven without dying. Elisha had a great ministry full of miracles and signs.

Two of the good kings of Judah were Hezekiah and Josiah. The book that was found in the Temple during the reign of Josiah is thought to be Deuteronomy. As great as Hezekiah and Josiah were, the kings that followed were not faithful to God and their reforms were quickly forgotten.

The northern tribe of Israel eventually fell to the Assyrians and the people were exiled, while people of other nations were brought in. This is the reason that the Samaritans were hated by the Jews in the New Testament, they were mix of faithless Israelites and pagan foreigners. Eventually the Assyrians were taken over by the Babylonians and the Babylonians conquered Judah. They destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem that Solomon had built and exiled the Jews to Babylon.

For a selection of readings in 1 & 2 Kings, read:

1 Kings 3:1-28

1 Kings 18:16-40

2 Kings 5:1-14

2 Kings 22:8-20

2 Kings 25:1-12

What do you think true wisdom is?

What kind of faith did it take for Elijah to stand before the prophets of Baal?

How could the book of Deuteronomy get lost in the Temple? Is there a way in which we lose God's Word?

Chapter Ten

1 & 2 Chronicles

Chronicles basically gives another account of the events described in Samuel and Kings.

Many Christians are not sure what to do with Chronicles with all of its overlap with Samuel and Kings. To be fair, the Jews were not sure what to do with Chronicles either. In the Hebrew Bible, Samuel and Kings are placed among the Former Prophets, while Chronicles is placed among the Writings. In fact when Jesus speaks of the martyrdoms of Abel and Zechariah (Matthew 23:35), he is speaking of the martyrdoms found in the first (Genesis) and last (2 Chronicles) books of the Hebrew Bible.

The question is: why is Chronicles included in the Bible if it is a re-presentation of the material found in Samuel and Kings? What we must remember is that Chronicles is not a simple repetition of Samuel and Kings, Chronicles comes at the material from a different perspective.

Samuel and Kings were written from the perspective of the destruction of Jerusalem and the beginning of the exile to Babylon. It was a record to remind the people as they went off to exile what faithfulness looked like from both positive and negative examples. Chronicles was written from the perspective of the end of the exile and there were a whole new set of concerns for the people. Chronicles was written to encourage the people as they reentered the Promised Land and attempted to reestablish their society. It was a discouraging and difficult time as the land had been neglected and they were surrounded by their enemies. Chronicles was written to give the people the encouragement they need to get things back on track.

There are a few differences between Samuel/Kings and Chronicles that reflect this purpose. Chronicles begins with some lengthy genealogies that the reader is tempted to skip. The purpose of these is to remind the people that God took a small and struggling group of people and made them into a great nation. The implication is that God could do the same thing in their own day. Also, unlike Kings which alternates between the kings of Israel and Judah, Chronicles deals only with the southern kingdom of Judah. It is not that the northern kingdom of Israel was not important. Israel appears sometimes as it interacts with Judah. However, Chronicles is more a vision for the future than a history of the past. Israel had permanently disappeared in the Assyrian exile. It is Judah that the people needed to work toward

reestablishing. Finally, Chronicles has a much more positive view of King David than Samuel and Kings. Samuel and Kings speak highly of David and hold him up as the measure by which all later kings are compared to. However, they do not hesitate to mention David's failings, such as his adultery with Bathsheba. Chronicles, on the other hand, leaves out all the mistakes of David and focuses on his achievements. This is not a simple whitewashing of history but an understanding that there is a time to learn from our leader's mistakes and there is another time when our confidence in leadership must be strengthened by focusing on the positive.

For a selection of readings in 1 & 2 Chronicles, read:

1 Chronicles 17:16-27

1 Chronicles 29:10-19

2 Chronicles 7:11-22

2 Chronicles 24:20-22

2 Chronicles 36:15-23

Have you ever looked at the same event differently because of a change of perspective?

Do you ever have to be reminded of God's faithfulness to be encouraged in difficult times?

Do you think of King David as a mostly positive figure or as a mix of positive and negative? Is David a hero or a human?

Chapter Eleven

Ezra and Nehemiah

In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra-Nehemiah was one book because of their short length and their common theme and time frame.

Just as the Babylonians conquered the Assyrians, the Persians conquered the Babylonians. While the Assyrians and Babylonians ruled by fear and terror, the Persians kept peace by having a positive relationship with their subjects. As a result, the Persians under King Cyrus issued a decree that the Jewish exiles could return to their homeland. This was seventy years after the Babylonian exile.

Not all the Jews left Babylon. Even at the time of Jesus there would have been a large Jewish population in Babylon. The Jews in Babylon had prospered and it was a difficult decision for them to leave and return to the Promised Land where they would face hunger and poverty and danger. Some of the important people that made the trip were Jeshua (same name as Joshua and Jesus) who was a priest, and Zerubbabel, who was a descendant of David who became the governor but was never king.

The first thing the returning exiles did was rebuild the altar and the Temple so that they could properly worship God. In this they had to face the hostility of the surrounding peoples as well as the fickle will of the Persian rulers. Eventually the Temple was rebuilt.

The people realized that they were struggling and so they sent for Ezra the scribe to teach them the Law of Moses. One of the problems that the Jews faced was that of intermarriage. This was not a racial issue (although the priests and Levites were expected to marry only within their own tribe) but about spiritual faithfulness. There are examples in Israel's history of positive intermarriages (e.g. Ruth and Boaz), but most often it led to spiritual corruption (e.g. Solomon and his many foreign wives; Ahab and Jezebel).

Nehemiah was a Jew who was a cupbearer to the Persian king. Nehemiah had become depressed at the unfortunate state of the Jewish community in Jerusalem. The Persian king had compassion and allowed Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls (destroyed walls were a great sign of shame in ancient days as well as a terrible danger).

Rebuilding of the walls began but was soon disrupted by local opposition. The surrounding people were threatened by the possibility of Jerusalem having rebuilt

walls. Nehemiah faced and defeated this opposition with courage and wisdom. Eventually the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt.

It was not just the physical walls that had to be rebuilt. The people had fallen into spiritual ignorance. As a result, the people were gathered and Ezra read the entire Law of Moses to them. Levites walked among the people and explained the difficult parts to all those who needed help.

Nehemiah, in partnership with Ezra and others, worked hard for the rebuilding of the community, not just physically but spiritually and socially as well. Nehemiah's final words left with us are "Remember me, O my God, for good."

