

WEEKS 14-26
Days 92-182
Series 2
Volume 2

Reflections



Reading
through
the Bible
in a year

I Samuel
II Samuel
I Kings
II Kings
I Chronicles
II Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther
Job
Psalms

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.

Dear Friend,

The Sword is a powerful weapon, a dangerous tool used in battle. The Bible too is a powerful and dangerous instrument and is often described as a sword. The apostle Paul tells the church of Ephesus that when putting on the armor of God they should include, "the sword of the spirit which is the Word of God" (Ephesians 6:17). The writer of Hebrews describes the Bible as "living, and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

The Bible has the strength of a weapon because it contains the very words of our powerful (and dangerous) God.

Now think about that for a moment. The Bible contains the very words of the God who created the entire universe and He has given these words to us! Therefore, our goal should be to read His words regularly so their power can transform us into the people He's created and called us to be.

This is why we've published a second series of guides for reading through the Bible. Our hope is that these devotional books will encourage God's people to embrace this powerful and dangerous gift by reading His Word on a regular basis and allowing it to transform their lives.



Michael Perry, President
SpringHill Camps

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I Samuel 14-15

Yesterday, we read about the promise of God to the Israelites and their king – if they would obey His voice... follow the Lord your God, it will be well (12:14). Today, we read of Saul's act of disobedience that leads to God's final rejection of him as Israel's king. Saul blatantly disobeyed God's direct command to destroy everything related to the Amalekites. Saul and the people kept all the valuable spoils for themselves and then rationalized this deed by saying they intended to "sacrifice it to the Lord".

Samuel, the prophet, tells Saul the truth about what God truly desired – a truth that is as applicable to us today as to Saul and the Israelites then. God desired obedience and faith in Him over any religious practice (15:22). It's a truth that is repeated again by other prophets to other kings throughout Israel's history. We can never use religion to replace living according to God's will. We can never hide our rebellious living behind such things as attending church, reading our Bibles, or giving a tithe. The greatest gift we can give to God is living for Him every day, all the time.

□ Notes



I Samuel 16-17

With the days of Saul's reign numbered, because of his disobedience, we're introduced to the future king of Israel. Samuel anointed David, a shepherd and a man after God's heart. Saul fit the physical expectations of the people for their king – a man taller than all the rest, but David had the kind of heart needed to be king.

"Man looks at the outward appearance; but the Lord looks on the heart" (16:7).

Once introduced to David, we read one of the most well-known and loved stories in the Bible – David's slaying of Goliath. Beyond just being a great story, it sets the stage for the rise of David and his eventual succession as king of Israel. David becomes the "king-type" for the future Messiah, meaning, he becomes the representative of an ideal king. By looking at David over the next week, we'll be getting a glimpse of what our Savior will be.

□ Notes



I Samuel 18-20

The relationship between Saul and David quickly erodes. The Spirit of God left Saul and came to David. David found success in all that he did, especially in his military exploits. This success led to David being loved and honored by all the people. His popularity threatened Saul and made Saul jealous. Finally, Saul began to act out on this jealousy by trying to kill David.

The people's hearts were with David including Saul's son, Jonathan, who pledges to inform David if it becomes obvious that his father would try to kill him. Their friendship became a model for people ever since. This situation reminds us of how God uses others to provide us with what we need – whether protection or companionship. Such loyalty and faithfulness in friendship reminds us of the loyalty and faithfulness we're to have in God.

□ Notes



I Samuel 21-24

The plot thickens as David becomes a larger preoccupation of the now paranoid King Saul. The story provides a great comparison between these two men. Saul, when God took away His Spirit from him, and David on whom God placed His Spirit. Notice how Saul becomes a victim and displays an extreme case of paranoia which leads to the murder of more than 80 priests and their families; compared to David who spares Saul's life because Saul is God's anointed king.

Faith in God requires us to be obedient to Him even in the face of potential harm and suffering. We trust God to vindicate us as He did for David. We'll continue to see David develop into this role model of a person – a person after God's heart.

□ Notes

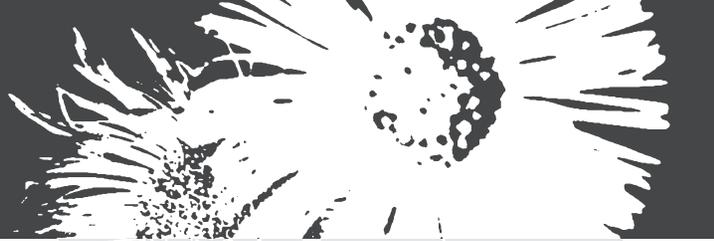


I Samuel 25-27

David's power continues to grow as more men gather around him. David uses this militia to win the trust and hearts of the people of Israel by protecting them and their property from their enemies. However, not everyone is appreciative of the work of David and his men.

Yet, with all of the power and influence David has accumulated, he still will not hurt or attack Saul whom he sees as God's anointed king. For the second time David spares Saul's life when he could have taken it. He urges Saul to stop his pursuit because he intends him no harm. Ultimately, Saul is trying to kill David not because he's worried about being harmed by him, but because of the danger of David's popularity to his reign. Saul knows the people would quickly make David king if the opportunity became available. Saul will go to almost any length to protect his power and prestige.

□ Notes



I Samuel 28-31

The story of Saul and David comes to an end with one final comparison between the two men. A major battle with the Philistines is developing and Saul seeks the Lord's input through every method he knows and yet hears nothing back. Ultimately, Saul turns to a medium in hopes of communicating to the dead. In comparison, when David learns that his family and his men's belongings have been taken by the Amalekites he seeks the Lord; but unlike Saul, David hears a word from God that assures him of victory and the return of their families and possessions.

Because of Saul's unfaithfulness, God turns His back on him which leads to his and Jonathan's death in battle. David's faithfulness, on the other hand, allows him continued access to God and victory over his enemies. David takes his faith a step farther and acknowledges before his followers that God gave them the victory and to Him alone should be given the credit and the glory.

□ Notes



II Samuel 1-3

Though Saul is dead, the story of his reign and of David's ascension to the throne of Israel continues. David shows his ongoing respect and loyalty to "God's anointed king" even after his death. Ironically, the man who tells David of the death of Saul and Jonathan is an Amalekite – the same tribe who had raided and burned David's home and captured his family and belongings. Within this context, David shows no mercy to this man who claims to have killed "God's anointed".

Though it appears David could quickly take the throne of Israel, David moves slowly by first accepting the kingship of his ancestral tribe of Judah. Then, during a period of years where there's war between Judah and the other tribes, David slowly gains strength and influence while the house of Saul continues to diminish. God promised that David would become Israel's king and David waits patiently for God's timing to see this promise become a reality.

□ Notes

II Samuel 4-7

With the death of Saul's son, Ish-bosheth, the rule of Israel is consolidated under the kingship of David, just as God had promised years before. David's first military act is to capture Jerusalem from the Jebusites and make it the capital of Israel. David chose it, in part, for its central location as well as its natural defenses against enemy attacks (thus the Jebusites' confidence in the face of David's attempt to capture Jerusalem).

Part of David's plan to solidify his rule was to bring the ark of God to Jerusalem and make it the new capital and center of Israel's religious life. After building up the city and completing his own palace, David draws up plans to build a temple for the ark to replace the tents it has resided in since the time of Moses. After seeking God's direction on the project, David finds out that God's plan is for his son to build the temple. God makes a covenant with David – what the scholars now call the Davidic Covenant – in which God promises that David would always have a descendent on Israel's throne. We now know this promise has been fully fulfilled in David's descendent and God's Son, Jesus Christ.

□ Notes

II Samuel 8-11

With his throne secure, David begins to subdue the nations around Israel and extend the boundaries of his kingdom. To do this requires war. David and his men become proficient in both winning wars and then ruling over the defeated nations. Notice the subtle change in how these battles were fought. We have our first hint in verse 10:7 where we read that David sent out Joab to lead the fight – implying he stayed back at the capital. But David's move away from physically leading his armies as he initially did, and as the other kings did is highlighted more clearly in verse 11:1.

This shirking of responsibility leads to idleness on David's part and this idleness opened the door to temptation and ultimately, horrific sin. As we read about David's series of grave sins, remember how it all began – David not leading his armies as he should, but instead, staying back while others did his work for him. Unfortunately, the consequences of David's fall will haunt him and his rule as king for the rest of his life.

□ Notes

II Samuel 12-13

David's personal life quickly unravels. It begins with his desire for Bathsheba and a habit of collecting wives – a violation of a command given by God to the kings of Israel (Deuteronomy 17:17). It's within this context that the prophet Nathan confronts David in the most powerful way – through a moving parable about injustice. Though David's response is admirable, he quickly confesses his sin before God and repents. The consequences of such a pattern of sin will not be undone. From the death of his child to the future violence and humiliation that will come upon David and his house, there's no escaping the consequences of David's choices.

Possibly, the most damaging consequences are experienced by his children who seem to quickly imitate their father's sexual desire. We see this in the story of one of David's sons who stalks, schemes, and then rapes a half-sister. Because of David's weakened moral position, he does nothing in response – leading to another sin – murder. This became the seed of rebellion and the public humiliation of David announced by Nathan.

