

Reading the Bible
through in a year.

Reflections by Michael Perry

Volume 2

DAYS 91-181

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Kings
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DISOBEDIENCE
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DEDICATION
POWER

This effort is dedicated to my wife Denise, the love of my life, who has been my constant morning companion in reading God's Word for 27 years.

To my assistant, Katie Witbeck, for transforming 365 blog entries into workable documents.

To Lynn Fischer, SpringHill Development Coordinator, along with my wife Denise, for their diligent and effective editing of 365 days of journal entries—thank you.

Special thanks to Mike Smith and his team at Designvox for their creative giftedness, encouragement and willingness to take on this project. Their work made the publication of these journal entries a reality and the life transformation of many more people possible.



About Michael Perry

I'm married to Denise and we have four children, M.D., Christina, Mitch and Jonathan. I've worked for SpringHill Camps since 1998 and have been its President and CEO since 2001.

I graduated from Central Michigan University with a degree in Business Administration in 1984. I will obtain my MA in Ministry Leadership at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary through Cornerstone University in May 2012.

Since my days at Central Michigan, I have made reading the Bible in its entirety a major commitment. This practice has made a significant personal difference in my life and I'm excited to help others live out this similar commitment.

Though I am not a Bible scholar or theologian, I have a deep love of the Scriptures and have taught it for over 15 years through adult Sunday school classes and retreat seminars. My goal is to inspire others to spend time in all of the Scriptures on a daily basis allowing the Scriptures to transform their lives and the world in which they live.

For additional copies, please contact the Development Department at 231.734.2616.





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Dear Friend,

Congratulations on reading the first 25% of the Bible. You're now ready to take on the next quarter.

By now I'm sure you have seen why I love reading the Old and New Testament side-by-side. It provides a daily reading of the New Testament which can be a great supplement to those more difficult Old Testament books (like Leviticus). But more importantly, reading the Old and New Testament together allows us to see the connections between the two.

So often we think of the Bible as simply a collection of stories, books and letters. But it's more than a literary collection, the Bible is what the scholars call a meta-narrative, one big, unified story. It is the story of God's creation of this world and in particular His creation of the bearers of the Imago Dei (image of God) – human beings. It is also a story of the bearers of the Imago Dei falling from God's grace because of their disobedience. The consequence of this disobedience (sin, sickness, suffering, violence, death, etc.) enters the world in Genesis 3 and becomes one of two themes that run through the rest of the Scripture.

The second theme, and the most important one, that fills the rest of the pages of the Bible, is the redemptive work of God. This is the main storyline of the Bible, and I hope you have already seen the pieces of it so far in your reading. Please know you will continue to see this theme develop more clearly as the story unfolds in all its fullness, beauty and love. My prayer is that, as you continue to read through the Bible, you will have a deeper appreciation of God's redemption of His Imago Dei, His redemption of you and me and that our appreciation will be foundational in the ongoing restoration of our Imago Dei.

By the transformational power of the Word,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael Perry', with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Michael Perry, President
SpringHill Camps

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How does one have a life of fruitfulness like Gideon?

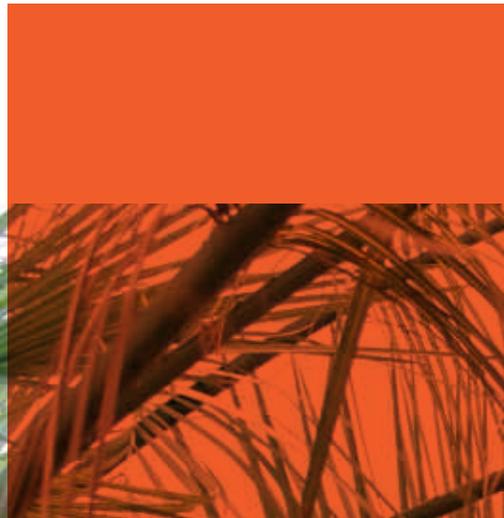
The book of Judges is full of many well-known and beloved stories, one of which is the story about Gideon. Gideon is memorable for many reasons, partly because he can be so much like us in regards to doubting God. Yet, what makes this story full of hope is that, in spite of Gideon's doubts, God uses him in a powerful way to rescue the Israelites. It reminds us of the reality that behind any great action that benefits people, there stands God, who ultimately is responsible and should receive credit.

How does one have a life of fruitfulness like Gideon? Jesus shares a parable about the seed and the ground it is planted in. This story illustrates how we can grow, become fruitful and multiply. One perspective that is often not considered in this parable is the season of time. Most fruit bearing plants require years to grow before they become fruitful; it is a several season process. This reminds us that if we will be the seed that is planted in good soil, it may take time until we bear fruit. The good news? We can then bear fruit for years.

Treachery toward God.

The story of Gideon continues. Yet, after all that God did for him and the Israelites, one of his last acts of creating an ephod (shirt-type clothing that held the breastplate), soon would become a snare to the Israelites who would begin to worship it. The pattern of chasing after false gods will continue in Judges and throughout the history of Israel. This treachery towards God leads to treachery towards each other and the vicious cycle of Judges begins again.

As Jesus continues to do great works, we see various people responding differently to Him. The disciples still are not sure who Jesus is even as He calms a storm. Meanwhile, a woman who has suffered for years has the faith to just touch Jesus and be healed. Finally, we see the ruler and his family disrespect Jesus' authority when their daughter dies – not believing He could still do something. Similar to the disciples, the ruler lacked faith. Jesus continues to meet all of these people right where they are in their faith.



Do not make rash vows to the Lord.

Today we are confronted with one of the most perplexing stories in all of Scripture. It concerns a man named Jephthah and his daughter. Jephthah leads Israel into war against the Ammonites, then makes a vow to God to, offer as a burnt offering, the first thing that walks out of his home when he arrives after victory. As it turns out, it is his unmarried daughter who walks out. Jephthah, along with his daughter's encouragement, commits to follow through on his vow. Scholars do not agree on exactly how Jephthah lived up to his vow, whether he actually offered her as a burnt offering (which would have been a major violation of the Law) or kept her as an unmarried woman committed to serve the Lord the rest of her life. Regardless, the lesson is – do not make rash vows to the Lord.

As we turn to Luke, the story is less perplexing. Jesus begins to bring the "Twelve," as Luke calls them, into more responsibility in His ministry. He sends them out to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom, has them participate in feeding 5,000 people, as well as having a select few witness a glimpse of the Kingdom through seeing His transfiguration. In spite of the Twelve's shortcomings, we see how Jesus uses them to advance His Kingdom. A reassuring thought for all of us.

God never changed His original intent for His Image Bearers.

We move into another well-known story in Judges with one of its most famous characters – Samson. It is a complicated story from a theological standpoint but the tension, as in any story, makes it an interesting story to read. We see God’s providence at work, the unfaithfulness of people including out of control anger, lust and betrayal and, in the end, heroics. There are lessons for us to learn from the life of Samson. Some are lessons of things we are to avoid, while others are things we should do. As you read this story over the next couple days, look for those lessons and see how they can apply to your life.

We continue to catch glimpses of the Twelve as Jesus continues in His ministry. Not all the glimpses provide the most flattering portrayals of the disciples. As with Samson, there are lessons of behavior to avoid as well as good examples of how we should live. One of these lessons (one which we have already seen in earlier readings) is the hope we have of being used by Christ in His work, like the disciples, in spite of the shortcomings we have.

We too can experience the success on behalf of Christ as these first disciples.

This verse clearly summarizes the point that Israel was at in their history, in addition to introducing us to a new chapter in their story. It points out the dire condition during the time of the Judges – because the people were leaderless – they did what they wanted to do. This meant more times than not, living outside the boundaries of their covenant with God. It also pointed to the day when they would ask God for an earthly king to rule over them.

In Luke, we see Jesus continue to expand His ministry beyond the Twelve to include 72 disciples. He sends them out in pairs to announce the Kingdom of God to all the towns and villages in the area. These 72, like the Twelve, are called and chosen by Jesus and thus given the power of the Spirit to do great works on His behalf. These 72 do the work that followers of Christ through the ages (including us today) are called and chosen to do. We have been given the same power of the Spirit so that we too can experience the success on behalf of Christ as these first disciples.

“In those days Israel had no king;
everyone did as he saw fit.”
Judges 17:6



Shock and anger.

Things only get worse in the book of Judges during the time that “Israel had no king.” This meant people do what they want to do, in some cases without any restraints. As if to prove the writer’s point and prepare us for Israel’s need for a king, we are given two progressively bad stories. To make matters worse, both stories involve a Levite. The second story is shocking, appalling and leads us to wonder how things could have become so bad. The writer wants to provoke us to this level of shock and anger.

Contrasted to this story, Jesus proceeds to share one of His most famous parables, the parable of the Good Samaritan, after an inquiring person asks “who is our neighbor?” In it, we see much of the same evil as the story in Judges. There is a man who is brutally attacked then left to suffer and possibly die. A number of folks pass him by as he lies on a road. Finally, a Samaritan stops and rescues the injured man showing the kind of mercy we are all to show. It is hard not to read this parable and wonder why there was not a Samaritan available to rescue the Levite’s concubine. More importantly, we are to ask ourselves; will we be that Samaritan when the opportunity arises...one who shows mercy?

When we are not praying, we are not submitting to our King.

As if the last four chapters of horrific sin and terrible destruction of Benjamin did not demonstrate it enough, the last words of Judges in verse 21:25 tell the whole story of the Israelites’ plight. “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” If we had any doubt that they did what they thought was right, the author of Judges provides us illustration of the spiritual, social and political state of Israel. We have one positive but brief story to read about this time before we learn how Israel ends up with their king.

Now compare Judges 21:25 to Luke 11:1 where one of the disciples asks Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” The Israelites, during the time of the Judges, are not looking for the Lord’s leadership; rather they do what they want to do. The disciples, by wanting to learn how to pray, are in essence acknowledging their desire to have God as their King. Prayer is the humble posture of one who knows that Christ is King and Lord, and submits to His authority. When we are not praying, we are not submitting to our King. That is why we need to learn and practice prayer as this disciple showed us.

Good and noble people remain.

The book of Ruth is a wonderful story (you will learn why so many daughters over the generations have the name Ruth) that serves two purposes in being placed and included where it is in Scripture. The first is simply to let us know that for all the terrible things going on in Israel during the time of the Judges, there were still some good and noble people. Secondly, the story introduces us to King David and lays the foundation for understanding his ancestry. This will link the story of the Judges to the next books we will be reading in the Old Testament.

There is an interesting comparison to be made between Boaz in the book of Ruth and the Pharisees of Jesus' day. Whereas Boaz is noble, compassionate, full of mercy and obedient to the spirit of the Law, the Pharisees are self-serving, prideful and follow the letter of the Law, while ignoring the spirit of it with things such as mercy. We can imagine that Ruth, if born in Jesus' day, would have been treated differently by the Pharisees. She may have been taken advantage of, abused or simply ignored because she was both a woman and a Gentile, even though she would become the great-grandmother of King David.



When we make His Kingdom our first priority, all other things will be given to us as well.

In Samuel, we are presented with the faith and the prayers of a humble young woman, who is contrasted to the total lack of faith and disrespect of two young sons of Eli, the head priest. This woman simply wants a son, compared to men, who take advantage of their position in the Tabernacle for their own personal gain. The irony is that this woman does have a son, Samuel, who becomes a great prophet in Israel and whose first prophetic word is the announcement that God is going to punish Eli's sons for their flagrant disobedience.