For a selection of readings in Ezra and Nehemiah, read:

Ezra 1:1-11

Ezra 6:13-22

Nehemiah 1:1-11

Nehemiah 8:1-8

Have you ever wept at the state of the Christian church?

What impact does it have on you to hear the Bible read?

Esther

Esther is one of only two books in the Bible named after a woman.

Just as many Jews prospered under the Babylonians, so did many under the Persians. Esther is the story of a family of Jews who had important roles among the Persians. Despite the prosperity, there were some, such as Haman, who despised the Jews.

In this story, the Persian king desired a new wife after removing his previous wife. Esther was chosen as the new queen, although she hid her identity as a Jew. Unaware that the new queen was Jewish, Haman set into motion a plot to have all Jews in the Persian empire killed. With her cousin Mordecai's encouragement, Esther took the brave stand of bringing this to the king's attention, thus saving her people.

The book of Esther is unique in that it is the only book of the Bible that does not mention God. This is perhaps a reason that Esther is the only Old Testament book not found at Qumran among the Dead Sea Scrolls and why later writers added to the book, the additions of which can be found in the Apocrypha. It is possible that the absence of God is deliberate. There are times when God seems silent and yet when we step out in faith we find that God continues to work miracles.

Read from Esther:

Esther 4:1-17

Does it ever feel as if God is silent in your life?

Chapter Twelve

Wisdom Books

What Christians call the wisdom books made up the backbone (along with some of what we would consider historical and prophetic books) of the third major division of the Hebrew Bible: The Writings. These books, although containing historical allusions, are really about timeless truths that are not bound by a historical context. Each of them in their own way represent the lifelong quest for wisdom. What is beautiful about these books is that each quest is different. The frantic quest for understanding by Job in the midst of suffering is different from the practical reflection of Proverbs or the passionate worship of the Psalms. What binds them all together is that true wisdom is found in God alone.

Job

Job represents the classic struggle to understand where God is in the midst of suffering.

The book of Job begins with a conversation in the throne room of heaven. God, surrounded by his angels, was approached by Satan. Satan (which means “accuser”) appears not as the incarnation of evil but as an angelic accuser of humanity that tests their faithfulness. God proudly presented the example of Job who was known to be faithful to God. Satan countered with the comment that it was easy for Job to be faithful because he lived an extremely prosperous life. Under those circumstances, anyone could be faithful to God. To prove Satan wrong, God gave Satan permission to take those things away.

Job, unaware of the debates going on in heaven, was devastated when his wealth, family and health were all taken away. A number of Job’s friends and his wife approached Job in his suffering. The understanding of Job’s “comforters” is that suffering was directly related to sin. The only answer to Job’s suffering was that he must have sinned and that he only needed to repent. Job, knowing that he had not sinned in a manner deserving this suffering, held on to his faith in God. Even though all his experience and even his wife’s advice suggested that he should give up on God, Job stubbornly clung to his faith.

Eventually God intervened in Job's life. Having proved Satan wrong, God chastised Job's friends and praised Job. When Job asked God the reason for his suffering, God did not tell him but rather reminded him that God is far above the understanding of humanity.

For a selection of readings in Job, read:

Job 1:6-12

Job 1:20-22

Job 19:25-27

Job 40:1-7

Job 42:10-17

Do you ever wonder about the hardships you have experienced in life?

Do you wonder if there is something going on in the spiritual realm?

What kind of faith does it take to endure suffering?

Chapter Thirteen

Psalms

The Psalms were the hymn book of the Israelites.

The Psalms have been enjoyed by people throughout the generations. This is seen in how often the Psalms are included with editions of the New Testament. The Psalms are not an attempt to describe history or even theology. The Psalms express something deeper: the longing that people have for a God who will protect them in the midst of a difficult life. There are different types of Psalms, including: laments, thanksgiving Psalms, hymns of praise, salvation history Psalms, Psalms of celebration and affirmation, wisdom Psalms and songs of trust. Many of the Psalms are attributed to King David and some of them can be connected to certain periods of his life (e.g. Psalm 51 with his repentance after his adultery with Bathsheba). However, there are additional psalmists as well, including Moses, Solomon and a number of others. The Psalms are divided into five books. They are loved both because of the beauty of the praise and the brutal honesty of difficult life can get.

For a selection of readings in Psalms, read:

Psalm 22

Psalm 23

Psalm 51

Psalm 121

Psalm 139

Do you ever find it difficult to worship when life gets difficult?

When you pray, do you include confession and thanksgiving alongside your petitions?

How do you think writing these Psalms helped King David?

Chapter Fourteen

Proverbs

Proverbs is a practical book of wisdom, attributed mostly to Solomon.

Often times religion is accused of being so heavenly minded that it is no earthly good. The book of Proverbs reminds us that biblical faith is meant to be relevant and practical. Proverbs covers a number of subjects including money, relationships and work. Most of the Proverbs are attributed to Solomon, who was known for his wisdom, but others are written by different authors.

For a selection of readings in Proverbs, read:

Proverbs 1:1-7

Proverbs 3:5-6

Proverbs 6:16-19

Do you feel as if the Christian faith is practical to your life?

Ecclesiastes

At first glance, Ecclesiastes seems to be the most pessimistic book in the Bible.

The author takes on life like an experiment. He tries a life of sacrifice and discipline, and he tries a life of abundance and pleasure. The author discovers that all people in every state of life are all in the same boat. In the end, the only thing we can do is to “fear God and keep his commandments.” (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

Read from Ecclesiastes:

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

What encouragement do you find in the fact that there is a time for everything?

Song of Songs

The Song of Songs or Song of Solomon is one of the strangest books in the Bible.

This book seems to describe the passionate love between a man and a woman. Some people have felt this is not spiritual enough. Some Jewish traditions teach this is an allegory about God and Israel and some Christian traditions teach this is an allegory about Christ and the Church. Perhaps these interpretations are forcing something that does not belong to the text. This book may simply be a celebration of the love between a man and a woman.

Read from Song of Songs:

Song of Songs 2:16-17

How do you think God feels about the passionate love between a man and a woman?
Why does the church not talk about this?

Chapter Fifteen

Prophetic Books

One of the most popular sections of the Old Testament is that of the prophets. In the Hebrew Bible there are former and latter prophets. The former prophets are what we would call the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. The latter prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve. The Twelve are what we call the minor prophets. They are called “minor” not in terms of importance but in size relative to the major prophets. It must always be kept in mind that there are two types of prophecy: foretelling and forthtelling. Foretelling is predictive prophecy. Forthtelling is when a prophet calls the people to repent of their sin. There are many more examples of forthtelling than foretelling.