□ Notes

II Samuel 14-15

Without having a final resolution to the rape of one of his daughters by his son and the revengeful murder of that son by another of his sons, David begins to reap the consequences of his action. Absalom, the son who murders his rapist brother, conspires to seize control of the throne from his father. Notice the lack of awareness David has about what is going on in his kingdom. It's only speculation, but there's a sense that David's lack of action and awareness comes from wallowing in guilt for his own adulterous and murderous affair.

As we continue reading David's story, it's truly heartbreaking to see a man so devoted to God make bad decisions and live with the crushing consequences. It sends us a warning that we need to do all we can to guard against sin in our lives. The repercussions of sinful decisions, lack of action, and attentiveness to the people and the world around us can be more devastating, long-lasting, and far-reaching than we can ever imagine.

□ Notes

II Samuel 16-17

As the revolt by Absalom continues, we see God's hand at work – both for and against David. First, we see the fulfillment of God's word through Nathan, the prophet, concerning the continuing consequences of David's sin with Bathsheba (II Samuel 12:11-12). But then, God thwarts Absalom's take over. He uses Hushai to deceive Absalom which leads to his death and returns David to his throne.

In the midst of all the intrigue, there's a sense that David has given up and accepts the fate he deserves for his shortcomings, as foretold by Nathan. Even when a member of Saul's family verbally assaults David and he still has the power to take the man's life, David accepts it as punishment from God and spares the man. Once again, we're confronted with widespread, long-lasting, and deeply penetrating impact of sin in one's life and the lives of those around them. There is no easy way out of the consequences of sin apart from the graciousness of God through Jesus Christ.

□ Notes

II Samuel 18-19

David's victory over the army of his son, Absalom, is bittersweet. Sweet because David returns to Jerusalem as the rightful king; bitter because in the process his son, Absalom, is killed in battle. David's precarious hold on the throne continues as he lets this grief over shadow the rightful appreciation of the men who remained faithful to him during the rebellion and risked their lives to protect him and restore him to the throne.

David displays great mercy and grace to those who took part in the rebellion. He pardons a man, who heaped public curses on him as he escaped Jerusalem, as well as Saul's grandson, who stayed in Jerusalem instead of escaping with David. It's hard to determine if these demonstrations of grace are signs of strength or of weakness. In either case, David models the Christ-like grace we're to show others – even those who have wronged us. Our motivation is the knowledge of all that Christ has done for us in His great display of grace in our lives.

□ Notes

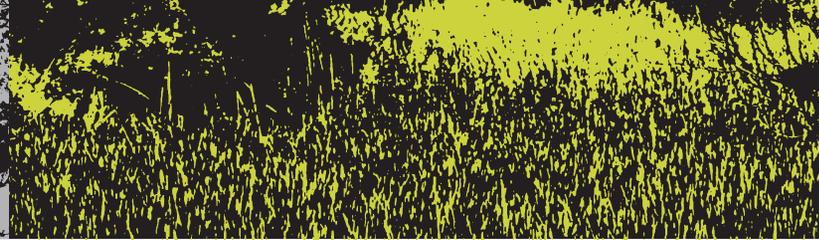


II Samuel 20-22

The remnant of Absalom's rebellion is snuffed out and the author moves to reviewing other key events in David's reign as king. Even through all of David's greatness, we can see that he was far from perfect. He had his share of shortcomings which caused suffering for him and those around him. However, he did have a heart for God which the beautiful psalm we read in chapter 22 shows. David sought God in his need, and when God delivered, David quickly gave Him praise. It's this perspective that makes David a great role model. He understood the relationship between him and God, giving God all the credit for his success.

In this way, David can be a role model for us – seeing our lives from God's perspective, acknowledging Him in all things, humbling ourselves before God, in whose hands our lives sit. If we can have this perspective, like David, we too can be called a “person after God's own heart.”

□ Notes



II Samuel 23-24

It's appropriate that the author of II Samuel records David's final words as a psalm, for David wrote the majority of the psalms found in the Bible. As verse 23:1 says, David was the “sweet psalmist of Israel.” This particular psalm of David's final words provides a beautiful glimpse into the heart of the king of Israel. A king that all other kings were to be measured against. A king who began the royal line that would only end in the coming of Israel's final, eternal King – Jesus Christ.

We also read of the men who helped David become a successful king – all of the courageous military leaders and their great feats. It's a reminder that people who do great things, such as David, are typically surrounded by great people. But even beyond being surrounded by great people, verse 23:12 acknowledges all of Israel's victories and successes came about as the result of the Lord. Ultimately, David and Israel became what they were because God made them a reality.

□ Notes



I Kings 1

I Kings records the transition of the reign of David as king of Israel to his son Solomon. Then it spends a considerable amount of time reviewing the key events in Solomon's reign before moving to the painful split of Israel and the succession of kings in both the northern kingdom called Israel and the southern kingdom called Judah. This history will continue through the next book, II Kings, ending with the exile of Judah to Babylon.

Before we get too far, we're given the story of the transition of power from David to Solomon. As was the case in most of David's life, there was drama and intrigue surrounding the transition. David had planned on Solomon to be his successor, but had not publicly stated it even though he was old and in need of constant care. In turn, another son of David takes advantage of David's seemingly weakened state and claims the throne for himself. In the end, because of the foresight and faithfulness of David's advisors, Solomon becomes king while granting his brother a stay of judgment for his brash actions.

□ Notes



I Kings 2-3

Solomon secures his throne by following through on the instructions David gave him before he died. In one of his last acts as King David, who had avoided dealing with wrongs done by those closest to him, he delegates the deed of justice to Solomon. When circumstances provide an opportunity, Solomon carries out these instructions and at the same time secures his throne.

Early in Solomon's life, he was fully devoted to God and received the blessings God had promised David if his sons would remain faithful to God's covenant. To highlight Solomon's early faithfulness, we read about a dream where God offers to grant any request Solomon wants to make. Instead of asking for riches, power, or fame, Solomon asks for wisdom to govern and lead God's people. As a result, God not only grants Solomon wisdom but also the riches, power, and fame he could have requested from God initially. Then, we're given a well-known story that affirms the gift of wisdom God granted Solomon, a story that is the basis for the description we use when we say a person "has the wisdom of Solomon."

□ Notes

I Kings 4-6

There's no doubt, what we've been reading today isn't just a glimpse into the wildly successful King Solomon, but more importantly, the pinnacle of political power and wealth of Israel. As we'll see in our future reading, Israel will never maintain or regain this level of economic, political, and social status in that part of the world again. Solomon's reign becomes the measuring stick of Israel's future national life. In Israel's mind, these decades represent the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham, Moses, and David – the desired state of being.

If we read carefully, we find cracks in the beautiful veneer that indicate Solomon and Israel are not at all what they seem to be. In particular, Solomon's use of forced labor (5:13), high taxes (4:7), and the subtle hint of the loss of spiritual sensitivity that comes from having "plenty" (4:20). Later we'll see further cracks that eventually lead to the downward slide of the nation.

□ Notes

I Kings 7

The review of the wealth and riches of Solomon and Israel continues in chapter 8. In particular, we have the opportunity to see Solomon's home compound, including all of its public and private buildings. But the detail description is saved for the temple – the temple that becomes known throughout history as "Solomon's Temple." It can be tedious to read at times but the details not only help provide a description of the temple, but they also show the importance of the temple in the life of Israel. If you have a chance, look up Solomon's temple in a Bible dictionary or on-line. Scholars put together an approximation of what it looked like. One final group of observations to make as you read this chapter – look for the "cracks" we mentioned yesterday in Solomon's and Israel's veneer, which will lead to problems in the future. There are hints in the text so we shouldn't be surprised when we read of Israel's slide from this prominent place to its ultimate destruction.

□ Notes



I Kings 8

With the temple completed, Solomon puts the ark in its place – in the Holy of Holies. The ark represented the dwelling of God among the people of Israel for generations. At the moment it's set in the Holy of Holies and the priest leave because, "a cloud filled the house of the Lord so that the priest could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord" (8:10-11). This scene highlights the significant difference between the God of Israel and all the other gods of that day (and of our day as well), a transcendent and Holy God who chooses to dwell in the midst of people.

As we learn in the Gospels, this incredible temple and God's presence in it is only a foreshadowing of the coming of Jesus in whom the fullness of God the Father dwells. As John 1:14 says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt (literally "to tabernacle") for a while among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." Today Jesus dwells in us as individuals and His Church which is why Paul calls us and the Church the temple of God (I Corinthians 3:16-17).

□ Notes



I Kings 9-10

Solomon's wisdom and his wealth become famous, even outside of Israel. Foreign dignitaries come to observe all that Solomon has done and to hear his wisdom (10:24). Israel has come a long way from the days just a couple of generations earlier where they had no king and were constantly under the political control of the nations around them.

The description of Solomon's throne (I Kings 10:18-20) symbolizes the dangerous place Solomon ended up. It seems as if Solomon had begun to believe all of the press about him and Israel instead of remembering God's word to him found in I Kings 9:3-9. Solomon's fame and fortune were from God and the ability to maintain such fame and fortune for himself and his successors depended on God – the kings of Israel needed to continually obey God's commandments and align with His Law. The message becomes clear – Solomon didn't earn or deserve what he had so he could not, or should not be prideful in having it (i.e. the biggest throne in the world). It was all a gift from God and contingent on faithfulness to Him.