Greed is also a major theme in our Luke reading where Jesus tells His listeners of the dangers with wealth and riches. He provides a helpful warning of how quickly one can begin to trust wealth instead of God. He ends His teaching with the call to make His Kingdom and its pursuit our first priority. When we make His Kingdom our first priority, all other things will be given to us as well. A lesson the sons of Eli never grasped.

“Who can stand in His presence?”

One of the last verses in the I Samuel reading, the people of Israel ask “Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God?” (6:20). This question summarizes much of what we read today, including what happens to Eli’s sons as a result of their flagrant disobedience. This is followed by the plagues experienced by the Philistines, who have the ark – representing God’s presence – in their midst. In the end, the 70 Israelites who look into the ark itself die as a result of their actions. No wonder the Israelites asked “who can stand in His presence?”

This question is the same question we need to ask ourselves today. Because of our fallen and sinful nature, we too cannot stand before our Holy God. But God provides a way for us to be in His presence, it is through and in Jesus Christ. This is why He came into the world and why He will come back again. This is also why Jesus tells His disciples to be ready for His return. Unlike the Israelites lack of preparedness for the return of the ark, Jesus calls us to be ready for His return by knowing and doing His will every day, every week, every year, all the time.

This earthly King opens the door for God.

These are God’s words to Samuel whom Israel asked to find them a king. These are key verses because they reveal God’s “A Plan” for Israel which was that they would have no human king, but that God would be their King. However, the Israelites wanted to be like the other nations and have a human king lead them. Even though this was not the “A Plan,” this earthly king opens the door for God becoming their King once again, through His Son Jesus.

It is Jesus as “Christ and King” that we see in Luke. He is the Lord of the Sabbath thus instructing His people to do the right things on that day. Jesus also tells parables about the Kingdom of God of which Jesus is King. Unlike Israel, who wanted an earthly king with an earthly kingdom, Christ came to establish the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom not on earth, but of Heaven. A Kingdom, as the parables point out, that would grow, spread and be home for God’s people for eternity.

“It is not you they have rejected but they have rejected me as their king.”
I Samuel 8:7

We are called to know Him and thus be known by Him.

Israel gets its human king – a man named Saul, whom God has chosen. As you read today, notice two important factors. First, the process of identifying and confirming the king that God uses. God intends to give the new king a strong start. Secondly, try to identify some of the “chinks in Saul’s armor” that will eventually lead to trouble. The author has put them in the story to prepare us for the rocky road ahead for Saul and Israel. Jesus shares some difficult words with His listeners in our Luke reading.

They are words about His Kingdom and who will be a part of it. We learn that being in Jesus’ presence is not enough to be included in His Kingdom, just as having the ark in the Israelites’ presence was not enough. We cannot trust in just being in His presence, whether it is a part of a church or in relationship with other Christians (both places where Jesus is present today). We are called to know Him and thus be known by Him. Jesus says in Luke 13:25 to those trying to get into the Kingdom, “I don’t know you.” Do you know Jesus personally? Remember it is not enough to be in close proximity to Him.



Many are invited to be part of the Kingdom, but only some will choose to attend.

The “chinks in Saul’s character armor” continue to be apparent and visible in these two chapters. This includes disobedience of God’s instructions, resulting in Saul’s kingdom to become only temporary. It was as if God had been giving Saul the opportunity to prove he is worthy of the responsibility of being king, but Saul fails the test. This pattern of weak leadership and character flaws will continue until the end of Saul’s reign.

These weak leadership and character flaws show up as well with the Pharisees, who are the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. Jesus confronts the Pharisees about their strict adherence to the letter of the Law instead of being committed to the spirit of the Law. Then, Jesus follows up this confrontation with a discussion about the Kingdom of God as seen as a great banquet. The message is clear – many are invited to be part of the Kingdom, but only some will choose to attend. Legalism can blind us to the invitation and the need for a relationship with Jesus, because we believe we can earn our place at the banquet, instead of receiving it through grace.

Disobedience towards God.

The mistake that brings Saul and his reign to an end occurs. Once again, we see that Saul's character flaws create poor leadership and lead to his disobedience towards God. As a result, God withdraws His Spirit from Saul, leaving him to rule on his own strength. Samuel gives Saul a message we all need to hear, "to obey is better than sacrifice," (15:22). God wants our hearts through obedience before our religious acts. Religious acts can never replace a heart devoted to obedience to Christ.

Jesus addresses the same issue that afflicted Saul. He calls His disciples – which now includes us – to love Him more than all else, which may cost us everything, including our lives. Saul could not pay the cost of criticism from people of Israel and felt the need to please them, instead of God. Because of this, God withdrew His Spirit. When we follow Jesus, we must understand that He demands total allegiance with no compromise. This is the cost we are to weigh before we commit ourselves to His rule.

“To obey is better than sacrifice.”

I Samuel 15:22

The transition begins.

The story of Saul continues, but a new focus begins to shift to Israel's next king – David, the son of Jesse. The transition begins with dramatic fashion in one of the best-known and most beloved stories in all Scriptures. In this story, we are to compare and contrast Saul and David. We are able to see what a person after God's heart looks like and how God works in their lives compared to one who is not after God's heart.

David is a shepherd who would risk his life for a lost sheep, as he explains to Saul; Jesus uses this as a metaphor to describe God's love for lost people. God pursues lost people and celebrates when they are found, much like David would have done in rescuing his lost sheep. David becomes the model of a shepherd king of the people of Israel until Jesus comes. Jesus is now the final and eternal Shepherd King who loves and cares for His sheep.

The standard for all future kings of Israel.

The plot thickens between David and Saul. David continues to grow in power and influence within the kingdom, and Saul becomes more and more jealous. The author's intent is for us to compare and contrast these two men, both in their character and in their leadership. This comparison helps us set a standard for what a Godly leader and leadership should look like. Though David proves later to be far from perfect, he becomes the standard for all future kings of Israel.

In Luke, we read one of the most beloved and well-known of all of Jesus' parables – the story of the prodigal son. It is also one of the more complex stories because of the characters He uses. The beauty of its complexity is that everyone who reads it twice can find themselves in the story through one of the characters, or a portion of the character's life. As you read it ask yourself, "Which character or part of a character's life do I most identify with?"

The topic of money.

The "Saul and David tale" continues and becomes more intriguing because of the widening gap of character between the two. Saul's continued decline leads him to killing a town of priests and their families. All the while, at every turn, David seeks God in prayer to discover what he is to do next. Saul shows no mercy; David shows great mercy in sparing Saul's life even though Saul is seeking to kill him. As the story continues, we begin cheering for David to become king and to avenge Saul for all his wrong doings. Yet David, because of his great mercy, will not give us this satisfaction. Like David, we need to trust that God will bring justice to any situation.

Jesus continues to tell parables to help His listeners understand the Kingdom of God and His values. Today's parable addresses one of the most sensitive topics of that time – even today – the topic of money. Money is one of the most addressed topics in the Bible and one of the least discussed in church. We do well to acknowledge that money is a topic God knows quite a bit about, and thus we should listen carefully to His words when He speaks about it.



Are we generous with those nearest to us?

Lack of generosity is the theme within our two readings today. The first story concerns a man named Nabel, who shows no generosity to David and his men even though they have been faithfully protecting Nabel's herds and his herdsmen. Nabel is contrasted to his wife, Abigail, who sees her husband's "wickedness" and works to make things right with David and his men. In the end, Nabel receives his just reward for his stinginess.

The second story is a parable told by Jesus about two different men. The parable is about a rich man (no name given) and a poor man named Lazarus. The rich man is never generous with Lazarus, though Lazarus lives right outside the rich man's gate. This means the rich man sees Lazarus and his poverty almost daily. In this story, the justice given out by God is more severe and permanent – the rich man with no name spends eternity in Hell while Lazarus spends it in God's Kingdom.

In both cases, we are confronted with the question of whether we are generous with those nearest to us or do we ignore or rationalize why we should not be? Both stories provide a real warning to the potential consequences if we are not generous.

Faith and obedience.

Faith and obedience are the integrated themes in today's readings. We see Saul hit his lowest point as a man and as king of Israel. He turns to a medium to call up the ghost of Samuel because God no longer responds to him. Saul's lack of faith goes all the way back to his earliest military campaigns and continues in his disobedience as he refuses to do what God has commanded. See the connection between faith and obedience in Saul's life? Saul's disobedience is a result that leads to further lack of faith.

Jesus confronts the same issue in our Luke reading. His apostles ask Him to increase their faith. Notice Jesus did not answer by telling them to do things such as praying, reading Scripture or going to the Temple more. He answers by telling them to be more obedient and faithful in doing the everyday things of their lives. By doing this, one day they may have enough faith to tell a tree to uproot and replant itself someplace else. So if we, like the apostles, want our faith to grow, we need to start by being obedient with the day-to-day things in our lives.



Saul ends his life.

The end finally comes to Saul and his reign as king of Israel. If nothing else, he appears to have acted courageously by going into a battle that the ghost of Samuel tells him will cost him and his sons their lives. By taking his own life, Saul shows one of his character flaws once again – the fear of what others might do to him. This same fear drives Saul’s desire to kill David and is at the root of his disobedience to God’s command early in his reign. It is this fear, and not courage, that ends his life.

As we read Jesus’ words about the Kingdom of God, we need to remember that Jesus’ listeners had in mind a kingdom like the one we have been reading about in I Samuel. It is a kingdom led by an earthly king, like Saul, who will lead Israel into battle and overthrow their oppressors. Jesus turns their ideal kingdom upside down and says the Kingdom of God is not a visible worldly kingdom; it is a Kingdom that begins in the hearts of His people and between His people. As followers of Christ, we are to live out His Kingdom today in the midst of worldly kingdoms.



A flaw in David’s character.

Regime changes are almost always messy affairs. Unfortunately, this is true of the transition between Saul and David. As you read through this transition, notice two points. First, many of David’s positive character traits come through in his handling of this transition. Second, note any character weaknesses David may have. In particular, look for David’s unwillingness to confront people close to him when they have committed grievous acts. This flaw in David’s character, and this one case in particular, will be the seed for future problems both in his family and in his reign.

Jesus continues to teach on the Kingdom of God and its values by sharing two parables about prayer. What we learn is not the particulars about how to pray, but about what our posture of prayer needs to be. This posture is best described in Luke 18:17. For Jesus was not really teaching us about prayer as much as sharing with us what our relationship with the Father should look like. It is when we lack the proper posture before God that we stop growing as followers of Christ.

There is always a personal cost to following Jesus.

David finally comes into complete leadership of Israel after the death of Saul's son, Ish-Bosheth. Once again, David shows his sense of justice in dealing with Ish-Bosheth's murderers. In the midst of this political victory, we see that David still has some things to learn about the Lord as he attempts to bring the Ark to Jerusalem – lessons which are important for us to remember even today.

As David dances before the Lord and tells his wife, Michal, that he will “become even more undignified than this” (6:22), we are able to compare him to the rich ruler who comes to Jesus wanting to know what he must do to have eternal life. This ruler, unlike David, is not prepared to give up what he had in order to follow Jesus. David is willing to give up his kingly appearances to show his dedication to the Lord, yet this ruler cannot imagine giving up what he held so dear. There is always a personal cost to following Jesus. It may be different for each one of us, but there is a cost. However, the return is far beyond anything we can ever imagine.