Isaiah

Isaiah is one of the longest books in the Bible and one of the most often quoted books in the New Testament.

Isaiah (whose name means “The Lord Saves” lived in the 8th century BC and was a contemporary of other Old Testament prophets Amos, Hosea and Micah. Isaiah wrote his book in the difficult times of the menacing Assyrian empire. The Assyrians eventually conquered, destroyed and exiled the northern kingdom of Israel. The Assyrians also began to terrorize Jerusalem and the southern kingdom of Judah. The Babylonians were beginning to exert themselves toward the Assyrians and Isaiah understood that one day they would destroy Judah. Isaiah’s prophecies are filled with descriptions of exile and the promised restoration.

One of the reasons that Isaiah is so important is that he speaks so much about the Old Testament understanding of the Messiah (Christ). Looking back from what we know about Jesus, we can see many of the details of his birth and death.

For a selection of readings in Isaiah, read:

Isaiah 6:1-8

Isaiah 9:1-7

Isaiah 40:28-31

Isaiah 53:1-12

Isaiah 61:1-3

What does Isaiah teach us about a true experience with God?

How do you feel about seeing God's plans for the Messiah set out centuries before the appearance of Jesus?

What does it mean to you that the Messiah had to suffer so much?

Chapter Sixteen

Jeremiah

Jeremiah is sometimes known as the “weeping prophet” as he had a very difficult ministry.

Jeremiah lived in the 7th and 6th centuries BC, during the time of the Babylonian aggression toward Judah. Jeremiah was not a very popular prophet. At the time, Judah was trying to figure out a way to survive the Babylonian expansion. In the midst of that, Jeremiah was preaching a message of surrender and submission to the Babylonians. Jeremiah even wrote a letter to some exiles encouraging them not to seek to return but to set down roots in their exile in Babylon. To some, Jeremiah’s message was unpatriotic at best and traitorous at worst. However, Jeremiah understood that God was using the Babylonians and that God would return the exiles after seventy years. Jeremiah holds in common with Isaiah the message of exile and restoration.

For a selection of readings in Jeremiah, read:

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Jeremiah 18:1-12

Jeremiah 23:1-8

Jeremiah 29:10-14

Have you ever had to give an unpopular message?

Are you able to endure difficulties when you know there is something good at the end?

Lamentations

The author of Lamentations is anonymous but Jewish tradition attributes it to Jeremiah.

The setting is that of the destroyed city of Jerusalem, the holiest city in Israel and Judah. This book describes the weeping over the destruction, a funeral lament over the terrible loss. In the midst of his grief, however, the author found hope in God.

Read from Lamentations:

Lamentations 3:13-26

Are you able to see God's mercies new every morning?

Chapter Seventeen

Ezekiel

Ezekiel was a priest and a prophet who wrote while in exile in Babylon.

Ezekiel is a strange book for many people with his bizarre visions. Some have even tried to find evidence for UFOs in chapter one. What must be remembered is that Ezekiel is trying to describe heavenly visions in human language. It is like trying to explain colour to a person born blind. Do not get focused on the details but get a sense of the majesty of being in the presence of God.

For many people, being sent to Babylon would seem to disqualify one from being a Jewish prophet. However, God had a purpose for Ezekiel while in exile. This was a dark time for the Jewish people and they needed a sense of what God was doing. Like Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel gave many prophecies about the exile and the incredible restoration that God had planned.

One of the questions that the people had was about how the Babylonians were able to destroy the Temple. If God dwelt in the Temple, it should have been impervious to any Babylonian attack. God gave Ezekiel a vision of how God's glory left the Temple because of the people's sin before the attack.

The famous passage about the valley of the dry bones was not a reflection upon the afterlife. The vision of the dry bones coming back to life was a picture of what God was going to do with his people.

For a selection of readings in Ezekiel, read:

Ezekiel 1:1-28

Ezekiel 3:18-19

Ezekiel 10:1-22

Ezekiel 28:25-26

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Do you ever feel discouraged when you are far from home?

What do you think heaven looks like?

What does the vision of the dry bones say about your life?

Chapter Eighteen

Daniel

Daniel is one of the most popular books of the Old Testament but it is more complex than people think.

Daniel and his friends were sent to Babylon during the exile. The purpose of their exile was not to punish them but to train them to work for the Babylonians. The Babylonians knew that if their empire was to survive, they needed the best and the brightest of all the conquered nations working for them.

While Daniel and his friends prospered in Babylon to a certain degree, there was incredible pressure for them to compromise their faith. Their courage and faithfulness in the face of persecution would be an example to followers of God for centuries after.

Daniel, like Joseph many years before him, was gifted at interpreting dreams. God used Daniel to speak to the Babylonians and to warn them. Daniel also has a number of apocalyptic visions that spoke of the future, including the appearance of Alexander the Great. Daniel spoke of a “Son of Man,” the same title that Jesus identified as himself with. Daniel provides one of the clearest biblical descriptions of the resurrection of believers.

For a selection of readings in Daniel, read:

Daniel 3:13-30

Daniel 6:10-24

Daniel 7:19-14

Daniel 9:4-19

Daniel 12:1-4

Have you ever wished that you could know the future? Why?

Why would Daniel, who is described as righteous and without sin, repent with his people in his prayer in Daniel 9?

How does the promise of an afterlife help you in this life?

Chapter Nineteen

Hosea

Hosea was a prophet who was asked to pay a higher price than most.

Hosea ministered in the northern kingdom of Israel before the Assyrian destruction. It was a time of outward prosperity but inward corruption.

Some prophets were asked to do some strange things to illustrate to the people what was happening on a spiritual level. Hosea was commanded to marry an unfaithful woman named Gomer to illustrate what Israel had been doing to God. By commanding Hosea to love and forgive his unfaithful wife, God was demonstrating the mercy that he was willing to show to Israel.

For a selection of readings in Hosea, read:

Hosea 1:1-2:1

Hosea 3:1-5

Hosea 6:1-3

Have you ever been unfaithful to God?

Do you have assurance that God will forgive you?

Joel

Joel is an important book, especially regarding what God would do in the New Testament.

Joel prophesied in the southern kingdom of Judah. It is unknown if the people suffered under a literal plague of locusts or if this was an image for another disaster.

