

## Welcome to iStudy - Old Testament!

### The big picture

Members and friends of First UMC, Oak Ridge are participating in a church-wide emphasis on reading the Bible, pondering its teaching, and experiencing God through the Word. This "Old Testament" booklet is the second seven-week series in our larger forty-week iStudy. The first seven-week series covered the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. This series provides an overview of the remainder of the Old Testament.

\* The remaining 34 books in seven weeks!? Yes, we have a lot to cover! But remember, this is an overview. We do not plan to read every verse, but we will cover a significant number of key passages.

\* You can select the level of involvement that best suits you! There is a *5 minute "Devotion"* each day. You may want to also add the *"Personal Worship Option."* If you prefer to *spend 20 minutes a day and "Dig A Little Deeper,"* there are notes on texts, commentary, and a few questions. For recommended readings and personal research topics, *spend an hour with the "Hard Core Study" in Appendix A.* Choose what helps you!

\* Now it is time for our standard warning - for all of you who are over-achievers and perfectionists....take a deep breathe. Relax. Decide to what extent you want to participate and do not let it all overwhelm you! It is fine to read the five minute devotion and stop. God loves you. You do not need to earn that love. More material is provided each day than 99% of us want or need. Read until you are "full." Stay healthy. **Relax into God's relentless pursuit of you.**

\* This study is written from a christian perspective - it assumes Jesus is Lord. It also assumes that followers of Jesus need to grow. We grow by being challenged to think. We believe the Bible is the word of God for the people of God. The Bible is authoritative for our lives. However, there are many ways of interpreting scripture within the christian tradition. All of us disagree with some interpretations, but it is good to be challenged by hearing and pondering different perspectives. You do not have to agree with 100% of this study's statements, but you should allow the differing viewpoints to push you to think and become aware of why you believe as you do. Keep track of everything with which you disagree - that is great fodder for discussion later!

\* Classes are available during the week for questions, conversation, and study. Many classes and small groups are using this study as a beginning point for discussion. If you do not currently participate in a group, now is the perfect time to consider doing so. New classes begin every seven weeks. We learn and grown more when we study with others.

**Week 1 - Promised Land****Lesson #1****Promised Land**

Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.  
- C. S. Lewis

**Devotion:** Read Joshua 1. God selects Joshua to lead the Israelites into the promised land following Moses' death. Forty years ago they were too afraid of the Canaanite inhabitants to obey God's command and move forward into the land (Num 13-14). Now, after forty years of living in the wilderness, they find themselves on the west side of the Jordan River, looking east to their future homeland. As with Moses (Ex 3:11-12), God assures Joshua he is not alone. God is with him. The phrase "be strong and courageous" is used four times in various forms. There is a link between God's presence and Joshua's strength and courage. Our culture teaches that strength and courage are internal qualities some have and others do not. How would your life change to believe courage is not determined by your disposition but upon the degree to which you trust that God is with you? How difficult is it to trust God to supply that internal strength? Is there a link between our awareness of the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:16), our desire to be faithful in our decisions, and courage?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Isaiah 41:10. God's presence does not take away difficulty, but it makes us capable of facing moments with calm assurance we are not alone. What situations typically dismay you? There are many kinds of strength - what kind do you need in those situations? When will you be most challenged in your faith in the coming days? Pray specifically about those moments, asking for an awareness of God in them.

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

1:1 The phrase "servant of the Lord" appears fourteen times in this book. Thirteen of those instances refer to Moses. Just as Moses first receives the title in the passage reporting his death (Deut 34:5), the one time the writer refers to Joshua with the title is after his death (Josh 24:29). How do you want people to think of you after you have passed away?

1:3 God once again uses the image of walking the land as a sign of possession (Gen 13:17; Deut 11:24). The pronouns shift in this verse from singular to plural, referring to the nation.

1:4 God says the promised land will one day extend as far as "the Euphrates" (also Gen 15:18; Ex 23:31; Deut 1:7, 11:24). This boundary is never achieved. Although Joshua 21:43-45 states the land conquest is complete, this passage must be read alongside Joshua 13:1, describing the territory that has been conquered so far. Joshua 13:1 assumes unconquered land still exists. The idea that Israel has never occupied all of this promised land has given rise to a theory among a few that Israel will occupy it as a apocalyptic sign pointing to Jesus' return.

1:6 Compare Joshua's commissioning with similar passages in Deuteronomy 31:7-8, 23. The primary difference is the addition of God's command to obey the Law (v. 7-8). So, along with recapping Moses' death and Joshua's selection, this section provides a nice transition from Deuteronomy 34, the conclusion of the Torah or "Law."

1:8 The phrase "book of the Law" likely refers specifically to Deuteronomy (Deut 29:21; 30:10; 31:26).

1:12. Three tribes (Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh) have settled on the eastern side of the Jordan. They will possess this "trans-Jordan" area as their share of the promised land (Num 32, Josh 13). Joshua demands these tribes provide military support as the remaining tribes cross the Jordan River and conquer Palestine. The fact that all these tribes help conquer the entirety of the land is quite important in the future when the tribes form one nation.

1:18 These elaborate statements of loyalty from the three trans-Jordan tribes are probably necessary considering Moses' accusation of faithlessness when they first requested to settle there (Num 32).

*(A reminder: there are extensive research topics available for you to explore in Appendix A.)*

**Lesson #2****Promised Land**

It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are. - e. e. cummings

**Devotion:** Read Joshua 2. Unlike the 12 spies sent into the land forty years ago (Num 13), these spies return with news about the people melting in fear of the Israelites. However, the majority of the chapter concerns Rahab. She is celebrated as one of the heroes of our faith (Heb 11:31) and included in Jesus' genealogy (Mt 1:5). We do not know about Rahab's past, but we know women in this culture were often forced into prostitution since the only way an unmarried/widowed female with no family support could earn a living was by prostitution or begging. Most likely Rahab faces the choice of prostitution or starvation. Foreshadowing Jesus' words about "tax collectors and prostitutes believing" (Mt 21:28-32), Rahab's faith in Yahweh leads her to risk death by saving the spies and her family in defiance of the king. Is faith an intellectual belief or an action? Does it surprise you a prostitute has such great faith? What are some cultural assumptions about prostitutes? How does Rahab's story challenge those assumptions? How does Jesus' example of eating with tax collectors and sinners (Mt 9:10-13) inform your life?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Psalm 37:4. What were your favorite games to play as a child? Reflect on what made those games or activities enjoyable. Play requires us to abandon pretensions and enjoy the moment. When was the last times you were relaxed and playful? Find a way to play today.

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

2:10 Rahab and the people of Jericho know about God's decree of complete destruction which had been carried out on the nations east of the Jordan (Num 21:21-35). Those actions were in keeping with God's command to "devote" all people and property to God as they conquer the promised land, meaning "anything that breathes" is utterly annihilated and all plunder is turned over to the national treasury (Deut 20:16-18).

Be aware this topic is very important, quite divisive, and even dangerous. People use this "the righteous shall annihilate the unrighteous" concept to justify all manner of violence against those with whom they disagree. Be careful! How do we define righteousness? When is violence permissible? Is killing ever acceptable for a Christian when Jesus taught us to take up a cross and die? How do we reconcile this passage with John 8:2-11?

The command by God to devote everything and the Israelites' efforts to fulfill it are extremely difficult for many faithful people. How is this decree in line with the "loving" character of God? Many people offer answers to that question, but there is no agreement. One traditional answer is that Deuteronomy 20:18 suggests God's command attempts to fulfill the goal of Abraham's covenant: creation of a righteous nation to act as a light to the world (Gen 12:2-3). If those who worship false gods remain, the Hebrews will inevitably intermarry, worship multiple gods, and corrupt their calling. Interestingly, the Hebrew people did not carry out God's call! They destroy Jericho but do not annihilate all those who worship false gods (Josh 23:12), and they do indeed intermarry. The resulting worship of false gods leads to over 500 years of pain and sorrow, the destruction of the nation, and the need for God to initiate a new covenant with humanity.

There are other points to consider. Some argue the Canaanites are far from innocent. These nation-states regularly go to war with each other - so those living in the land took it by force

from others. Others believe the book of Joshua represents "sacred history" and is therefore an attempt by Israel to justify its actions by claiming God's mandate. There are some who believe the goal of this book is to teach a theological lesson, not report historical facts - the lesson being "faithfulness is rewarded." If so, the basic history of the conquest of Canaan is being exaggerated by the writer to make the point clear.

Still others point to Rahab as an example of a middle ground between all these arguments. We have seen many examples of the same text having different versions (i.e. Ex 20:8-11, Deut 5:12-15). These differences arise from the tribes having variations in their oral histories. Keep this in mind when you read about Rahab's request. She acknowledges the decree for total annihilation, but asks for an exception for herself and her family. A divine reprieve is granted - making it less than "total" destruction. This might indicate that while God's call is understood as total destruction by some tribes, others define it as death for those not converting to faith in the one God, Yahweh. That there is tension among tribes regarding intermarriage with Gentiles is certainly evident considering that both Ezra (Ezra 9 is very anti-intermarriage) and Ruth (celebrating intermarriage) are included in scripture. Where are the tensions today regarding separation from and hospitality to unbelievers? What should the church teach about a believer associating with a non-believer?

How do you experience God's call for complete destruction (Num 21:21-35)? What do you make of the exception granted to Rahab?

**Lesson #3****Promised Land**

I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will consider all your works and meditate on all your mighty deeds. - Psalm 77:11-12

**Devotion:** Read Joshua 3-4. Just as the people were led through the waters of the Red Sea to freedom, so now they pass through the waters of the Jordan into the promised land. While the circumstances of this crossing are slightly different from the Red Sea, the message is the same: God is present and guiding. Intermixed with the miraculous story of the upstream waters standing still is the explanation of the twelve stones. We are a people who far too easily forget God's actions in our life. We create memorials to remember particular moments and as a means to pass on our faith and history with God to later generations. In one sense, the Bible is a written memorial passed on to us by our faith ancestors.

Previous generations made pilgrimages to holy sites an integral part of their faith. How have the gifts of photography, videography, and modern travel impacted the idea of memorials and pilgrimage? What are the positives and negatives of emphasizing sacred sites versus emphasizing the presence of God everywhere? Looking back on your life, what significant events or encounters with God do you desire to remember in the future?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read John 14:25-26. There is great power in remembering events in the past from your later perspective. Often, after time has passed, we are able to see God was active in our lives when we could not see it before. Write a description of an important moment from your past. (We find a remarkably different, and often unique, perspective on an event when we write about it.) If you are hesitant to write, think about the moment or describe it to someone else. What do you see now that perhaps you could not see back then? What lessons can you bring forward from that experience for your life today? Write or offer a verbal prayer following the narrative.

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

3:3 The ark of the covenant represents the presence and power of God. God leads. Israel follows. What are some creative ways we try to lead God? In what role does that place us?

3:4 Two thousand cubits is around one thousand yards or nine hundred fourteen meters.

3:5 Joshua commands the people to sanctify themselves, as Moses did before crossing the Red Sea (Ex 19). Most likely, this involves washing of clothing and sexual abstinence. What do you need to do to give God your complete, undivided attention and present your best self? Is there a time each week or during the year when you do these things?

3:16 Adam is probably the city Tel ed-Damiyeh, approximately twenty miles to the north.

4:7 The stones are memorials, reminders of God's activity on Israel's behalf. One set is placed on the far side of the river, and one set remains in the middle of the river, hidden from view. What is the significance of the twelve stones left in the middle of the river? Is there a permanence to those hidden stones (v. 9) that is lacking in the ones on the far bank?

4:21 This historical account takes the form of a catechism, a series of questions and answers which provide meaning for a community regarding historical and theological issues. Here are a few questions answered in the Episcopal Church's "Book of Common Prayer" catechism:

Q. What is meant by a covenant with God?

A. A covenant is a relationship initiated by God, to which a body of people responds in faith.

Q. What is the Old Covenant?

A. The Old Covenant is the one given by God to the Hebrew people.

Q. What did God promise them?

A. God promised that they would be his people to bring all the nations of the world to him.

Q. What response did God require from the chosen people?

A. God required the chosen people to be faithful; to love justice, to do mercy, and to walk humbly with their God.

What are the positives about having a church-wide catechism? Can you think of any negatives?

**Lesson #4****Promised Land**

All you need is love. But a little chocolate now and then doesn't hurt. - Charles M. Schulz

**Devotion:** Read Joshua 5:1-12. Circumcision is the sign of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants (see Gen 17:10 note, Sept 2). Circumcision communicates the Jews identity as God's people to the next generation. Compare this idea to yesterday's lesson about stone memorials. While memorials recall an important event, circumcision and baptism, its New Testament counterpart, testify to an ongoing covenant relationship with God. While memorials are external to us, circumcision and baptism are "carried" on our bodies. Memorials remind us of God's faithful action on our behalf, but circumcision and baptism remind us of who we are as God's people.

After crossing the Jordan River, the manna ceases. The produce of the land makes the "bread from heaven" unnecessary (Ex 16:35). In both cases, God provides. Is food growing from the earth any less miraculous because it occurs regularly? Many people believe that if they ever witness a miracle, faith in God would be easier. However, people throughout scripture experience miracles and afterwards doubt, fall away from God, or ask for more miracles. The children of Israel see great signs of God in Egypt and cross the Red Sea, but they still create a golden calf when Moses is delayed (Ex 32). What makes it hard to see God at work in the daily "miracles?" What is an example of God's blessings you have overlooked today?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Matthew 6:16-18. Consider fasting from something for the next 24 hours. It might be giving up a meal, meat, drinking only water, doing without television and/or electronics...there are many possibilities. Use the time wisely. Be aware of God's presence. Reflect on the experience afterwards. And if you decide not to fast from anything, be sure to reflect on why you chose to do that.

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

5:2 The generation wandering in the wilderness for forty years neglects to circumcise their children. This failure reflects their rebelliousness which led to the wandering (v 6). Often we are quick to label actions as "merely ritual," suggesting they have no value. What is the connection between maintaining covenant rituals and obedience? Is it necessary for us to be baptized to be obedient or is it a ritual that can be overlooked?

"Gibeath-haaraloth" means "the hill of foreskins," promoting all sorts of questions and poor jokes.

5:9 "The disgrace of Egypt" refers to either the degradation of slavery or their embrace of Egyptian gods. If the former, the act of circumcision symbolizes the shift from bondage to their former owners to their freedom to obey God. If the latter, the ritual renews their covenant with Yahweh, providing an opportunity for a fresh start.

5:10 As circumcision recalls the covenant promises of God, so Passover celebrates the power of God to fulfill the promises. Both rituals bestow identity, reminding the people who they are and who God is.

*(A final reminder: look at Appendix A for more research topics and readings.)*

**Lesson #5****Promised Land**

One act of obedience is better than one hundred sermons. - Dietrich Bonhoeffer

**Devotion:** Read Joshua 6:1-27. Why does God have Joshua lead the army in circles around Jericho for seven days? There is not an obvious military reason for such a ritual - the people of the city were already filled with fear (Josh 2:9). A few people see symbolism in the seven trips and blowing of the trumpets, claiming this prophesies Jesus' return, but this seems like a forced interpretation to most. Others believe this teaches the people of God that if we walk seven times around a building, neighborhood or city, God will bless or destroy it for us. Again, a forced reading. When you are listening to people's interpretations of the Bible, be careful. Remember to pray and talk to faithful friends that you trust. Just because someone is nice or sounds knowledgeable does not mean their interpretation is correct.

The Church traditionally interprets God's instruction as a test of obedience for the people. Are we willing to "go into battle" God's way? If we believe our only way to "victory" is to fight as the world fights, using the same weapons, we will fail. Read Ephesians 6:11-20. What is God communicating to the church in this passage? What is the relationship between faith and obedience? How do you know what God desires from you so you can be obedient?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Romans 12:1. If the way we treat our bodies is an act of worship, how are you doing? What habits do you need to develop or overcome to be more "holy and pleasing" to God? Is there a correlation between your physical and spiritual habits? All of us are broken. Is your brokenness evident to everyone or hidden from view?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

6:2 The commands follow the same order presented in the first chapter: God to Joshua, Joshua to the officials, and Joshua to the people.

6:4 The repetition of the number seven calls our attention to the way numbers are used in scripture. There are times when writers use numbers as standard cultural symbols to communicate to readers. This is seen in Daniel and Revelation. Written in an "apocalyptic literature" style, these books use common symbols of the day (colors, animals, actions) to poetically communicate meaning. However, not every number or color in scripture is intended to be a symbol. Biblical readers disagree over which numbers in scripture are symbols with deeper meaning and which are simply communicating an arithmetical value. So, people read this passage in different ways: walking around Jericho seven times symbolizes the "divine completeness" of their obedience to generations that follow; walking around the city that number of times somehow unleashes God's power and destroys the enemy; or perhaps God wants them to spend a week contemplating how they cannot win a battle against a fortified, walled city unless God acts.

6:5 Compare the use of trumpets here with Exodus 19:13, Leviticus 25:9, Judges 6:34, and Psalm 47:5-6. Is there a common thread running through the use of trumpets?

6:17 Such "dedication" is practiced by other nations in this era. A 9th century BCE memorial celebrates that the Moabites "dedicated" 7,000 Israelites to their god, Asher-Chemosh.

6:26 See 1 Kings 16:34.