□ Notes

I Kings 11-12

The cracks in the veneer we've spoken of over the past few days now open wide and the author of I Kings lets us see the underbelly of Solomon's reign and the waywardness we sensed was there. Just as Solomon grew wealthier than all the other kings of the earth (10:23), his royal harem grew to a 1,000 women. It's an incredible number and a clear violation of God's command to Israel and Israel's kings. But in the end it wasn't just the number of wives, but that many of them were from nations God prohibited the Israelites to marry because of their false religions. These women, as God warned, brought their false gods and religions into the heart of the kingdom. Their influence was so great that they caused Solomon, the king to whom God appeared to twice, to follow after their false gods and to set up alters for false worship.

The consequences of this pattern of sin and the blatant disregard for God's commands was the split of Israel into two nations – a split Israel never fully recovers from and the fall from its political, economical and social pinnacle.

□ Notes

I Kings 13-14

For the rest of I Kings and into II Kings, we'll read parallel stories of the kings of both Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom). The first thing we'll see in this new chapter in the history of God's people is how spiritually corrupt both kings were and the impact they had on their nations. We're first given a glimpse into Jeroboam's reign over Israel. To stop the Israelites from traveling to Judah to worship and thus potentially compromising their loyalty to him, Jeroboam set up a new center of worship with new gods. As a result of this evil ploy, Jeroboam is told by a prophet from Judah that his alter would be destroyed along with all its priests. This message followed another message from the Lord that Jeroboam and all the males of his family would also be destroyed.

It's no better in Judah where Solomon's son, whose mother was an Ammonite (the probable negative influence), continued down the path of unfaithfulness that his father Solomon had taken later in life. As a result, Egypt, who was an ally of Solomon attacked and plundered much of his riches marking the quick spiritual erosion of God's people and nation.

□ Notes

I Kings 15-17

We're given a snapshot into the reigns of a succession of kings in both Judah and Israel. Notice how the author evaluates and categorizes each one. They're either a king who "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as David his father had done" (15:11), typically a king from Judah, or a king who did "evil in the sight of the Lord, walking in the ways of Jeroboam" (16:19), typically a king from Israel.

The succession of kings in Israel (the northern kingdom) grew worse over time with each king "doing more evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who went before him" (16:30). In this horrific situation a prophet named Elijah arises. Elijah will become the hero of the story, standing up for God and speaking truth to the kings of Israel and in particular the most evil king in Israel to date, King Ahab.

□ Notes

I Kings 18-19

Today we read one of the most dramatic, and in some ways, entertaining stories in the entire Bible. For this reason, it's also one of the better known stories and it centers on the prophet Elijah and his duel with the prophets of Baal and Asherah. But the duel isn't really between prophets of different gods, it was between the gods themselves – between Baal, Asherah, and the Lord God of Israel. The duel's intent, as Elijah set it up, was to once and for all demonstrate to the people of Israel which god was the true God. As you read this incredible account, notice the detail, the humor, and the drama. By doing so, you can also better appreciate who God is and all He did to bring His wayward people back to Him. Notice, in the end, even after such a dramatic and decisive victory by God, Ahab's wife Jezebel acted as if it never happened. She clung to her false gods and set out to kill Elijah for what had happened on Mount Carmel ignoring the fact that it was the true God that made it all happen.

□ Notes

I Kings 20-22

The stories about King Ahab of Israel that we read about today demonstrate how Ahab and his wife Jezebel became two of the most evil rulers in Israel's history. Each story shows the corrupting influence Jezebel brought to Ahab and to Israel, reminding us of how easily we can allow others to cloud our own thinking and faithfulness to God if we're not careful. In the end, Ahab responds to God's word and repents of the horrible murder of his neighbor. In His mercy, God grants Ahab a reprieve from all the disasters foretold to come his way (21:29).

Though Ahab dies in battle, by what appears to be a random arrow, we see God's mercy and justice at work. God's justice must always be fulfilled; it's why we pray, as Ahab did, for His mercy and to have God hold back what we deserve (just punishment). Today, we live with the knowledge that in the end, the justice we deserve is met in Jesus Christ and instead we receive His undeserved grace.

□ Notes

II Kings 1-2

II Kings begins with one last story of Elijah interacting with a king of Israel, Ahab's son Ahaziah. For one final time, Elijah confronts the godless leadership of Israel's kings. We then read of Elijah's final days on earth and the transition of the prophetic mantle to his disciple Elisha. It appears that Elijah doesn't die, but instead, is swept away into the heavenly realms with the angels. It's a fantastic scene filled with wonder and mystery.

The story quickly moves to the beginning of Elisha's prophetic ministry. Though Elijah is often considered to be the greatest of all Old Testament prophets, in many ways Elisha appears to do more miraculous works than Elijah did in his lifetime. This may be the result of Elisha's request to receive a double portion of Elijah's spirit (2:9). As we will read, this seems to be a necessary request because of the peoples continual slide towards false gods and abandonment of God's Law.

□ Notes

II Kings 3-4

As Elisha takes over the power of his mentor Elijah, he has the opportunity to serve both the king of Israel and the king of Judah by giving them the word of the Lord concerning a battle they're about to enter. But it's in the miraculous work that Elisha does – the multiplication of oil for the widow, the raising of the dead boy and the feeding of the 100 prophets with a few loaves of bread that we see the “double portion” of Elijah's spirit on Elisha.

However, it's not just the double portion of Elijah's spirit that we need to see, it's the connection between Elisha's miracles and those done later by Jesus. With each miracle of Elisha, we will see Jesus doing them in greater and more spectacular ways. Elisha feeds 100 people, Jesus feeds 5,000. Part of the significance of Jesus' miracles, beyond caring for people, was to show the world that He was even greater than any of the previous prophets including Elisha. This is because Jesus came not just as another prophet, but in fulfillment, once and for all.

□ Notes

II Kings 5-7

The story of Elisha continues with more miracles. We'll see later, in a much grander way, miracles in the ministry of Jesus, such as the healing of a leper. But to see Elisha as just a miracle worker would be to miss all that's actually happening in this story. In addition to his miracles, we also see God's miraculous work in the world, apart from working through one of His prophets. Each reminds us that, whether a prophet does a miracle or when there's a miracle occurring in the natural course of things, God's ultimately behind it all. God orchestrates events in the world to assure the accomplishment of His purposes.

We are not able to fully see “behind the scenes” where God is working out and fulfilling His purposes. Yet, in faith, we believe that God watches over the world and our lives and guides it by His hand. We are a part of His daily miracles even if we can't see them. We experience the results.

□ Notes



II Kings 8-9

After the death of Jehoshaphat (King of Judah) his two successors turn out to be more like the kings of Israel – unfaithful to God. This turns out to be one of the low points in the history of Judah, where the kings have previously been faithful to God and maintained the corporate worship of Him. A clear signal of the state of Judah and its kings is that King Ahaziah was an in-law to the house of Ahab and Jezebel – showing a direct political, religious and moral alliance between the two nations.

We read how God assures justice is given out for the evil perpetrated by Ahab and his wife Jezebel. We read how God anoints a new king in Israel who cold-heartedly carries out God's judgment on Ahab's descendents and then on Jezebel. As you read this sequence of events, notice how quickly the people turn away from Ahab to follow the new upstart. Maybe the people had begun to be weary of the evil in their midst and decided there needed to be change.

□ Notes



II Kings 10-12

Just when it seems Judah and its line of kings could go no lower the queen mother, Athaliah, sets out to destroy all of the royal family (her own sons and grandsons) so she could reign over Judah. Remember, she was a granddaughter of Israel's King Omri making her a sister of the wicked King Ahab of Israel (II Kings 8:26). What makes the situation even more horrific is the fact that this wicked woman attempted and nearly succeeded in snuffing out the royal line of David. If not for the courage of a sister of the previous King Ahaziah, Athaliah might have accomplished her goal and ended the line of David.

This aunt of King Ahaziah's sons, stole one of the sons away – rescuing him from the queen mother's onslaught. She risked her life to preserve her brother and father's royal line. More importantly, whether she understood it or not, to preserve David's royal line was preserving the royal line of Jesus Christ. It's through this act that we also read of the beginning of a spiritual revival in Judah led by this rescued son of King Ahaziah.

□ Notes



II Kings 13-14

We continue to read about the succession of kings for Judah and Israel. The pattern continues to repeat itself – Israel’s kings continue in their sins and Judah’s kings generally continue in their faithfulness to God and His Law. Notice though, what the sinfulness of the kings of Israel looks like (with exception of Ahab) – in almost every case the new king is introduced with something like the following, “He also did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” (13:11). What was this evil? “He refused to turn from the sins that Jeroboam” – the first king of the divided Israel – “led Israel to commit” (13:11). Jeroboam’s sin was centered on the false worship he setup with two golden calves (I Kings 12:28-33) and a new place of worship he created for the people of Israel. He recreated the religion the Israelites concocted in their Exodus from Egypt (Exodus 32).

□ Notes



II Kings 15-16

As we continue to read through the rapid succession of the kings of Israel and Judah, notice a couple of differences between the two nations and their kings. As mentioned already, the pattern for the kings of Judah was that they “did what was right in the sight of the Lord” and for Israel they did “what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” Also notice the average tenure of the kings from the two nations and the circumstances that each king’s reign ended. In Judah (those kings that did right) most often their reigns lasted for decades and they died of old age. But the kings of Israel (those kings who did evil in the sight of the Lord) reigned a few short years or even just months and most often they were overthrown and killed by an upstart.