The concept of stewardship.

We continue to see David grow in power, not just within Israel, but now outside of it. God grants David success on every front expanding Israel's borders and subduing their enemies. David also demonstrates his understanding of the role God plays in all of his successes as we read in his prayer to God. This prayer is a wonderful example of having the right perspective about God and His involvement in life. Unfortunately, David's success politically, militarily and spiritually do not last forever as we will read in the days ahead.

Speaking of kings, Jesus tells a parable about a king who entrusts his servants with some of his money while away on a trip. This parable teaches many important truths, one of which is the importance to use what one has been entrusted with by God to expand and grow His Kingdom. It is the concept of stewardship, and it is foundational to our understanding of our relationship with Christ and the gifts and talents He has given us. It is the same attitude David demonstrated in his prayer to God in II Samuel 7 and one we need today as followers of Christ.

David is an earthly king.

The question one can ask is how David ends up in such a bad place, especially since he shows such devotion to God in so much of his life? Notice the words of II Samuel 11:1 and how they describe the start of the mess David is in. Also, remember back to our earlier reading of Deuteronomy 17:14-20 (and in particular verse 17), where God commands the future kings of Israel on a number of issues including not taking too many wives. Both verses provide clues to understanding the place David is in and why he becomes vulnerable to such horrific sin.

If David was considered the standard-bearer of Israel's kings, and yet could still do what he did, he set the bar low for future kings. Now compare David, the standard-bearer, to the One who fulfilled all that the king of Israel was to be and is the Standard-Bearer for all kings in history – Jesus Christ. He enters Jerusalem as a humble servant, yet demonstrates the strength of a true King by confronting the issues in the Temple. This is why David is an earthly king and why Jesus is the King of not just Israel, but Savior of the entire world.



A Savior and a King was and is still needed to protect us from ourselves.

David's shortcomings not only affect him and a few others, they spill over into his family and in particular his children. In the story we read today, we see a son who seems to have his father's strong interest in women but to a more extreme degree. Secondly, we see once more the consequence of David's unwillingness to confront those closest to him when they have done wrong. This lack of confrontation leads to even more serious family problems and eventually to serious problems in his reign as king.

These same human flaws and impure motives that created so much heartache and pain for David and his family are behind the Jewish leaders' challenge of Jesus. They see in Jesus and His teachings a loss of power, wealth and prestige that comes with their positions in Jewish society. They are willing to do whatever it takes to protect themselves and their "place in society." This includes plotting a way to kill Jesus even though He is an innocent man.

The world has changed dramatically since the time of David and Jesus, but human nature and desires have not. A Savior and a King was and is still needed to protect us from ourselves.

The darkest time of his reign as king.

David's inability and unwillingness to confront the wrong done by those closest to him as well as his inappropriate desire for women, come together in the darkest time of his reign as king. His son, Absalom, leads a rebellion to take control of the throne and lead Israel. As we read this account, there is almost a sense that David understands it was his own shortcomings that contributed significantly to the crisis. Yet, at the end of the day, he trusts that God will do what is best.

Jesus, in our Luke reading, quotes David from Psalms 110. It is considered one of the Messianic Psalms because it speaks of the coming of Christ and His rule as both King and High Priest. Jesus had quoted this Psalm as a follow-up to questions He received from the Sadducees about the resurrection (ironically the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection). Jesus, by quoting Psalms 110, makes the point that to believe in the coming Messiah means one is to believe in the resurrection – the two being woven together as part of God's promises and plan.

The revolution.

The revolution continues and war breaks out between the supporters of Absalom and the supporters of David. During this time, David struggles with separating his responsibilities as king and his feelings as a father. Even as David seems weak, unsure and lost, God continues to direct the circumstances of his life and in the life of the nation. Why? Because God has determined that it will be through David and his offspring that the true, eternal King of Israel and the Savior of the world will come. David is part of a bigger plan, one that even he cannot disrupt with his own shortcomings.

Jesus talks about war and revolutions in Luke 21:9 as He prepares His disciples for the days ahead. What David experienced and what the followers of Christ should expect to experience through their lives are the consequences of living in a fallen and broken world. There will be victory, but not until the battles are fought.



The final battle.

Though David's men win the battle and defeat Absalom, David cannot bring himself to celebrate this victory. His reign continues to teeter on the edge of destruction until Joab, his commander of the army, brings him to his senses. Yet, the revolution is not finished as factions continue to fight over control and influence with David and his administration. It takes a final battle to finish off the last of the rebellion and for David to begin piecing back together his reign.

Jesus continues to prepare His disciples for the days ahead. These words can be confusing because it appears that Jesus moves from events contemporary in His day to events in the distant future. It is important to note that both periods of time have many of the same elements – war, destruction and suffering. We are called by Jesus to watch and be ready for what will happen between Christ's first coming and His second as well as His return.

Closure.

As the story of David and his reign begin to wind down, the author brings closure to some loose ends of David's story. This includes bringing closure to an issue with the Gibeonites, which went back to the days of Saul's reign, as well as continued battles with the Philistines. Our reading today ends with the first of David's Psalms. It is a fitting part of David's story because it introduces us to his important contribution to the Scriptures – writing many of the profound Psalms we will read later on.

Speaking of nearing the end of one's life, Jesus is in His final hours of His earthly life. He spends it having a meal with His closest disciples. In this meal, Jesus gives His disciples an incredible gift – a memorial of His death on the cross. This memorial is called, "communion" by some and the "Eucharist" by others. Its purpose is clear by Jesus' words; He wants to give us a way to remember the incredible gift He gave by giving His life. When we participate in this memorial it is an opportunity for us to reflect on this gift and to remember its significance in our lives.

We may at times need to defend ourselves from those we intend to serve.

Chapter 23 of II Samuel provides an important look at the men that helped create David's success as a military leader. The characteristics of these men reflect the characteristics of their leader and king. The description also shows insight into determining one of David's greatest contributions to the nation of Israel – military success. It also leads to him making a decision to count his men for apparently prideful reasons. It is an act of a man publicly counting his victories while forgetting the true source of these victories.

As the last hours of Jesus' earthly life continues, Jesus prepares His disciples for the reality that the world will not always have a warm reception for them, just as it did not always for Him. They were to pack supplies – different from Jesus' earlier instructions when sending out the 72 disciples (Luke 10:4) – and bring a sword if they own one. It is a reminder that the world in which we live will not always openly embrace us as Christians. We may at times need to defend ourselves from those we intend to serve.

Transition of power.

We begin I Kings with the transition of power from David to his son, Solomon, the son of his beloved wife Bathsheba. If you will remember, Bathsheba is the woman David has an affair with, causing so much heartache for him and his reign. As with many transfers of power, there is much lobbying for position and influence during this transition. Once again, David does not confront the wrong act committed by those closest to him. In the end, Solomon firms up his power and establishes his reign.

The divided loyalties of Solomon's day were present in Jesus' last hours as well. Peter courageously follows the arrested Jesus to the courtyard of the High Priest, but when confronted by the servants, he denies knowing Jesus. His loyalty is torn between his commitment to Jesus and his own self-preservation. When confronted, he chooses to save his own life. Divided loyalties will always create conflict and heartbreak in our lives and in the lives of those around us. A divided loyalty, like Peter's, between anything and Christ himself can be devastating.



A tale of two kings.

In our readings, we have the tale of two kings. The first king is Solomon, David's son. The author provides a picture of a king at his pinnacle, as well as the pinnacle of the nation of Israel. Solomon is wise, rich, smart and at peace with his neighbors. In many ways, he represents what Jesus has in mind when they thought of what life would be like under the rule of the Messiah. Yet, if you read closely you, will notice areas of Solomon's life that will create problems for him and his reign.

The second king is Jesus. He is asked by Pilate directly, "Are you the king of the Jews?" and Jesus replies affirmatively (23:3). Yet, on the surface, it appears Jesus' Kingdom and His reign is at its end. He is sentenced to death, though found innocent, and is accused by those He was to lead. We know this is not how the story ends. Whereas Solomon's reign slowly declines, Jesus' death and resurrection is the inauguration of His Kingdom and His rule. Surface appearances are not always reliable as we judge the success of others.

All of it will slowly decay.

The contrast between two "kings of the Jews" continues. In this reading, we see the material riches of Solomon and the Temple compared to Jesus and his last possessions – his clothing – being divided up by lots. Yet, for all that Solomon built, the beauty and detail we are given is somewhat unsettling. One of the reasons it is unsettling is its temporal nature. All of it will slowly decay until a day when it is completely destroyed.

We read about Jesus' crucifixion and we sense a greater purpose behind it – that it is not the end but actually the beginning of something eternal. As we read this part of Jesus' story, keep a close eye on the details. They are important because they tie back to the Old Testament Law and prophets. The details remind us that in this very desperate situation, God had planned this out from the beginning of time. He is not surprised at what happens. He is not working off the "B Plan"; the details tell us this is His "A Plan" and this should provide us with significant comfort.

"Are you the king of the Jews?" Luke 23:3

The two temples of Israel.

The last two days we have compared and contrasted two different kings of Israel. Today is a comparison of two Temples of Israel – the original Temple built by Solomon, dedicated in today’s I Kings reading, and the new temple in Jesus Christ.

The original Temple is the place where God is to dwell among His people. We see this in the form of a cloud during the dedication ceremony. Solomon’s prayer is beautiful and insightful. One insight of his prayer is acknowledging the conditional nature of God’s dwelling in the Temple. The condition is the ongoing faithfulness of the Jews, which we have read and will read more about.

Jesus is the new “Temple” where God fully dwells among His people. We see this “Temple” executed by being nailed to a cross. Yet, this “destruction” of the “Temple” is foretold by Jesus Himself and would lead to the “rebuilding” of His “Temple” in three days, which we know to be the resurrection. This rebuilt “Temple” will be a glorified body much like the one Peter, James and John saw on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13, Luke 9:28-36). This glorified “Temple” provides us hope for the same body in His Kingdom, for this Temple is eternal; never to be destroyed again.

Solomon and Israel are at the top.

In I Kings 10, we see the pinnacle of Solomon’s reign. Throughout this chapter, Solomon’s fame and fortune are on display. We are given an inventory of his riches and see an example of his fame in the story of the Queen of Sheba. Solomon and Israel are at the top, no one and no nation are higher. But where can you go when you are on top? We find out in chapter 11. It begins with that key word “however” which indicates there is another side to the story. For all of Solomon’s wisdom, there is a part of his life where wrong decisions are made, which lead to tragic consequences.

Jesus on the other hand moves from what appears to be the end of His run at fame and fortune to the greatest victory ever – He conquers death and rises from the grave. The meaning, significance and implications of the resurrection run deep. It is the most significant event in history because it validates everything Jesus said and did. It is, as Jesus describes for two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus, the fulfillment of all God’s plans as given through Moses and the prophets. It is the inauguration of the New Covenant and the Kingdom of God.



God's Word is always true.

Today's theme in both our readings is that God's Word is always fulfilled because it is always true.