**Lesson #6****Promised Land**

If you are renewed by grace, and were to meet your old self, I am sure you would be very anxious to get out of his company. - Charles H. Spurgeon

**Devotion:** Today's readings are a little different. We read about Joshua leading the nation in a renewal of their covenant with God. Then, we skim over chapters 9-22, which recount Israel's military victories and how the land is distributed among the tribes. There are some interesting stories (the sun stands still in chapter 10), so feel free to explore. Then we read about Joshua's desire, near the end of his life, for future generations to maintain the obedience toward God which benefited them during this conquest. The readings before and after our skimming present Joshua casting a vision of faithfulness.

Read Joshua 8:30-35; skim chapters 9-22, and read Joshua 23. Nations, churches, families, and individuals - all are tempted to lose focus on God's call once our initial goals are met, the danger is past, or the crisis comes to a conclusion. When have you seen this in your life? What is the relationship between this tendency and pride? How can communal worship help us stay focused on what matters to God? How does mistaking worship for entertainment prevent us from focusing on God by playing to our pride?

**Personal Worship Option:** As Joshua nears the end of his life, he shares what matters to him. At this point in your life, what matters to you? What are lessons future generations need to learn from the present? How do your thoughts line up with 2 Timothy 3:1-5?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

8:30 Joshua is obedient to Moses' commands in renewing the covenant (Deut 11:26-32; 27:1-13). The location of Ebal and Gerizim indicate this takes place at Shechem, near the modern city Nablus.

8:31 For instructions on building an altar according to the Law, see Exodus 20:22-26 and Deuteronomy 27:4-8. There are various interpretations as to why unhewn stones should be used, but most likely this is to prevent the excellence of the stonemasons and artists from being the focal point rather than God. On the opposite side, what is the danger in churches being too ornate, too beautiful, or too expensive? What is the danger in not giving God our best by settling for rustic, plain buildings? How should artists view their gifts? How should business people view their gifts? Is there a difference?

8:33 The participation of Hebrew and non-Hebrew, male and female, elders and children (v. 35) in the ceremony is a significant statement about the new nation God is creating.

23:2 Compare Joshua's farewell speech to Joshua 1:2-9. The tone has shifted from victory and destruction of the people who formerly possessed the land to one of remaining separate from them. This might signify that not all the tribes agreed on the idea of total annihilation of the Canaanites (see note regarding Rahab on Tuesday). Some believe this demonstrates Israel did not fulfill God's call to create a holy nation (Deut 20:16-18). Is the tone of this address more or less optimistic than chapter 1?

Read Judges 1:1 - 3:6 for another account of Israel's disobedience in failing to drive the inhabitants of Canaan out of the land. As chapter 3 begins, there is a list of the nations that remain in the land. Interestingly, the death of Joshua is reported again. Such overlap and

repetition reminds us that Joshua and Judges were written at different times and for different purposes.

23:11 Take a moment to look at Appendix B. We estimate Joshua enters the promised land in approximately 1220 BCE. In approximately 389 BCE the prophet Ezra leads the people in a reform (more details about this later). Ezra believes intermarriage with the polytheistic inhabitants who remained in the promised land led to Israel's eventual exile (Ezra 9:1-15). Indeed, worship of foreign gods, brought about primarily through intermarriage, will regularly plague the nation and its leaders (1 Kgs 11). What gods are our leaders tempted to follow now? What is the difference between following a god and a set of rigid political guidelines?

23:13 Compare the promise of God in verse 5 with this very conditional promise. How do our responses to God's saving activity determine whether God's promises find fulfillment in us? Do we have the power to prevent God from achieving God's desires? Can "free will" be defined as the ability to prevent God from achieving God's desires? Does God force you to do what is right? How do you experience God's power in your life?

**Lesson #7****Promised Land**

Most human beings have an almost infinite capacity for taking things for granted.  
- Aldous Huxley

**Devotion:** Read Joshua 24. Joshua calls the twelve tribes to faithful living and renewal of their covenant with God. Several points stand out about this call and their response: the historical overview assumes God is the driving force while the Israelites are passive, Joshua fears the people will return to worshipping foreign gods or they have never given up the practice, and Joshua provides a very stern warning against falling away. That warning describes God as holy, jealous, and unforgiving of rebellion by those who know better. A similar stern warning is found in Hebrews 10:26-27. Like all scripture, believers need to hold these shocking passages against those which suggest all sin can be forgiven (Is 1:18, Titus 2:14, 1 Jn 1:9). What is the danger of relying too much on God's forgiveness rather than fearing the Lord (Prov 1:7, Mt 10:28)? Are there times when you take forgiveness for granted?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read 2 Corinthians 5:17. We are called to make a choice about serving God in Joshua 24:15. Choices bring consequences. Choosing to serve God might mean we cannot do everything we want. But serving God also brings new life. Serving other gods or self can bring certain pleasures, but the cost is high. If you are a follower of Jesus, when has walking that path cost you? If you are not a follower of Jesus, how might walking that path cost you? How does not following that path cost you?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

24:2 Take note of the verbs used to describe God's actions in this overview, in particular the number of times the phrase "I gave" is used. This culminates in v. 13 where it is made clear the land is God's gift, not achieved by Israel's power.

24:12 People disagree over what "the hornet" means. The Hebrew word is rarely used, and therefore translators are uncertain of its meaning. Some believe this is a literal reference to swarms of insects sent forth like one of the plagues of Egypt. Others believe the phrase is figurative, meaning the fear and dread of the Lord went ahead of the conquest. See Exodus 23:23, 28 and Deuteronomy 7:20 for the other times the word is used.

24:14 The verb "to serve" is used multiple times in this chapter, and six times in vs. 14-15. What does service to God look like in our time? How does this relate to our use of the term "worship service?" How do we serve God in worship? Do you think of worship as costing you something? Is it an act you perform or watch?

24:19 Why does Joshua issue such a stern warning? Does this description of God draw you in or push you away? What is the positive of a jealous God? What does Joshua fear? Given what you see in the modern church, is his fear valid? Would such a warning be good for the church today to hear?

24:26 Like Moses (Ex 24:3-8), Joshua establishes a memorial stone to witness to their vow.

24:32 The burial of Joseph's bones brings a patriarchal promise to fruition (Gen 33:18-20; 50:25-26; Ex 13:19).

**Week 2 - Judges****Lesson #1****Judges**

God's truth judges created things out of love, and Satan's truth judges them out of envy and hatred. - Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The book of Judges is a collection of stories about the leaders who emerge from the twelve tribes following Joshua's death and prior to King Saul. During this era, the nation is a loose confederation of independent tribes. The term "judges" suggests a legal position, but these leaders primarily rise up to direct armies against foreign nations and purge instances of idolatry. This period is marked by violence, intertribal killing, oppression, increasing religious unfaithfulness, and social decay. It is easy to see why the people of this period have a growing desire for a powerful King who will establish justice and demand faithfulness!

**Devotion:** Read Judges 3:7-31. (*We skip the first chapters because they repeat material from Joshua.*) The bulk of our reading this week is spent on three judges: Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. Today we meet three lesser mentioned judges: Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar. In these three judges, we see a pattern which repeats throughout the remainder of the Old Testament - a cycle of sin, repentance, deliverance, and rest. Why do the Israelites repent? Do you see a similar cycle in your spiritual life? What does each phase look like in your life? Where are you in the process now? What leads you to cry out to the Lord? How might Jesus be considered a delivering "judge?"

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Psalm 40:8. Some people believe peace is found when all problems are solved and everyone around them is happy. (If that is the case, we will not find rest in this life!) Peace is found by looking within. When we are at peace with God, we find rest. Are you at peace? Spend time in prayer, but do not ask God to solve problems or change others. Rather, ask God to change you.

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

3:7 It is important to remember that these stories of judges is compiled by the Hebrew people when they are living as exiles in Babylon (587-538 BCE). This is significant because after these first excellent judges, this book will track the steady decline in religious faithfulness and military success until the story of Samson (13-16). Thus, Judges tracks their failures of leadership. The Jews are looking back over their early leaders, exploring why they went into exile and hoping for a more faithful future.

3:8 The name "Cushan-rishathaim" means "Cushan of double evil."

3:10 "The spirit of the Lord" is not a trinitarian reference pointing to the Holy Spirit, but a divine presence that enables someone to accomplish extraordinary things. However, this spirit is also given to the less exemplary judges (6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 9; 15:14). What does it mean that the spirit of the Lord may be active in our lives and we still make the wrong choices? Do you see evidence of this in your own life?

3:12 The name "Eglon" means "fat calf," mocking the king's obesity, as verses 22-24 mock his death.

3:13 "The city of palms" refers to Jericho, which lies in the tribal territory of Benjamin. Therefore, Ehud the Benjamite (3:15) is taking tribute to Eglon.

3:14 Compare the increase in the years of servitude between this verse and verse 8.

3:15 Because Ehud is left-handed, an unusual situation for a warrior, he is able to conceal his weapon on his right thigh, making it harder to detect. This continues the biblical theme of God using unlikely people.

3:19 Ehud delivers the tribute and sets out for home. However, after reaching Gilgal, he returns. The "stone images" references a shrine found in that city. Ehud is suggesting he arrived at the sacred site and received there a divine message for the king.

3:22 Scholars are uncertain of the actual Hebrew words translated "and his bowels discharged" in the NIV. Other translations read "and the dirt came out" or "and his guts spilled out." All these are conjecture.

3:31 The Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament common in Jesus' day) places this story at Judges 16:31, tying Shamgar to Samson. Both judges battle the Philistines with unusual weapons.

**Lesson #2****Judges**

We cannot change what we are not aware of, and once we are aware, we cannot help but change. - Sheryl Sandberg

**Devotion:** Read Judges 4. Deborah is a powerful prophet and judge. The military leader, Barak, shows no hesitation in accepting her leadership, and he is depicted as lacking faith when compared to Deborah. God uses a variety of people to rescue Israel from the Canaanite King Jabin and his military commander Sisera. The Lord uses the righteous judge Deborah; the hesitant leader Barak; the faithful but outnumbered warriors; and the quick-thinking Jael. Each play a role in accomplishing God's larger purpose. It is easy to focus on the problems in our situation instead of what gives us hope. On what disadvantages can Deborah, Barak, the warriors, or Jael focus? On what advantage can they focus? Scripture teaches everyone has God-given gifts to be used in the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:4-13). Do you have a clear sense of your role in what God is doing? Have you taken a spiritual gifts inventory? (*There are many available online!*) On what disadvantages in your life can you focus? On what advantages?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Galatians 3:27-29. What are the implications of this passage for your life? Does the idea that you are clothed with Christ change how you view yourself? What limitations do you place on yourself that, according to this passage, you need to release?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

4:1 The pattern of sin, repentance, and deliverance holds true here. This verse assumes a connection to Ehud (3:30), not to Shamgar (3:31). See yesterday's note on Judges 3:31.

4:3 The number of iron chariots emphasizes military superiority and the need for divine rescue. This is also why Judah and Benjamin are unsuccessful against the valley inhabitants (1:19). Why do we often wait until the odds are against us to seek God's guidance?

4:4 Deborah is one of four women identified as Old Testament prophets: Miriam (Ex 15:20), Huldah (2Kgs 22:14), and Noadiah (Neh 6:14).

4:6 Barak is told to gather troops on Mount Tabor and then descend into the valley where the iron chariots would normally have a distinct advantage. A "wadi" is a dry riverbed that floods when heavy rains come. Perhaps this plan is the reason Barak is hesitant to go without the prophet. It certainly points back to God's presence bringing victory.

4:11 Kadesh is approximately 40 miles northeast of the Kishon valley.

4:15 Notice the language here reflects that of Exodus 14:23-34.

4:17 Faithful people disagree over whether Jael is faithful or deceitful. How does she strike you? As a woman, what were her options? Is it ever acceptable for a faithful person to lie?

4:24 Read the "Song of Deborah" in chapter 5. This victory hymn is one of the oldest compositions in the Bible, using archaic diction and vocabulary. It originates from approximately the 12 century BCE.

**Lesson #3****Judges**

Never underestimate the power of dreams and the influence of the human spirit. We are all the same in this notion: the potential for greatness lives within each of us. - Wilma Rudolph

**Devotion:** Read Judges 6. The angel's greeting to Gideon is ironic. Mighty warrior?! Fear and doubt drive Gideon. He hides in a wine press to thresh his wheat because he fears the Midianite raiders. He destroys a pagan altar but fears the townspeople. He doubts himself and God's calling on his life. His act of "putting out a fleece" becomes a metaphor for doubt and hesitation. So why does God choose Gideon? Are we surprised God sees potential in us that we cannot imagine? God can do far more with us, when we are healthy and obedient, than we can imagine. If you completely give yourself over to God, what can God do with you? When has your fear caused you to doubt God's ability to use you?

Read Ephesians 3:20-21. How do we limit God's ability to use us? How is holding ourselves back from God's use a form of pride? Which is a more powerful force in your life: fear, guilt, love, or trust? What experiences have made each of these powerful for you?

**Personal Worship Option:** Sit and reflect on "The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love" (Ps 145:8). How does this promise strike you? If it is true, does it challenge some of your pre-conceived ideas about God? Which of those four aspects of God (gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, rich in love) do you need to accept more for yourself?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

6:1 The Midianites (Gen 25:25-32) were a nomadic tribe known for powerful, quick attacks. The once nomadic Israelites are now settled and threatened in a way they once threatened others.

6:8 In a change from the earlier stories, God sends a prophet to condemn the people's sin before supplying a judge. Along with other details in the story, this sequence of events suggests Israel's ongoing moral decline. The people are called to remember God's faithfulness in the past. How does this idea tie into the church's use of ritual? How might ritual be a form of faithful remembrance? Why does ritual not always result in remembrance?

6:11 Compare God's call of Gideon to the call of Moses (Ex 3-4). Both are hesitant to follow, but are there differences? Take note of Gideon's less than ideal responses. What do we learn about Gideon's character? Are you willing to follow a leader that has only recently received a call from God?

6:16 Although Gideon experiences the angelic presence and has assurances of victory, he asks for a sign. Why is the angelic appearance not enough of a sign? When have you needed a second or third "sign" before doing the right thing?

6:22 What does the angel look like if it takes the sign to convince Gideon this is a divine encounter?

6:25 Gideon's family worships Baal and Asherah. What does this tell us about who God calls? The symbol of Baal is a bull, so using a bull to tear down the altar is an ironic slap at the religion, as is using the sacred pole as wood for the offering to Yahweh.

6:27 Gideon's character again shines forth. He is too afraid to tear down the altar alone or in daylight. And, after pulling down the altar and having the spirit of the Lord visit him (6:34), he asks for another sign (6:36). What do we learn about God from this passage? What would you say to a friend who is waiting on a sign from God before acting?

6:39 While it may be possible for a fleece to be wet by dew while the ground is dry, it is miraculous for the opposite to occur. How do you feel about the second request for a sign? Is Gideon faithfully cautious or unfaithfully cowardly? Should faithful people "put out a fleece?"

**Lesson #4****Judges**

Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.  
- Psalm 20:7

**Devotion:** Read Judges 7. Even the bravest military leader might hesitate to reduce his troops from twenty-two thousand to three hundred, especially if the enemy is described as being as numerous as locusts. What does the extreme nature of this troop reduction teach us about humanity's tendency to take credit for God's actions (v. 2)? Why do we do that? What is the difference between taking credit for God's action and not showing gratitude for blessings? What do we learn from the idea God reassures Gideon through the voice of an enemy? Amazing things happen when we trust God. How do you decide whether or not trust someone? What would you say to someone who has a difficult time trusting God because people have been unfaithful to them? What actions can you perform to demonstrate your desire to trust God more? Are you trustworthy?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Psalm 20. What "battles" have you fought over the course of your life? Besides your relationship with God, what "forces" do you bring into such a battle? (intelligence, experience, wit, reason, determination, willpower, focus, relationships, community support, strength, endurance, faith, etc.) Which of these "forces" are you tempted to put ahead of God? What helps us trust God more?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

7:1 The story continues forward from Judges 6:33, which is why many scholars believe verses 34-40 is a different story which was inserted later. The Midianites are encamped in the Valley of Jezreel.

7:2 God's concern that Israel will take credit for the victory drives the extreme reduction in the numbers of warriors. With this concern in mind, what do you think of Gideon's instruction for the warriors to add "...and for Gideon" to their battle cry (7:18)? Compare this with Joshua's battle cry (Josh 6:16).

7:5 One interpretation of this passage is "those who lap the water with their tongues as a dog laps" are soldiers who refuse to release their weapons, while the who kneel down to drink "from cupped hands" would temporarily have to set their weapons aside. Another interpretation involves the warriors lapping water like a dog as symbolic of lapping of the blood of their enemies (Ps 68:23). However, these are merely guesses since the text does not report God's criteria. The primary point remains that God desires a reduced number of soldiers so everyone knows who brings the victory.

7:10 Gideon is once again afraid to move forward without a sign. This story of sneaking into an enemy camp is reminiscent of Jonathan (1 Sam 14) and David (1 Sam 26).

7:13 The dream is symbolic, with 'barley bread' representing the people settled enough to grow crops and the 'tent' representing the nomadic people. The fact Gideon's name is mentioned (7:14) suggests the attack is specifically against Gideon's clan.

7:19 "The beginning of the middle watch" is a an hour before midnight.