As we’re already starting to see, “how the king goes, so goes the kingdom”. This means Israel is sliding quickly towards its end as a nation but Judah experiences a much slower decline. It’s no coincidence that there’s a connection between the spiritual state of a nation and its destination.

□ Notes



II Kings 17-18

The end has finally arrived for the northern kingdom of Israel. The Assyrians captured all of the cities and deported all of the Jews (but the poorest) and resettle them in other countries. In turn, the Assyrians bring in other conquered people and resettle them in the cities of Israel. God's land promised to His chosen people, the Jews, becomes inhabited by pagans from far off countries who bring with them their worship of false gods.

As tragic and horrible this state of affairs is, the reasons behind it are even more devastating. By carefully reading chapter 17, we see all the "why's" behind this end to Israel. In particular, verses 7 and 8 summarize the reasons well – God's people, instead of acting and living as God's people, chose to act, live and follow after the people in the nations around them including, of all things, mimicking their religions. What makes it so tragic is that they forgot or ignored the Lord God who rescued them from Egypt and gave them the land He promised to Abraham by driving out the other nations.

□ Notes



II Kings 19-21

Today we'll see a very informative interaction between Judah's faithful King Hezekiah, the enemy who's attacking Jerusalem and God who speaks through the prophet Isaiah. We're given a glimpse behind the curtain of how God chooses to work in the world, His interactions with the prayers of righteous people, as well as His dealing with evil people. Though in the end, we cannot draw any conclusive principles. We can rest in the fact that God does intervene and direct the affairs of the world and answers the prayers of His people.

We are left with a bit of a mystery – we don't know why God chooses to intervene at times and why He doesn't at other times. If He does choose to act, why doesn't He do what we ask Him to do or what we hope He would do? In the end, all we can do is trust in a God who is actively involved in this world and will do so to assure that His great purposes are fulfilled. We, His people, will be witnesses to this great end (and new beginning).

□ Notes



II Kings 22-25

As we approach the end of II Kings, there's one last king who, "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and walked in all the ways of David his father, and he did not turn aside to the right or to the left" (22:2). His name was Josiah and he led the most complete and extensive revival in the history of Judah. It all began as a result of what we'll see as a model of repentance by Josiah and the repercussions this repentance had on the entire nation.

Josiah's repentance began after hearing the book of the Law that was found during the badly needed remodeling of the temple. In response to hearing God's word, the first thing Josiah did was to request forgiveness for his sins and the sins of Judah. But true repentance doesn't end with forgiveness but instead takes two other important steps as modeled by Josiah. Josiah undoes all the false worship found throughout Judah and Samaria. Josiah then reinstates important religious festivals such as the Passover. This is the model of repentance we all need to follow – seeking forgiveness followed by turning away from sin and then actively doing what God has directed.

□ Notes



I Chronicles 1

We begin a new set of books, I and II Chronicles, which were originally written as one book. Although it seems that these books are a repeat of I and II Kings, we'll find, like the four Gospels, that they cover the same subject matter but from a different perspective. The different perspective comes from when and for what purpose the author wrote them. Scholars believe that the priest Ezra wrote these two books during the return of the Jews from their 70 years of exile in Babylon to Jerusalem and Judah. When the Jews returned to their homeland, they found it, and in particular Jerusalem and the temple, destroyed and their promised land inhabited with pagans.

The author's purpose was to give the returning Jews hope and a vision of what their country could once again be, inspiring them to do the hard work of rebuilding. In this task of giving hope and vision, the author starts right in the beginning with Adam, the first human being, reminding the Jews of God's hand in all of history.

□ Notes

I Chronicles 2-4

As we continue through the lists of names, remember who the author wrote to and why. He was writing to Jewish descendants of the people in these lists, who have arrived in their destroyed country. Their center of worship is demolished and they must have been questioning God and His promises to His people. These detailed lists of names would have provided another level of assurance that though the external and material evidence of God's favor were gone, God had preserved His people and the line of David, right up to their present day. This fact provided hope that God would once again restore their place and position in the world as He promised.

So much of faith in God rests in our willingness to look back in history (in general and especially in our own personal histories) to see the hand of God working, even in the darkest moments of time. The truth is, the farther back we can look with clarity, the further into the future we can see and thus the stronger faith we can have in the God who not only sees, but directs both.

□ Notes

I Chronicles 5-7

The genealogies of the tribes of Israel continue in our readings today with the focus on the tribe of Levi. As you might remember from our earlier reading, the tribe of Levi was given the task of working in and caring for the tabernacle followed by the temple. Because of their special work, they were not given an allotment of land as the other twelve tribes but instead received cities dispersed throughout all of the other tribes. The Scriptures do not say this but it seems likely that God intended the Levites to be a positive spiritual influence throughout the entire nation and not just near the tabernacle/temple area.

In particular, our reading focuses on the genealogies of the priests (the descendants of Aaron) who had the special privilege and responsibility of serving in the "Most Holy Place" to "make atonement for Israel" (6:49). Therefore, these records become critical as the temple was being rebuilt (we'll read more about this later in the year) and the sacrificial system was re-established so that the Jews would be sure to have only the descendants of Aaron serving in the Most Holy Place.

□ Notes

I Chronicles 7-9

We finally reach the conclusion of the Jewish genealogies with the inclusion of the genealogy of Saul, Israel's first king. Once again, it's good to remind ourselves of the author's audience and the purpose for this book – it is written to the Jewish exiles returning to their destroyed homeland that need encouragement and inspiration to do the large job of rebuilding their nation. These genealogies gave tangible connection to Israel's previous "glory days" and their present situation. This connection provided hope that God had not totally abandoned them, but still kept a remnant that could bring Israel back to its past glory.

It was in this hope that the author brings the genealogies to a conclusion by connecting them to the first group of Jews who return to their homeland – "the priests, Levites and temple servants" (9:2). Notice how the religious leaders led the way in returning to the homeland and beginning the process of rebuilding. Returning to the Promised Land was not simply a political and social action; it was first and foremost a spiritual one.

□ Notes

I Chronicles 10-12

The author of Chronicles spends scant time on the reign of Saul, Israel's first king, and only says he was unfaithful to God and thus "the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse" (10:13-14). The author then quickly moves to David, God's anointed, the king for whom God established His covenant and promised a descendent of his would always sit on the throne of Israel. In the author's mind, David not Saul, is the archetype and the measuring stick to which all future kings would be evaluated.

We also see the key to David's success – the strength of his army. David's army becomes full of loyal and courageous men who did incredible feats and helped establish Israel's security. This picture of David as a warrior king as well as "shepherd of my people Israel" (11:2) is not only the measuring stick of future kings, but more importantly, a preview into Israel's final King. The One who rules forever as the Warrior King defeating sin and death and shepherding His people into eternity – Jesus Christ.

□ Notes



I Chronicles 13-16

After his throne is established, one of David's great visions was to make Jerusalem the center of Israel's religious life by bringing the Ark of the Covenant to it. Even in his righteous vision we see that David was careless in the execution of his plan. He didn't consult God's Word on the proper way to transport the ark, and the result was the accidental death of one of the men David assigned to move the Ark to Jerusalem.

It's easy to ask "why would God allow someone to die for simply not following the 'letter of the law' when his and David's intentions were good?" The answer lies in the nature of God – He's holy and transcendent and cannot allow any unrighteousness in His presence – whether a small transgression or a great one. The entire episode was a lesson to David and Israel as it is to us today – though God is close and intimate, He's also transcendent and holy which demands our respect and proper fear if we're going to relate to Him as we should.

□ Notes



I Chronicles 17-19

After the ark moves to Jerusalem, David sets out to accomplish his next vision – to build a temple for God and His ark to replace the tabernacle where the ark has rested since the days of Moses. As part of David's planning, he seeks God's direction through the prophet Nathan. To both David and Nathan's surprise, God tells David he would not be the one to build a house for Him. Instead, it would be one of his sons. Then God does something even more surprising – He establishes a covenant with David and his descendents called the "Davidic Covenant" promising David that one of his descendents would always sit on the throne of Israel.

As we already know from reading II Kings, it seems that because of the sin of the kings and the people, the promise is broken. However, this promise is completely fulfilled in Jesus Christ; who being a descendent of David, now sits in eternity as the King over His Father's Kingdom and will return one day to bring to final fulfillment God's Kingdom on the new earth, where the Son of David, the Son of God will reign forever.

□ Notes

I Chronicles 20-23

Today we read a fascinating story, an incident during David's reign as king. In a moment of weakness, David decides to take a census of all the men in Israel capable of fighting in the army. The stories are thought-provoking on a number of fronts. First, we see that it's Satan who tempts David to do what he should not do (21:1). Second, we have the question of what exactly was sinful about the census since it appears in our previous readings that Israel, and in particular Moses, had taken a census before? We don't have an answer; we can only speculate that it had to do with David's pride as a young king, and his lack of acknowledging God for his reign. Finally, there's the harsh punishment endured by people who did not participate in the sin and no direct consequences for the perpetrator himself. Again, we are not given an answer, but to say that when a person sins, the consequences rarely stay just with the sinner. Instead, it's the nature of sin to spread its consequences to others (far and wide.)

□ Notes

I Chronicles 24-26

Keeping in mind the author's audience and purpose, we read about David's organization of the priests and Levites and their work in the tabernacle/temple. This organization included the priests who performed the daily sacrifices, the gatekeepers in their work as security, and the Levites who were charged with the temple treasury. Finally, we see an extensive section of the musicians and singers assigned to the temple. This function appears to be an additional role to the original jobs outlined by Moses at the establishment of the tabernacle. David was a musician (played the harp) and songwriter (think of the psalms he wrote) and it appears David made music a part of the temple worship.