Joel spoke of an event in the last days when the Holy Spirit would be given to all people. This was a radical prophecy as the Spirit was considered to be available only

for a select group of prophets. Joel stated that God would give the Spirit to all, men and women, old and young, rich and poor. This prophecy was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost as described in Acts 2. This suggests that the last days began two thousand years ago.

For a selection of readings in Joel, read:

Joel 1:1-4

Joel 2:28-32

What does it mean to you that you have the Holy Spirit?

Chapter Twenty

Amos

Amos prophesied during a prosperous time in Israel.

Sometimes it is during the times of prosperity and abundance that spirituality is weakest. Repentance during prosperity is not a popular message as people do not feel the need to rely on God.

Amos was brilliant in his call to repentance. He began with prophecies of judgment against all the hostile nations surrounding Israel. To each of these the people would have given a hearty “amen.” Then Amos included Judah which would have made the Israelites slightly uncomfortable. Finally, Amos reported God’s judgment against Israel, indicating that they were as guilty as the other pagan nations. This would have provoked a strong reaction.

For a selection of readings in Amos, read:

Amos 2:6-8

Amos 3:1-8

Amos 9:11-15

Do you feel closer to God in times of need or in times of abundance?

Is it easier to point fingers at others than yourself? Why?

Obadiah

Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament, having only one chapter.

The book of Genesis described the birth of the twins Jacob and Esau. Jacob became the father of the Israelites and Esau became the father of the Edomites. There was continual conflict between these two nations. During a time of invasion, the

Edomites encouraged and contributed to the suffering of God's people. This sealed their fate and Obadiah prophesied God's judgment upon them.

For a selection of readings in Obadiah, read:

Obadiah 10-14

Obadiah 17-21

Do you think withholding help is as bad as actually harming someone? Why?

Chapter Twenty-One

Jonah

Jonah is the most well known of the minor prophets.

Jonah was prepared to bring God's word to anywhere in Israel or Judah. When God told Jonah to preach in Nineveh, he was horrified. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the nation that would eventually destroy Israel. Jonah decided to go the opposite way but had his mind changed by an encounter with a fish. Jonah went to Nineveh and preached his message, feeling confident that he would at least be able to see Nineveh destroyed. God responded to Nineveh's repentance with mercy. This offended Jonah who could not imagine how God could spare a people that he hated so much. This book is about Israel as much as it is about Jonah.

For a selection of readings in Jonah, read:

Jonah 1:1-17

Jonah 3:1-10

Jonah 4:5-11

Do you expect God to dislike the same people you dislike?

Are there certain people that you avoid? Why?

Micah

Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah.

The basic message of Micah is that of social justice. Throughout history the rich have taken advantage of the poor. God is not an unbiased spectator. Micah called the people on their sin and evil deeds and announced the judgment of God.

For a selection of readings in Micah, read:

Micah 2:1-5

Micah 6:6-8

In modern terms, what does God expect of you?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Nahum

Jonah spoke of the saving of Nineveh, Nahum speaks of the destruction of Nineveh.

Despite a temporary revival at the time of Jonah, Nineveh soon returned to their evil ways. Assyria was the major superpower that all the small nations feared. Nahum reminded the people that there was a greater power than Assyria: God. The Assyrians would pay for their crimes. Eventually, Assyria would fall to the Babylonians.

For a selection of readings in Nahum, read:

Nahum 1:2-3

Nahum 2:1-13

Is it distressing or comforting that God has an angry side to him?

Habakkuk

Habakkuk prophesied during the last days of the northern kingdom of Israel.

Why do bad things happen? Is it acceptable to even ask that question? Habakkuk did not hesitate to ask God why things were so bad. Habakkuk was particularly concerned about the impending destruction of Israel. God gave some answers but ultimately “the just shall live by his faith.”

For a selection of readings in Habakkuk, read:

Habakkuk 1:2-4

Habakkuk 2:2-5

Habakkuk 3:17-19

Do you feel comfortable asking God the “why” question?

What does it mean for the just to live by faith?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Zephaniah

Zephaniah's prophecy may have influenced the revival during the time of King Josiah.

Zephaniah continued the common prophetic theme of calling people on their sin. All actions have consequences and evil will not be overlooked. Outward respectability is not substitute for inner integrity. The people's sin will lead to punishment and correction but restoration will follow.

For a selection of readings in Zephaniah, read:

Zephaniah 2:1-3

Zephaniah 3:8-10

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Why do the prophets keep preaching the same message?

What message would they preach to our society?

Haggai

Haggai lived after the exile when the people were trying to rebuild their lives in Judah.

It was difficult work to rebuild after the terrible Babylonian destruction decades previous. The people needed the prophetic encouragement of Haggai. Some of the important themes include rebuilding the Temple and obeying the governor Zerubbabel (a descendant of King David) and the high priest Joshua. People should not judge based on the present difficulties but on the future promises of God.

For a selection of readings in Haggai, read:

Haggai 1:12-15

Haggai 2:1-9

Are the good days behind you or ahead of you?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Zechariah

Zechariah is the longest of the minor prophets.

Zechariah, like Haggai, lived after the exile and during the rebuilding of the Temple. Zechariah encouraged the people to continue to rebuild, even in the face of discouragement. One of the ways Zechariah did this was with a number of apocalyptic visions. Zechariah even gave some information about the coming Messiah.

For a selection of readings in Zechariah, read:

Zechariah 3:6-10

Zechariah 12:10-14

Zechariah 14:1-9

Do you have trouble completing tasks?

Do promises of the future help you in the present?

Malachi

Although in the Hebrew Bible, 2 Chronicles was the final book, in the Christian Old Testament, Malachi is the final book and is seen as the last Old Testament prophet.

Malachi lived during the time of Nehemiah and he was concerned about internal corruption. Leaders, including the priests, had disobeyed God. Malachi called the people to repent and to purify their worship. Worship is not just about human rituals but is rather interaction with God and deserves respect. Malachi was particularly concerned with offerings to God that were only second rate. Malachi also predicted the return of Elijah. This prediction became an important part of Jewish tradition.

Both John the Baptist and Jesus were seen as candidates for a returned Elijah. In a way, John was connected with Elijah in that John continued the ministry of Elijah, but they were two separate individuals.

For a selection of readings in Malachi, read:

Malachi 3:8-10

Malachi 4:1-6

Do you think that you have ever robbed God? How?

Chapter Twenty-Five

New Testament

After centuries of prophetic silence following Malachi, the windows of heaven opened once more. The author of Hebrews describes the situation in this way: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.” (Hebrews 1:1–2) The appearance of Jesus is much more important than just the changing of how we reckon years. Jesus was God’s ultimate act of salvation and it is Jesus who defines us as Christians.