**Lesson #5****Judges**

True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less. - C.S. Lewis

**Devotion:** Read Judges 8:22-35. Gideon refuses the role of king. However he makes a priestly garment, called an ephod, which becomes an idol for the people. He gains numerous wives, concubines, and children, and names a son Abimelech, which means "my father is a king." (Abimelech attempts to establish a monarchy in chapter 9!). Although he does not take the title, Gideon is corrupted by the power of a king. We must resist the temptation to allow victories to fill us with pride. How do you define pride? When have you allowed power or success to go to your head? Humility is not thinking badly about yourself but remembering who you are in the presence of God and living out of that awareness. Imagine standing in the presence of God, righteous and holy. What parts of your life (good and bad) stand out? What gifts has God given you? What faults do you need to confess? What habits, activities, rituals, and people help you stay humble?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Genesis 2:7. "Humility" has the same root word as "humus" (earth). How might reflecting on being made from dust make us humble? Some spirituality exercises invite people to contemplate their death as a way to appreciate the gift of life. Are you close enough to your family and friends to discuss what you desire for your funeral? How might envisioning our funeral overcome our pride?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

8:22 The book of Judges is a wonderful example of how the nation was torn between pro-monarchy and anti-monarchy sentiment. Gideon refuses to become king and form a dynasty (9:7-15 and 1 Sam 8:10-18), but several passages seem to support the idea of a monarchy (17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25).

8:24 Notice the Midianites are here called Ishmaelites, denoting a probable second oral tradition.

8:26 A shekel is approximately .33 ounces. A shekel of gold at today's value is equal to around \$500. So 1,700 shekels of gold would be equal \$850,000.

8:27 An ephod is a garment worn by priests and those who represent God to the people. The implication is that an ephod made of gold signifies someone important and holy. Ophrah is the center of Gideon's power (6:11, 24).

Wealth is often a snare to people. James talks about the temptation of treating the rich better than we do the poor (Jam 2:1-7). What is a healthy understanding of money? An unhealthy understanding? How might your view of money change if you had more or less?

8:30 Gideon taking numerous wives is the action of a king, and the practice is condemned (Deut 17:17). It foreshadows King Solomon's great sin (1 Kgs 11:3).

8:33 Baal-berith is a deity which attempts to combine the Israelite God Yahweh with the Canaanite god Baal. This syncretism suggests that Gideon rules over the Hebrews and Canaanites.

**Lesson #6****Judges**

The world has yet to see what God will do with a man fully consecrated to him. - D.L. Moody

**Devotion:** Read Judges 13 and 14. Sampson's mother is instructed to raise him as a Nazarite. This special vow usually dedicates a person to God for a particular time, requiring them to abstain from alcohol, cutting their hair, and touching dead bodies (Num 6:1-21). The goal of this "consecration" is to witness to our faith and glorify God. For Sampson, these vows are permanent. Christians are to be consecrated for Jesus. Our lives are to glorify God and witness to the presence of the Holy Spirit. How do followers of Jesus look different from non-believers? In what ways do believers witness through action versus using words? Other than attending worship services, what demonstrates to others that you follow Jesus? What actions might encourage others to ask you about your faith?

**Personal Worship Option:** What song(s) would you want to be played at your funeral? What is it about those songs that make you select them? What memories do they bring to mind? What statements do they make? What would you like to be said about you at your funeral? What qualities do you want people to see in you?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

13:1 Samson is the only judge whose birth story is provided. This story gives us insight into someone who is called and set apart from birth to serve God. Samson's failures and tragic ending cause many people to see a parallel between Samson and the nation of Israel during this era of the judges.

13:2 Along with Deborah, Samson's unnamed mother is one of the few positive females in the book of Judges. What qualities do you see in her that all believers should emulate?

13:5 "Nazarite" means "consecrated one." The phrase "he will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines" indicates he will begin moving the nation toward freedom but not fully arrive there. Some believe this passage points toward the coming of the monarchy since King Saul and King David will eventually liberate the nation from the Philistines.

13:14 Notice that Samson's mother must maintain Nazarite purity until the birth.

13:17 Compare this passage to Exodus 3:13-15.

13:20 The angel's unique departure is unlike anything in the Old Testament.

14:1 Samson intermarries with the oppressors, an indication of Israel's decline (Judges 3:5-6). Such a marriage is forbidden (Deut 7:3-4).

14:3 Compare Samson's statement "she's the right one for me." (literally, "she is right for my eyes.") with 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, and 21:25. What is being communicated by that phrase?

14:4 People disagree over whether this verse means Samson is acting under the direction of God or if it is a later editorial addition to soften his failures. His actions at the wedding do not indicate he is looking for a fight. Do you think God can use people who may not have the best intentions?

14:9 Sampson's decision to eat honey from the lion's carcass violates one aspect of his Nazarite vow, the avoidance of dead bodies. Likewise, the assumption in the text is that the wedding feast is a "drinking feast," which violates a second part of his vow.

14:16 This deception by coaxing out the secret from Samson foreshadows his encounter with Delilah (16).

14:18 The comment "plowed with my heifer" is an insulting, sexually suggestive phrase aimed at his wife.

**Lesson #7****Judges**

Everything we hold dear in this world - titles, money, relationships, influence - everything will, at the end of our life, be taken away from us. Everything but our identity in God. - Roger Marks

**Devotion:** Read Judges 15-16. Samson's hair is not magic. His strength is a gift from God. His hair is an outward sign of his Nazarite vow. He commits himself to the unsavory Delilah, who is willing to betray him for money, instead of committing himself to God. Sampson breaks his vow long before the shears touch his hair. As is true for all of us, there comes a time when our brokenness and bad choices catch up to us, and we discover God's strength and mercy are now hidden from our sight. Does God withdraw from us, or do we withdraw from God? Telling Delilah about his hair is a sign Samson has turned his eyes from God. Who or what do you trust that might compromise your faith? However, Samson's story is also one of redemption. Reflecting on our brokenness and bad choices sometimes bring clarity about what matters in life and what does not. What have you learned from your brokenness?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Psalm 61:1-3. Faithful people take great comfort from knowing biblical writers struggled just as we do now. How do you cry out to God (prayer, physical stress, work too much, depression, lash out at others, unhealthy behaviors)? Does the image of God as "rock" provide you comfort or is "refuge/strong tower" more helpful?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

15:16 Whenever a writer adds poetry or verse to a story, it is likely the content is well-known to the readers. Scholars suspect this is a fragment of a victory hymn, associated with either Samson or another Israelite hero and applied to Samson.

16:1 Samson once again chooses a Philistine woman, this time a prostitute. The distance between Gaza and Hebron is 40 miles.

16:10 Is Samson's bad decision-making driven by lust, an overconfidence in his strength, or a belief God will always provide a way out of trouble? Verse 20 indicates he still believes God is with him.

16:21 Samson is reduced to Philistine servitude, as is Israel. Verse 22 seems to hold out hope for the future. Why does God forgive us? Why do you forgive people you love?

16:31 In many ways, Samson's life represents the failure of the Israelite nation during the era of the Judges. Samson delivers no repentant people, leads no tribe away from idolatry, intermarries with the oppressors, and ends his life in a questionable act of vengeance. Is it any wonder the nation desires a change from the Judges? Sadly, the change they seek is not to return to faithful worship of their true King, Yahweh. They ask God to appoint a human king. And in doing so, they learn another lesson: be careful what you ask for.

**Week 3 - United Kingdom****Lesson #1****United Kingdom**

But the proconsul urged him and said, 'Swear, and I will release thee; curse the Christ.' And Polycarp said, 'Eighty and six years have I served him, and he hath done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?' - The Martyrdom of Polycarp

This week we explore the period when the twelve tribes form one nation. Before examining Saul, David, and Solomon, the three kings of the united kingdom, we read about Samuel, who is a judge (1 Sam 7:6) and prophet (1 Sam 3:20). (*We skip the book of Ruth but will return to it in week 7 of this series.*) Like the two books named after him, Samuel is a transitional figure between the judges and kings. In week two of the first seven-week series on the Torah, we read about God directing Samuel to anoint a king for the tribes.

**Devotion:** Read 1 Samuel 3. The youth and innocence of Samuel stands in sharp contrast to the old, corrupt priest. Eli may be unwilling to punish his sinful sons (2:12-36), but he helps Samuel understand God's calling. Indeed, Eli has enough integrity to acknowledge the truth of Samuel's report that God will remove the role of high priest from Eli's family. There are many of us who have been in the church so long that we have forgotten the joy and deep peace that came with first experiencing the love of God. How has your faith changed over the years? Have you lost anything that needs to be recovered? Who are the people you need to help hear God's voice? What actions or words help someone find their calling?

God speaks to each person in unique ways (audible voice, scripture, music, intuitive awareness, dreams, intellectual connections, a friend's voice, etc.). If God speaks to you, how do you experience that?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Revelation 3:20. Pray the following words and then sit quietly (or go for a walk, listen to music, work on a hobby - whatever helps you) and listen for God to speak to you: "gracious Creator, what do I need to hear from you today?"

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

Read chapters 1-2 and look for insights in the culture of Samuel's day: assumptions about prayer, marriage, God's role in pregnancy, and child-raising.)

3:1 The statement "in those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions" (3:1) is significant for three reasons. First, it makes a recent prophecy by a man of God (2:27-36) stand out all the more. Second, we are reminded that prior to Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21), God's Spirit is not readily available to all people at all times. Prior to its being "poured out on all flesh," the spirit of God only came upon individuals at special times. Samson is a good example (Jdg 14:6,19; 15:14). Finally, "in those days" reminds us these stories are written down after the fact. Scholars disagree on when these stories were fixed in written form, but a standard assumption is the final collection came together immediately before or during Israel's exile in Babylon.

3:2 Eli's physical blindness symbolically indicates his growing spiritual blindness.

3:3 A lamp is to burn in the sanctuary throughout the night (Ex 27:20-21). It is not yet morning.

3:7 What is the difference between "knowing the Lord," "the word of the Lord being revealed," and hearing God's voice? When does someone cross the line into "knowing the Lord?"

3:11 The tingling ears image is also used to describe Jerusalem's destruction (2 Kgs 21:12, Jer 19:3). The priesthood passing from the house of Eli due to their sin is obviously significant. What do we learn about God and our callings from this judgement?

3:13 The punishment of God comes not only because of the sin of Eli's sons, but because Eli does not restrain them. What responsibility do parents, the church community, and/or the culture have to confront people's sin? Is it our responsibility to change someone or to confront them? What is the difference? How might these questions help us define what real community is?

3:19 What needs to happen in your life so that none of your words "fall to the ground?"

3:20 "From Dan to Beersheba" denotes the most northern and southern extent of Israel (Jdg 20:1).

**Lesson #2****United Kingdom**

Sadly, we skip large blocks of biblical material for the remainder of our Old Testament overview. This week we jump over the capture and return of the ark (1 Sam 5-6), Saul's victories (11), Saul's sin (13,15), the love of Jonathan and David (18), and the increasing tension between Saul and David (18-31). Passing over these passages is not a sign they are unimportant. If these topics interest you, please read!

**Devotion:** Read 1 Samuel 9:1-3. Handsome and tall, Saul looks like a king from the human perspective. The reader remembers this description of outward attributes later when David is selected (1 Sam 16:7). Are the qualities that make a good spiritual leader the same as those of a good national leader?

Read 1 Samuel 10. Samuel anoints Saul, and the King begins the difficult process of uniting the tribes and saving them from their enemies (11:1-14). Samuel's choice to anoint secretly and comments from leaders (10:27) suggest some are still unhappy with the idea of a monarch. Even Saul seems to have doubts. People with faith do have doubts! Write a definition of faith that incorporates the idea of doubt.

Read 1 Samuel 12. Samuel's address to Israel confirms Saul and chastises the people for desiring a king in the first place! Sometimes, getting what we desire is a terrible burden. That painful reality of free will and sin is that the Holy Spirit guides us but does not override us. How might this idea shape our prayer lives?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Mark 9:14-27. Doubt is a natural part of faith. The very word "faith" assumes we must trust what is beyond our sight. When do you experience the most doubts about God or your relationship with God? When do you experience doubt about yourself? In what ways does the father's statement in the story resonate with you? When was the last time you wrestled with doubt?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

9:1 The tribe of Benjamin is located in the center of the nation. This, along with Saul's appearance and wealth, make him a good unifying choice for king.

10:1 Samuel has been actively working against a monarchy (8:6). So, three increasingly shocking signs are given to convince Saul that God is behind this unusual turn of events.

10:6 Groups of prophets use music and dance to experience states of ecstatic frenzy in order to experience direct spiritual inspiration (19:18-24). See yesterday's note on 3:1. Have you ever had a powerful, spiritual encounter with the divine? How would the people in your life and our culture respond if you told them about such an encounter?

10:11 The people believe Saul is a farmer and has no business being a prophet. Verse 12 suggests prophets are a lower class whose parentage is questioned, whereas Saul is wealthy and known.

10:17 The divine selection at Mizpah seems redundant considering Saul's earlier anointing. This suggests two sources being reconciled by editors. No doubt it is quite important for Saul to be celebrated by the people he will lead (10:24).

10:25 Compare this section to Deuteronomy 17:14-20 and 2 Kings 11:12.

12:3 Samuel is a transitional leader, passing on his authority. He wants to address any supposed wrong before he fades away or dies. Why is this a good practice during a time of transition? How does a healthy church transition between leaders, staff, or pastors?

12:6 What is Samuel trying to accomplish with this historical retrospective of all the good that took place when God was the King? What determines if the next phase of a group's life will be productive and faithful? What role does remembrance play?

12:12 Samuel suggests the renewed desire for a king in this generation arises from the threat posed by the powerful Ammonites. This seems to contradict 7:9-14, where the Philistines are the threat, and the reasons provided in 8:1-5.

12:17 God demonstrates displeasure with the people's longing for a king by bringing thunder and rain during the wheat harvest. Readers disagree regarding whether the time of year or the storm's sudden appearance at Samuel's call is the miraculous element.

12:20 How do you experience Samuel's words regarding how to move forward after committing sins? What does it mean that God acts "for the sake of God's great name?" How might the goal of "magnifying God" help us clarify whether or not to act in a certain way? What goals do we substitute for "seeking to glorify God?"

**Lesson #3****United Kingdom**

Courage is not something that you already have that makes you brave when the tough times start. Courage is what you earn when you've been through the tough times and you discover they aren't so tough after all. - Malcolm Gladwell

**Devotion:** Read 1 Samuel 16-17. (*A longer reading - but I assume everyone loves David and Goliath!*) David did not look like a king to anyone but God. This story teaches that God does not look on the outward appearance but judges according to what is on the inside. When the Spirit of the Lord enlivens someone, amazing things happen. What do we learn about David from the Goliath story? How many opportunities does David have to doubt God? What drives David? What drives Goliath? If great achievements, such as Goliath's past victories, are not all based on faith, how can we tell if someone is faithful?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Acts 13:22. This is high praise for David. If we remember that David is not perfect - wait until Friday's reading if you are not certain - what does this phrase mean? Can you see that same quality, that same desire, in others? In yourself? How would you describe your level of commitment to growing in your faith? To what actions can you point to support your answer?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

16:10 Compare this list with 1 Chronicles 2:13-14.

16:14 This is a chilling passage if we read it literally. Some interpret "an evil spirit from the Lord" as God withdrawing favor and protection from Saul and allowing evil to attack. Others believe this is a theological way of writing about a psychological illness. Still others point out God is portrayed here as causing all events, good and bad. This perspective is an attempt to support monotheism - suggesting that regardless of what happens, God is in control and, at the very least, allows it to occur. What are the implications of believing God sends an evil spirit (James 1:13)? What is the difference between God causing evil and God allowing evil?

16:21 An armor-bearer for the king is a formidable warrior. David's quick rise in the eyes of the King is intended to demonstrate for the reader the power of David's anointing (16:13).

17:1 The Philistines control the coastal plain; Israel controls the hill country. Socoh and Azekah are near the disputed area between the two locations.

17:4 Goliath is described as over nine feet tall.

17:5 5000 shekels of bronze is around 125 pounds. 600 shekels (v. 7) is close to 36 pounds.

17:12 Although the last chapter says he is already in Saul's service, David is introduced as if for the first time (see also 17:55). Two independent stories about David are combined here. Likewise 17:54 indicates David has a tent, seemingly in conflict with the story of his arrival. An editor has added 17:15 to provide an explanation.

17:28 Here is another passage suggesting two accounts have been combined. Eliab's reaction is not consistent with 16:13, where David was anointed in the presence of his brothers.

17:33 "Boy" here denotes a young man but not a child. The same word in Genesis 14:24 references young warriors.

17:37 How do you experience David's comments about going into battle? Is David unique since he is chosen to be king or are we to have the same confidence going into "battles?" What determines whether God is on our side in a battle? Does God being on our side always result in victory? How does the cross of Jesus play into this discussion?

17:42 Early readers would find great irony here. King David's military prowess later in life is well known.

17:50 Does David kill the giant with the stone or with the sword?

Compare this passage with 2 Samuel 21:19. Another textual variant to consider! Oh, the joy of biblical study when multiple sources are used. There is no scholarly agreement on reconciling these texts.

**Lesson #4****United Kingdom**

But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." - Luke 1:30-33

**Devotion:** Read 2 Samuel 5. This is the high point in Israel's history. Their beloved king consolidates the twelve tribes into a unified nation. David is wise. He furthers the new nation's sense of unity by choosing Jerusalem as a new capital, bringing the ark of the covenant there (6:12-19), and casting the vision of a Temple for God (7). Many Christians long for unity today. In what ways are followers of Jesus divided? How are we divided within denominations? How are we divided within congregations? What lessons can we learn from David? What unified vision should we cast? If all churches read John 17:20-23, what keeps us from pursuing unity?

**Personal Worship Option:** Who is someone from another Christian denomination you can invite to join you for a worship service, with the understanding you will also attend a service at their church? What is the difference in approaching such visits as an opportunity to build bridges rather than a chance to recruit for each church? Pray about this opportunity, asking God to lead you.

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

5:3 David is already anointed as king over the tribe of Judah (2:4). This brings together all twelve tribes.