Having such detailed descriptions of both the people and the functions related to the temple provided two important perspectives for the returning Jewish exiles. First, David's organization provided the Jews with a model for reinstating the temple sacrificial and worship system. Second, it provided a list of names and functions which would help the Jews assure the proper assignment of families to the right duties. Both provided a necessary vision of what the new temple worship could look like.

□ Notes

I Chronicles 27-29

The author finishes up his coverage of David's reign by recording a prayer of David acknowledging who God is and what He's done for David and Israel. The prayer itself is a beautiful model, one worth following, which includes praise, adoration, petition and acknowledgement of our lowly position before God (29:10-19). This prayer is then followed by the anointing of David's son Solomon as the next king of Israel and then David's death.

What's not included in this entire overview of David's life and reign are the low points. These would include his adulterous affair with Bathsheba, followed by the murder of her husband, and the rebellion of David's son Absalom. We shouldn't see these omissions as any sort of cover up. The author acknowledges in 29:29-30 that there's more complete records of David's life if one's interested (we've already read them). This is simply a brief, inspirational, and instructive history of David's reign given to help the returning Jews begin the difficult task of nation building.

□ Notes

II Chronicles 1-4

II Chronicles begins with the reign of Solomon, and in particular, his building of the temple which his father David had prepared for him to do. As you read the detailed description, take time to imagine each part of the temple and its contents. See if you can picture in your mind's eye what it looked like, what it would have been like to be in such a place. It's an incredible picture – gold lined walls and solid bronze and gold articles – it must have been absolutely stunning to see.

It's this picture that the author wanted the returning exiles to have in their mind as they began the work of rebuilding the temple. Solomon's temple was the standard and the returning Jews hoped to recapture some of its incredible glory. As we read further on, the author and God wanted more from the returning Jews than a beautiful temple – their intention was for the exiles to once again become the nation of God – where their faith and their personal and national life integrated together for God's glory.

□ Notes

II Chronicles 5-7

With the completion of Solomon's temple and its dedication to the Lord, we see God's intentional acceptance as His dwelling place on earth. First, in II Chronicles 5:13-14 and then in 7:1-2 we see God's glory fill the temple – so much so the priests could not enter. You might remember this same thing happened with the completion of Moses' tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-38) and the cloud of God's glory, which would lead the Jews through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

Both the tabernacle and the temple were just representations of the true Temple to come – Jesus Christ. John 1:14 says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt (literally 'tabernacled') among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son." This is why Jesus could say, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). It's because He became and is the living, eternal Temple. The place of the last and final sacrifice, where the glory of God dwells forever. Now we, the Church, are His body here on earth and thus the place where the glory of God as the Holy Spirit now dwells (I Corinthians 3:16).

□ Notes

II Chronicles 8-10

Through our reading today of the wealth and splendor of Solomon's reign, we have the most comprehensive inventory of his accomplishments including his political influence and his wealth. It's stunning to read just how wealthy both Solomon and Israel had become. If we could translate this inventory into today's dollars, it would be staggering. Yet again, with an eye to the author's audience and purpose for writing, we should also notice the exclusion of Solomon's significant shortcomings. In particular, the exclusion of Solomon's spiritual unfaithfulness and how it's not listed as a reason for the split of the kingdom after his death.

Solomon's reign was truly the golden age of Israel but also the beginning of its slow decline and eventual demise. As is so often the case, buried in the covers of one's success is the sin that actually destroys it – be it spiritual unfaithfulness or the loss of focus and zeal – pride and hubris almost always lie at the center. When we experience success and blessing, we should be guarded against the hidden consequences self-importance.

□ Notes

II Chronicles 11-14

I and II Chronicles focus primarily on Judah and its kings and not on the northern kingdom of Israel. It's clear the author sees Judah as the rightful covenant people of God and its kings as the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant and rightful heirs to the throne. As we have already seen, the focus of this history is on the positive side of both the kings and the country, neglecting some of the more negative aspects of each reign. We also receive more detail about each king than in our earlier readings.

Notice the strong connection between the kings' faithfulness to God's Law and the security and prosperity of the nation. When the kings were faithful, all of Judah experienced security and prosperity. When they were not, God caused other nations to attack and plunder them. From these stories, it would be easy to conclude that the relationship between faithfulness and blessing is a 1-to-1 relationship. But, as we know, it's not. Unfortunately, sometimes bad things happen to faithful people. It's a truth we'll see more clearly in our reading ahead, though we're not able to grasp why.

□ Notes

II Chronicles 15-18

Though the picture we see of the kings of Judah in I and II Chronicles is generally positive, the author does begin to point out their deficiencies to begin building the case for Judah's exile to Babylon. Today we read about two kings who had many good qualities but who also made poor decisions or moved away from faithfulness. The first is King Asa who reigned 41 years and for most of those years was faithful to God. At the end of his life and reign his heart became hardened against God resulting in the Lord allowing war and conflict to be constantly at Judah's door.

The second king is Jehoshaphat, a king well-known for his faithfulness to God and for leading Judah to military and economic success. Jehoshaphat allies himself with the infamous King Ahab of Israel. You might remember Ahab is considered one of the most evil kings in Israel's history, not the kind of king you would expect a faithful king, like Jehoshaphat, would ally with.

In both cases, we see that even the best kings are prone to sin and poor judgment and require God's grace and mercy to lead.

□ Notes



II Chronicles 19-22

After the death of the faithful king Jehoshaphat, the kings that follow did not display the same faithfulness to God. As a matter of fact, the next two kings “walked in the way of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done” (21:6, 22:3). Now those are words no king would want said about them and shows how far and how quickly the descendents of a family can slide away from God. As we’ve already said, “As the king goes, so goes the kingdom.”

One of the causes for this decline was the relationship Jehoshaphat had with Ahab – the relationship God condemned through the prophet Jehu (19:2). As part of the alliance between Jehoshaphat and Ahab, Jehoshaphat’s sons married the daughters of Ahab. The influence of Ahab and his house continued for the next generations of Judah’s kings. It’s a reminder of the ripple effect of sin and poor judgment. Sin is never contained just with the sinner. Like a plague, it always spreads to those around the sinner and often far beyond and for long periods of time.

□ Notes



II Chronicles 23-25

Today we see just how fragile the reigns of Judah’s kings had become and how fragile Judah’s security and prosperity were. Though we read about just two of Judah’s kings, Joash and Amaziah, whose reigns began well, at some point they fell hard from faithfulness. Notice what the Scriptures say about each. “Joash did what was right in the eyes of the Lord all the years of Jehoiada the priest” (24:2). Of Amaziah, “He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, but not wholeheartedly” (25:2). Neither are ringing endorsements.

These statements are also a sign of the direction Judah was heading during these years. It’s difficult to watch others (or maybe watch yourself) make poor choices and turn away from what is right and true and then reap the natural consequences. Today, the only hope for long-term and true transformation is found through faith in God through His Son Jesus Christ.

□ Notes



II Chronicles 26-28

After a dark period in Judah's history, God gives Judah two successive kings who were faithful to God and who demonstrated the ability to lead the nation effectively. The result is Judah regains some of the power, influence, and economic strength that was lost during the previous administrations. It seems that the reigns of Uzziah and Jotham were not enough to turn back the cultural tide of Judah. Notice verse 27:2, "But the people still followed corrupt practices."

It's that plague-like characteristic of sin we've observed. Sin and its consequences spread from one person to another and from one generation to another like a contagious disease. Even the faithful leadership of two kings wasn't enough to stop the spread. What can stop the downward spiral of sin and its consequences? A movement of God's Spirit, often called a revival or an awakening, is the only hope of transforming a culture and turning a people away from a downward slide towards destruction and death.

□ Notes



II Chronicles 29-30

After the reigns of unfaithful kings, Judah is blessed with a new king. Hezekiah halts the spiritual slide of Judah and through God's Spirit, ushers in revival. It appears that the Temple has been severely neglected for years and the people responsible for its care and operation have turned to other work. Hezekiah's first act is to clean up the Temple and call the priests and Levites back to their work. Once the Temple and the staff become consecrated (ceremoniously cleansed), Hezekiah, with the counsel of the priests, re-institutes the Passover celebration. He invites all the Jews from Judah and Israel to come to Jerusalem to take part. It turns out to be the greatest Passover celebration since the days of Solomon – the golden age of Israel.

The entire episode is a wonderful reminder of how one person, fully committed to God, can change the course of a nation. What's even more important for us to see is the necessity of God's Spirit, working in people's lives, that ultimately moves a nation.

□ Notes



II Chronicles 31-33

We continue to read about the good and faithful king Hezekiah. His commitment to the Lord not only led to reforms in the temple, but ultimately to a revival among the people. It appears his steady and dedicated allegiance to the Lord and the temple caught on with the people and they began to become more committed and involved as well. One of the most obvious signs of renewal among the people was the incredible tithes and gifts the priests received for the temple and its operation. It was so great that Hezekiah ordered the priests and Levites to open up unused store rooms to hold it all.