In the two chapters of 1 Kings, we see God's Word fulfilled a number of times. First, Solomon's kingdom is split into two with part going to his sons (Judah and Benjamin) and the rest (the other 10 tribes) to a man named Jeroboam, as fulfillment of God's Word. Then, the false altar Jeroboam sets up is split in two by the Word of God. Finally, the prophet who delivers the Word about the altar dies for not obeying God's Word

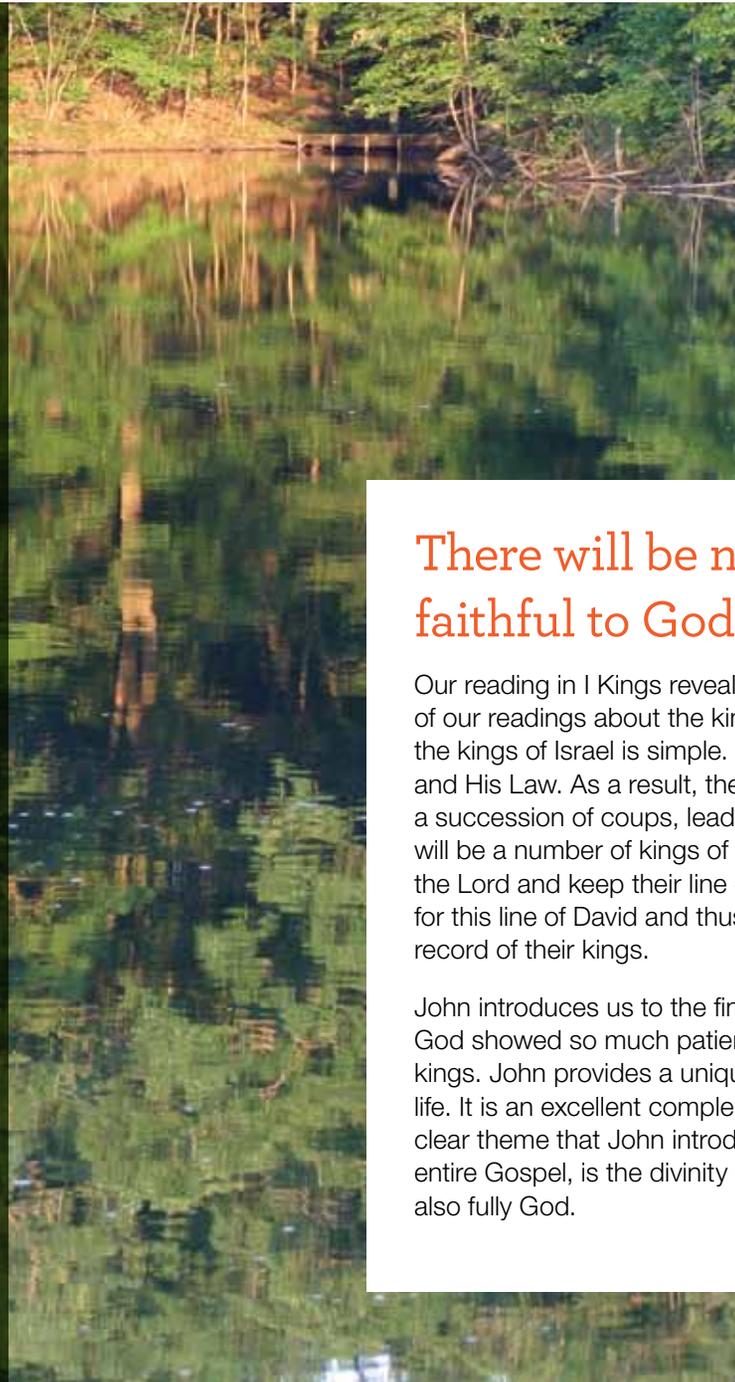
We read in Luke the greatest fulfillment of God's Word – the resurrection of Jesus Christ. When the disciples show surprise to see Jesus resurrected, He reminds them of His own words and the Words of God in the Old Testament that spoke of His death and resurrection.

Then, Jesus opens their minds to the meaning of the Scriptures so they can see for themselves how God's Word has been completely fulfilled in Him.

God's Word is always fulfilled.

God's Word is always completed.

God's Word is always true.



There will be no king that is faithful to God and His Law.

Our reading in 1 Kings reveals a pattern we will see throughout the rest of our readings about the kings of Judah and Israel. The pattern for the kings of Israel is simple. There will be no king that is faithful to God and His Law. As a result, there will be no continuous line of kings, but a succession of coups, leading to new kings. On the other hand, there will be a number of kings of Judah who show themselves faithful to the Lord and keep their line of kings going. But God has a bigger plan for this line of David and thus will keep it going in spite of the spotty record of their kings.

John introduces us to the final King of David's line, Jesus, the reason God showed so much patience with both Judah and their long line of kings. John provides a unique perspective of Jesus and His earthly life. It is an excellent complement to the other three Gospels. One clear theme that John introduces, which will weave its way through the entire Gospel, is the divinity of Christ. He is not only a man, but He is also fully God.

The prophet Elijah.

As we race through a list of short-lived kings of Israel who progressively become more evil, we are introduced to one of the greatest characters of the Old Testament – the prophet Elijah. The story of Elijah is exciting, at times humorous, inspiring and instructive. Take note of the details of this story about him. Elijah is what the scholars call a “type” or model of prophets to come in the future. He is a type for John the Baptist and he is a type for Jesus who ultimately is the fulfillment of this prophetic office.

As we turn to our John reading, we see Jesus calling His first disciples to Himself. Through the interaction between Jesus and these new disciples, we get a glimpse into their personalities and characters. These men, along with the other men and women we will meet as the story progresses, will become the foundation of the Church. Looking at who these men are helps us see how God uses ordinary people to do an extraordinary assignment – begin the Church.



The best and the worst.

We are given a more thorough look into some famous and infamous people in the Old Testament. People like Elijah and Elisha provide a contrast and are seen in conflict with people such as Ahab and Jezebel. It is a storyline that we will follow over the next couple of days. These two groups represent the best of God’s people in Israel and the worst. In particular, in today’s reading, we see Elijah’s absolute commitment and zeal for God and His Law as contrasted to the selfish ambition of Ahab and Jezebel.

In much the same way, John shows us Jesus with the same zeal and resolve as Elijah to uphold His Father’s Word and His dwelling place – the Temple. Jesus takes His own aggressive action to cleanse the Temple of the marketers and money exchangers. This action begins an ongoing conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, much like the conflict between Elijah and Ahab. We too, like Elijah and Jesus, need preparation to stand up for God and His Word, not because He needs us to, but because it is one way to demonstrate our love for Him.

A fitting end.

We are shown in I Kings just how bad things have become in Israel. In it, we see both Ahab and his wife Jezebel's desire to have a vineyard and their abuse of power to get it. In the end, Ahab gets what he deserves and what was foretold by God through Elijah. It was a fitting end to one of the most evil kings in the history of Israel.

Jesus on the other hand has a conversation with a man named Nicodemus who was sincerely seeking truth and God's Kingdom. What transpires between these two men is one of the most well-known and beloved exchanges in all of Scripture. Please note all of the details of this exchange because many times we read or hear just snippets of it. To truly understand all that is said and its significance requires a complete reading of the exchange. Seeing the context of these important words is noteworthy.

Elisha and John.

Today's readings are stories about two different prophets – Elisha in the Old Testament and John the Baptist in the New Testament. We see the great prophet Elijah mentoring Elisha, and when Elijah asks what he could do for Elisha, Elisha asks for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. In other words, he wants to speak with more power and do more miracles on behalf of God than Elijah does. A very ambitious request when you consider the faithful career of Elijah.

John the Baptist on the other hand, instead of seeing his ministry increase in influence like Elisha's, sees it begin to decrease and wind down as Jesus begins His public ministry. John says, "He (Jesus) must become greater and I must become less" (John 3:30). John becomes the last in a long line of old covenant style prophets that go all the way back to Elijah and beyond. Jesus, instead, becomes the fulfillment of that old covenant prophetic office and becomes the New Covenant Prophet whose office will never end.

"He (Jesus) must become greater and I must become less." John 3:30

A foreshadowing of what the Messiah Jesus will do.

The story of II Kings turns and focuses on the life and ministry of Elisha, the prophet who inherits the double portion of Elijah's spirit. In these stories, we see the evidence of this inheritance – raising a boy from the dead, healing a leper, miraculously providing food and oil for others. All these incredible acts are a foreshadowing of what the Messiah Jesus will do, including doing even greater miracles when He comes into the world.

Jesus continues to show Himself to others as the Messiah. He tells the woman at the well that He is the Living Water and that anyone who drinks of this Living Water will never be thirsty again. Jesus, like Elisha, provides people with what they need. But unlike Elisha, Jesus does so in deeper more eternal ways. This is why Jesus, as we have seen before, is the perfect fulfillment of all that Elijah, Elisha, Moses and all the other Old Testament prophets stand for. Jesus does what they do and yet does more by bringing truth and God's Kingdom into the world.

The King and the people miss the point.

The story of Elisha continues, and more importantly, the story of God's interaction with the people of Israel continues. Elisha's life is so integrated into God that when there is a famine in the land, the king blames Elisha. When Elisha predicts there will be food, he receives the credit and becomes a celebrity. The king and the people miss the point – it is God who is responsible for all the miracles; Elisha is only the person He uses to perform them.

Jesus on the other hand is responsible for the miracles He performs – from foretelling the life of a woman at the well to healing a sick boy. Yet, He receives sporadic appreciation from the people, as in Elisha's case, there is little acknowledgement that God is behind Jesus' miracles or that He is the Son of God. All this raises the question for us, "Do we see God behind even the smallest miracles or the people He uses to accomplish them?"



The royal drama continues and grows more violent.

The royal drama continues and grows more violent. Today we will see once again God's Word becoming reality. God promises judgment on Ahab and his house for the incredible wickedness it participates in and is leading the people of Israel into. The result is a violent end to all of Ahab's family, friends, associates and even the priests of the gods he worships. It reminds us how evil breeds evil.

This evil environment in Israel contrasts to the life of Jesus. Jesus heals a paralyzed man who seeks healing from a superstitious pool. When Jesus heals the man, the man does not even know who He is. Yet, when questioned about the incident, Jesus makes it clear who He is – God's only Son. He is God in the flesh who gives life to His people.

A vivid reminder of God's promises.

The pattern continues in II Kings of the succession of evil kings followed by a glimmer of hope when a king appears and attempts to follow the Lord. There is a short story about the end of Elisha's life that is worth pondering. After he dies and is buried in a tomb, another dead man is rushed into burial in Elisha's tomb as well. When the dead man touches Elisha's body, the man rises from the dead. It is a vivid reminder of God's promises to the Israelites when they lived faithfully to Him.

It is this same hope Jesus speaks about in John. He tells His listeners that there will be a day "when all who are in the grave will hear His voice" (5:28). That same power that was present in Elisha, and even greater now in Jesus, will awaken many from the dead with His voice and not solely by the touch of His body. It is this hope in Christ that we cling to not just for eternity, but for our life today.

A warning for us today.

A very sad day comes in our II Kings reading. After decades of unfaithfulness in Israel, the Northern Kingdom representing 10 of the 12 Jewish tribes is finally destroyed. Assyria deports many of the Jews to their country which is now present day Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Some were left in Israel, where people from other nations, who were also conquered by the Assyrians and settled in Israel, begin creating what will become in Jesus' day the mixed race of people called the Samaritans. Why did all this happen? II Kings 17:15 states it clearly, "they imitated the nations around them..." – a warning for us today.

Jesus continues to "reveal" Himself to the Jews by introducing a New Kingdom, unlike the previous Jewish kingdoms, this one will never fail. He reveals Himself in a very public way by miraculously feeding 5,000 people – an Old Testament sign of the coming Messiah. Jesus is not ready or interested in becoming an earthly king like those we have been reading about in II Kings, but instead, a King of God's eternal Kingdom.