5:5 Jerusalem is chosen because it is a neutral city, without a significant political history favoring any one tribe.

5:7 This is the first use of the word "Zion." It is of unknown origin, but becomes a synonym for Jerusalem. It is often used poetically to describe the hill on which the city rests, as in "Mount Zion."

5:8 A description of Jerusalem's conquest by David's troops is found in 1 Chronicles 11:4-9.

5:9 The "Millo," which means "to fill," probably refers to a earthwork or rampart near the city.

5:13 This action is forbidden (Deut 17:17). This might be David's first misstep. Some scholars suggest this is an indication that Deuteronomy is not compiled yet (see August 20th note on Gen 1:20).

5:20 Baal-perazim is traditionally located four miles southwest of Jerusalem.

5:25 Geba is north of the capital, and Gezer borders the Philistines' territory. Already David is expanding the new nation through military conquest.

**Lesson #5****United Kingdom**

No adultery is bloodless. - Natalia Ginzburg

David's life has numerous military victories. His relationship with Absalom powerfully displays the King's humanity and ability to love deeply (2 Sam 13-18). So, why is David's greatest moral failure our reading? We need to see the cycle of obedience, sin, repentance, and deliverance permeates even our great leaders. Understanding this gives our lives perspective and shows the love of God that forgives time after time after time in the old and new covenants. God does not give up on us! **A common misconception is that God is harsh in the Old Testament but merciful and forgiving in the New Testament. That is not true!** God confronts our sin and offers forgiveness in both covenants!

**Devotion:** Read 2 Samuel 11:1 - 12:15. When our choices are driven by selfishness, people suffer. As a woman, Bathsheba has no voice in this matter; she must obey the king. How many others are affected by David's sinful choice? The confrontation between Nathan and David provides a glimpse into the tension between prophets and kings. Prophets "speak truth to power." Good kings listen; bad kings do not. How hard is it for those with power to receive critique? Rebuke? How hard is it for you to receive these? What qualities are necessary for us to receive valid criticism? Why do power and wealth make this difficult? How does Nathan's rebuke draw on a form of "the golden rule" (Mt 7:12)?

**Personal Worship Option:** Pray the following: Most merciful God, I confess that I have rejected you by my thoughts, words, and deeds, by what I have done, and by what I have left undone. I have not loved you with my whole heart; I have not loved my neighbors as myself. I am deeply sorry, and I humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on me and forgive me; that I may seek your desires for me, walk in your ways, and glorify you. Amen.

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

11:1 Hebrew scholars point out "in the spring" is perhaps a poor translation of the phrase "at the turning of the year" which suggests Fall. Rabbah is the present day city of Amman, the Jordanian capital.

11:8 "Wash your feet" is a euphemism for having sexual intercourse. Uriah rightly understands what is being suggested (11:11).

11:11 David sends the ark of the covenant into battle, a practice established early on (Josh 6, 1 Sam 4).

11:14 David not only sins and tries to conceal his sin, but he has the righteous warrior carry the order for his death to his executioner. The writer is not shying away from pointing out David's horrible actions.

12:5 The King is the final judge in the nation. David's judgment against "the man" is that he deserves death. Is God's judgment against David (12:11), which does not include death, therefore an act of mercy? What role should mercy play in judgment?

12:8 Apparently Saul's harem now belongs to David. This not-so-subtle comment suggests that David is not only an adulterer but unappreciative of his blessings (1 Sam 8:10-18).

12:9 David's root sin is despising the word of the Lord. Adultery, lying, murder, and the coverup are sinful actions which arise from that foundational sin.

12:11 These words are fulfilled in the following chapters, as David struggles with Amnon and Absalom.

12:13 Nathan's powerful parable traps David, and he confesses. What are your feelings about the King at this point in the story? How hard is it to confess with such frankness? How quickly do you forgive people? How quickly do you forgive yourself? Does forgiveness mean we should not face the consequences of our choices?

12:14 Compare this verse with Exodus 34:7 and John 9:1-7. Are the sins of parents visited upon children? What is the difference between God visiting sins upon children and parents' actions causing problems for children?

**Lesson #6****United Kingdom**

We should not judge people by their peak of excellence; but by the distance they have traveled from the point where they started. - Henry Ward Beecher

Like Saul and David, Solomon is associated with many wonderful stories. Some are positive, celebrating his wisdom (1 Kgs 3) and his reception of the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10). Others are negative, such as his order to kill rivals for the throne (1 Kgs 2) or building a palace larger than the Temple (1 Kgs 7).

**Now is a good time to introduce "Wisdom Literature."** Both Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon are attributed to King Solomon. Along with Job, Psalms, and Proverbs, these books are referred to as "Wisdom Literature." This style of writing is found in many ancient cultures. It is a genre known for teaching about virtue, beauty, practical aspects of life, and challenges that arise in ambiguity. We often read from the Psalms in this study. Other wisdom readings will be suggested as we move ahead, but we will not spend an entire week on any books of this genre.

**Devotion:** Read 1 Kings 8:14-61. Solomon's greatest positive achievement is building the Temple. Like the ark of the covenant, the Temple is a sign of God's presence and faithfulness. Solomon acknowledges no earthly dwelling can contain God. What are signs of God's presence in your life? What is your experience in sanctuaries and worship spaces? What helps you experience God's presence? What distracts you? If the Holy Spirit moves in and through us, are the distractions outside ourselves or within us? What are the implications of this idea on how we experience worship spaces?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Ecclesiastes 9:7-12. We are encouraged to live in the moment, enjoying the good of life while we can. This passage is a nice balance to those biblical passages which suggest life unfolds in predictable and fair ways. Spend a few moments remembering that life is a gift from God. What might help you live in the moment and enjoy the day?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

8:16 How do you interpret the phrase "that my name might be there?" What does it mean for someone's name to be present? How does this relate to the human desire to create memorials and name buildings after people?

8:24 Read 2 Samuel 7 to be reminded of the covenant God made with David.

8:27 The issue is God's transcendence and the divine presence in the Temple. Are some locations more holy than others? If so, what makes one place holy and another not? Could Solomon pray a similar prayer of dedication for a home? What occurs when a church blesses or consecrates a new building?

8:29 The Temple is a sign of God's availability for anyone who prays "toward this place." Later verses make it clear the guilty will be condemned (8:32). Compare this image to Jesus' words in John 14:13-14.

8:34 This verse indicates an awareness of the Babylonian exile, as does 8:46-51. Does this strike you as prophecy by Solomon or the writer incorporating his knowledge of what lies

ahead for the nation? If this passage is written by someone currently experiencing the exile, how would other exiles experience it?

8:41 The building is to draw the nations (8:60), and the sincere prayer of a foreigner is acceptable to God. How does this idea influence how we understand reach out to people? How we perform Holy Baptism? Who is welcome in worship?

8:54 2 Chronicles 6:13 explains the apparent contradiction between Solomon rising from before the altar and the statement in 8:22 that he is standing.

**Lesson #7****United Kingdom**

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—  
for your love is more delightful than wine.

Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes;  
your name is like perfume poured out.

No wonder the young women love you!

Take me away with you—let us hurry!

Let the king bring me into his chambers. - Solomon's Song of Songs 1:1-4

**Devotion:** Read 1 Kings 11:1-13. Modern readers often focus on Solomon's 700 wives and 300 concubines, but the book's first readers understand the issue is his worship of false gods. Obviously, if the King succumbs to idol worship, the nation is in deep religious crisis. Monotheism is the most foundational, theological truth taught in the Old Testament - there is one God (Deut 6:4). And yet, the chosen people fail to grasp or embody this core idea time after time. The question of monotheism will not finally be answered until the nation finds itself in exile in Babylon.

Christians need not be dismissive of the Israelite's failures. How often do we fail to grasp and embody the basic truths of the new covenant?! If we really believe God loves us, forgives us, and teaches us to be the body of Christ (taking up our cross, forgiving our enemies, and feeding the hungry), why do we struggle so much to do these things? Solomon allows his heart to be turned away from God by those he loves. What causes the church to turn away from God? What actions and ideas do followers of Jesus too easily incorporate into our lives? What drastic steps could Solomon have taken to walk more faithfully? How drastic are the steps we need to take?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. How do you encounter this passage? In what season of life are you? What are your goals for the next year or two? What are God's goals for you during that time? How much does your faith influence your goal setting or how you go about achieving those goals?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

11:2 Solomon violates Deuteronomy 7:3. However, so did David, who married a Calebite and an Aramean (2 Sam 3:3). Intermarriage is a divisive issue throughout scripture, with faithful people taking opposing positions (Jon 1, Ezra 9-10, Ruth 4, 2 Cor 6:14). Given Solomon's tragic story, what are some of the dangers of intermarriage between people of different faiths?

11:4 Is it possible to know if someone has turned their heart away from God? What are outward signs they are in danger of doing so? Is it the faith community's responsibility to point out when people are headed down the wrong path?

11:5 Ashtarte is a fertility goddess. Milcom, which means "king," may be another name for Moloch, a fire god, whose followers are known for child sacrifice.

11:7 By worshipping other gods, Solomon breaks the most basic tenets of the Law (Ex 20:2-3).

11:13 When leaders fail, their people also suffer. Compare this passage to James 3:1. What kind of support and boundaries does the faith community need to put in place for teachers? Who are the teachers in your life? Are you praying for them?

**Week 4 - Divided Kingdom: Israel and Its Prophets****Lesson #1****Divided Kingdom: Israel**

Family quarrels are bitter things. They don't go by any rules. They're not like aches or wounds; they're more like splits in the skin that won't heal because there's not enough material. - F Scott Fitzgerald

Because Solomon turns his heart away and worships false gods, Yahweh promises to tear the united kingdom away from his descendants (1 Kgs 11:1-13). This promise is fulfilled following Solomon's death, as his son, Rehoboam, begins his reign. Ten northern tribes secede to form a nation called "Israel." The southern tribes of Benjamin and Judah take the name "Judah." Both nations in this divided kingdom fall away from God and meet tragic ends. Israel is destroyed by Assyria. Judah is conquered and its people exiled to Babylon. This week we examine the northern nation of Israel: its kings, prophets, and eventual destruction. (*A full list of Israel's kings is found in appendix B.*)

**Devotion:** Solomon faces growing resistance during his lifetime. Jeroboam, from the tribe of Ephraim, is inspired by God to lead the northern tribes in rebellion against the monarchy. Solomon manages to drive Jeroboam to Egypt, but the nation is restless and resistance to the King grows (1 Kgs 11:26-40).

Read 1 Kings 11:41 - 12:24. The dark side of Solomon's massive building projects is revealed: the people suffer under oppressive labor and tax policies. With the kingdom hanging in the balance, the new King Rehoboam, listens to his young, harsh advisors. None of the advisors, nor the King, consult God through prayer or a prophet. What is your usual pattern for making decisions? Do you rush too quickly or ponder too long? Do you include God in big decisions or pray only during times of crisis? To whom do you listen when you make decisions? What decision-making process would you like your leaders to use?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Proverbs 3:5-6. We are encouraged to trust, lean, and submit. What makes it difficult for us to trust and submit to God? What has been your experience in trusting people? How much do we project our negative experiences of people onto God?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

Read 1 Kings 11:14-40 for the growing opposition to Solomon during his lifetime.

11:41 This same formulaic summary is used for David (2:10-11) and other kings (14:19-20, 29-31, etc).

12:1 It is interesting that Rehoboam is not crowned in Jerusalem. This indicates the extent of the northern tribes' anger following Solomon's death. He travels north to obtain their loyalty.

12:4 For Solomon's "heavy yoke," see 1 Kings 4:7-19 and 5:13-27. The northern delegation seeks a reduction of these burdens in exchange for their obedience. How would a healthy leader reply in this situation? What questions would a healthy leader ask?

12:11 "Scorpions" is a term given for a severe type of whip with thorns added or rods with thorns.

12:15 This series of events is interpreted as fulfilling 2 Kings 11:29-39. Do we still believe God's guiding hand lies behind political events of our day? What role does the Holy Spirit play in directing the course of history?

12:16 The people sing a song that originated during the rebellion of a northern leader named Sheba against David (2 Sam 20). The song became associated with northern tribes standing up to the monarchy which is based in the south.

12:18 In a act of arrogance, Rehoboam sends the leader of the hated labor gangs to deal with the rebels. His arrival inflames the insurgents, and his death commits the north to full rebellion. Looking back at Rehoboam's actions, when did he miscalculate the situation?

12:20 This verse contradicts 12:12, suggesting Jeroboam was not present at the confrontation.

12:22 The division of the kingdom into two nations is in line with God's current desires. This passage is a wonderful opportunity to examine Leslie Weatherhead's understanding of the three wills of God. Research his views on divine will and consider how it relates to this situation.

**Lesson #2****Divided Kingdom: Israel**

Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more. I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods or take up their names on my lips. - Psalm 16:4

Take a moment and skim through 1 & 2 Chronicles. These books cover much of the same historical time period as the books of Samuel and Kings. However, Chronicles tells the story from a different perspective. Kings is written during the Babylonian captivity (550 BCE); Chronicles is written after the captivity is over (~ 400 BCE). That is why 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 notes Cyrus the Persian sets the Babylonian exiles free. The Chronicles focus on the goal of unity, the belief we are not responsible for our ancestor's sins, a concern for restoration, the importance of Passover, and the idea that Yahweh is still Israel's God.

**Devotion:** Read 1 Kings 12:25-33. The northern tribes secede; Jeroboam is finally king. Sadly, he soon promotes the worship of golden calves - the false gods that angered Yahweh in the Exodus story (Ex 32)! The new king is thinking politically. He fears the people will return to the Temple to the South. He is unconcerned with God's desires. Tragically, Jeroboam sets the pattern for his Israelite successors (1 Kgs 15:25-26, 33-34; 16:13, 18-19, etc.). Almost all these kings "do evil in the eyes of the Lord." Leaders in institutions (business, church, education, government, military, etc.) often place the survival of the institution ahead of doing what is right. Where have you seen decisions based on such survival? How should the Church make decisions? What does Jesus teach his followers about this instinct for self-survival (Lk 9:23-26)?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Psalm 16. Anything we place ahead of God, even good things, become false gods. A job can be a gift from God or a false god. The same is true for children, church, comfort, family, money, pleasure, power, reputation, etc. What are the false gods that tempt you most? How might you serve that god a little less this week?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

12:25 Jeroboam establishes Shechem as the capital of the new nation. Penuel, the modern city of Tulul adh-Dhahab, is a fortress in the Transjordan region, probably designed to harass traders traveling into Judah.

12:28 Many scholars believe the golden calves are intended to represent Yahweh's throne since none of the northern prophets are recorded as speaking against them. However, the young bull is a symbol of the Canaanite god Baal. The danger is that people will begin to confuse Yahweh and Baal, which happens in King Ahab's day (1 Kgs 17-18).

Just because Jeroboam is an instrument of God's will (1 Kgs 11:27-39) does not mean he is a faithful follower of Yahweh. Success does not equal faithfulness. Why are we tempted to equate those two? What are signs of faithfulness?

12:31 The creation of rival sanctuaries and pagan religious practices brings God's judgment against Jeroboam and his "house," including his son, King Nadab (1Kgs 13-14, 15:16-31).

12:32 This festival is most likely Sukkot, known as "Booths." It is a pilgrimage feast initiated by Solomon (1 Kgs 8:65). Since people would be in the habit of making a pilgrimage to the Temple in Judah, the new King provides them an alternative destination. The critique is that Jeroboam is changing the cultic calendar, which is unacceptable.

**Lesson #3****Divided Kingdom: Israel**

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. - Mark 9:2-4

**Devotion:** Elijah is considered the greatest of the prophets. He prophesied during the reign of King Ahab, as well as the reign of Ahab's son with Queen Jezebel, King Ahaziah. Elijah appears on the scene pronouncing "there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word" (1 Kgs 17:1).

Read 1 Kings 18:17-46. There comes a time when each of us must decide if we believe in God, and if we do, whether or not we will allow that belief to change us. Our moments of decision may not be as dramatic as Elijah's encounter with the priests of Baal, but the choice remains the same. "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him" (18:21). Have you made a decision about who God is in your life? About who Jesus is for you? Are you faithfully living out that decision?

**Personal Worship Option:** Reread Joshua 24:15. Read Matthew 7:21-23. How do you experience these passages? How easy is it to avoid thinking about God, Jesus, etc. and just ride the wave of daily life? With what do you distract yourself when you want to avoid thinking about something? Does someone really believe in God if that belief never impacts their life?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

18:21 The people's silence in response to Elijah's question demonstrates they have lost touch with their heritage in Yahweh.

18:24 How do we reconcile this passage with Luke 4:9-12?

18:26 The prophets of Baal perform a ritual limping dance intended to offer mournful supplication to their god, in hopes of drawing a response. They cut themselves to show loyalty and increase the urgency of their prayer. Common in ancient pagan worship, these actions are forbidden in the Law (Lev 19:28, Deut 14:1). How is this self abuse different from fasting?

18:27 Elijah is mocking Baal. The Hebrew phrase behind the translation "traveling" ("on a journey" in some translations) is a crude expression meaning "relieving himself."

18:29 They perform from morning (18:26) until mid-afternoon.

18:30 Elijah repairs the altar that presumably has been destroyed by Queen Jezebel (18:13).

18:38 The miraculous fire could not have been lightning, given 18:44.

18:41 Elijah's words fulfill the prophecy in 17:1.

18:46 The miracles continue; Elijah outruns Ahab's chariot.