We speak of the New Testament not in derision of the Old Testament. The New does not replace the Old but builds on it and reshapes it. Old Testament prophet Jeremiah spoke of a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31) and that is what we have in the New Testament.

Gospels

The four Gospels are not our earliest New Testament writings but they are placed first as the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are foundational for the Christian faith. The word “gospel” means “good news” and the Greek word is the same from which we get evangelism (proclaiming the good news).

There are four Gospels in the New Testament but Matthew, Mark and Luke have more in common with each other than John. The first three are called synoptic Gospels since they can be examined side-by-side with many of the stories being similar. It is likely that Mark is the earliest Gospel and that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source (Luke tells us he used sources, Luke 1:1-4). John, while somewhat different than the synoptic Gospels, tells the same basic story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

Although there are other ancient writings called “gospels,” the four New Testament Gospels are the only ones that go back to the first century and are reliable for understanding the historical Jesus.

Matthew

Matthew was one of Jesus' inner core of twelve disciples (Matthew 9:9).

Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels. Whereas the other Gospels speak of the "kingdom of God," Matthew speaks of the "kingdom of Heaven," out of a Jewish sensitivity toward using God's name. It is in Matthew that we find the Sermon on the Mount and the familiar version of the Lord's Prayer. Matthew is especially interested in showing how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies, seeing the big picture of what God has been doing for thousands of years.

Matthew has in common with Luke, an interest in the birth of Jesus (although Matthew has an independent source). Matthew then follows the common pattern of describing Jesus' ministry, including the miracles and teachings. The Gospel concludes with a description of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel ends with the Great Commission, Jesus' marching orders to the church.

For a selection of readings in Matthew, read:

Matthew 5:1-12

Matthew 6:7-15

Matthew 25:31-46

Matthew 27:32-50

Matthew 28:1-20

Who do you think Jesus is?

Why do you think that people continue to pray the Lord's Prayer?

Does the parable of the sheep and the goats frighten you? Why or why not?

Chapter Twenty-Six

Mark

Mark is likely the earliest Gospel account of Jesus that we have.

Mark has a very distinctive style. He provides short, powerful statements and sometimes abruptly moves from one story to the next. Mark portrays Jesus as a teacher on the move. One of the things distinctive about Mark is the so-called “messianic secret.” This is a reference to Jesus’ apparent reluctance to accept the title of Christ (Messiah). As we see in Mark 1:1, Jesus is understood as both Christ and Son of God. The reluctance to be called Christ is because Jesus needed to redefine the role and separate it from the current political and military definitions. Jesus was to be the Christ whose victory was to be on the cross.

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not have a birth narrative. The original version of Mark likely ended at Mark 16:8. We therefore have an announcement of Jesus’ resurrection but no actual appearance. The author of the Gospel is likely the John Mark of Acts 12:12, 12:25 and 15:37. Tradition says that Mark received his information from Peter.

For a selection of readings in Mark, read:

Mark 1:1-11

Mark 4:35-41

Mark 13:1-13

Mark 15:33-47

Mark 16:1-8

Why did John the Baptist appear first?

Do you believe that Jesus has the power to calm storms in your life?

Why do you think Mark ended his Gospel with women who were afraid?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Luke

Luke was the only Gentile (non-Jewish) writer in the Bible.

Luke had very specific interests in presenting the Gospel of Jesus. He had an interest in his fellow Gentiles, in the poor and in women. Luke often parallels stories that feature men with stories that feature women. Luke had a love of parables and it is in this Gospel that we get such beloved parables as the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Luke is also unique among the Gospel writers in that he included a sequel with the book of Acts.

One of the reasons this Gospel is important is that the Christian church quickly moved from being a Jewish church to a Gentile church. Luke was helpful in making clear how universal the church was and the importance of breaking down barriers. Luke is mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament in Colossians 4:14, 2 Timothy 4:11 and Philemon 24. It is unlikely that the church invented Lukan authorship as aside from Luke-Acts, Luke was not an important figure in the early church.

For a selection of readings in Luke, read:

Luke 2:1-7

Luke 10:25-37

Luke 15:11-32

Luke 23:39-49

Luke 24:13:35

Why is it important that Jesus arrived as a baby?

What character are you in the Prodigal Son?

What made the thief on the cross change his mind about Jesus?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

John

While having some things in common, John is very different from the other Gospels.

Unlike Mark who starts his Gospel with John the Baptist or Matthew and Luke who begin with Jesus' birth, John begins with creation. Of all the Gospels, John has the clearest description of the divine nature of Jesus. John is very interested in signs. Miracles are not included just for the sake of interest, they are important signs that point toward who Jesus is. The style of John is much different from the other Gospels. Instead of short memorable sayings, John records some longer speeches of Jesus. John has more of an interest in Jesus' presence in Jerusalem. Unlike the other Gospels who only record one visit to Jerusalem, John records three visits. A turning point in the Gospel is the raising of Lazarus. Other Gospels record miracles of raising the dead but John provides more details about this event. Instead of rejoicing at Lazarus' return from the dead, the religious leaders saw this as going too far and requiring the arrest of Jesus. John has a complex view of Jesus. John's Jesus is clearly the divine Word who has come out of heaven, but he is also the one who takes time to make breakfast for his friends after the resurrection. John 3:16 may be one of the most well known verses in the Bible.

John provides us with his intended purpose for the book. "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30–31)

For a selection of readings in John, read:

John 1:1-18

John 3:16-21

John 11:17-44

John 19:23-30

John 21:1-14

Who or what is Jesus?

Do you believe that Jesus can conquer death?

What does it say about Jesus that in his exalted resurrection state that he cooked breakfast for his friends?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Acts

This is Luke's sequel to his Gospel.

The Gospel story did not end with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Acts records Jesus' ascension to heaven and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Thus began the Christian church.

This book is called the "Acts of the Apostles" but it is not about all the apostles. The book mainly deals with the ministry of Peter and Paul, with some stories about Stephen and Philip. In this book, we see how Peter, who made so many mistakes and often said the wrong thing in the Gospels, develops into an important and powerful leader. It is under Peter's preaching that the church is born and it is during Peter's ministry that Gentiles are brought into the church. Paul (also known as Saul) was a Pharisee who actively persecuted the church. After an encounter with the risen Christ, Paul not only converted, he became the church's greatest evangelist, missionary, theologian and leader.