"They imitated the nations
around them..." II Kings 17:15

The greatest of all the kings.

We are introduced to whom the author of II Kings states was the greatest of all the kings of Judah, even comparable to David himself. His name is Hezekiah and the author calls him great because, like David, he leads the nation through a spiritual renewal and increased military strength. Hezekiah shows incredible trust and faith in God during the invasion by Assyria, the same nation that overthrows the Northern Kingdom. Because of Hezekiah's faithfulness and His promises to David and His people, God miraculously defeats the Assyrians and puts Judah's destruction off for another day.

John is full of hard teachings of Jesus, including the teachings found in today's readings. Jesus tells His followers that He is the Bread of Life. Anyone who trusts in Him will never be hungry again but will be nourished forever. It is the Father who draws people to Him, not the promise of being full and well-fed. Allow today's words to sit with you all day, so that both the truth and the promises will become apparent and real in your life.

Judah continues to show faithfulness.

Now Israel, the Northern Kingdom, has been deported and destroyed. The focus for the rest of II Kings is on the Southern Kingdom, Judah. Judah continues to show signs of faithfulness to God, usually as a result of the spiritual condition of their king. The king, Judah's leader, sets the tone for the spiritual climate of the entire nation. This climate determines its ability to withstand the pressures and attacks of its neighboring nations. Their spiritual condition does not stop this pressure; it only determines how Judah will respond and the outcome of that response.

Jesus, understanding this principle, tests His followers by giving them difficult teachings and asking them to believe and obey. In particular, He teaches that if one is to follow Him, they must eat His flesh and drink His blood – a horrific thought for a devout Jew who would have known and followed the commandment to not eat anything with blood in it. In this way, Jesus challenges the Jews' conventional thinking on many fronts. The 12 disciples are spiritually open to hear it, but many stop following Him.



A distressing chapter in the history of the Jews.

The record of Josiah as king is also a record of how far Judah has fallen away from the Lord and His commandments. As you read this account, pay close attention to the details of the practices engaged by the Jews. It explains why God allows the Babylonians to attack and conquer them. They are not only conquered, but sent into exile. They return to captivity after God had set them free from Egypt many centuries beforehand, making this a distressing chapter in the history of the Jews.

Jesus continues to tell His followers about the Kingdom and His opposition continues to grow. He purposely takes a low-key approach in His entrance into Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus waits for His Father's timing before revealing Himself. He says, "The right time for me has not yet come, for you any time is right" (7:6) – A good reminder of the importance of God's timing in our lives as well.



Judah provides both hope as well as an explanation.

Our new books, I and II Chronicles, will appear to cover some of the same ground as I and II Kings. They do, but from an entirely different perspective. The writing of these two books came during or right after the exile, providing the Jews of that time a contemporary history of their nation. The focus is on Judah and provides both hope that they will once again become a great nation, as well as an explanation to the causes of their recent exile. It also includes another look at the continuity of the Jewish royal line starting with King David.

As we turn to John, we know that Jesus is a descendent of David – that He has Jewish royal blood. This is not where Jesus places His claims of authority when challenged by the Jews. No, He bases His authority on His relationship with His Father and the truth that He is God’s Son. As John says in his first chapter – Jesus is God in the flesh, a royal line more significant than that of David’s because it is God’s royal line.

A renewed hope.

The record keeping and genealogies continue in I Chronicles. It is easy to breeze through these long lists of names. If you will take a moment, you will notice small but important details about some of the people, clans and tribes of Jewish history. These details remind us of the history of Israel and why they ended up where they did, as well as renewed their hope that God will one day restore His people to their rightful place in the world.

Jesus continues His time in Jerusalem and thus continues to be challenged by the Jewish leaders, in particular the Pharisees, who are threatened by Him. The Pharisees try to “set Jesus up” by bringing a woman caught in adultery to Him and asking Jesus what is to be done with her. His response is famous because it is effective and right in its judgment. When challenged, Jesus claims to His own witness and the witness of His Father to verify who He is – a powerful statement about the nature of Jesus.

The issue of genealogy becomes central in Jesus' discussions.

As we continue to read through the genealogies and history of the Jews, notice two key details. First, the connectedness of people back to the sons of Jacob. The Jews trace their genealogies back to the time where God makes His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, so that their descendents will be God's people. Second, there is mention of the land that is assigned to each tribe when they entered into the Promised Land. This reminds the Jews that the land is promised to them as their inheritance forever. This whole exercise is a reminder of God's faithfulness in fulfilling His promises.

The issue of genealogy becomes central in Jesus' discussions with the Jewish leaders. The Jews place great importance on being Abraham's descendents, thinking it gives them authority to judge others. Jesus challenges them to consider not just being a physical descendent of Abraham, but a spiritual one. Jesus claims that unless you are freed from sin through Him, one is not truly free. Even though physical genealogy and political freedom are important, one's spiritual family and spiritual freedom are the highest good.



The rightful heirs to the throne.

The genealogies and their history become more specific in I Chronicles. The writer is laying the groundwork for the history of the great King David, who is a "type" for the coming Messiah – Jesus Christ. The writer wants to assure the Jews that David and his descendents (not Saul and his descendents) are the rightful heirs to the throne, that this throne is established by God and is eternal!

The debate Jesus has with the Jews continues and now centers on the Jews' claims to be Abraham's descendents, which they consider to be significant (it is what makes them Jewish). Jesus explains to them that their relationship to Abraham needs to be spiritual, not just physical, and that their most important relationship is with God. This leads Jesus to also explain who He is, but they do not get it because they continue to be stuck in their old way of thinking. Finally, Jesus makes His claim to be God's Son and the Jews try to stone Him. There is never any doubt in Scripture about who Jesus claims to be; He claims to be the Son of God – God in flesh.

A warrior and a king.

David becomes king over all of Israel. We read about all of the men who play a significant role in his coming to power as well as during his reign. Most are military leaders, which makes sense because David is both a warrior and king. His reputation is built on leading armies and fighting wars, thus he is the “type” of another warrior and king – Jesus – who comes to defeat sin and death once and for all. We also read about the steps David takes to firm-up His kingdom, including capturing Jerusalem and bringing the ark to make the city a permanent place of worship.

Yes, Jesus is “the perfect Warrior King.” We also see in our reading today that He is the Great Healer. In one of the most well-known healings in all of the Scriptures, Jesus gives sight to a man born blind. In this simple act, Jesus overturns a long-held belief by the Jews that blindness and other disabilities are the consequences of specific sins of a person or their parents. Jesus explains that there is more to physical disabilities than simply the specific sin of a particular person and one should not be held in judgment as a result.

The spiritual life of the Jews.

The writer of I Chronicles continues to provide an overview of David’s reign. In these chapters, the author’s primary focus is on his influence towards the nation’s spiritual climate. David does a number of significant things that helps lay the foundation for the spiritual life of the Jews. He sets up the tabernacle in a permanent location, organizes worship in the tabernacle and contributes greatly to the music and liturgy used in worship (we will read more about this in the Psalms). All of this explains why David is described as a man after God’s own heart.

The drama associated with Jesus healing the blind man continues. It now centers around the question of whether Jesus was really of God because He healed on the Sabbath. Yet, common sense and a basic understanding of who God is should answer the question. The Jewish leaders cannot move on from this issue because accepting that Jesus – and thus the healing – is of God, will throw their system of laws and power into disarray. For this, Jesus accuses them of the worst kind of blindness.



A picture of Christ.

I Chronicles 17 spells out for us what scholars call the Davidic Covenant. It is the covenant established between God and David. The details are important because they lay the foundation for the coming of Christ. The fulfillment of this covenant – the eternal throne and reign of David’s line – is found in Jesus Christ. All the good we read about David; his great victories and leadership, are a foreshadowing of Jesus. When one looks at David within the context of the Covenant, one should begin to see a picture of Christ.

Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s covenant with David, showing Himself to be the Shepherd of God’s people. In helpful detail, Jesus explains the significance of the shepherd to his/her sheep. A shepherd will “lay down his life for his sheep,” and the sheep will recognize the shepherd’s voice and obey it over all other voices. Thus, Jesus shows Himself as the Great Shepherd; the one who will die to rescue His sheep, for those who will hear His voice and follow Him. Thus we are His sheep not only when we hear His voice, but when we follow and obey it.

In this world, we live with consequences.

Though David foreshadowed the coming of Jesus, he was neither Jesus nor the Messiah. Why? Because he is far from perfect (remember those earlier Old Testament readings). The writer shares a story where David’s pride leads him to sin and the consequences are severe. Even though David loves God and devotes himself to glorifying Him, David is not exempt from temptation or the consequences of sin. In this world, we live with consequences, but we also live with the hope of God’s consummated Kingdom, where there will be no sin and where its consequences are wiped away.

The presentation of Jesus as Shepherd continues in John. Once again, Jesus finds Himself in the middle of a controversy. However, this time the controversy is at the core of all that Jesus does and who He is. He claims to be God, a claim that the Jews try to stone Him for. There is no greater sin in the eyes of the Jews. Either Jesus is who He says He is or – as C. S. Lewis pointed out – “He is a liar or a madman.” The option I choose to claim and believe is that He is who He claims.



God is a God of peace and order.

The organization of the tabernacle/temple service is outlined in today's reading. It shows the thoughtfulness and intentionality of David, and more importantly, God's ongoing maintenance and care of this center of worship. It also shows that God is a God of peace and order, not disorder (I Corinthians 14:33). The instructions will also provide the future exiled Jews with hope and the information they will need when the temple is one day rebuilt.

The most significant disruption to the created order of life is death. Sickness and death are the chaotic reality of living in a fallen and broken world. This is the place that Jesus steps into when visiting friends whose brother is sick and dying. Because God is a God of order and peace, Jesus responds to this situation by not only bringing order, but by ultimately giving glory to His Father by reversing death and bringing life to His friend.

Jesus is both God and fully human.

The review of the organization surrounding the tabernacle/temple continues in today's readings. In addition we begin to see the people in David's administration and how they are organized. The description and the lists of these people help to show the size and extent of David's kingdom and the significant place the Jewish people are at during this time. Keep this in mind as we continue in our reading through both I and II Chronicles.

As we read John and the continuation of the story of Lazarus, we see Jesus completing His mission of bringing order to the situation. As we see Christ doing work that glorifies His Father, we also see His humanness by the emotion He experiences from the pain and loss of Lazarus. Jesus is both God, who does all for the Father's glory, and fully human who suffers, as all people do, at the loss of a loved one. This is why Christ can be and is our Savior.

Inspiration, hope and pride.

The writer of I Chronicles brings the story of David to a close. Notice the differences between this account of David and the previous accounts we have read. The key difference is that we do not read the bad things that happen to David or of his shortcomings. It is a true version of his life, but an incomplete one. The purpose of the writer was not to hide facts, but to create inspiration, hope and pride in their nation and in their spiritual heritage. It is written as an example of what Israel can look like if they are faithful to God and His covenant.

The conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders continues to grow. The leaders make a decision that Jesus needs to be killed to “preserve” their nation under the current Roman rule. The chief priest even tells the leaders “that it is better for one man to die for the nation than for all the people to perish.” Little did he know that God’s plan is exactly that, except in Jesus’ death something more significant occurs than just saving the Jewish nation – He is paying the price for the sin of all His people, so no one will perish but have eternal life if they believe in Him.