**Lesson #4****Divided Kingdom: Israel**

Today, I will have no competition or comparison. I will simply be me, and that is enough.  
- Unknown

**Devotion:** The great prophet Elijah is succeeded by the prophet Elisha (1 Kgs 19:19; 2 Kgs 2:1-14). He inherits a double share of Elijah's spirit and performs amazing miracles (2 Kgs 2:19-25, 4-6).

Read 2 Kings 5:1-19a. What does Naaman's expect to Elisha to do? What lessons does he learn through this experience? We sometimes look for God in big, dramatic experiences or incredibly beautiful places but fail to see the divine presence in simple, common moments. What can you do to be aware and open to God in the next twenty four hours? Do you have to understand how God is at work to experience God's presence?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Psalm 8. Consider the past twenty four hours. Where did you see God's presence? Had you been looking, where might you have seen God? Like many of our most dear relationships, we do not constantly have to be thinking about someone to know they are in our lives. Is that how you experience God? Of course, every friend wants a call now and then.

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

5:1 God enables Aram (Syria) to have military success. When we read the history of God's interaction with the Jewish people, we are tempted to forget that God is also interacting with other nations and races. How should this idea change how we view the Bible?

Leprosy is a term used to describe a wide variety of skin diseases, not only modern leprosy.

5:4 Both kings are unnamed - this is another subtle statement by the writer that being connected to God is more important than having positions of authority. The time period suggests the Aramean King is Ben-hadad (8:7) and the Israelite King is Jehoram (1:17).

5:5 Naaman and the Aramean King assume the Israelite king possesses the healing power or the authority to command its use. This prejudice and its preconceived notions appear again when Naaman visits Elisha.

5:7 Naaman and the Aramean King assume their gods cannot help, as does the Israelite King! It never crosses his mind to pray or ask the prophet.

5:11 What are our preconceived ideas about how God works? What can break through those to allow the uncontrollable, living God into our lives?

5:17 Like his contemporaries, Naaman assumes gods are powerfully connected to the land and must be worshipped only on their native soil. The idea that Yahweh is not only the strongest of all gods but the only God (and powerful in all places) is a radical notion.

5:18 Rimmon is a Syrian word meaning "thunder maker" and is assumed to be the rain god Hadad. What does Elisha's response teach us about helping newcomers to faith?

**Lesson #5****Divided Kingdom: Israel**

There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest. - Elie Wiesel

The northern kingdom of Israel is destroyed by Assyria in 722 BCE; the southern kingdom of Judah is taken into exile in Babylon in 587 BCE. This means all the prophets sent by God to denounce the idolatry and injustice of Israel are also aware of Judah's failures. Many prophets of this era prophesied against both nations. This is true for Jehu, Elijah, Hosea, Amos, and Micah.

**Devotion:** Israel's sin is not only the worship of false gods. The prophets continually testify against corruption and injustice - especially mistreatment of the poor. Read Amos 2:6-8 for an overview of Israel's sin. Now read Amos 5. The prophet weaves back and forth between their rejection of God and the sins of injustice and oppression. What is the connection between false worship and injustice? If a culture's relationship with God is evident in its treatment of the poor, what does our culture say about us? What needs to change in us?

**Personal Worship Option:** Look at national and local news headlines for the past week. According to these sources, what are the biggest issues facing our culture? What are the issues not mentioned that should be? What role do the faithful people of God play in addressing all these? Reflect on our call to justice and righteousness (5:24)?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

2:6 People are sold into debt slavery either unjustly ("the innocent for silver") or because they cannot repay trivial amounts, such as the cost of a pair of sandals (Ex 21:1-11).

2:7 Read Deuteronomy 15:7-11. How might a righteous community enforce laws requiring people to be kind and compassionate?

Scholars debate whether "the same girl" represents the sexual abuse of a female slave, secular prostitution, or prostitution associated with Baal worship.

Every act contrary to the Law profanes God's "holy name." What responsibility does a "Christian" have when bearing that name?

2:8 The poor offered their garments as collateral for loans. The Law teaches that their clothing is to be returned at night to used as blankets (Deut 24:12-13, 17-18). These creditors are keeping the garments. "Beside every altar" assumes pagan worship.

5:4 Israel's only hope is to seek God, but their perversions of justice and righteousness (5:7, 10-12) make that impossible. How does this passage relate to James 2:12-17?

5:5 A distinction is made between seeking God and seeking the traditional religious shrines which are doomed to judgment (3:14). What is the difference between seeking God and "going to church?" What steps can you take so that you seek God?

5:6 Ephraim and Manasseh were sons of the patriarch Joseph (Gen 48:1). The tribes named after them are in the northern nation. Therefore the people of this region are referred to as "tribes of Joseph" or "sons of Joseph."

5:7 Wormwood is a plant which tastes bitter and symbolizes something revolting.

5:10 Exploiters of the poor despise those who protest against injustice at the city gate, a traditional place of civic conversation and court proceedings (Deut 21:19; Is 29:21).

5:11 Contrary to the Law, landowners demanded excessive shares of produce from farmers (Deut 23:19). What factors should a Christian business owner use to decide how much profit to keep versus paying employees?

5:15 What is the difference between seeking good (v. 14) and hating evil?

5:16 This passage describes common rituals of mourning following a death. The word "mourners" refers to both people who are hired to wail and cry during funerals for the wealthy and Baal worshippers who believe their ritual wails bring back the dead god of vegetation to life.

5:18 This is the first mention of "the day of The Lord" in Hebrew literature. The prophet never defines the term, indicating it is a common expression to his reader. The phrase describes a future time when evil and injustice, God's enemies, are defeated. Israel assumes that day will be positive. However, Israel has become evil, and therefore, God's enemy.

5:21 How do you experience this passage? What does God desire from those who worship? What is God's response to those who believe worship rituals bring divine favor (4:4-5)?

5:26 Sakkuth is an Assyrian-Babylonian god. Kaiwan is an Assyrian name for the planet Saturn, which was worshipped as a star-god.

**Lesson #6****Divided Kingdom: Israel**

I agree with Dante, that the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in a period of moral crisis, maintain their neutrality. - Martin Luther King Jr.

**Devotion:** Read Micah 1:1-7 and 6:1-8. The prophet pronounces judgment against Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. Yet, amidst the words of doom comes a simple call: act justly, love mercy (be kind), and walk humbly with God. Israel's sin makes it clear these three hang together. Justice and loving kindness (which moves beyond mere legal requirements) are only possible in the fullest sense, when we are walking with God. Is it possible to love God and mercy and not seek justice? Is it possible to love God and justice while not being kind?

**Personal Worship Option:** Reflect on the people you encountered in the last twenty four hours. Did your words and actions reflect justice, loving kindness, and a relationship with God? If you meet them following a worship service on Sunday, would your choice of words or actions be different? How does the setting affect our encounters? Do you put on masks in some settings? Do you put on masks in worship?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

1:1 Moresheth is a town located 22 miles southwest of Jerusalem. So, this Judean prophet passes on the "word of the Lord" to both the southern and northern kingdoms.

1:2 Using language from a courtroom, God comes from the Temple to witness against sin and then pass judgment.

1:4 The imagery is that of a volcano and earthquake.

1:7 Israel's sin is idolatry. "All her temple gifts" refers to the wages of temple prostitutes. The concluding phrases allude to when Samaria falls and the objects of worship will be carried away to Assyria (2 Kings 17).

6:1 The first chapter's judicial setting continues. God brings a lawsuit; Israel is instructed to plead its case to the mountains. The creation acts as the jury (Ps 50:4; Jer 2:9, 12:1). The people are accused of ignoring God's righteous actions on their behalf. How might this accusation impact our prayer life?

6:3 The term "my people" is a powerful image, reminding readers of God's choice of Israel (Ex 19:5-6). What is the tone of these verses? What is being communicated about God?

6:4 God lists faithful actions on Israel's behalf: the Exodus story, Balak (Num 22-24), Balak (Num 22), and the travel to Gilgal (Josh 3-4).

6:6 Sacrificial offerings are the culturally acceptable way to appease a god. Micah is challenging the status quo by demanding personal engagement that leads to just behavior. Compare the prophet's summary of the Law to John 4:24.

**Lesson #7****Divided Kingdom: Israel**

Second chances do come your way. Like trains, they arrive and depart regularly. Recognizing the ones that matter is the trick. - Jill A. Davis

During King Pekah's reign in Israel, the Assyrian King Tiglath-pileser invades and captures many cities. However, before the Assyrians capture Samaria, Israel's capital, a pro-Assyrian Hebrew named Hoshea leads a coup against King Pekah. The Assyrians are happy with Hoshea as the new King, and he promises to send annual payments to Tiglath-pileser. Israel avoids destruction for twenty years by becoming as a vassal state (2 Kgs 15:27-31).

**Devotion:** Read 2 Kings 17:1-18, 24-34. After twenty years, King Hoshea stops sending tribute to Assyria and attempts a military alliance with Egypt. Shalmaneser, the new Assyrian King, is angered, invades, destroys Samaria, carries away captives, and resettles the area with his people. The newcomers intermarry with the Hebrews, mixing the worship of Yahweh with that of foreign gods. Thereafter, Hebrews in the southern kingdom view the Samaritans as pagan half-Jews. Consider God's original goal of a nation that would be a light to the world (Gen 12:1-3). The nation of Israel had 19 kings since Solomon. How many second chances did God give over those 209 years? What causes us to lose sight of God's purposes for our lives?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read 1 John 3:1-3. What are the implications of this passage? Imagine for a moment that God really does love you more than the best parents on earth love their children. What does it mean to you that you are a child of God? How should you treat people if they are children of God? How should you treat yourself if you are God's beloved?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

17:5 Historians estimate Shalmaneser's invasion and siege begins in 724 BCE. The sequence of events is not clear, but one explanation is that Hoshea capitulated before the invading army arrived, bringing the vassal tribute to the Assyrians. Shalmaneser imprisons him and sends the army to begin the three year siege of Samaria.

17:6 Shalmaneser dies soon after capturing Samaria, and Sargon II rises to power. His historical records indicate 22,290 Israelites are sent to Assyria, approximately one-tenth of the population. This group is composed of the leaders, craftsmen, and wealthy families. The goal of the deportation and inter-marriage (17:24) is to discourage future rebellion.

The deportees are taken a great distance away, to northern Mesopotamia and to Media, to prevent return and insurrection.

17:25 Lions are native and present in this region until the 12th century.

17:26 As with Naaman (5:17), there is a belief among pagans that gods are powerfully connected to a particular territory. The King assumes that only a priest familiar with the "god of that country" knows how to satisfy divine wrath.

17:29 This negative legacy regarding Samaritans is reflected in the gospels (Mt 10:5; Lk 10:25-37, 17:11-19; Jn 4:1-42, 8:48).

17:30 This is an impressive list of pagan gods that are now interwoven in Israelite culture.

**Week 5 - Divided Kingdom: Judah and Its Prophets****Lesson #1****Divided Kingdom: Judah**

...there is still a need for those of us nestled deep within the Christian bubble to look beyond the status quo and critically assess the degree to which we are really living biblically.

- Francis Chan

**Devotion:** This week we examine the southern nation of Judah: its kings, prophets, and destruction by Babylon. Unlike the evil Israelite kings, the kings of Judah swing back and forth between those who sin against God and those who do "what was right in the eyes of the Lord." Today we examine King Ahaz, one of the worst of Judah's kings. Read 2 Kings 16.

A faithful Jew cannot imagine a more detestable King! Child sacrifice, using Temple money to bribe the Assyrians, changing the sanctuary, and even destroying altar furniture because of what he saw in a pagan temple - shocking indictments! How difficult is it to live faithfully when your King is acting immorally? What complications arise because of your faith? How difficult is it to confront evil in a culture where individual rights triumph? How difficult is it to be a follower of Jesus when the culture does not make his teachings a priority?

**Personal Worship Option:** Slowly read Proverbs 4:10-27. Stop and ponder any passage or phrase that connects with you. If that phrase or passage occupies you, feel free to not complete the remainder of the passage.

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

16:3 The insulting comment "he followed the ways of the kings of Israel" reinforces last week's study on the northern kingdom. "Even sacrificed his son in the fire" means that he sacrifices a child to a pagan Canaanite god (Jer 7:31).

16:5 Although Judah and Israel share a heritage and many prophets address both nations on behalf of God, they are at odds politically and militarily. Their leaders make military alliances with foreign nations in hopes of defeating the other (1 Kgs 15:16-24). The story of the siege of Jerusalem is found in Isaiah 7. Notice this is the original context for the popular Advent/Christmas reading "the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son" (Is 7:14).

16:6 Although Jerusalem does not fall, Judah is so weakened by Aram and Israel's invasion that Edom, which had been controlled by Judah, reclaims land lost in previous wars.

16:7 The words of Ahaz could easily be addressed to God. Unfortunately the King looks to another savior. This was against the advice of the prophet Isaiah (Is 7). To what "powers" do we turn in crises?

16:10 Most likely, Ahaz has Uriah model the Temple after the temple of Hadad-rimmon in Damascus. This is referred to as Beth-rimmon in 2 Kings 5:18.

16:17 Not only does Ahaz give Assyria most of the Temple treasury to purchase their military support (v. 8), the King melts down the bronze accessories to send as tribute.

Remember: the writer of 2 Kings is looking back on King Ahaz from the perspective of an exile in Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 25). He is able to see where these decisions led the nation.

**Lesson #2****Divided Kingdom: Judah**

People, even more than things, have to be restored, renewed, revived, reclaimed, and redeemed; never throw out anyone. - Audrey Hepburn

No matter how corrupt Judah's kings become, the nation's religious leaders claim Yahweh will not allow the Temple to be destroyed. This overconfidence led them to believe Judah might become a vassal state, but prophetic warnings of total destruction by invading armies are ignored. This attitude is reinforced when Assyria conquers Israel. God rescues Judah from the same invading army led by Sennacherib (2 Kgs 18-19). This is a blessing in the moment, but it reinforces the false idea Jerusalem is invincible.

**Devotion:** Evil kings are so common, good Judean kings spend their time reforming the nation's pagan ways. King Josiah is the greatest of these reformers. Read 2 Kings 22. (For the specifics of his reforms, read 23:1-30). The "book of the law" which the high priest finds is "Deuteronomy!" They had lost it! The list of gods the people worship is shocking (23:5-7). This is the context for God's anger. The prophetess declares even Josiah's efforts cannot change the nation's heart. Indeed, the next king returns to evil ways (2 Kgs 23:31). The end is coming. There are consequences for our actions, even when our sin is forgiven. If we kill someone, we may be forgiven, but the person remains dead. What unhealthy decisions in your past still have consequences in your life today? What is the difference between doing the right thing for a reward and doing it because it is right? How might focusing on the "reward" of heaven prevent someone from being changed in this world?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Romans 12:1-2. There is a great deal packed into these two verses, but for today focus on the portion that says "be transformed by the renewing of your mind." What renews you physically? Is there a correlation between that form of renewal and renewing your mind? Are you good at taking care of yourself mentally? How might renewing your mind in Christ require you to not be conformed to the world?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

22:3 Historians believe this event happens in approximately 622/621 BCE.

22:8 Some claim Hilkiah finds all of Deuteronomy, others believe he finds chapters 12-26. These are the levitical traditions most likely brought to Jerusalem after the fall of Samaria.

22:12 The King's response is not only lament, but seeking God's direction. To grieve the tragic situation is good; to respond and seek guidance toward change is faithfulness.

22:14 Huldah is one of four women identified as Old Testament prophets: Miriam (Ex 15:20), Deborah (Jdgs 4), Huldah (2Kgs 22:14), and Noadiah (Neh 6:14).

22:16 Huldah's prophecy is in line with the earlier prophecy in 2 Kings 21:10-15.

22:19 What is God's response to faithful actions in the midst of a corrupt nation? Are there faithful individuals within corrupt nations? What makes it difficult to remain faithful when the leader or culture is not? How might the life of Jesus guide us in this discussion?

22:20 Compare this statement about Josiah's death to 23:28-30. What might the term "buried in peace" (or "gathered to your grave") mean, if he dies in battle?

**Lesson #3****Divided Kingdom: Judah**

God allows us to experience the low points of life in order to teach us lessons that we could learn in no other way. - C.S. Lewis

There is almost universal consensus among scholars that Isaiah is written by the prophet and at least one other person. Isaiah writes chapters 1-39 before the Babylonians destroy the Temple and take Judah into exile. Chapters 40-55 are clearly written in Babylon during the Exile. A very old Isaiah might have written these chapters, but most scholars believe one of his disciples penned them. Chapters 56-66 are written by one or more prophets either immediately before or after the Jews return from exile. We examine chapters 1-39 this week.

**Devotion:** Read Isaiah 1:1-20. Such painful, sad words. Judah has forgotten God. They cry out to God under the unrelenting military pressure but fail to change, seek justice or rescue the poor. If we pray for what we want but never ask what God desires from us... If we ask for deliverance and forgiveness but do not seek the justice for the oppressed... If we perform rituals to appease God's anger but do not open our hearts to be transformed...then we have chosen ourselves over God. What does 1:18-20 teach us about God? What steps can we take to keep our worship focused on God rather than on ourselves? How difficult is that?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Psalm 62:1-2. Consider memorizing these two verses and repeating them to yourself throughout the next 24 hours. If you prefer, write them down on a small piece of paper and keep them in your pocket.

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

1:1 This verse identifies Isaiah's ministry as occurring between 742-687 BCE. That 55 year length of time is one of many reasons most readers believe the prophet wrote the first 39 chapters of this book, and his disciples wrote the remainder.

1:2 Like Micah (1:2, 6:1), this is a courtroom setting with God accusing Israel ("Israel" describes the Jews, not the northern nation) with the heavens and earth as witnesses.