In Acts, we discover how God used men and women to spread the Gospel across the Roman Empire. The story is not all about victory, as some Christian leaders were martyred. However, even in death their witness served to strengthen the church. One of the important changes we see is that the Gospel moved beyond the Jewish world and was embraced by Gentiles. The story begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome, leaving us inspired to take the Gospel to our own corner of the world.

For a selection of readings in Acts, read:

Acts 2:1-24

Acts 7:54-60

Acts 9:1-19

Acts 10:9-48

Acts 16:25-34

What role does the Holy Spirit play in your life?

Have you ever had to suffer because of your faith?

Why was Paul able to worship while he was in prison?

Chapter Thirty

Letters of Paul

The conversion of Paul was detailed for us in the book of Acts. Paul was one of the most important figures in the early church. Paul was a church planter, evangelist, theologian and most of all a pastor. Paul loved the church and sometimes that love came in the form of gentle encouragement and sometimes in the form of harsh rebuke.

One of the distinctives of Paul's ministry was his focus on the Gentiles (non-Jews). This was controversial to a certain extent because, unlike some other teachers, Paul did not require conversion to Judaism (with the sign of circumcision) before conversion to Christ.

Paul's letters follow the same general pattern of greeting, thanksgiving and body found in many ancient letters. The order of the letters in the New Testament is not chronological (the first letter was either Galatians or 1 Thessalonians) but is arranged from longest to shortest. The letters of Paul are our earliest Christian documents, predating even the Gospels.

Romans

Romans is widely considered one of Paul's most important letters and a classic of Christian theology.

Like many of the first churches, the church at Rome began with a core of Jews who recognized Jesus as the Christ. Eventually the Emperor banished the Jews (traditional and Christian) from Rome. Later, the Jewish Christians returned to find that the church had continued and even flourished among Gentile converts. This caused some tension and confusion in the relationship between the two groups of Christians.

Romans begins with a description of the human situation. No group has an advantage over the other because all of humanity is damaged by sin. The only way to overcome this is by the grace of God. Just as Abraham was considered righteous because of his faith, all people must reach out in faith and not rely on works. This is not easy as human instinct is to earn our own way. Paul works through many

important issues, including the resurrection, the role of the Spirit and the fate of Israel.

Paul's letter to the Romans deals with what it means to be right with God. Human desire is to take credit for it our selves. Paul reminds us that we are justified (declared innocent) because of God's grace alone.

For a selection of readings in Romans, read:

Romans 1:16-17

Romans 3:21-26

Romans 8:12-27

Romans 10:12-15

Romans 12:1-2

Why is it so hard to accept something without earning it?

How does the Holy Spirit help you to pray?

What does Romans say to the modern church with all its divisions?

Chapter Thirty-One

1 & 2 Corinthians

These letters continue to have great relevance to modern church and the issues faced today.

Paul wrote at least three letters to the church at Corinth, only two of which survive. Corinth was a challenging city, full of idolatry, immorality and an emphasis on worldly wisdom, especially in terms of oratory ability.

Paul's letters are responses to real life situations. Divisions were a real problem in the church. There were questions about what to do with Christians who fall into habitual sin. Is it okay to eat meat dedicated to idols as long you know those gods do not really exist? What are the gifts of the Spirit and how do they fit into the nature of the church? The resurrection receives some detailed treatment in 1 Corinthians 15. The second letter continues these important subjects. Topics include relationships between Christians and non-Christians, and the importance of generosity. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul shares some interesting personal details.

The church at Corinth valued spiritual gifts but had lost the way of love. They had fallen into divisions, aligning themselves under different leaders, and had failed in the basics of the faith. It was to this situation that Paul wrote his two letters.

For a selection of readings from 1 & 2 Corinthians, read:

1 Corinthians 12:12-20

1 Corinthians 13

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

2 Corinthians 4:7-12

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Has the church lost sight of biblical love? Have you?

How would church look if we really understood what it means to be a part of the Body of Christ?

Do you have a thorn in the flesh? Where is the grace?

Chapter Thirty-Two

Galatians

Galatians is one of the earliest letters of Paul, and one of the harshest.

Galatians was written to deal with a specific problem within a group of churches. Paul had travelled through the area, preaching a Gospel of grace. The people readily accepted that message and began to serve Christ. However, some other teachers later came through teaching that the Galatians needed to follow the Law, symbolized by circumcision if they were truly to be Christians. This created great anger within Paul, as he saw their very salvation as being in danger. According to Paul, grace plus something is no longer grace. If they went down the path of earning God's favour through works, they would have abandoned the only true Gospel.

This letter is interesting for a number of reasons. Unlike the other recipients of Paul's letters, Galatia is not a city but a region. We also see some interesting biographical information about Paul, including his interaction with Cephas (Peter). Galatians deals with some of the same topics as Romans, but was written earlier and so here we get a first draft of some of Paul's ideas. Galatians is the only one of Paul's letters that lacks a thanksgiving section, as Paul was so shocked by their error that he could think of nothing to be thankful for.

For a selection of readings from Galatians, read:

Galatians 1:6-24

Galatians 2:11-14

Galatians 3:23-29

Galatians 5:1-6

Galatians 5:19-26

Do find it difficult to receive something without earning it first?

Have you ever had to correct someone who was in error?

Do you see the fruit of the Spirit growing in your life?

Chapter Thirty-Three

Ephesians

Ephesians is a “big picture” letter that deals not with specific problems but with God’s overall plan.

Ephesians is known as a circular letter. Although we have this letter addressed to Ephesus, it likely was a form letter that was sent to a number of churches. This is evident by the lack of specific greetings in the letter. Paul deals with such issues as predestination, grace, unity in the church, relationships, spiritual warfare and prayer. The first part of the letter looks at the faith from a cosmic perspective and then moves to the practical. Paul’s theological language is extremely worshipful. Unity is a particularly important topic in this letter. The church cannot afford to weaken itself through division. As Paul explains, Christians are involved in a spiritual war and must always be prepared and ready to support one another. Some of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament are found in this letter. The reader gets a sense of the deep love that Paul had both for God and for his fellow Christians.

For a selection of readings from Ephesians, read:

Ephesians 1:15-23

Ephesians 2:8-10

Ephesians 3:14-21

Ephesians 4:25-32

Ephesians 6:10-20

Do you long for greater understanding of God?

How much does God’s grace mean to you?

How do we actually go about putting on the armour of God?