God’s dwelling place will be permanent.

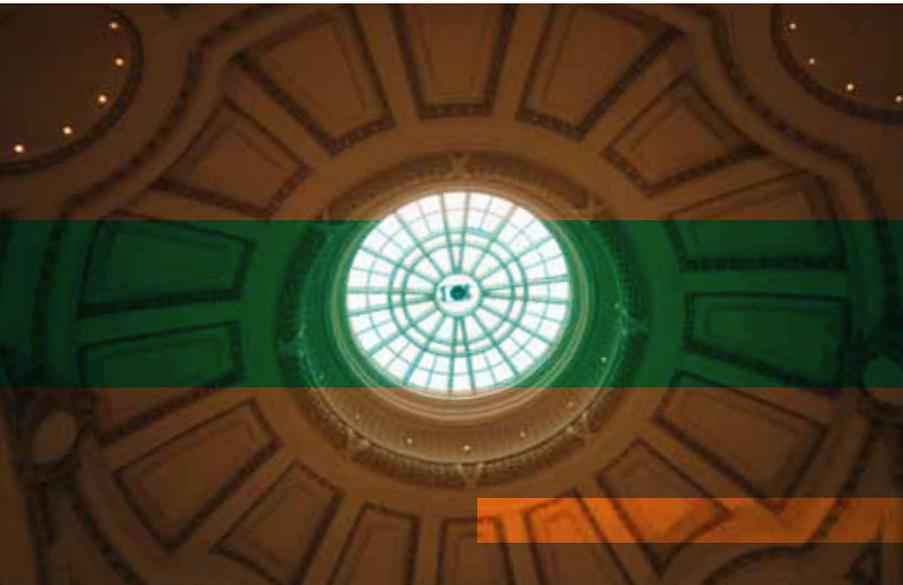
King Solomon moves towards his two tasks – the building of his royal palace and his greatest project, the building of the temple. The building and establishment of the temple creates a focal point for the Jewish people, a focal point that exists even to this day. God has dwelt in a tent (the tabernacle), which moves around as the Jews travel. With the temple, God’s dwelling place amongst the Jews will be permanent. Because of the temple’s significance to the Jewish people, we are provided with rich detail of the construction of this first one, built by Solomon.

In Jesus’ last week before His death, Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead, anoints Him. This sets up a series of events, which include a royal procession into Jerusalem. Unlike Solomon with all his grandeur, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a simple colt while people shout praises from Psalms 118, a Messianic Psalm pointing to a King greater than Solomon. Jesus never fulfills the expectations of the Jews for being an earthly king, but completely fulfills the prophets and His Father’s expectations for being the King of the World.

A prayer of dedication.

As the temple is being finished and furnished (and the ark is being put into its proper place), Solomon delivers a prayer of dedication. It is an incredible prayer outlining clearly the relationship between Israel and God. Note some of the language we have read in earlier books and the utter dependence the Jews had on God not only to survive, but also to thrive as a nation. If the Jews could have lived up to this prayer, their temple and history in general would appear completely different.

Amazingly, the attitude of Solomon, reflected in his prayer, lays the groundwork for the Pharisees' strict adherence to the law. It is so strict that they do not see how far they have moved away from the true Law. This leads to their extreme response to Jesus and their desire to kill Him. Instead of seeing Him as the fulfillment of all of God's promises, they see Him as a threat to their way of life. The Pharisees' way of life was only a poor imitation of the true life found in the very man they wanted to kill.



The contrast between Solomon's reign and Jesus' ministry.

We continue to explore the extent of Solomon's riches and fame today. The biblical writer continues to show details because the goal of this record is to provide a picture of what the Jewish nation once was and a vision of what it could be once again. It is not a complete picture of either Solomon or of Israel. As we know from our other readings, there is increasing spiritual corruption happening within Solomon's life and reign. This corruption ultimately leads to a split within the nation of Israel.

It is stunning to see the contrast between Solomon and his reign and Jesus and His short ministry on earth. Whereas Solomon is visited by dignitaries from around the world who give gifts, riches and praise, Jesus spends the last days and hours of His life with a small, humble group of people who will become the foundation of the Church. Jesus' time is not spent in receiving riches or praise, but instead, is spent giving – both in word and example – a picture of what the Kingdom of God should look like and of those who will live within it.

The continuing decline of Israel.

Today, we see the ongoing downward spiral of a nation and a person. In II Chronicles, we learn of the continuing decline of Israel and Judah, which began at the end of Solomon's life. The decline moves quickly after Solomon dies. Israel seems solid and secure but, within a short period of time, breaks apart into two nations. Then Judah, the new nation ruled by Solomon's son, is attacked by Egypt after years of peace. Israel is at its peak when it begins to fall apart.

The downward spiral we read about in John centers on Judas, one of Jesus' disciples. John provides hints of Judas' internal slide throughout the book but, in these last days of Jesus' life, it becomes apparent. As a matter of fact, Jesus calls him out on it and releases Judas to do what he intends to do – betray Him.

In the end, both Israel and Judas spiral to horrible ends, which started, not with external pressure, but with the conditions of their hearts. The end of one's downward spiral always begins from within.

Judah is superior to Israel both spiritually and militarily.

Judah continues to have kings who, for the most part, do right before the Lord. This is an important distinction between Judah and Israel. Israel has a history of no kings that are fully devoted to the Lord, but instead, kings who do evil to some degree. This is why the writer assures we see how Judah continues to be superior to Israel both spiritually and militarily – a message that we are going to continually read about.

A heart fully devoted to God for a lifetime becomes possible when Jesus returns to His Father in Heaven. When Jesus returns, He promises His disciples that He will send the Holy Spirit. He will be "with you and will be in you" (14:17). This is an incredible promise for not only His disciples, but for us today. Christ, through the Holy Spirit, now dwells within us, both as individuals and collectively as the Church. This is a place of great hope and comfort.



An answer.

Where is our source of strength and direction? Where do we put our trust? To whom do we turn to in times of need?

King Jehoshaphat's answer, in part, is to create an alliance through marriage with the evil King Ahab of Israel. He allies himself with a man whose heart is far from God's Will. Though Jehoshaphat himself fears God and leads a revival in Judah, this trust does not spill over into his politics or foreign affairs, and one of God's prophets calls him out for it.

Jesus on the other hand shows us where we can put our trust and find the strength to live. We are to put our trust in Him and Him alone. We are to be connected to Christ like a branch is connected to a vine. Even though we may face hardships because of our relationship to Christ, He will provide all that we need to face and live for Him and His Father's glory. We need no alliance with evil when we are connected to the True Vine.



A lack of transformation.

The story of King Jehoshaphat continues. He leads Judah to new military victories, but does not fully lead the people to spiritual fidelity. For all his greatness as a king, his influence is not enough to change the true nature of the nation's spiritual climate, except in moments of crisis (such as being threatened by war). This lack of transformation is seen in the transition of leadership from Jehoshaphat to his son, Jehoram, who kills his own brothers in an effort to secure the throne. He is clearly not committed to the Lord as his father was.

This lack of true transformation and the reasons behind it are addressed by Jesus in his teaching about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will come, as Jesus told His disciples, after His death, resurrection and ascension to His Father. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to His followers, in all places at all times, and plays a vital role in their lives until Jesus returns. The Holy Spirit guides us in all truth bringing comfort, guidance and assuring that our lives continue to align with Christ more and more each day.

Losing sight of God.

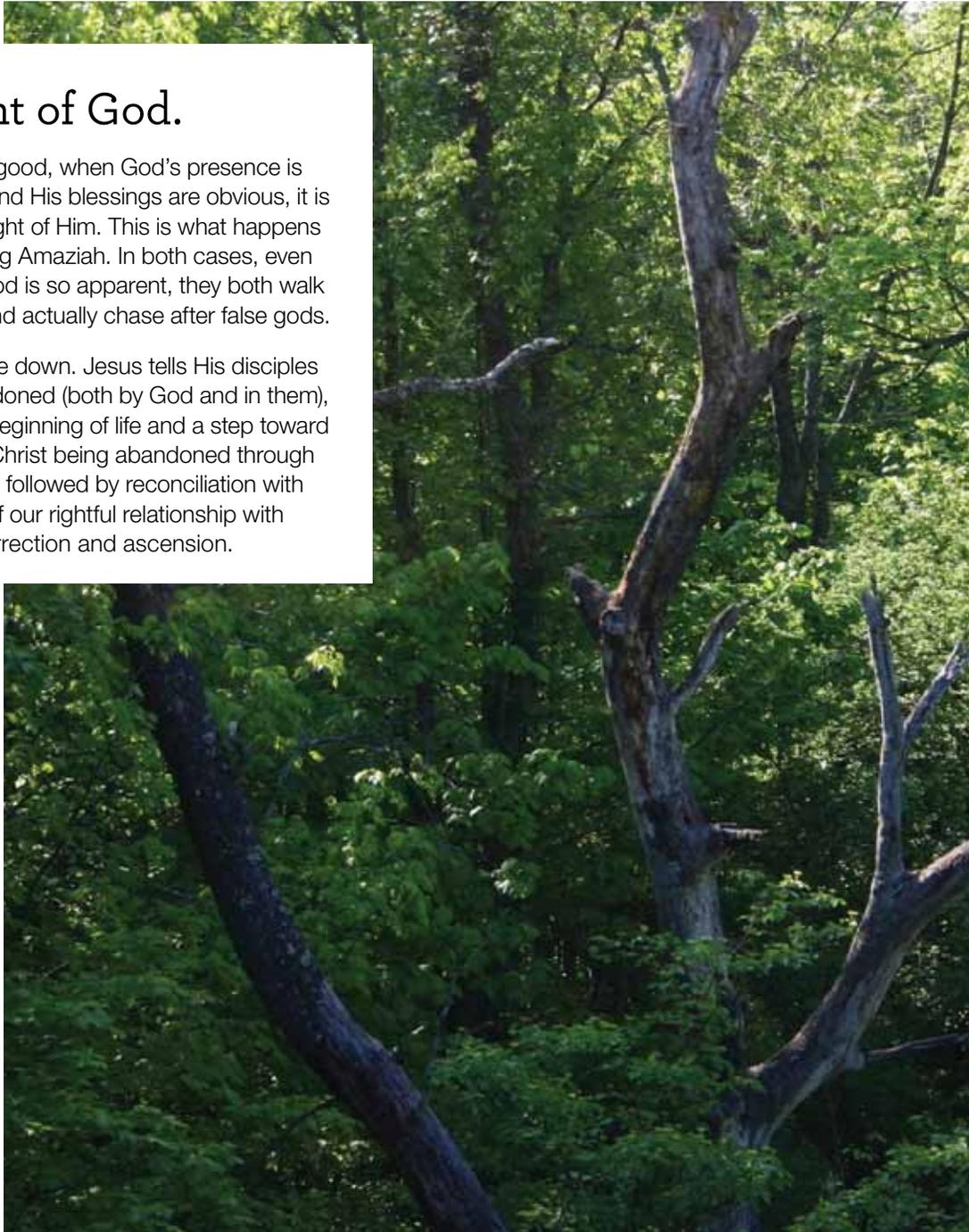
Even while things are good, when God's presence is apparent in our lives and His blessings are obvious, it is still possible to lose sight of Him. This is what happens to King Joash and King Amaziah. In both cases, even though the hand of God is so apparent, they both walk away from the Lord and actually chase after false gods.