1:4 "The Holy One of Israel" is a title for God Isaiah uses but not many others. Since the word "holy" means "other than/separate from," what is being communicated?

1:5 The image of a parent/child relationship (v. 2) transitions to a wounded body.

1:7 Historians believe this describes the devastation following the invasion in 701 BCE (2 Kgs 18). Military records indicate Assyria conquers 46 walled cities before retreating from Jerusalem. 1:9 describes the capital standing isolated in the midst of the conquered land.

1:11 This same call for righteousness over ritual is found in Amos (5:21-24) and Hosea (6:1-8). How might this theme need to inform our expectations of worship attendance? What does faithful worship attendance mean? Compare this passage to Psalm 15.

1:16 Examine yourself according to the standard set by these two verses. Which aspect of this call to faithfulness do you need to focus on?

1:19 The words of hope are offered with a condition: the people must be "willing and obedient." Given the first 17 verses, what actions will demonstrate this attitude?

**Lesson #4****Divided Kingdom: Judah**

I don't know if you've ever noticed this, but first impressions are often entirely wrong.  
- Lemony Snicket

**Devotion:** Read Isaiah 39:1-8. The Assyrian kingdom dominates the region, but the Babylonians are rising in power. The Babylonian King sends envoys to convince Hezekiah to join him in rebellion against Assyria. Trying to impress the visitors, Hezekiah welcomes them, receives their gift, and takes them into his confidence. This foreign entanglement is exactly what Isaiah has been warning against (7:3-9, 30:3-5). Most of us struggle with the temptation to impress others. What person or group do you find yourself wanting to impress? What do we gain when they include or admire us? How has that desire to impress caused you problems? Does that desire increase or decrease in hard times?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Philippians 3:4-8. Sometimes we try to impress people with how religious we are. Read Matthew 18:3. What is the difference between being childish and child-like? How often do you laugh? When do you play? How annoying are ultra-humble, religious know-it-alls? How do we avoid becoming like that?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

Interestingly, this exact passage is also found in 2 Kings 20:12-19. What does that tell you about these two books?

39:1 History records the Babylonian King led a short-lived but quite successful rebellion against Assyria in 702 BCE. The "letters and a gift" are intended to encourage Hezekiah to join his political uprising.

39:7 "Eunuchs in the palace" refers to those who guard the king's harem, a degrading post for the descendants of a powerful king.

39:8 Isaiah does not record the destruction of Jerusalem. Chapter 40 begins a collection of passages written during the Babylonian exile from Babylon.

**Lesson #5****Divided Kingdom: Judah**

So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me. He said, "Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel." - Jeremiah 18:3-6

The Assyrian Empire dominates the region until the death of King Assurbanipal in 633 BCE. After his death, the empire disintegrates quickly through civil wars. As Assyria's diminishes, Babylon, the capital of Babylonia, asserts itself as a regional power. Although Assyria has been the perceived threat for centuries, Babylonia destroys Judah in 587 BCE.

**Devotion:** Jeremiah repeatedly prophecies against Judah, challenges false prophets (14:13-22), endures persecution (20:1-6), and weeps as he proclaims the coming disaster (20:7-18). As the Babylonian threat grows, he is increasingly persecuted by those who do not want to hear his words. Read Jeremiah 27:1-11 and 28:1-17. Hananiah breaks the symbolic wooden yoke, but God assures Judah its destruction is set in stone, or in this case, iron. What makes it hard to receive words of correction? What should we do when various "prophets" want to lead us in differing directions? What criteria should the Church use when deciding who to believe? What should happen when church leaders disagree over a path?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Jeremiah's cries in Lamentations 3:1-6, 19-25. Prophets do not enjoy speaking words of destruction and pain. There is a price to be paid for being faithful and speaking the truth. And yet we are not without hope. Reflect on verse 22. Does that promise resonate with any part of you?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

27:1 Zedekiah is the last King of Judah. According to 28:1, this series of events takes place in the fifth month of the King's fourth year, 594 BCE.

27:2 God frequently uses physical symbols to communicate to Jeremiah and the people (1:11, 13:1, 16:1, 18:1, 19:1, 24:1). What meaning does a yoke communicate (v 8)?

27:3 Just as in Hezekiah's day (Is 39), envoys from other lands are forming an alliance against the dominant power in the region. The only difference is that Babylonia has taken Assyria's place as the nation controlling the Near Middle East area. And as did Isaiah, Jeremiah prophecies that God desires Judah to submit.

27:6 Nebuchadnezzar is God's servant. How might this idea challenge some views of what it means to be "chosen" by God? Does being chosen make you moral? Does it make you good?

27:9 Like Isaiah, Jeremiah must deal with false prophets who are proclaiming what everyone wants to hear. It is easy to see why "we must submit to Babylon" is an unattractive word, and the message "God is on our side and will rescue us" is appealing. But we need to be open to the painful word.

28:3 Judah is already a vassal state of Babylon. The Babylonians conquered the land several years ago, installing Zedekiah as their puppet king, but they did not destroy the city. At that

time the Temple treasures and many people were taken to Babylon. Hananiah is falsely prophesying the return of captives and Temple vessels within two years.

28:5 What do we learn about Jeremiah from this public encounter? What guidelines would we suggest for those dealing with a prophet speaking a word in sharp contrast to ours? Do you think Jeremiah is being sarcastic or sincere?

28:10 Hananiah's is relying on the military power of the nations assembled (27:3) to bring his prophecy to fruition. It is very tempting to put faith in military force rather than listen to God.

28:11 Dramatic gestures and powerful voices are not always correct or righteous. What might be the reasons Jeremiah does not immediately respond to Hananiah's challenge?

**Lesson #6****Divided Kingdom: Judah**

Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked person, 'You will surely die, 'and you do not warn them or speak out to dissuade them from their evil ways in order to save their life, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. - Ezekiel 3:17-18

Jerusalem is actually conquered twice. Immediately after King Jehoiachin takes the throne, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon lays siege to the city and captures it. King Jehoiachin, along with his family, officers, and high ranking officials, are taken into exile in Babylon (2 Kgs 24:10-12). Judah becomes a vassal state of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar names Jehoiachin's uncle, Mattaniah, the King, changing his name to Zedekiah. The prophet Ezekiel is a priest that was taken to Babylon along with Jehoiachin (Ez 1:-3).

**Devotion:** Ezekiel uses vivid imagery, demanding words, and powerful gestures to proclaim that God's patience is over. The promises of the false prophets are crushed when the prophet pronounces God's glory has left the Temple (10:18). Some inhabitants claim innocence to the very end, suggesting the imminent destruction is a result of their ancestors' sin. Read Ezekiel 18:1-9, 21-32 to see God's response. When children cry, "it's not fair!" how do good parents respond? What should the people be saying to God? When does life seem unfair to you? What might you need to say to God about your life?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Psalm 86:1-7. Who in your life might need to be reminded they are not alone? Spend a little time today contacting someone to let them know you are thinking about them.

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

18:1 The people are referring to Exodus 34:6-7, claiming it was their ancestors' sins that are being punished. How do we know if someone quoting scripture is in line with God? Is quoting scripture ever enough? Did you know Satan quotes scripture (Mt 4:6)?

18:3 God corrects the use of a popular proverb (Jer 31:29). What are some popular Christian sayings that are not found in the Bible (God helps those who help themselves, accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, once saved always saved, etc.)?

18:4 The idea of individual responsibility is also found in 2 Kings 14:6 and Deuteronomy 24:16. What are the implications of this teaching? What is the relationship between this teaching, Exodus 20:5, and Leviticus 26:39-40?

18:9 Does the word "live" here mean physical life, spiritual life, or both?

18:23 How should this passage and 18:32 impact "hellfire" preaching?

**Lesson #7****Divided Kingdom: Judah**

Living in deep, authentic relationship with God is like the moon shining brightly in the dark sky, while the Bible and the Church's teachings are like a finger pointing up toward the moon. Too many people, however, instead of gazing at the gracious moon, prefer to relentlessly suck on the finger. - Brother Husband

Nine years into his rule, King Zedekiah (whom Nebuchadnezzar placed on the throne) rebelled against Babylon (2 Kgs 24). The Babylonians return, lay siege to Jerusalem, and destroy everything. Judah falls.

**Devotion:** Read 2 Kings 25:1-21. And so, the destruction of Judah finally arrives. We have listened to the prophets and seen this moment coming. But like any death or loss, it is still difficult to watch, and we grieve. Thankfully, each of the prophets also reassure all who will listen that God does not turn away forever. God will bring the captives back and bless them again. Isaiah 9, 11, 14, 25, 27, 35; Jeremiah 16, 23, 30, 32-33; and Ezekiel 11, 20, 34, 36-37, 39-48 all look forward to the day when God restores the nation. Spend time today aware of the presence and love of God.

**Personal Worship Option:** Read John 8:1-11. Imagine yourself in each of the roles in the story. Spend a few minutes picturing yourself as one of the accusing scribes, an elder who walks away first, the woman, and finally as Jesus. To whom do you most naturally relate? What message do you think each of those people would give you today?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

25:1 The exact dates are given: the Babylonians begin attacking Jerusalem on January 15, 588 and after starving out the inhabitants, take it on July 29, 587 BCE.

25:7 Zedekiah's punishment is intended to make a statement to other kings who might defy Nebuchadnezzar.

25:8 It requires only a few verses to report that the magnificence of Jerusalem, created during the short existence of the united kingdom, is destroyed.

25:12 The poor who are left behind, and the leaders that emerge from them, are a major obstacle when the exiles return to Jerusalem in 49 years.

25:13 This passage fulfills the prophecy made in Isaiah 39:6.

25:21 This verse creates within us a hunger to read about the restoration of the nation that God has promised will come after their exile. And the reader now understands God is faithful in keeping promises.

**Week 6 - Babylonian Exile****Lesson #1****Babylonian Exile**

Only in the darkness can you see the stars. - Martin Luther King Jr.

Today's reading is sad and painful. To begin an examination of the Babylonian exile any other way is to ignore the reality of that period. However, God makes it clear to the nation before the exile unfolds that hope is not lost. Judah is destroyed, the Temple razed, and the people taken as captives to Babylon, but God has not abandoned them. Our readings this week begin in tragedy but move toward hope and restoration.

**Devotion:** Read Psalm 137. This disturbing lament expresses the exile's pain at the memory of Babylonians and Edomites destroying Jerusalem and killing their loved ones. Violent anger and desire for retribution pour out of the psalmist. Those of us who hold back strong emotions in worship or prayer need this lament to remind us to share the fullness of our lives with God. We must choose to take the healthy path of offering ourselves fully to God (our emotions, fears, desires) or the unhealthy path of burying these deep powerful forces deep within us. What message does the church project about expressing strong feelings? To what extent are you encouraged to share during worship? What is frightening or difficult for you to share with God? What are the results of pushing things down?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read 1 Peter 5:6-7. Humility is not thinking badly about yourself but remembering who you are in God's presence and living out of that awareness. If we are to cast our anxiety on God, we must admit who we are to ourselves. This is difficult in the best of times. Spend time in prayer, reflecting on the passage and offering yourself to God.

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

137:1 Like Ezekiel (Ez 1:1), the exiles gather together by a river or irrigation canal. If it is the same body of water, Ezekiel identifies this as the River Chebar, south of Nippur in Mesopotamia.

37:3 The Babylonians taunt the exiles, urging them to sing hymns celebrating God's protection of Judea and Jerusalem (Ps 46, 76, 84, 125).

37:4 This question has two meanings. It is an emotional reaction to the captors' mocking. It is also a theological question based on the polytheistic belief that gods are tied to their lands. Judah never fully embraces monotheism prior to the exile. The exilic experience forces them to address the issue. They find Yahweh is indeed still with them and can be trusted to bring retribution on Babylon and restore their nation. After the exile, Judah is dedicated to monotheism.

37:5 The right hand is used for playing instruments; the tongue is used for singing. What purpose do laments play in a healthy faith? When do Christians lament?

37:7 The Edomites helped the Babylonians destroy the city (Obad 10-14; Ez 25:12-14).

37:9 For more accounts of this tragedy, see 2 Kings 8:12, Hosea 10:14, and Nahum 3:10.

**Lesson #2****Babylonian Exile**

Job's suffering hollowed out a big space in him so that God and joy could fill it. - John Kreeft

Although scholars argue over the details, the book of Job in its present form is likely finished during the Babylonian exile. The opening two chapters, written in prose, and the final chapter's ending (42:10-17) hold together as a complete story. This is an ancient, simple morality tale about a man named Job who remains faithful during tragedies. The exiled author splits the very old story and adds the large, poetic middle section as a theological reflection on suffering.

**Devotion:** (Those unfamiliar with Job should read the first two chapters.) Read Job 3:1 - 4:9. Eliphaz sits with Job, listens to his lament, and offers a standard answer for suffering: you sinned. His two other friends offer the same message. Job claims innocence - which is true (1:8, 22; 2:10). The exilic author is wrestling with the question, "is tragedy, pain, and suffering always the result of sin?" Do sinful choices ever affect the innocent? Are the children killed in the fall of Jerusalem sinful? Are those born in exile sinful or suffering in bondage because of another's sin? The idolatry of Judah's kings and leaders is clear, but did faithful people get caught up in the wake of their sin? Is choice necessary for sin?

Job demands answers (31:35-40); God responds. Read Job 38:1-11. Neither Job nor his friends will ever understand the mysteries of God. The world cannot be reduced to simplistic formulas, such as pain equals sin. Like a parent saying "because I said so," God demands obedience without full understanding. We do not understand the creation, let alone the mind of the Creator. We can trust God or not, but we should not fool ourselves into believing we are God's equals. Why is obedience without understanding difficult?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Job's response to God in Job 42:1-6. Job does not say "I now understand." He says "now I have seen you." What is the difference between knowing the definition of a friend and having one? What is the difference between talking about God and prayer to God? What is the difference between thinking theologically and "seeing God?"

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

3:11 Job's "why" transitions his lament in the first ten verses into a search for explanation. He is asking about the purpose of life and God's goodness. His statements about wishing to die say to God, "I reject your gift of life. It is no gift."

3:17 These verses assume a belief in Sheol, the place of the dead. The concepts of heaven and hell as reward and punishment after death, develop later. They believe both good and bad people go to Sheol. Job wishes he had died at birth so he could already be at rest there. Sheol is not a happy place, but one of "shades" and shadows. Job's desire to go there is a powerful expression of his pain and grief.

3:23 Job asks, "why is life given when finding joy is so hard and often beyond our knowledge?" He feels trapped, "hedged in." How would you answer him?

4:5 Eliphaz is surprised that Job has not offered prayers of repentance and even rejected his God-given gift of life God. He assumes his role is to help Job examine his sin and repent. What should friends say to those grieving? What are idiotic comments people too often make?

4:7 Eliphaz believes that people are rewarded and punished in this life according to their good and evil actions. This is called "deuteronomic theology." For him, the matter is simple: Job is suffering, therefore he has sinned. Since Job is innocent, the writer is challenging this common theological assumption.

38:1 God's answer not only puts Job in his place, it addresses those who believe in the deuteronomic belief that pain is a result of sin. God specifically rebukes Eliphaz and the two other friends, pointing out Job has been right to claim innocence (42:7-9).

38:4 What is the significance of God asking a series of unanswerable questions? What is being communicated about God and Job? God never specifically addresses Job's questions of "why." What does that teach us?

38:5 Modern humanity prides itself on scientific knowledge. Do these words have the same effect on our "advanced" race?

38:11 Having read the first eleven verses of God's response, what might be the symbolism of God speaking "out of the whirlwind" (38:1)?

**Lesson #3****Babylonian Exile**

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
 and proclaim to her  
 that her hard service has been completed,  
 that her sin has been paid for,  
 that she has received from the Lord's hand  
 double for all her sins. - Isaiah 40:2

**Devotion:** Read Isaiah 43:1-19. Chapters 40-55 of Isaiah are written during the exile in Babylon. The people are suffering greatly; now is the time to bring comfort and a vision of restoration. These chapters address a great theological issue: has God given up on the Jews? Some Torah stories (Gen 6:5-8, Ex 32:10) and their recent past beg the question, "have we sinned so badly that God has given up on us and chosen a different nation?" Do you find these verses encouraging? When you suffer, what makes it difficult to hear words of comfort? What promises does God make? Can you hear those same promises for you?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Psalm 118:1-6. Memorize the phrase "give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever." Consider repeating this phrase on a regular basis throughout the next twenty four hours - perhaps before you eat or drink, every time you sit down, when you pick up your phone, etc. What would be a good reminder for you to quietly repeat this verse? What healthy and unhealthy words or ideas do you already repeat to yourself? How does your self-talk encourage or discourage you?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

After Assyria destroys the northern kingdom, the area is no longer referred to as "Israel." The region is called "Samaria." Because the title "Israel" has such a powerful history with the Jewish people, during the exile that name begins to be used to describe the nation God is going to re-establish. So, when the exile and post-exilic prophets refer to "Israel," they mean the Jewish nation that will be restored in their former promised land (Is 44:5).

43:1 The phrase "but now" speaks volumes. God declares a time of reversal. The judgement on Israel's past sins is over. God renews the parent/child relationship.

43:8 The nation that has been blind and deaf is now going to witness to the world that Yahweh is the one, true God. Israel's leaders must learn from their tragic past the important lesson that monotheism is true. God re-establishes Israel's original calling to witness to all nations (Gen 12:1-3).

43:14 This is a clear statement of when Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) is written.

43:16 The Exodus experience of bringing the former slaves through the Red Sea (Ex 14) becomes a metaphor for God's promise to bring the exiles through the wilderness to once again enter the promised land.