Chapter Thirty-Four

Philippians

Philippians is Paul's letter of joy.

If Galatians is Paul's most negative letter, then Philippians is Paul's most positive letter. The reader can almost see the smile on Paul's face as he writes this letter. The irony is that Paul was in jail when he wrote this letter. Yet even in his hardship, Paul was able to see reasons to rejoice. For Paul, the Christian can rejoice at any time because of who Jesus is and what he does for us.

This is the only letter in which Paul does not assert his apostleship at the beginning. While others may have questioned his role as an apostle, Paul's relationship with the Philippians was such that it was not an issue. In Philippians, we get one of the clearest pictures of the divinity of Jesus. Central to Christianity is the understanding of Jesus as both God and man. This letter presents not only the theology but also the practical implications for the Christian in terms of humility. Paul also wrote about the importance of contentment. Christianity does not proclaim the virtue of either wealth or poverty. The Christian should be content with what they have and be able to rejoice "for richer and for poorer."

For a selection of readings from Philippians, read:

Philippians 1:12-24

Philippians 1:27-30

Philippians 2:1-11

Philippians 3:1-11

Philippians 4:4-7

What is the difference between happiness and joy?

Do you understand Jesus to be God?

Is your life marked by anxiety or peace?

Chapter Thirty-Five

Colossians

Although Colossians and Philemon are separate in the New Testament, they are often treated together because of their close connection.

Colossians, like a number of Paul's other letters, is written to confront dangerous teachings that had appeared. Like Philippians, Colossians provides a valuable witness to the divinity of Christ. The careful reader will notice that there are some parallel passages in Colossians and Ephesians. Paul did not "reinvent the wheel" for every letter.

Some important passages include Colossians 1, where Paul again presented the divine nature of Christ. Paul warned the Colossians about being led astray by false doctrines. Paul understood that Christianity is not just a mystical faith but rather is something that shapes our life. This letter offers practical advice on how the Christian life should look.

For a selection of readings from Colossians, read:

Colossians 1:3-8

Colossians 1:15-20

Colossians 2:6-15

Colossians 3:1-4

Have you ever thought about Christ being involved in creation?

How easy is it to set our minds on the things above rather than the things on earth?

Philemon

The connection between Philemon and Colossians is that it is thought that it was Onesimus who delivered Colossians (Colossians 4:9)

Philemon is the hidden gem in the New Testament. Unlike most of the letters, it is written to an individual rather than a church. The basic story is that Onesimus, a slave, ran away from his master Philemon. In the course of his journey, Onesimus encountered Paul and became a Christian. Paul was now returning Onesimus to Philemon, knowing that Philemon had the right to punish Onesimus severely. Paul informed Philemon that they are now no longer just master and slave but brothers in Christ. Paul strongly encouraged him to treat him accordingly.

Read the entire letter to Philemon.

Do you feel a connection with other Christians, even if they come from a different culture, economic status or background? Why?

Chapter Thirty-Six

1 & 2 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians may be the first letter by Paul and our earliest Christian text.

Like many of Paul's letters, the letters to the Thessalonians are written to clear up some confusion. In this case, there was some confusion about the return of Christ. What happens to those who die before Jesus returns? Will they still be saved? Have they already missed the second coming? Paul gave his typical strong answer mixed with a good amount of love for these confused Christians. Paul explained that those who die before Jesus returns are not without hope. The return of Jesus will be accompanied by the resurrection, where both dead and living Christians will be transformed to live with Christ in eternity. There are many similarities between 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15.

One of the issues in 2 Thessalonians is about the timing of the return of Jesus (the Day of the Lord). Some of the Thessalonians had feared that it had already happened and they had missed it. Paul explained to the Thessalonians that there are some dramatic signs that will accompany this event and that it is not something that can be missed.

For a selection of readings from 1 & 2 Thessalonians, read:

1 Thessalonians 1:4-10

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

2 Thessalonians 1:3-10

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Do you often think about the return of Christ? Why or why not?

Do you think we are close to Christ's return? Why or why not?

Do you see a difference between how Christians and non-Christians face death?

Chapter Thirty-Seven

1 & 2 Timothy

The letters to Timothy, as well as to Titus, are called the pastoral epistles and it is here that we really see Paul's pastoral heart.

Timothy was a young associate of Paul who had been disciplined and trained for ministry. Throughout Paul's letters we find mention of Timothy and we can see that Paul respected and trusted Timothy. In these letters, Paul gives Timothy very practical advice for his ministry. Topics include instruction for worship and instructions on the qualities to look for in leaders. One of the most well known passages is the warning about the dangers of wealth. Notice that Paul does not say "money is the root of evil" but "the love of money." The second letter gives a helpful explanation of the value of the Bible and the meaning of inspiration. Paul knows that he is near death and wants Timothy fully equipped for the work God has for him.

For a selection of readings in 1 & 2 Timothy, read:

1 Timothy 1:15-17

1 Timothy 6:3-10

2 Timothy 3:14-17

2 Timothy 4:6-8

Why is the love of money so dangerous for Christians?

If you knew you were about to die, what would you like to say about your own Christian life?

Titus

Like Timothy, Titus was trained by Paul for ministry.

The letter to Titus is extremely practical. The teachings found within are very relevant to Christian leaders today. Paul has an extremely balanced view in this letter. Paul stresses the importance of both sound doctrine and living out the Christian life. This balance is needed in the church today.

Read from Titus:

Titus 2:11-15

How does grace (as an undeserved gift) and the importance of living a godly life fit together?

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Hebrews

Hebrews is one of the most complex and yet rich texts of the New Testament.

At one time, people believed that the Apostle Paul was the author of Hebrews. We know that Paul was not the author but we do not know who was. Some think that Apollos (mentioned in Acts 18-19 and 1 Corinthians 1-4) was the author, as Hebrews represents the style of interpretation from Alexandria where Apollos was from.

The letter was written to a group of Christians who were suffering from persecution. The author encouraged these Christians by reminding them of who Jesus really was. Jesus was not an angel but was the radiance of God. Jesus was the high priest, greater than any Israelite high priest. The author got around the fact that Jesus was not of the tribe of Levi (from which all priests belonged) by linking him to the Old Testament priest Melchizedek to whom even Levi's ancestor Abraham paid a tithe. The author also demonstrated how the Old Testament tabernacle points forward to the truth of Christ.