Jesus turns this upside down. Jesus tells His disciples that when He is abandoned (both by God and in them), His death will be the beginning of life and a step toward their ultimate victory. Christ being abandoned through His death and burial is followed by reconciliation with God and restoration of our rightful relationship with Him through His resurrection and ascension.

Trouble for both the king and the nation.

The pattern continues in II Chronicles, when a king of Judah is faithful to the Lord and His covenants, things go well for both the king and nation. But when the king becomes unfaithful, it creates trouble for both the king and the nation. It demonstrates the reality that when one is unfaithful to God, it is never in isolation – it always impacts others. There is no sin that impacts only the sinner, life is too interconnected for that to be true.

This is why Jesus specifically prays not just for Himself, but also for His disciples and all believers who will follow them. His prayers reflect this connection between people – what many call community. We never live in isolation as a king or as a plain citizen; how we live becomes important because it impacts others whether we want it to or not. This is why Jesus prays for unity of His followers because unity, such a rare quality among people today, is a powerful witness to Christ and His Kingdom.



A renewed focus on worship.

A new king arrives on the scene in Judah. His name is Hezekiah and he is a God-fearing, covenant-keeping king who leads not just Judah, but others, across Israel (the Northern Kingdom), back to the true worship of God. Hezekiah is not only faithful personally, but he enlists the priests (the Levites) in leading a renewed focus on worship. After this, he calls all the people to join in. This results in true revival across Judah. A revival marked by an outward movement, but started inwardly by transformed hearts.

As we read about Hezekiah's big Passover celebration, we continue to read of an even bigger Passover celebration – one that is more significant and will make all future Passover sacrifices absolute. It is the Passover sacrifice of Jesus Christ who is and is still our Passover Lamb. In His final hours, Jesus continues to lead and protect His disciples, while at the same time, is willing to go to a place of sacrifice and death. Jesus sees the end and knows this "end" will be glorious even though it appears hopeless at the moment.

The survival of a nation.

King Hezekiah continues to seek the Lord, especially in the midst of challenging times. His faithfulness not only upholds his life, but also the life of the entire nation of Judah. Because Judah follows Hezekiah's spiritual lead, the nation is in a place to survive a great challenge when Assyria comes to attack Jerusalem. Their survival is not because of their great army or brilliant diplomacy, but because God honors their humility, as demonstrated through their prayers, and saves them in a miraculous way.

As Jesus continues to be on trial, He has a conversation with Pilate who asks Him if He is a king. Jesus acknowledges this reality, but makes it clear that His Kingdom is not of this world. When Jesus challenges Pilate to confront this truth, Pilate answers "what is truth?" (18:38). This is the same response many people have today when confronted with truth, especially the Truth. When people, like Pilate, reject the reality of truth they are rejecting Jesus because He is the Truth (and the Way and the Life). It is easier to reject a truth, like Jesus, when you start by accepting there is no truth at all.

A final celebration.

A Passover is celebrated by King Josiah, like no other Passover since the time of the prophet Samuel (before there were any kings in Israel). Think about that for a moment – all the great and faithful kings in Judah and Israel's history (David, Solomon, Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah), none of them had celebrated a Passover like Josiah. Yet, sadly within years of this incredible celebration, Judah once again falls away from God, which leads to its final destruction by Babylon a few decades later.

King Josiah's Passover was the greatest up to that point in Jewish history. Then, in John, we read about the most significant Passover in history. The one where the unblemished, perfect, sinless Son of God is sacrificed on a Roman cross to pay for the sins of the people once and for all. Jesus is the final Passover sacrifice – He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We continue to celebrate this Passover every year, but now we call it Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

The book of Ezra..

The book of Ezra covers the time at the end of the Babylon exile and the beginning of Jerusalem's resettlement. The author, many believe to be the same author of I and II Chronicles, wants to share how God fulfills His promises of bringing the Jews back to their homeland from 70 years of captivity – a prophecy made by Jeremiah which provides hope to the Jews during their decades of exile. As we read how God moves the heart of a secular king to fulfill His promises, we are reminded of God's ongoing faithfulness to His people.

As we read of Christ dying on the cross, John also makes sure we know that it all happens according to the Old Testament Scriptures. He, like the author of Ezra, wants to show that God's plans are fulfilled even in their smallest details. John goes to great lengths to assure us the accuracy and truth of his version in these events and that they fulfill the prophecies written about the Messiah. This, too, should give hope and encouragement in our own faithfulness of God.



Rebuilding the temple.

The work of rebuilding the temple begins in earnest with the construction of the altar. This first step allows the Jews to begin their worship as expressed through the daily and annual sacrifices and burnt offerings. Then, the Jews follow by laying the foundation of the temple and the beginning of rebuilding its structure. As expected, it takes time and they run into opposition – a reminder of the time required to do important work, as well as the usual accompanied obstacles and road blocks.

In Jesus' life, He experiences obstacles including the attack of Satan and His three days of separation from the Father following His death on the cross. Jesus overcomes these obstacles, including the greatest obstacle of all – dying for the sins of the world, by rising from the dead and physically appearing to the disciples. This great obstacle becomes the greatest victory, not just for Jesus, but for all who believe in and follow Him. This act changes the world forever.



Opposition rises.

God's hand continues to be on the Jewish residents of Jerusalem and Judah, who are continuing to work on rebuilding the temple in spite of opposition. As the opposition rises, we see how God turns it into support. Later, as part of the continuing hand of God, we are introduced to a priest named Ezra who arrives from exile and will guide the people not just in "right worship," but more importantly in "right living."

As Ezra provides leadership to the Jewish people, we see Christ reinstating Peter to a place of leadership within the fledgling Church. This reinstatement begins when Christ affirms Peter as His friend and His follower. This reinstatement is necessary because of Peter's denial of Christ right before His execution. The reinstatement is for Peter's benefit, but more importantly, it is for the benefit of Christ's Church and His Kingdom, for which Peter will lead in its early growth. Peter's reinstatement is also an encouragement for all of us who have failed. God is a God of second chances and still uses us, even when we fail, to make a difference in His Kingdom.

Serious concerns for Jewish leaders.

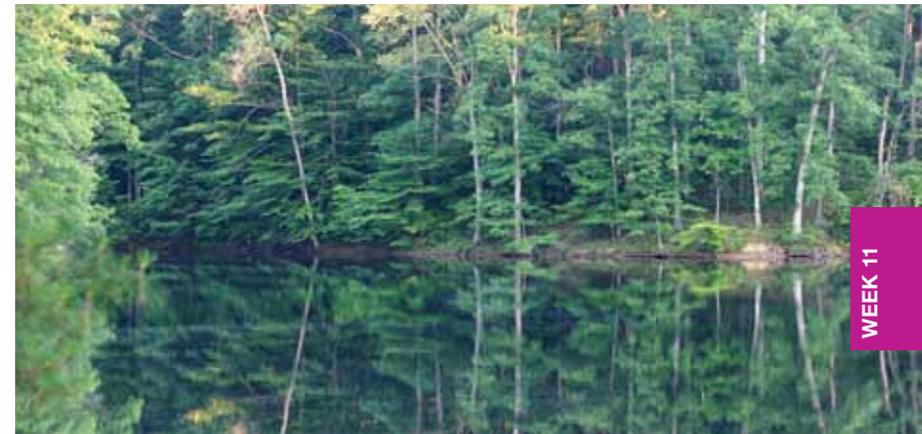
As Ezra arrives in Jerusalem, he is made aware of a situation which could have created serious concerns for the Jewish leaders of that time. Many of the people, including priests and community leaders, have intermarried with the neighboring people. The issue was not interracial marriage – God does not condone interracial marriage (remember the story of Ruth we read earlier). No, the issue is that the Jews are picking up their customs, including worship customs of these neighboring people instead of the other way around. This is exactly the situation that led to their exile decades earlier and why the leaders are so sensitive to it. The Jews (and we as Christians) are to change the world and not allow the world to change us by its standards.

John ends with the reinstatement of Peter as the leader of the new Church. In Acts 1, we see one of his first acts as a leader. He leads a small band of Christ followers in selecting a replacement for Judas as one of the 12 apostles. This decision has as its foundation, the combination of biblical understanding, Holy Spirit leading and faith that God will direct them to selecting the right person to fill this spot – a perfect combination of elements for making important decisions.

Nehemiah is called.

We begin a new book about a man named Nehemiah who is a contemporary of Ezra. Ezra's leadership has focused on the spiritual life and climate of Jews in Judah, while Nehemiah's focus is civil. In particular, Nehemiah is called by God to lead the Jews to rebuild the broken walls and burned gates of Jerusalem. We will see that this civil project is as much a work of God as rebuilding the temple was for the spiritual leadership of Ezra.

As God promised Nehemiah success in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, Jesus promises His disciples that they will receive a comforter (The Holy Spirit) when He ascends into Heaven. This happens on the Pentecost following Jesus' return to the Father, and it becomes the most significant event in the history of the church after the crucifixion and ascension of Christ. It is the beginning of the Church moving out of Israel and reaching the rest of the world as Christ commands the disciples to do.



The real work begins.

After Nehemiah organizes the work of rebuilding the wall, including securing the king's blessings and resources, the real work begins. The beginning of the work also includes both external opposition and internal strife that threatens the success of the project. Nehemiah handles this with courage and wisdom, seeking God through prayer along the way. These problems remind us of the opposition we all face when doing work on behalf of God. The answer, as Nehemiah demonstrates, is appealing to God through prayer.

After receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, Peter gives his first sermon to the Jews who were visiting Jerusalem. It is a powerful message that points the Jews to the story of Jesus and how He fulfills God's promises as given through the Old Testament. As a result, over 3,000 people repent, are baptized and become followers of Christ. It is an incredible start to the fulfillment of the mission of Christ's Church which is to "make disciples of all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).

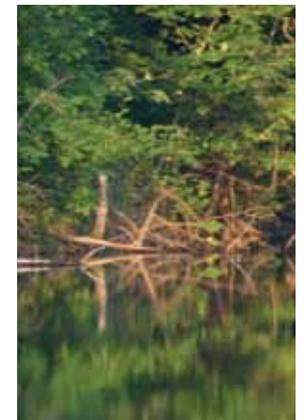
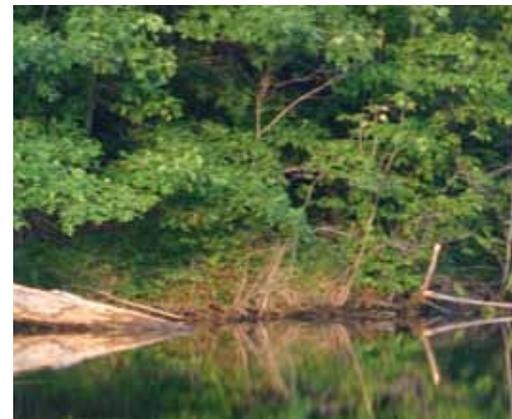
"Make disciples of all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." Matthew 28:19



Nehemiah leads.

With the wall completed and the gates hung, Nehemiah leads the community into the rebuilding of their religious and spiritual lives. He accomplishes this by holding a festival where each morning Ezra reads through the Law, the Levites follow by helping people understand the meaning and apply it to their lives. The community's response provides a great example of how one will act when one hears the Word of God. The community repents and takes action by celebrating the festival in the way prescribed in the Law – they built temporary booths and lived in them – a step no Jew had taken since the time of Joshua.