43:19 Just as idolatrous Judah in the past could not see God had abandoned them, exiled Judah struggles to believe God is now working to bring them back to Israel. We are too easily captivated by what we see with our limited vision. We must have eyes of faith to see the world as God sees it. What are some spiritual practices that remind us God is at work beyond our ability to see? What is faith?

**Lesson #4****Babylonian Exile**

Do not put your trust in princes,  
 in human beings, who cannot save.  
 When their spirit departs, they return to the ground;  
 on that very day their plans come to nothing.  
 Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,  
 whose hope is in the Lord their God. - Psalm 146:3-5

Scholars disagree about when Daniel is written. Many believe it is written around 170 BCE during the reign of evil Antiochus IV, Greek King of the Seleucid Empire (11:5-45). Because of this late date, they suggest reading the book as an introduction to the New Testament. We read Daniel this week because it is written about the era of Babylonian exile and gives a Jewish perspective on that time. Daniel tells the story of four young Hebrews taken into captivity following the defeat of Jehoiakim (2 Kgs 24:10-12). The four young men impress King Nebuchadnezzar and rise in power in his court (Dan 1). When the King has a troubling dream, only Daniel with God's guidance is able to interpret the dream.

**Devotion:** Read Daniel 2:1-49. Daniel describes four historical kingdoms in chronological order: gold - Babylonian; silver - Media; bronze - Persia; iron - Greece (the clay/iron "divided kingdom" refers to the Greek empire divided among generals like Antiochus IV following Alexander the Great's death). We know all the world's nations crumble and fall. Followers of Jesus are called to put our trust in God, not a nation state. Christians in the United States are often accused of being more influenced by national interests and political parties than their faith. Is that critique fair? When is being a US citizen difficult for followers of Jesus?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Philippians 3:17-4:1. How do you experience the phrase "our citizenship is in heaven?" What are the practical implications of that teaching? What are the duties of a US citizen? What are the duties of a heavenly citizen?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

2:1 "In the second year" contradicts the three-year time frame of 1:5, 18. Clearly, at least two sources are melded together in these opening chapters.

People of the ancient Near East believe God or the gods communicate through dreams (Gen 28:10-17; Num 12:6; 1 Kings 3:4-15). Do you believe this is true today?

2:4 The book of Daniel is written in two languages. The parenthetical comment refers to a transition from Hebrew to a long Aramaic passage (2:4b-7:28). What might the presence of two languages indicate?

2:28 Daniel interprets the dream as prophecy regarding "the end of days." So, many people interpret this dream as not about a kingdom which emerges after the fall of these four earthly kingdoms. They believe it is about a kingdom which emerges at the end of time. In this interpretation, the statue represents all human kingdoms, all earthly governments.

2:40 The details of this fourth kingdom (strongest dynasty, "divided," intermarriage) seems to refer to Antiochus IV who rules the Roman region named Syria which includes Israel. During his reign, he claims to be a god, takes the name "Epiphanes" meaning "God made manifest," marries his sister Laodicea IV, profanes the Temple, and makes many Jewish rites illegal.

Some scholars use this reference to suggest a writer in Antiochus' day (170 AD) writes the book as a negative commentary on the evil king, projecting the commentary back onto the exilic period.

2:44 The stone is a prophecy regarding an unending kingdom established by God, the Rock (Gen 49:24, Is 28:16). Christians see this as prophetically announcing the arrival of Jesus and his teachings on the kingdom of God. He is identified as the stone on which God builds the kingdom (Eph 2:20; 1 Pet 2:4-8).

2:47 A moment before, Nebuchadnezzar worships Daniel. Is his statement celebrating Daniel's "God of gods and Lord of lords" a profession of faith? Can a polytheist believe in Yahweh? What is necessary for someone to make a profession of faith?

**Lesson #5****Babylonian Exile**

In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious. - Isaiah 11:10

The concept of Messiah emerges during this Babylonian exile era. The word itself means "anointed one," or in Greek, "the Christ." However, during and after the exile, Jews are not expecting a teacher like Jesus, let alone a divine/human crucified Savior. They no longer have a nation. They want God to send another Moses to deliver them or a descendant of King David to re-establish Israel as a strong, independent nation. Many figures are messianic in that God sent them to cast off military oppression. Even Cyrus the Persian (who releases the Babylonian exiles to return to Israel) is called God's messiah, God's anointed (Is 45:1).

Once the Jews return to Israel, good leaders emerge, but no great king reestablishes a united kingdom, conquers all enemies, and provides lasting peace. As centuries pass, people begin to idealize this coming, future king. Some still look for a Jewish military leader/king to cast off Roman oppression, but others desire an ideal deliverer who initiates a golden "Messianic Age" of peace and prosperity. What began as a longing for a strong nation becomes a hope of military and religious salvation. These different hopes are why many writings of the prophets get a variety of interpretations. Some see the prophets' longing for a future ruler to reflect a longing for a military rescue of the nation, others see an idealized messianic image ushering in that yet-to-be messianic age, and still others see Jesus.

**Devotion:** Read Isaiah 42:1-9. This is the first of Isaiah's "Suffering Servant songs." These verses present a coming leader who accomplishes God's desires quietly rather than using great military force, suffers for others, and establishes justice. Christians see Jesus in these words. Read the other three servant songs: Isaiah 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12. Do any of these passages remind you of Jesus? What are the qualities you most love about Jesus?

**Personal Worship Option:** Simplicity is considered one of the great spiritual practices. Its goal is to place the kingdom of God first, which puts other concerns in proper perspective (Mt 6:25-33). We are to be enslaved to nothing in the world. Our devotion to God should guide us to make healthy decisions. What are your current addictions or bad habits (television, phone, unhealthy food or drink, money, work, drugs, buying things, gambling, gaming, etc.)? What is a reasonable amount of time for you to "fast" from one of these things?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

42:1 The "servant" image was originally believed to represent the nation of Israel being encouraged to take the servant role during the exile experience (41:8-10; 49:3). It is only after the resurrection of Jesus that people saw a messianic vision in these passages. The servant receives the spirit of God to bring forth justice to all nations. God is concerned with justice for the entire world, not only Israel. How might these images remind you of Jesus' ministry?

42:2 God's agent does not bring justice by force but in a manner that is so gentle he does not bend reeds or extinguish a dimly lit candle. Do you see Jesus' ministry in those images?

42:4 While the servant brings forth justice, he also teaches. The Hebrew verb translated "will put their hope" (some translations, "wait") means energetically striving for life.

42:6 How do these verses relate to Luke 4:18-19? Why is it significant that Jesus quoted the prophets in defining his ministry? As we transition soon to studying the New Testament, it will be important to remember that Jesus' ministry arises out of a long, rich Jewish prophetic tradition.

42:9 Like the identification of the servant, the term "new things" is interpreted many ways: the forthcoming proclamation of Cyrus that frees the Jews (2 Chr 36:22-23), the coming of Jesus as Messiah, a personal experience for all humanity, etc.

**Lesson #6****Babylonian Exile**

Therefore this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "I will punish the king of Babylon and his land as I punished the king of Assyria." - Jeremiah 50:18

**Devotion:** In chapter 49, Jeremiah begins a series of judgment oracles against various foreign nations. Babylonia is the final nation judged. Read Jeremiah 50:1-20. Babylon was God's chosen instrument of justice against Judah, but now, even as the Hebrew exiles suffer in their exile, God pronounces judgment against Babylon's idolatry and violence. Just as Babylon defeats Assyria on the world stage, the Median-Persian empire rises to destroy Babylon. What does it mean to be "chosen" as God's instrument? Is there a connection between chosen-ness and righteous-ness? Is the Church God's chosen instrument? What might that title say about the Church? What temptations must the chosen avoid?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read John 13:34-35. What is the public face of the Christian Church around the world? Do you think the presence of denominations enables or hinders the church' ability to obey Jesus' command? Is the primary goal of the church to love others in the name of Jesus, make other disciples, or worship God? How might selecting one or the other of these choices change how we spend our time? How we spent our money?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

50:1 "Chaldeans" is used as an equivalent for Babylonians, but historically refers to a semi-nomadic tribe that lived in the southern part of that land. Today this region would be found in the southern part of Iraq. An equivalent might be referring to all United States citizens as "yankees." Although referring to the northeast U.S., it is often used to mean all Americans.

50:2 Bel and Merodach are alternative names for the head of the Babylonian pantheon, the god "Marduk."

50:3 Babylon will be invaded by the northern kingdom of Media-Persia.

50:8 The fall of Babylon is imminent, prompting the prophet to encourage the exiles to flee immediately.

50:17 The history of the promised land is summed up in four verses.

**Lesson #7****Babylonian Exile**

'Make no mistake,' He says, 'if you let me, I will make you perfect. The moment you put yourself in My hands, that is what you are in for. Nothing less, or other, than that. You have free will, and if you choose, you can push Me away. But if you do not push Me away, understand that I am going to see this job through. Whatever suffering it may cost you in your earthly life, whatever inconceivable purification it may cost you after death, whatever it costs Me, I will never rest, nor let you rest, until you are literally perfect - until my Father can say without reservation that He is well pleased with you, as He said He was well pleased with me. This I can do and will do. But I will not do anything less. - C.S. Lewis

**Devotion:** Read Ezekiel 37:1-14. Because we are not reading all of the Old Testament prophets' writings, there is a danger of suggesting their words always promise doom and destruction for the Jewish people. That is certainly not true! Spread through most of the prophetic oracles are wonderfully uplifting statements of hope and assurances of God's future restoration (Is 2, 4, 9, 11, 14, 26-27; Jer 23, 30-33; Ez 11, 16:59, 20:33, Hos 3; etc.). Ezekiel's "valley of dry bones" is a wonderful example of hope and promised renewal. There is no circumstance that is beyond the resurrection power of God. That assurance is difficult to remember when all around us feels like defeat and destruction, but the breath of God is more powerful than even death. Does our culture have a generally optimistic or pessimistic view of the future? What about the church? What about you?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read the following traditional graveside prayer:

Lord God,  
 whose days are without end  
 and whose mercies are beyond counting,  
 keep us mindful that life is short and the hour of death is unknown.  
 Let your Spirit guide our days on earth  
 in the ways of holiness and justice,  
 that we may serve you in union with the whole Church,  
 sure in faith, strong in hope, perfected in love.  
 And when our earthly journey is ended,  
 lead us rejoicing into your kingdom,  
 where you live for ever and ever. Amen.

What is your experience of that prayer? How might standing at a graveside change how we hear parts of it? How might praying it beside a newborn change how we hear it?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

37:1 The spiritual terms Ezekiel uses to describe this "vision" is reminiscent of his description of his calling (1:1, 3:22). Perhaps this the same valley he received his call. The scene is that of a great battlefield where many have died. Does God still send visions? Would you be open and receptive to receiving a vision? What would you think of someone who told you they had a vision?

37:3 What wisdom do you see in Ezekiel's answer to God's question?

37:4 God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones before the re-assembling takes place. Given this setting, what is the role of prophecy in relation to God's action?

37:9 The Hebrew word "Ruach" means wind, breath, and spirit. These verses are a play on these various meanings. Compare the use of this same word in Genesis 1:1-2. What do these two verses teach us about the spirit of God? How might the church acknowledge the power of these three meanings in worship?

37:12 The metaphor transitions from "bones" to "graves." Is there a difference in how these two images affect you?

37:11 God wants the exiles to know their despair is known. The vision is given to provide hope. Compare this to Exodus 3:7-9.

**Week 7 - Return and Restoration****Lesson #1****Return and Restoration**

Sometimes the hardest part isn't letting go but rather learning to start over. - Nicole Sobon

**Devotion:** Read Ezra 1:1-11. Cyrus the Persian conquers Babylonia. After 49 years of exile, the Israelites are free. Cyrus allows them to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple. He returns the sacred vessels Nebuchadnezzar removed. However, the Jews desire to rebuild the nation without the previous stains of idolatry and foreign oppression. They now know tolerance of polytheism leads down terrible paths. They believe the prophets' words and fully embrace monotheism. Although Christians often look down on Pharisees, there are good reasons the Jewish religious leaders return to Israel with an absolute determination to keep the law and avoid exile again. If you are a returning leader, what rules do you want in place? What dangers can you not overlook? Do you desire a human King again? How should Jews interact with non-Jews? How does the exile change our worship experience?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Galatians 3:21-29. The people of God always struggle to balance law (following rules, setting healthy boundaries, naming unacceptable behavior) and grace (being led by the Holy Spirit, offering forgiveness, seeking the intent of the Law but not robotically controlled by it). Where do you need hard and fast rules in your life? What unyielding boundaries help you stay healthy? What kind of prayer life do you need so that you are led by God rather than substituting rules and regulations for the Spirit?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

1:1 These opening verses are the same as the end of 2 Chronicles (36:22-23). The writer is tying the two books together. This means Chronicles is looking back on the events of Israel's history from a post exile perspective.

Cyrus' first year of rule in Babylon is approximately 539 BCE. He has been King of the Persian Empire for 20 years. This means the Jews are in exile for around 70 years.

"In order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah..." refers to Jeremiah 25:11-12 and 29:10. Is God still working through the political decisions of foreign nations?

1:2 Cyrus is not expressing faith in Yahweh. Rather, this is a polytheistic king giving approval for his subjects to participate in their indigenous religion. What political advantage does Cyrus have in allowing the Jews to practice their faith? Remember he has just conquered the Babylonians, who had enslaved the Hebrews.

This version of Cyrus' decree is most likely the oral proclamation made throughout the land. The written Aramaic version of the same decree is found in 6:3-5.

1:5 The entire Jewish population does not return at once, but those stirred by God.

1:6 The return to Jerusalem is written as a second Exodus story (Ex 11:2-3).

1:7 The return of sacred vessels is an act of generosity.

1:8 Sheshbazzar is a Persian name for Zerubbabel (2:2).

**Lesson #2****Return and Restoration**

Names have power. - Rick Riordan

**Devotion:** Read Isaiah 62. Remember: Isaiah chapters 56-66 are written by one or more prophets either immediately before or after the Jews return to their homeland from exile. This joyful oracle uses names to celebrate God's restoration of Israel. The nation is referred to as Zion (the name of the Jebusite fortress conquered by King David, 2 Sam 5:7), Hephzibah ("protected, delightful one"), Beulah ("married"), God's bride, Daughter Zion, Holy People, Redeemed of the Lord, Sought After, and the City No Longer Deserted. These titles reassure the Israelites and give them hope for the future. What names or descriptions would you like to hear God call you? When you are angry or make a mistake, what names do you give yourself? When you accomplish something positive, what names do you label yourself? How might God and your loved ones desire for you to change your self-naming?

**Personal Worship Option:** What words or names would you use to describe the church today? Read 1 Peter 2:1-10. What names does Peter give to the church? Which of his titles do the followers of Jesus need to most embrace in our current age?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

62:1 Are these words spoken by God or the prophet? If these are God's words, the opening lines reflect the breaking of God's silence (57:11; 64:12; 65:6). If the prophet is speaking, what joy to finally have good news to share with the people of God. Do we learn something from these joyful prophecies that we did not from the proclamation of destruction? Do prophets always go "against the grain" of cultural expectation? Is the church called to be prophetic in the same ways? How can we be hospitable if we always go against the grain?

62:4 Zion is seen as a bride. Prophets often use marriage symbolism to describe the relationship between God and the nation (Hos 2-3; Jer 3, 31; Ez 16). What does this image teach us about the intimacy God desires with his people? What benefits do spouses have in a healthy, good marriage? How do these relate to a healthy relationship with God?

62:6 Now that God is renewing Zion, the watchmen on the walls no longer have to warn of enemies. They now spend time in prayer, calling out for God to complete the restoration.

62:8 Knowing Israel's future (and the destruction that lies ahead in 70 AD), these assurances of perpetual peace remind us of the limited scope of prophecies. Such prophetic words are intended for the next several generations.

62:9 This verse refers to the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut 16:13-15) which they can now celebrate upon returning to the land.

62:10 The prophecy is interweaving the exiles' preparation for the procession back to Israel and the traditional procession/dance of the Feast of Tabernacles. The trip back is being described as a sacred ritual, like a pilgrimage.

**Lesson #3****Return and Restoration**

He must trust, and he must have faith. And so he builds, because what is building, and rebuilding and rebuilding again, but an act of faith? - Dave Eggers

Although God gives them a great gift of freedom through Cyrus, the returning exiles face serious difficulties: destroyed cities, neglected fields, and hostile neighboring states. Several "minor" prophets emerge during this post exilic era to reprove, encourage, and direct the people. Haggai chastises them for neglecting to rebuild the Temple and, when they respond, reassures them Yahweh is present. Zechariah calls for spiritual renewal and trust that God will subdue their enemies. Malachi tells of a messenger who will come before and prepare the people for the Day of the Lord. In anticipation of that day, he teaches God's people to give their best. Obadiah celebrates a future when all of their enemies will be destroyed. Joel calls for the people, led by the priests, to seek God through repentance and reform.