Faithfulness and revival didn't assure Judah would be free from challenges and difficulties. But it gave them strength to stand firm when the king of Assyria taunts Jerusalem, boasting about the gods he's conquered in an attempt to weaken them. Instead of being crippled by fear, Hezekiah pleads with God and God saves them with a miracle. God responded to Judah's faithfulness and delivered them from sure destruction.

□ Notes



II Chronicles 34-36

Today we read about the last faithful king of Judah (at least until the coming of the Christ). King Josiah led Judah and the remnant of Israel through another revival by destroying all the altars and priests of the false gods the people had begun to worship again. He, once again, cleaned up the temple and re-installed the temple services and led Judah to both the public reading of the lost Law now found, and the celebration of the Passover. This celebration is an incredible vision for the remnant returning from exile.

Almost as soon as Josiah dies, the destruction predicted from the time of Moses for unfaithfulness comes upon Judah. With a list of short-lived and unfaithful kings, Judah falls away from God and is finally conquered. The Temple and Jerusalem are destroyed and many of its people are exiled to Babylon. It will be 70 years before the people will have the opportunity to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple, their nation and their lives.

□ Notes

Ezra 1-2

We are nearing the end of a section in the Old Testament that contain the books scholars have labeled the historic books (Joshua through Esther). The last three of these books (Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther) all deal with the periods during or after the Babylonian exile. The exile was a period of 70 years, about two to three generations. This means the returning exiled Jews to Judah were people who were born and raised in Babylon. Their home wasn't the Promised Land but a foreign and pagan country.

On the other hand, the displaced people whom the Assyrians had put into Israel and the poor left by the Babylonians made up the current population of the Promised Land. These people had become a blend of races and nationalities and during the 70 years, the Promised Land had become their homes. This reality is the context for much of what we'll read about in our next two books. It's a situation that will create many problems, hardships and issues for the returning Jews as they try to re-establish their lives and their nation in the Promised Land.

□ Notes

Ezra 3-5

The first step the returning Jews took in rebuilding the temple was to build the altar. The reason for this step is simple – the priest could begin the regular daily sacrifices as soon as possible. The sacrifices were at the heart of Jewish worship so it made sense to complete the altar before any other part of the temple.

This step did not seem threatening to the non-Jewish people around Jerusalem. It was the next step – the laying of the foundation and the building of the temple building itself – that caught the attention of the Jews' enemies. The rebuilding of the temple meant the possibility of rebuilding Jerusalem itself which would result in that city becoming once again, a powerful influence in the region, and placing the Jews as the center of this power. None of the people around Jerusalem wanted to see the swing in power from the non-Jewish inhabitants to the new Jewish ones, so they worked hard to see that this next step – rebuilding the temple – did not happen.

□ Notes

Ezra 6-8

After a couple starts and stops, the temple is finally rebuilt through the strong decree of Darius, king of the Persians. But as the author points out in verse 6:14 – the temple was actually rebuilt through the absolute decree of God. The decree of Darius only complimented God’s will. This simple verse reminds us exactly how God works in the world – He does so through people, even those who have no allegiance to Him.

Once the temple is completed, the king sends a Jewish leader and scribe to Jerusalem to assure all is well and that there’s adherence of his decrees about the temple and its functioning. We are introduced to this book’s namesake, Ezra, the bases of whose leadership and influence rests on his unwavering faith in God (see verses 8:22, 31). His dedication clearly comes from his love and knowledge of God’s Word (7:10). We shouldn’t miss the connection between our time in the Scriptures and the knowledge it brings to our faith and trust in God.

Notes

Ezra 9-10

As we finish reading Ezra, we come to an episode that on a number of levels can be easily misunderstood if we don’t read it carefully. It’s brought to Ezra’s attention that many of the returned exiles have married women from the surrounding people. In particular, there were many priests and Levites who had done so. First, it’s important to remember that God’s command not to marry foreigners related directly to religion and not race. God knew that most of the time the Jews would adopt the religion of those they married instead of the other way around. As we’ve already read, there are scriptural examples of Jews marrying non Jews, such as Boaz and Ruth, but always when the non-Jew had adopted the Jewish faith first. This is why Ezra appointed judges to examine each case. If the issue was strictly race a judgment would be easy, but the issue was religion and that required wisdom.

Finally, if we remember what ultimately caused the exile in the first place (unfaithfulness) we better understand the seriousness in which the Jews addressed this issue.

Notes

Nehemiah 1-3

Nehemiah was a contemporary of Ezra, another Jewish leader called by God and appointed by the Persian king to help the returned Jews in Jerusalem. This book provides wonderful stories of faith, prayer and Godly leadership during a time of desperate conditions.

Notice in these first chapters how prayer is integral to Nehemiah's thinking and his life. At each critical stage we read one of his prayers. Also, notice Nehemiah's faith. Once he had prayed to God, he then trusted God by taking action – whether asking permission of the king to go to Jerusalem or dealing with opposition from the people surrounding Jerusalem. Finally, we see that prayer and faith provide the foundation for Nehemiah's Godly leadership. He assesses plans, organizes, and inspires the Jews to do the hard but necessary work of rebuilding Jerusalem's walls and gates. We'll continue to see these qualities of Nehemiah throughout the rest of this book as he addresses other challenging issues that arise.

□ Notes

Nehemiah 4-6

Nehemiah has a plan and He's focused on its fruition. It's an important project that, when completed, will elevate Jerusalem and the Jews in the sight of the other nations. It will provide protection as well as control of the flow of commerce in and around the city. For all of these reasons, the opposition against the rebuilding of the wall seems as strong as Nehemiah's will to rebuild it. The enemies of the Jews see the increased political, economic and military gains and as their own loss on all three fronts.

It's amazing to see the lengths the enemies of the Jews will go through to stop the rebuilding of the wall, including discrediting Nehemiah as a leader and plotting his murder. It's a reminder that we should expect opposition when doing God's work, opposition that will not be fair or forthright. When we face such opposition, we should respond as Nehemiah did with prayer, courage and integrity. This will allow us to trust that God will assure the accomplishment of His plans.

□ Notes

Nehemiah 7-8

With the completion of the wall and the installation of the gates, Jerusalem is now secure. Yet, because most of the houses haven't been rebuilt, there are only a relatively small number of people living within the great city. Nehemiah organizes these people, assigning some of them to be city gatekeepers, and calls a great assembly within the city walls. It's at this moment we're introduced to Ezra, the scribe and religious leader, sent by the Persian king to assure the religious life of the Jews was as it should be.

So it was Ezra that set aside two days for all the people (including women and children) to gather within the city to hear and learn God's Law. Notice the response of the people to hearing God's Word and understanding its implications on their lives. This remarkable scene is a reminder of the transformational power of God's Word, and why hearing, reading and studying it is so essential for our lives and the life of the Church.

□ Notes

Nehemiah 9-10

Today we read two compelling chapters that record the incredible way that the Israelites responded to learning the Word of God. The first response, found in chapter 9, is a beautiful prayer that starts at the beginning – "God created" – and tells the entire history of Israel. It recognizes all of the things God had done for Israel and, at proper points, confesses how Israel had fallen short in their relationship to God.

This prayer is followed by a public confession and commitment by the people (represented by their leaders) to live by and uphold the Law of God. In this renewed covenant, the Israelites obligations are clearly spelled out. It's a powerful follow-up to this beautiful prayer. Both represent a season in the life of Israel when their city and their temple became God-centered once again.

□ Notes

Nehemiah 11-13

The wall is completed and the gates are hung yet this is not enough to protect Jerusalem and its citizens from the corrupting influence of the people around them. Even the signing of a covenant does not assure the people will live according to God's Law. As the book ends, we see Nehemiah having to address issues with the leadership of the temple and its operations, as well as the character of those leaders. In particular, Nehemiah challenges the leaders and the priests who have married foreign women and were raising their children culturally, and most likely religiously, to be non-Jewish.

All of these episodes (and much of the Old Testament) attest to Israel's unwillingness and inability to live according to God's standards. It seems to be an impossible task. It's in the midst of this reality that God the Father sent His Son Jesus into the world to pay the debt for the penalty of humans who continually fail to live to God's standards.

□ Notes

Esther 1-3

As with our previous two books, Esther records events of the Jews during their exile. This is a dramatic story about the rescue of the Jews from certain annihilation. The purpose of telling this story seems to be to explain to future generations of Jews the story behind their annual observance of Purim. One of the most interesting facts about Esther is that God is never mentioned by name, though it's apparent His providential hand is guiding all the recorded events. Take note, as you read through Esther, of the spots where the authors give a nod to God and His faithfulness.

The story has three main characters, all of whom we meet in the first three chapters. There's Haman – "The enemy of the Jews" (3:10), Esther – the beautiful Jewish orphan who becomes queen, and then their Esther's cousin and guardian, Mordecai, who guides Esther in doing the right thing for her people. It's a powerful and exciting story that demonstrates God's faithfulness and His providence in bringing events to a successful conclusion.

□ Notes

Esther 4-7

The story of Esther is a story full of “twists and turns”. Today we’ll see some of the most dramatic twist and turns found in all of Scripture. It makes for a memorable story, one that the Jews would remember and retell every year at the time of Purim.