As we move through the book of Acts, Peter continues to be the central character. He, along with John, heals a crippled beggar, which leads to another opportunity for Peter to share the Gospel with a new crowd of people. His message, as recorded by Luke, demonstrates Peter's grasp of the Old Testament and how it points so clearly to the coming of Christ. This understanding is why it is so important for Christians to read and comprehend, not just the New Testament, but the Old Testament as well, in order to fully grasp who Christ is and what He means in our lives and to the world.



The greatest examples to follow.

These chapters in Nehemiah contain some of the greatest examples of prayer, confession and repentance. The prayer in chapter 9 contains many elements of healthy prayer – thanksgiving, praise, adoration and confession; the model of how we should pray. This model prayer is followed by a very tangible act of repentance. The people sign a document outlining the changes and commitments they have made together as a community to assure future faithful living. This pattern of hearing God’s Word followed by prayer and confession, then ending in repentance is a pattern that needs to also be a reality in our own lives.

The Jewish leaders’ response to an obvious act of God (the healing of a crippled man) is much different from their ancestors’ response to hearing God’s Word read to them by Ezra. Instead of thanksgiving, praise and adoration followed by confession and repentance, the leaders take a self-centered perspective and look to quiet Peter and John. Denial and suppression of the truth were their responses when faced with the reality of God, until the Jews of Nehemiah’s day.

We are always presented with two options when confronted by God – prayer that leads to repentance or denial of God and His truth.

Nehemiah steps up.

The work of a leader is never complete whether it is leading a celebration, continuing to improve and reform those you lead as Nehemiah did, or simply leading others in a God-centered honoring prayer, as Peter and John did.

Nehemiah leads a celebration for the completion of rebuilding Jerusalem’s wall – a great accomplishment considering the opposition and obstacles the people faced. Nehemiah’s work is not finished. He discovers unfaithfulness in many of the people, including leading priests. Nehemiah steps up to the task, faces these issues and takes needed action.

On the other hand, Peter and John lead their own (more subdued) celebration after being released from jail. This celebration is focused primarily on prayer, acknowledging who God is and His relationship to the world, in particular, earthly leaders of the world. This brief prayer is a beautiful statement of God’s sovereignty over every nation, kingdom and people. It ends with a request for God’s continued demonstration of His power; a prayer we should often repeat.



Esther's incredible story.

The book of Esther tells an incredible story. It is a story full of drama, intrigue and a plot filled with twists and turns. Although God's name is never mentioned, it is a story of God's guiding, directing and ultimately protecting His people (the Jews). It is a story that the Jewish people will turn to throughout history to find comfort and reassurance when their lives are threatened and enemies seek to destroy them. Esther reminds them that they are still God's people.

The enemy of God had intentions of destroying the early Church just as the Jews of Esther's day. This happens from two directions; internal corruption and external persecution, as we will read about in the next couple of days. The reading today concerns the internal corruption that threatens the integrity of the Church. Yet, as in Esther, God shows His hand and quickly addresses the corruption in dramatic fashion. This public intervention by God sends a message to all people of the importance of integrity and the need of the Church and its people to be fully devoted and Christ-centered.

God is the center.

Though God is never mentioned in Esther, as the story unfolds it becomes clear that God is the main character. From Esther becoming queen to her approaching the king at the risk of her life, to the king's sleepless night, which leads to the total humiliation of Haman (the enemy of the Jews) – God's hand is directing each circumstance to a final end. God is clearly the center of the story assuring that His people are not only saved from devastation, but have victory. As with this story, spiritual sensitivity allows us to see God working throughout the world, regardless of His Name being mentioned.

Persecution follows the apostles as they continue to share the Gospel with others. Though they see their lives threatened, the hand of God assures they will continue to live; His work of building the Church continues. Although they see their lives spared, the apostles are still flogged. This flogging is an occasion for celebration because they have been found worthy to suffer on behalf of Christ. It is an interesting perspective so often lost today in our self-centered world.

A reminder of God's faithfulness and protection.

The story of Esther and the Jews come to a satisfying conclusion. The man destined to gallows becomes the number two person in the kingdom and the people destined for destruction have victory over their enemies. One person's evil intention turns out for good and for God's glory. This also provides the Jews a story behind one of their annual celebrations. A celebration that is to remind generations of Jewish people of God's faithfulness and protection, not just in that one instance, but throughout all of their history.

The early Church's growth creates a burden on the 12 apostles. As a result, a decision is made to appoint other leaders to handle duties that are taking the apostles away from preaching and prayer. It is not that these other duties are less important (as evidence by the kind of people selected), It is a practical solution to a difficult problem. The apostles are the people who live with and are taught by Jesus Himself so, in turn, are the only ones capable of telling others about Him in the first person. This first-person witness is essential to the beginning of the Church.

Faith in God.

Faith is the theme that runs throughout today. First, we see faith and integrity in a man named Job who is described as "blameless and upright." Because we live in a broken and fallen world, Job suffers incredible loss. Hardship falls on him and Job loses everything but his wife and his integrity (his wife does not appear to be very helpful). Job's faith in God and his willingness to have his life in God's hand is the storyline of this book.

In the same way, when Stephen is questioned by the Jewish leaders, he responds with a clear history of God's interaction with His people. The story Stephen tells is one we have read about in our Old Testament readings. It is a story of the faith of Abraham, Joseph and later Moses. It is also a demonstration of Stephen's faith. He trusts God because he sees God's faithfulness played out over the centuries. History provides Stephen the foothold for his courageous faith.



Job's three friends.

Job has three friends who come to comfort his suffering. As we will see, their intentions are good, but their theology and world views are so off base, they are not helpful. In the first of a number of dialogues between Job and one of his friends, a man named Eliphaz speaks. His basic claim is that Job must be guilty of something because bad things do not happen to good and upright people. It is a naïve view of the world and, as a result, is not helpful to Job in his moment of need.

Stephen moves from the story of the patriarchs to Moses. In this point of Jewish history, Stephen hints at the unfaithfulness of the Jews. Stephen points out, though God performed an incredible miracle by freeing the Jews from Egypt, the Jews turned their hearts to false gods. The tendency to have a wandering heart is both an issue with the ancient Jews as well as the contemporary Jews of which Stephen is speaking (including people up to present day). A wandering heart leads us away from God for a moment or a lifetime and always ends with horrible consequences for ourselves and others.

A just God has to punish those who sin.

After Job's response to his first friend, Eliphaz, he hears from a second friend named Bildad. Bildad's perspective is not much different from Eliphaz's, except his focus is on God's justice not just Job's sin. His claim is that a just God has to punish those who sin, which means Job must have sinned if he is being punished. Job acknowledges that God is a just God, but questions if that is the cause of his suffering? Could it be both the righteous and the unrighteous suffer together?

Speaking of righteous people suffering, Stephen finishes up his message to the Jewish leaders and is condemned to death for his adherence to Christ and his condemnation of their actions. The leaders quickly usher Stephen outside the city where he is stoned to death, innocent of the charge against him. In this case, a person's commitment to truth and Christ led to suffering and death. It is a reality that does not fit into the world view of Job's friend.

Confess and repent.

As Job finishes his response to Bildad's explanation for his suffering, a third friend speaks. Zophar, like Job's other friends, sees Job as guilty of some significant sin, but takes still a third perspective. If Eliphaz's perspective was on Job's sin and Bildad's on God's justice, then Zophar focuses on Job's need to confess and repent of his sin. Job needs to wholeheartedly "respond to the altar call and walk down the aisle" recommitting his life to God. Job acknowledges the wisdom and power of God which means he cannot accept simplified answers to explain why he has suffered so much.

Simple answers and perspectives face the disciples as persecution breaks out after the martyrdom of Stephen scatters them across Palestine. When the disciple, Philip, comes to a town in Samaria, he proceeds to preach the Good News of Christ and the people respond enthusiastically, including a magician named Simon. Yet, Simon thought he was getting just another magic trick for his collection, not the God of the universe. Simon quickly finds out that God is no simple magic trick nor does he accept simple transactions like Zophar suggests to Job.



A place of despair.

As Job finishes his response to Zophar, he moves to addressing God Himself. Job begins to ask the kinds of questions we all ask when terrible things happen in our lives. Job's perspective, at times, seems to be coming from a place of despair – he wonders if things will ever get better – again a natural, human response to true suffering. Then Eliphaz comes in for a second round of words for Job. He continues down the same path of beliefs he pushed the first time, as well as becoming critical of Job and his words.

Raising questions to God and about God's purposes can, if accompanied by faith, cause growth in our faith. As the disciple Philip is walking down the road, he encounters a royal official from Ethiopia reading the Scriptures. This official has his own questions about God. Motivated from a different place than Job, his questions come from one who is seeking to understand God as part of his worship of Him. Yet, unlike Job, this man receives answers from Philip. The result is the first recorded disciple living outside of Palestine.

The discussions become more personal and combative.

Job responds back to Eliphaz, a follow-up to Eliphaz's speech. At this point, the discussions become more personal and combative as the different perspectives become more apparent. Job moves quickly from responding to Eliphaz to his continuing questions pointed to God. When Job is finished, Bildad has his second turn to defend his position – that God is carrying out the necessary justice in Job's life.

Bildad does not grasp that God's justice is much more complex than we can understand. For example, Paul after persecuting the Church (including the approval of stoning Stephen), experiences something quite different from justice on the road to Damascus. Instead of justice, Paul receives the grace of God through Christ. Paul is brought into a relationship with Christ and given a mission to advance His cause before the Gentiles. Paul will suffer in his life, not as a result of God's justice, but because of Paul's new allegiance to Christ and His Church. God's justice can seem complex and, as a result, we need to be careful to not be too quick in calling God to bring it upon a person or people.



A “justice is served” agenda.

Zophar and Job have their second round of debate over the cause of Job's misery. Zophar continues to push a “justice is served” agenda. He believes that God hands out justice during a person's lifetime and it must apply to Job's life as well. Zophar sees a straight “cause and effect” relationship – bad things happen to bad people. Yet, Job dismisses this reasoning based on the fact that many evil people prosper in their lifetimes, thus does not answer Job's question, “Why him?”

The story of Paul is proof of Job's contention with his friends. Paul persecutes Christians and instead of receiving justice, is given grace and a new life in Christ. After becoming a follower of Christ, obeying the call Christ has put on his life, his life is threatened on numerous occasions. His unrighteous life leads to a life-changing encounter with Christ; his righteous life leads to living on the run. Somehow Zophar's justice as “cause and effect” does not ring true. We are to always be careful before we assign fault or identify a person's specific sin as the cause of their suffering – there is always much more to the story.

About SpringHill Camps

SpringHill Camps is a non-profit Christian camp and retreat ministry with locations in Michigan, Indiana, Illinois and Ohio. Our mission is to create life-impacting experiences that enable young people to know and grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ. You and your kids will love Summer Camp with our extreme sports, high adventure activities and outdoor games because it's all integrated with life-changing, fun, faith-filled experiences.

But that's not where it ends! We've also got Day Camps, Weekend Retreats, Men's and Women's Retreats, Family Camps, Corporate Retreats, Church Retreats, etc. Whether it's Spring, Summer, Fall or Winter, there's always something going on! Youth, teens, adults and families can truly live it up. And you, your church, your company or organization can even book our facilities and programs for your very own group retreats, conferences or outings.

Over 42,000 people experience SpringHill Camps every year.

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