Like Paul, the author has a balanced view of Christ. Hebrews offers a high view of Jesus, seeing him as God. At the same time, Jesus is someone who was tempted as we are and is sympathetic to our weaknesses (Hebrews 4:15). A highlight of the book is the hall of faith found in Hebrews 11. Examples of Old Testament figures are given to encourage the readers in their faith. It is interesting to note that even these great heroes suffered and we should not expect following God to lead to comfort.

For a selection of readings from Hebrews, read:

Hebrews 1:1-4

Hebrews 4:14-16

Hebrews 8:1-6

Hebrews 11:1-3

Hebrews 12:1-3

Is it encouraging to know that Jesus can sympathize with your weaknesses?

Do you find it difficult to have faith in an invisible God?

What is required to run the race of faith?

Chapter Thirty-Nine

James

James was written by the brother of Jesus.

We are told in the Gospels that Jesus' brothers did not believe in him. In 1 Corinthians 15:7, we are told that the risen Christ appeared to his brother James. James went on to become the leader of the Jerusalem church.

The letter of James is a very Jewish writing. James is not interested in deep theology but practical spirituality. The purpose of the book is to demonstrate the works that should accompany the Christian faith. The lessons taught by James are just as useful for today. James expected that people would live out their faith, that they would act rather than just hear. James was especially interested in the poor. It was unacceptable for the poor to be rejected or ignored. There is a terrible judgment for those who misuse their wealth. James was also interested in the role of speech. With the same tongue we can praise God and tear down the people around us. In addition, James provided some helpful advice for seeing suffering in perspective and using it as an opportunity to get closer to God.

For a selection of readings from James, read:

James 1:2-8

James 1:16-18

James 2:14-26

James 3:13-18

James 5:13-16

Do you rejoice when bad things happen?

Why does faith require works?

Have you ever received a supernatural healing? Do you know someone who has?

Chapter Forty

1 & 2 Peter

Peter was one of the most important of the twelve apostles.

Peter wrote these two letters as encouragement to struggling Christians. They were challenged by persecution and false teaching. Added to this was discouragement about the delay in the return of Jesus. Peter encouraged his readers to find hope in God and to seek holy lives. Like Paul in Ephesians and Colossians, Peter gave guidance on how to have godly relationships. Peter also offered a deep reflection on the role of suffering in the life of the believer.

Peter's second letter has much in common with the letter of Jude. Peter was very concerned that people would have a proper understanding of Scripture. He also warned against the dangers of false teachers. Finally, Peter dealt with the concern over the delay in Christ's return. The delay is not evidence of God's unfaithfulness but rather of his love as he wishes more people to enter the Kingdom of God.

For a selection of readings in 1 & 2 Peter, read:

1 Peter 1:3-9

1 Peter 4:12-19

2 Peter 1:16-21

2 Peter 3:1-10

What does it mean to you to be born again?

Do you believe that Jesus will return soon? Why?

Jude

Like James, Jude is another brother of Jesus.

Jude writes his short letter to a church struggling with false teachers. Jude speaks strongly to the situation because he knows the danger of false teachings. False doctrine is not a harmless curiosity. False teachers can cause great damage within a church and Jude warned his readers against this. The church must hold on to the teachings of the apostles and not be tempted by false doctrines. Jude ended his letter with a beautiful doxology,

Read the entire book of Jude.

Do you believe that you can be presented to God blameless?

Chapter Forty-One

1, 2 & 3 John

These letters have much in common with the Gospel of John, taking the principles of the Gospel and applying them to the local church.

The books of 2 and 3 John are very short letters. They give us a little glimpse of what life was like in the early church.

In contrast, 1 John is much more detailed letter. It reflects both on the nature of God and the expectations on the Christian. There are a number of recurring themes. John speaks about sin, light and love. John is both strong against sin and compassionate toward human weakness. We are reminded of the importance of walking in the light. We are told that God is love and as a result, we are expected to treat each other with love. A study of the topic of love in this book is well worth the time. Love is not just a word to be thoughtlessly used, it is a concept that reflects the love of God and something that should be demonstrated by action. Like many of the New Testament writers, John was concerned about false teachers. John warned about those who denied that Jesus came in the flesh. While many people today deny the deity of Jesus, some people have denied the humanity of Jesus, seeing him as God using an illusion to seem human. A biblical faith sees Jesus as both God and human.

For a selection of readings in 1, 2 & 3 John, read:

1 John 1:5-10

1 John 2:15-17

1 John 4:7-21

2 John

3 John

What does it mean to you that God is love?

What is the relationship between love and obedience?

What do your actions say about you?

Chapter Forty-Two

Revelation

This Revelation was given to John on the island of Patmos.

Revelation is one of the most controversial and misunderstood books of the Bible. Many people see Revelation as a text written to give us details about the future and the end times. This book was written primarily to encourage Christians who were suffering persecution.

The book begins with a series of letters to seven churches in Asia Minor or modern Turkey. These were real churches and each letter addresses the different ways they were responding to their contemporary challenges. Revelation was written to encourage them, and by extension us, by reminding them of the big picture of what God is doing. What we see in the present is not the whole story. God will bring this current chapter to a close with the return of Jesus, the resurrection and the creation of the new heavens and earth. Evil and death will come to an end. Knowing this should give us strength to live in the present. The images and symbols used in Revelation seem very foreign to us. However, this book is a part of the genre known as apocalyptic literature. This genre often used the same symbols and the original readers would have been familiar with the style. Instead of getting stuck on using Revelation to predict the future, we should see it as an encouragement to a church being persecuted. We can then use this encouragement when we face our own difficulties. The truth is that Jesus is returning and he will make right everything that is wrong in this world. It would be good to remember the ending words of the entire Bible: “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.” (Revelation 22:21)

For a selection of readings in Revelation, read:

Revelation 1:4-8

Revelation 5:1-5

Revelation 12:7-17

Revelation 19:11-16

Revelation 21:1-8

Have you ever felt persecuted for being a Christian?

Do you believe that good will ultimately defeat evil?

What changes will the return of Christ make to the world?

Recommended Reading

This should not be the end of your biblical journey. This book only gives a small taste of what the Bible is. The following are some recommended books to take your understanding of the Bible to the next level.

T.D. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*. Baker Books, 2002.

Craig Evans, *Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence*. Westminster/John Knox, 2012.

Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth*. Zondervan, 2003.

C.E. Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

Phillip S. Johnston (editor), *The IVP Introduction to the Bible*. InterVarsity Press, 2011.

Tremper Longman III, *Reading the Bible With Heart and Mind*. NavPress, 1997.

N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church*. Harperone, 2008.