Haman, the enemy of the Jews, cannot get over Mordecai’s unwillingness to bow down to him as he walked by at the palace gate. Even though he put into place a plan to destroy all of the Jews throughout the empire (which would include Mordecai) Haman goes a step further by building gallows to hang Mordecai. In one of those twists, the king just happens to read of the good deed of Mordecai in exposing a plot to assassinate him. This twist leads to Haman’s immense humiliation. But worse than this humiliation, Esther uses her position as queen to expose to the king the plot of Haman to kill all of the Jews including her and Mordecai. In the final turn of the story, Haman receives what he deserves by being hung on the very gallows built to hang Mordecai. Though God’s name is never mentioned, it is obvious that His hand is guiding and directing each event to protect His people.

□ Notes

Esther 8-10

There’s more dramatic movement in the story. Esther and Mordecai needed permission from the king to not only defend themselves against all of their enemies, but to destroy them. Once again Esther risks her life to go before the king with one more request and he grants it. Her request was simply to allow the Jews throughout the kingdom the right to assemble and fight against their enemies. When they did, they killed tens of thousands of them in two days.

As a final twist to the story, Esther’s cousin, Mordecai is promoted to the number two position in the kingdom, Haman’s old position, and is given Haman’s estate. In this position Mordecai becomes the hero of the story by promoting the welfare of the Jews throughout the kingdom. He also initiates an annual celebration of the Jews’ victory of their enemies called Purim. It’s a holiday that’s been celebrated for generations in remembrance of God’s deliverance from their enemies while in exile.

Though Esther and Mordecai are the main characters of this story, we’re to understand that the star is really God who orchestrated all these things to save His people.

□ Notes

Job 1-5

Over the next week we'll read through one of the best written pieces of literature in the entire Bible, and one of the most theologically challenging. It's a beautiful piece of literature because of the creative way the author presents the problem of evil in the world. It's theologically challenging because there's no more perplexing theological issue than explaining why God allows evil to flourish in the world, and why it impacts even the righteous people of God.

The main issues of evil present themselves right in the first 2 chapters of the book. We're introduced to a righteous and faithful man named Job then see the very intentional attacks on him by Satan. It's not simply the two attacks we see but we also witness very clearly God granting Satan permission to stage these attacks on this righteous man. From this point forward, the story reflects a dialogue between Job and his friends, who try to answer this theological dilemma presented to us – why is there such evil in the world and why would God grant it permission to exist and impact faithful people?

□ Notes

Job 6-10

After hearing his first friend address Job's situation, Job responds back to the words he heard. This will be the pattern for much of the rest of the book, a friend of Job's speaks and Job responds, then the next friend speaks and Job responds, and so on. Each friend represents a similar but different perspective on why people suffer. Each perspective has truth in it but, as we'll see, they're also incomplete or a bit twisted, as each friend tries to deal with the reality of evil and suffering in the world.

As we read yesterday, Job's first friend, Eliphaz, claims no righteous person suffers, so if Job is suffering he's not as righteous as he appears. His second friend, Bildad, takes a slightly different angle on the situation. He rightfully claims that God is a God of justice, and justice demands the guilty be punished for his sins, thus Job needs to repent before God. Yet, as Job points out in his responses, each explanation does not satisfy the reality of his situation so he turns to God for an answer.

□ Notes

Job 11-15

As Job's talk continues with his friends, the conversation becomes more personal. Job sees what's happened to him and takes it as a personal attack by God, while Job's friends become more personal in their explanations for Job's sufferings.

In particular, Job's friends press two different explanations for what's happened to Job. His friend Zophar simply claims that Job should feel content because God's given him much less suffering than he deserves. Zophar seems to think that Job is not seeing his deepest sins thus doesn't appreciate how God has held back more of the just punishment Job should receive. On the other hand Job's friend, Eliphaz, claims Job doesn't fear God and His justice but instead says Job should be more respectful towards God and ask fewer questions about what God's done. Neither of his friends' cases seems satisfactory to a man who has lost everything with no explanation as to why.

□ Notes

Job 16-21

As Job and his friends debate, there's a particular line of thinking that's carried through the discussions we read today. Job's friends believe that God punishes the wicked in this life. Therefore, since Job is clearly being punished, he must repent and confess his sin to God to have the chance for God to restore him. Job's response is – if this line of thinking were true, then why are there so many wicked people, people who flaunt their disdain for God, who prosper (chapter 21)? It's this see-saw discussion that highlights the difficulties in understanding why evil exists in our world.

Yet, in the midst of all of this, Job acknowledges that his Redeemer lives and that one day he will see Him face-to-face (chapter 19). It's a beautiful response of faith in the midst of perplexing and horrific circumstances.

□ Notes

Job 22-28

We're nearing the end of the speeches given by Job's friends in which they attempt, in vain, to explain the cause of Job's suffering. One last argument his friend Eliphaz makes in chapter 22 is simply for Job to acknowledge his wickedness and turn back to God. If Job would only repent in this way God would accept him and deliver him from his sufferings.

Yet, Job's response is, "How can I turn to God when I can't even find Him. He's hidden Himself and does not respond to my petitions" (chapter 23). It's from this perspective that Job then launches into a larger speech that covers a number of chapters. In this speech Job commits to maintaining his integrity despite all that's happened to him. Job knows the truth about his suffering lies with God, so if only God would reveal this wisdom to him he'd understand why he's suffering.

□ Notes

Job 29-33

Job finishes his last defense before his friends and before God. It's a continuation of his speech that began back in chapter 26. As you can see it's one of the longest speeches of Job's we've read. Once again, Job defends his righteousness. In a particularly compelling sequence of rhetorical questions, which also foreshadows God's response to Job we'll read soon, Job uses the word "if" 16 times in asking questions about his life (chapter 31). Job challenges his friends, and God, to find and point out where he's fallen short in his life.

This final flurry of self-defending questions does not satisfy a new and younger friend who steps up to speak for the first time. Elihu first challenges Job's friends for their inability to convincingly explain why Job has suffered. Then he turns to Job and begins the last human rebuke Job will hear in this story. This rebuke will set the stage for God's response to both Job and his personal defense and appeal.

□ Notes



Job 34-37

The younger man Elihu continues his speech directed at Job but indirectly at Job's friends as well. His message is powerful because he focuses on God and many of His attributes. Over these four chapters we see an incredible description of God and many truths about Him and His nature. For example Elihu acknowledges God's eternal nature (36:26), His justice (34:17-19), His sufficiency (35:7-8) and His power over all (37:14-18). Elihu doesn't just mention these attributes but he uses them to challenge Job's perspective about God.

Elihu's entire speech becomes a preamble for the encounter Job will have next with God. God will answer Job's questions and we'll discover that Elihu had much of it right. As a matter of fact, one of the last things God does is He rebukes Job's three friends for misrepresenting God in their speeches to Job. God doesn't include Elihu in this rebuke indicating Elihu's clearly and more correct understanding of God.

□ Notes



Job 39-42

The Lord finally responds to Job and for three full chapters all He does is ask Job questions. Each question drives home the fact that Job is in no position to demand answers from God about his situation or anything else for that matter. God makes it clear that Job, and us, cannot truly grasp His ways or always understand why He allows what He allows or does what He does. It's a powerful expression of God's transcendence and who we are before Him.

Maybe the most remarkable part of this dialogue is Job's two responses to God. The first comes in the middle of God's message to him, in Job 40:3-5, where Job acknowledges that he has no answers for God's questions. The last response comes in Job 42:1-6 at the end of God's message, where Job confesses his sin and expresses his repentance. It's an incredible response to both God's Word and God's Presence. It also becomes an example of what our response should be when we experience His presence in our lives.

□ Notes

Psalms 1-9

Over the next several weeks we'll be reading through the book of Psalms. As a book it's really a collection of songs and prayers written by a number of people including King David. The ancient Jews used the Psalms as part of the temple worship as well as in celebrating their annual religious holidays, so some will have a more communal feel to them while others will be more personal. As you read them, consider whether a particular psalm is a personal prayer or a community song.

In the very first psalm we're challenged to be transformed by the power of God's Word and not by the deceptive voices of the world. The psalmist tells us that if we "delight in God's Law and meditate on it day and night" (1:2) we'll grow spiritually and have a greater influence on the world for God's Kingdom. This should give us encouragement to continue making God's Word a part of our daily lives.

□ Notes

Psalms 10-17

One of the major themes in our reading today is our unrighteousness and brokenness before a holy and righteous God. For example:

"Save, O Lord, for the godly one is gone; for the faithful have vanished from among the children of man." (12:1)

"Everyone utters lies to his neighbor; with flattering lips and double heart they speak." (12:2)

"The fool says in his heart, 'there is no God.'" (14:1)

"They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one." (14:3)

"I say to the Lord, 'You are my Lord; I have no good apart from You.'" (16:2)

It's this last verse which acknowledges the second half of the discussion about unrighteousness – any good we have, any righteousness or blessing, all comes from God. Apart from God we're broken and lost people. Thanks be to God, for in Jesus Christ we receive all blessings and righteousness for life now and into eternity.

□ Notes

Psalms 18-22

There is a progression of thought and faith which the psalms we read today follow. It begins in Psalm 18 with David's confession that the Lord is the source of all his strength. David's descriptive language helps to paint a picture of a God who provides protection and salvation. Psalm 19 then moves to affirming the trustworthiness of God's Word. Notice the different ways David tells us of the complete reliability and truthfulness of God's Word in verses 7-9. This psalm reminds us that we find the Lord's strength, described in Psalm 18, in His Word.

Psalm 20 calls us then to not trust in our own strength or resources but to trust in this strong God who, through His Word, promises us salvation. Psalm 21 calls us to rejoice and praise God for this gift of strength. Then, as a final psalm of hope, we read one of the "Messianic" Psalms, which describe the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ. This last psalm depicts the Messiah as being forsaken by God for our sake and abused by men for our salvation. It's in this Messiah that we find the fulfillment of God's strength and the goodness of His Word.

□ Notes

Psalms 23-31

Psalm 23 is one of the most loved and well-known psalms. It's a brief but powerful word picture of God's guidance and protection of our lives. Yet, it's interesting that it's placed right after Psalm 22. Yesterday, we read in Psalm 22 of the suffering of the Messiah followed by Psalm 23 that assures us of God's protection throughout this life. Believing there are no accidents in God's world, we conclude that the blessing spoken of in Psalm 23 is the result of the suffering of God's Son, Jesus Christ, in Psalm 22.

It's through faith in Jesus Christ that we can walk and live confidently in God's protection, His refreshment and in His righteousness. Even as we face death, because of the resurrection of our Savior, which followed His suffering, we too can be confident that we will also conquer death and dwell with God forever.

□ Notes

Psalms 32-37

Many of the psalms deal with the trouble evil doers create. Evil doers create trouble for believers on a couple of different levels. First, there's simply the philosophical question raised in some of the psalms today – "Why do the wicked prosper and why does God allow this to happen?" The second question is more troubling – "Why does God allow the wicked to take advantage of the poor and the righteous?"

It's a more troubling question because it's personal. David experienced this tension throughout his life, and reflected on it in many of his psalms. Yet, in the end, David doesn't despair but instead turns to God in faith, trusting Him that assures justice, when it comes to the wicked, as well as ultimate protection of the righteous. Faith in God will always fill the gap where we have no answers for what we see happening in the world, or what's happening to us personally.

□ Notes

Psalms 38-44

Are you lost, abandoned, attacked, or burdened with guilt? Maybe you're stuck in a place where you feel you can't escape, or are simply experiencing that bluesy feeling that can overtake all of us? In today's psalm the author expresses similar feelings and conditions of life. The reality is, even if we have a vibrant faith in Christ, there are moments and situations where God can seem distant and we feel abandoned.

It's part of the human condition, our sinfulness and the brokenness of this world, which alienates us from God. Yet, the truth is, God is never far from us. He never abandons us, He never allows us to suffer forever or for no purpose. He can and does turn evil into something beautiful, brokenness into victory. Often though, it simply starts with confessing our sin before God, as David did in Psalm 41:4, "Oh Lord be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you." In the acknowledgement of our sin and its contribution to our condition, we put ourselves in a position for God to rescue us – physically, emotionally and most importantly spiritually.

□ Notes

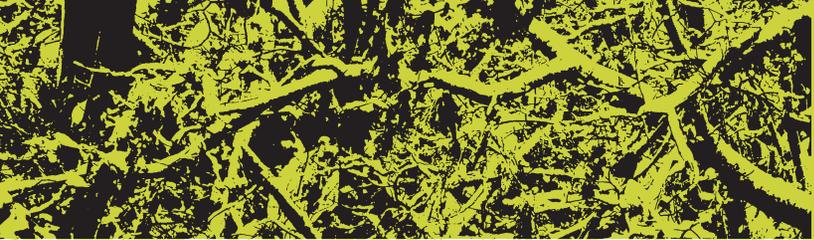


Psalms 45-51

One of the hardest themes found in the Psalms and all of Scripture is God as King of the earth, as stated in Psalm 47:7, "For God is the King of all the earth." What makes this truth, and these verses, so difficult is that it raises the question, if God is King of the earth why does He allow so much evil to happen in His realm?

Now we can't begin to answer this entire question in a few short sentences, but we can make a simple clarification that helps us understand how verses like Psalm 47:7 fit within the reality of the world in which we live. The clarification looks like this, though God is the King of the entire universe, for some reason we can't fully understand, He's allowed a "usurper" (Satan) to temporarily take reign of this earth until a time when he will be completely vanquished from this universe. So until that day, when Christ returns, we still live with evil present in our world. That's why we need to continue, as we see in the psalms, to turn always to God in prayer, asking for His protection.

□ Notes



Psalms 52-59

Psalm 53 speaks of a truth we don't often hear today – the sinfulness of all people. In an age where we're taught as kids that we're special no matter what, that we're born a clean canvas with the potential for beauty and greatness, the first three verses of this psalm shred these assumptions.

Now we can write off these verses as a bit of poetic hyperbole David uses to make his point but the Apostle Paul, in Romans 3:10-11, quotes these verses as fact. In Romans 3, Paul is making his case that all humans have fallen short of God's standard and His glory. Paul and David are confident of this truth because it goes all the way back to Genesis 3, where sin entered the world. From that moment forward, sin has been a devastating part of every human life, impacting every aspect of human existence.

But as Paul says in the verses (Romans 3:24) that follow – we, praise God, "are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

□ Notes

Psalms 60-67

Often in the psalms we read of David's deep desire to experience God and His love and deliverance. David uses descriptive and beautiful language to describe how much he desires God. For example, in Psalm 62, David says, "For God alone my soul waits in silence" (62:1, 5). It's a picture of faithful waiting, not in desperation, but in the confidence that God's salvation, the only true salvation, will appear.

Again in Psalm 63:1 he writes, "O God, you are my God: earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water." David compares his desire, his need for God to the desperate need for water one has when in the desert. It expresses a desperation that Psalm 62 doesn't have. Together these two psalms provide a portrait of a man who loves God and wants to experience Him at every level of life and in every fiber of his body. David gives us words to express our own desires and our own need for God as well.

□ Notes

Psalms 68-71

There's a definite sound of desperation in the psalms we read today. Each one has a cry to the Lord for salvation or for revenge on the writers' enemies. In many of these psalms there's a sense of urgency in their requests to God. The situations are certainly desperate and it must have felt that time was running short for some kind of salvation.

In each psalm, following these desperate cries and pleas to God, there are reassuring verses about God's power, faithfulness and righteousness. We finish each psalm, not with a desperate feeling, but with confidence and faith in God. God is the one who saves, brings justice to the wicked and will make all things right.

It's to these psalms that we should turn to in our own hour of trouble, when we feel desperate and have urgent needs, because these psalms provide both the honest expression of our hearts and the truth of our God's ability to answer.

□ Notes

Psalms 72-77

Today's reading marks a new section of psalms written by a man named Asaph. The writing of many of the psalms is for corporate worship and is very community and God focused. As you read, note how the author uses the words "we" and "us". The themes overlap with the themes of David's psalms, including such themes as God's justice, salvation and God's mercy. We'll see these same human emotions and needs expressed in many of David's psalms, including praise, worship and pleas for God's presence in the lives of people and in the nation.

One of the things you'll notice in many of these psalms is instruction and reminders given to us about how we're to live. Such verses as, "make your vows to the Lord your God and perform them" (76:11), or, "But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works" (73:28) remind us how were to think and live before God. It's in these verses that we can not only think and reflect on God's greatness but allow these words to change our lives.

□ Notes

Psalms 78-81

Psalm 78 is one of those incredible psalms that take us through the exodus story, setting the stage for David's reign as king. This brief history is given through a God centric perspective. It points out all that God did to free the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. The story highlights the miracles God performed in the midst of Egypt as well as those performed while Israel was wondering in the desert for 40 years.

The story also points out how the Israelites had fallen short and sinned against God. The message became clear – the Israelites quickly forgot all the miracles God did on their behalf and instead fell into the same sins as the nations around them. Seeing and experiencing God's miracles did not transform the Israelites, nor did receiving God's holy Law change their lives. The Israelites, as well as us today, need something more if our lives are to be transformed – we need Jesus Christ.

□ Notes

Psalms 82-89

God is always faithful when we're not. God always does what He says He'll do, where we so often fall short. God controls and orchestrates all things, where as we have little control over so few things.

These are the messages of the psalms we read today. Strong reminders of God's steadfastness, His faithfulness, and the trust we can place in Him. These psalms, therefore, bring us to a place, especially when life is uncertain, where we can go to Him. It's why so many of these psalms read like prayers, because the author appeals to these truths of God and His character when in desperate need. As you continue to read through the psalms make a note about those that especially express how you feel when things are going well, as well as pick out those that express how you feel when things are not going well and doubt begins to creep into your mind. Then in the future, when you enter into these moments, you can once again turn back to them and be encouraged by their truth.

□ Notes

Psalms 90-97

"The Lord reigns" is one of the ringing themes of the psalms. These words carry deep meaning about the nature of God, the reality concerning the universe, and the implications in our lives. First, reigns implies God's role as Sovereign King, the universe is His Kingdom, and we're His subjects. As King, God then rules over all things created – because He Himself is their Creator. This leads to both the comforting, and at times perplexing, reality that nothing in the world happens outside of His knowledge or His will. God did not set the earth in motion and then sit back to see what would happen. No, as any good King does, He's involved in every aspect of His Kingdom and cares deeply for His subjects. Finally, though this arrangement can create some difficult questions, in the end it should provide us comfort about the ultimate end of all things and the confidence to come to Him in prayer – for He is King.

□ Notes

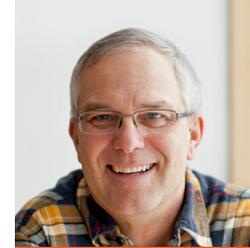
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About Michael Perry

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 obtained 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.

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