**Devotion:** Read Ezra 3. Arriving in the promised land, the priests re-establish worship as set out in the Law: building a proper altar (Ex 20:24), initiating sacrificial rituals (Ex 29:38), and celebrating sacred festivals (Num 29:12). At Haggai's urging (Hag 1:1-15), they begin a new Temple. They are not only laying the foundation for a building. They are establishing the groundwork for a nation built on faith. This is more than a construction project; it is worship. Those who remembered the splendor of Solomon's Temple weep, remembering what has been lost, and shout for what lies ahead. Have you had moments that might appear to an observer to be "work," but something more significant, more spiritual, was happening? Have you had any new beginnings that brought tears as well as joy?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Ezra 6:13-15. The building is complete. The Temple represents God's presence among the people. Next, they dedicate it, offer sacrifices to God, and celebrate the Passover. Read Ezra 6:22. God desires us to find joy in worship. What brings you joy in life? Are you more or less aware of God when joyful? Does your worship reflect a sense of joy? What is the connection between such an awareness of God and joy?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

3:2 Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the civil and religious leaders respectively, work together. What are the benefits and drawbacks of a nation where politics and religion are viewed as two sides of the same coin? Is separation of church and state a good thing? If so, why did God call on Israel to combine the two?

The "altar" here refers to the site where burnt offerings were previously made at the Temple. The Temple is now destroyed, but they are making their offerings amidst the destroyed building, not in a new or random place. Sacrifices were made at this site prior to Solomon's Temple was built (2 Sam 24:25) and after its destruction (Jer 41:5). It is unclear to what degree the Jews who remained behind during the exile (2 Kgs 25:12) maintained the ritual practices. The altar might have fallen into disrepair or the returning exiles found the religious practices of those remaining inadequate.

3:3 Those living in the land are not pleased with the returning exiles (4:4; 9:2). Why would this population see the return as negative? Who will gain or lose power at their arrival?

3:4 These returning exiles do not have a choice to build a new Temple somewhere else. There is one site for the Temple. Modern Christians believe that a church can be built

anywhere, but consider a congregation's attitude regarding rebuilding following the destruction of a church building. How difficult is it to leave a particular site and rebuild somewhere else? Relocating a church by abandoning or selling a building is traumatic for many who experience it. What experiences do you have with such relocation or rebuilding?

3:6 Compare this account of building to Solomon's Temple (1 Kgs 5-6; 2 Chr 2-3).

3:7 Some suspect the writer purposive lay mentions "money" because minted coinage is a relatively new creation at this time. This simple note might signal a transition from bartered payment to coinage.

3:8 Worship begins one year prior to the beginning of the Temple foundation. Note the difference in age restrictions between this passage and 1 Chronicles 23:3. The age limit might be reduced to fill a need for more workers.

3:10 "As prescribed by David king of Israel" demonstrates the leader's desire to see continuity between this Temple and Solomon's Temple.

3:11 The refrain is from Psalm 136.

Read Ezra chapters 4-5 regarding the local political resistance to rebuilding the Temple. Politics and religion are often intertwined, producing tension and conflict. What are examples of such tensions in our culture over the last twenty years?

**Lesson #4****Return and Restoration**

Intermarriage is one of the most provocative words in the English language. - Clotye Larsson

For the next few days our readings focus on the controversial issue of marriage between people of different religions. Although Paul briefly mentions intermarriage in the New Testament (2 Cor 6:14), longer statements on both sides of the issue in the Old Testament because it is an issue for the returning exiles. In this era where a single religion dominates a country, intermarriage is usually equivalent to marrying someone from another nation.

**Devotion:** Read Ezra 9:1 - 10:5. Nehemiah (Neh 13:23-31) also finds Jew/Gentile marriages unacceptable. Many prophets credit idolatry arising from mixed marriages as the issue that led the nation away from God. In spite of God's warnings (Josh 24), it causes Solomon to fall (1 Kgs 11). Jews who marry Gentiles may begin by hoping their spouses convert, but they are tempted to accept their loved one's god as equal to Yahweh. Future mixed marriages are forbidden, and Jewish men are forced to send away their foreign wives and children (Ezra 10:9-17)! What boundaries would you suggest for followers of Jesus interacting with non-believers? Should they become business partners, marry, share meals, live near, own property together, etc? Are the rules you suggest dependent upon the strength of the individual believer's faith or for everyone?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read 1 Peter 1:13-16. Have you had to give up anything to follow Jesus? Have you had to give up anything to be physically healthy or emotionally whole? Is sacrifice a rare event or a daily reality?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

9:1 The races listed are taken from Deuteronomy 7:1. The fact the Samaritans are not named is taken by some to suggest that population was working in cooperation with the rebuilding efforts.

9:3 Ezra's actions draw a crowd, and he sits in a state of despair and remorse all day. Some feel this is his attempt to gain favor for his opinion in what will be a controversial demand. How would you respond to Ezra's actions? Does it prompt you to respond favorably to his words?

9:6 Why does Ezra speak as if he is guilty of intermarriage? Is this a noble willingness to be one with the community or a manipulative ploy to move people's emotions?

9:11 Ezra refers to the "prophets" teaching, but the imagery is from Deuteronomy (7:1-3, 12). It is not an actual quote from any biblical source.

10:3 Do these Jewish men have any obligations to their wives and children? How do you understand Ezra's demand: a practical necessity, a necessary evil, an horrific injustice...? How do we tell the difference between holiness and fanaticism?

**Lesson #5****Return and Restoration**

Being a “friend of sinners” is an accusation that Christians should wear as a badge of honor, for nothing could honor Jesus more, and nothing is more revealing of who God actually is.  
- Ronnie McBrayer

**Devotion:** Ezra and Nehemiah are not the only books which deal with marriage between a Jew and Gentile. Although the story of Ruth is about a woman who lives during the era of the Judges, the book bearing her name is written many years later. Scholars disagree as to the precise date (don't they always!), but most agree it is written after the kingdoms divide and before the Babylonian exile. The book presents a positive perspective on intermarriage.

Read Ruth 1:1-18 and 4:13-22. This beautiful story introduces a Jewish widow named Naomi and her loving Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth. However, the majority of the book describes the courtship of a Jew named Boaz and Ruth. The reason this story is included in scripture is found in the closing verses; this Moabite/Jewish marriage produces Obed, the grandfather of King David. Our greatest ruler is a product of a mixed marriage. Ezra and Nehemiah present strict rules (see yesterday's readings). Ruth tells a story. Which is more powerful in changing people's hearts? Would you rather have a leader who sets clear rules or one who tells stories? What kind of leader is Jesus? Why does he chose that path?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Luke 6:39-42. It is the nature of a "log" that we do not see it in our own eye. How do we discover what our logs are? Can you see potential logs in your friends' eyes? Do you have friends close enough to you to perhaps know your logs? Are you willing to let a friend point out your logs? How does this conversation help us define what it means to be community?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

1:1 "In the days when the judges ruled" assumes the author is telling a story about long ago. Traveling to foreign lands in the time of famine is apparently quite common (Gen 12:10). We also note the Moabites welcome a Jewish family, sharing food and accepting marriage.

1:4 The writer offers no shame or surprise at the thought of marrying foreign wives. This is in keeping with the tradition of Joseph (Gen 41:45), Moses (Ex 2:21), and David (2 Sam 3:3).

1:7 Naomi returns home to find family support and to gain the use of the small piece of land Elimelech owned there (4:3).

1:8 A widow is cared for by her father's house (Gen 38:11). Naomi assumes it is acceptable to pray God's blessing on her Moabite daughters-in-law.

1:9 The word translated "rest" is the Hebrew word "menuhah," which means a permanent, true place or abode. The word is used to describe Israel's promised land (Deut 12:9), God's connection to the Temple (Ps 132:8), and the Jews view of a messianic age (Is 32:18).

1:11 Naomi assumes that if she had other sons, the young women would be taken as wives (Deut 25; Mk 12:19). Having none, Naomi is suggesting the line of David through Elimelech has ended. This makes the point of the story all the more powerful. If not for Ruth's faithfulness, the line of David does not produce the great heir.

1:14 Orpah's actions are not condemned, but presented as common sense. This provides a nice foil for Ruth's extraordinary loyalty.

1:16 The writer presents Ruth's first words in poetic verse, impressing upon the reader her nobility and character. She commits herself fully to Naomi and Yahweh.

1:17 After her public confession of obedience to God, Ruth now calls on God to punish her if she fails to be faithful to her vows to Naomi.

4:13 This closing parallels the opening. Where there was death, now there is birth. Where Elimelech's line seemed to end, now it is maintained.

4:15 In this culture, how high is the compliment Ruth is given?

**Lesson #6****Return and Restoration**

God often embraces those we label "sinner" because they are overwhelmed by the ferocious love of God and long to feel embraced. What must God think of the so-called "saints" who arrogantly and casually assume their well-connected Parent makes sure all charges against them disappear? - Roger Marks

**Devotion:** Many people think the book of Jonah is about a man and a whale. Interestingly, the "huge fish" only appears in the second chapter, turning the story temporarily away from the overall theme: God is at work among Gentiles. The post exilic author challenges the assumption Jews are more open to God than Gentiles.

Read Jonah 1:1-16; 3:1 - 4:11. All the Gentiles are open to Yahweh and eager to comply with God's desires. An entire nation repents upon hearing the word! Sadly, it is the prophet Jonah who resists God's call. Do you believe God is at work in everyone's life? How does the answer to that question change how we treat those who do not follow Jesus?

**Personal Worship Option:** Read Ephesians 2:11-22. For the early church, the divide between Gentile and Jew seems insurmountable. Peace is out of the question. What two modern groups fit this description? Are there groups which are opposed to the church? Are there groups within the church divided to this degree? How might Paul's words be applied to these modern divisions? Is it appropriate to say that if we have divisions in the church beyond our ability to overcome that it demonstrates we are not being led by the Holy Spirit?

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

Read Jonah 2 to complete the story. Is God sending the fish an act of punishment or care?

1:1 Jonah is a prophet during the time of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25). The Assyrian Empire rules this era of history; Ninevah is its capital.

1:3 Tarshish is assumed to be a Phoenician city in Spain - the ends of the earth to Jonah and in the opposite direction of Ninevah. The reader discovers later that Jonah opposes God's desire (4:2). Is Jonah still a prophet if he refuses God's word? Is prophecy a calling or a task?

1:7 In the orthodox Old Testament view, problems result from sin which must be confessed and forgiven.

1:10 The sailors' belief and faithful actions are in sharp contrast to Jonah's disobedience. Indeed, they convert and make vows (1:16)!

3:3 Modern excavation of Ninevah shows a city approximately 26 miles across. Given that outlying villages could be associated with the city, the claim of "three days journey" is certainly possible.

3:4 Is it possible to faithfully respond to God's call when you do not desire what God wants? Is it possible for God to use people who reject God's mission?

3:7 Compare the King's response to Jeremiah 18:7-8. Compare this entire situation to Jeremiah 36. What is the writer saying about Ninevah?

3:10 How do you interpret the phrase "(God) relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened?" What is the writer conveying?

4:2 Jonah is referring to Exodus 34:6. Are there modern examples of people who do not want God to be gracious and merciful to their "enemy?" Do we hate our enemies more than we love God? What are we to learn from this book about our enemies?

4:2 Jonah's anger and desire to die reflects a rejection of God. Of course, God rejects that rejection. Sometimes the most significant grace God offers is a "rejection of our rejection." How might God's response to humanity's murder of Jesus be seen as God's rejection of our rejection? Have you ever been loved by someone who you were attempting to reject?

4:4 Can the one who receives God's grace begrudge another from receiving it? Is the hatred of an enemy to that extent a sign we have not received the grace God offers?

4:10 Take a moment to reflect on the power of God's question. What inanimate objects, plants, places do you love deeply? How can we have the same love for children of God who are very different from us?

4:11 Compare this verse to Acts 10.

(Esther is another example of an Old Testament book that describes the positives of a marriage between a Jew and Gentile, as well as good Gentile leaders. Read Esther if you desire to experience another positive argument in the intermarriage debate.)

**Lesson #7****Return and Restoration**

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.

- Nehemiah 6:15-16

**Devotion:** Read Nehemiah 2. King Artaxerxes of Persia allows his trusted cupbearer to return and rebuild Jerusalem, beginning with the walls. Nehemiah surveys at night (2:13) because his plans upset those who currently exercise power over the land (2:19). Rebuilding the walls is the last major step in Israel's becoming a nation state following the Babylonian exile. Acting through a variety of people, God re-establishes what was destroyed through idolatry and rebellion. The Jews have come a long way from the call of Abram (Gen 12:1-3), but God is still faithfully working with and through his descendants. As the Old Testament comes to an end, God has even greater plans ahead. What lessons should followers of Jesus learn from the long arc of Jewish history, with its highs and lows? What walls does the church need to rebuild or tear down? What does God desire next?

**Personal Worship Option:** Spend some time today in prayer. Examine the long arc of your life, giving thanks for the highs and lows. Sometimes the "lows" are where we learn the most important lessons.

**Dig A Little Deeper:**

2:1 As cupbearer of the King, Nehemiah holds a trusted position. As an intimate of the monarchy, he is most likely a eunuch.

After hearing the report from Jerusalem (1:1-3), Nehemiah waits four months to speak to the King about his desire to travel to the city. Most likely he is looking for the right moment, waiting on the King to be in an agreeable mood.

2:7 This is an amazing request, essentially asking Artaxerxes to approve Nehemiah being given power over civil authorities for the purpose of re-fortifying and re-arming a subjugated vassal state.

2:10 "Haronite" refers to a small village northwest of Jerusalem. Ammonites are from the Trans-Jordan region. These local governing authorities are losing virtually all their power in this order.

## **Appendix A Hard Core Study Topics**

### **Lesson #1**

### **Promised Land**

- Explore the various opinions on when Joshua is written and/or collected into one work.
- Research the "Habiru" people and a possible insulting link of that term with "Hebrews."
- Find the traditional locations for each of the twelve tribes on a map.
- Read Judges 12:1-6, 21:5-14 to see the difficult relations between the Transjordan tribes and the others.

### **Lesson #2**

### **Promised Land**

- Explore the aspects of the Hebrew word "herem" ("charam") referred to as "the ban."
- Research the mid rash tradition that Rahab married Joshua, as opposed to Matthew 1:5. What does such a tradition indicate about Rahab's meaning for the Jewish people?

### **Lesson #3**

### **Promised Land**

- Research the great medieval pilgrimage sites, routes, and preparations.
- Find the city of Adam, Tel ed-Damiyeh on a map of ancient Israel.
- Compare the Episcopal Church and Roman Catholic Church catechisms.

### **Lesson #4**

### **Promised Land**

- Explore the theological connection between circumcision and baptism, especially considering the Roman Catholic position.
- Research the traditional definition of a miracle. What role should miracles play in faith? What is the distinction between "natural" and "supernatural?" Why are "natural" events occurring in the creation not considered miracles? What is the difference between a miracle edifying your faith and forming the foundation of your faith?

### **Lesson #5**

### **Promised Land**

- Read Joshua 5:13-15. Research various commentaries on why the commander of the army of the Lord replies "neither" to Joshua's question.
- Research the difference between numerology (the belief in mystical relationships between numbers and events that leads to divination) and the belief in the significant symbolic use of numbers in scripture to communicate truths.
- Find a definition of "apocalyptic literature" and examples of its style.
- Read Joshua 7:1 - 8:29.

### **Lesson #6**

### **Promised Land**

- Read Joshua 9-12, 20. Research why cities of refuge were also religious centers.
- Locate Nablus on a map. Research the archeological evidence of Joshua's altar discovered there.

### **Lesson #7**

### **Promised Land**

- Research the interesting history of Joseph's tomb at Shechem.

### **Lesson #1**

### **Judges**

- Explore the different opinions on when the book of Judges was written and by whom.
- Read Judges, chapters 11-12, looking for evidence of the steady decline in leadership between the exemplary Othniel and the dubious Jephthah.
- Research what worship of "the Baals and the Asherahs" (Judges 3:7) entailed.

- Study archeological evidence of when Jericho was inhabited. How do those estimated dates work in conjunction with the account of Ehud?

### **Lesson #2**

### **Judges**

- Explore the idea that this passage represents two stories merged together. If true, why would a writer want to conjoin these two accounts? What is the writer's goal?
- Map out the locations of the chapter on a map. Notice that according to Judges 4:17, Sisera flees the battle, and bypasses his master's city of Hazor. How do geographic details such as this contribute to the idea that two stories are conjoined together?

### **Lesson #3**

### **Judges**

- Research whether Judges 6 is 1) a combination of two stories: Gideon and Jerubbaal, or 2) the change in name is symbolic of Gideon's family moving away from Baal worship.
- How large did the Midian empire grow? What led to their decline? Do descendants of the Midianites and Amalekites exist today?
- Research the term "holocaust offering." How does this inform Gideon's sacrifice, Lev 9:24, 1 Kgs 18:38, and the Christian understanding of Pentecost (Acts 2)?

### **Lesson #4**

### **Judges**

- Read Judges 8:1-21. Is Gideon's vengeance a righteous action or self-centered?
- Research the possibility of two accounts merging to form the story of Gideon's 300 routing the Midianites.

### **Lesson #5**

### **Judges**

- Research ephods and their symbolic use in worship. Then explore the various reasons people use ritual garments in worship and entertainment. What is the connection with putting on a ritual garment and taking on a different persona?
- Study modern examples of syncretism. What are examples of Christian syncretism?
- Read Judges, chapters 9 - 12.

### **Lesson #6**

### **Judges**

- Explore the question of whether Samson (whose Hebrew name means "sun") might be written to appear as a form of sun-god hero or solar myth.
- Research the Philistine culture at the height of their power.
- Study the concept of "exogamous marriage." Is Samson's wedding such a marriage?

### **Lesson #7**

### **Judges**

- Explore the similarities between Samson's actions with the fox and the Roman harvest rite involving foxes.
- Read Judges, chapters 17-21. Sadly, the Levite's concubine passage is one of the most horrific passages in scripture regarding the perception of women in this period. How is this view of women held by the same people who recognize Deborah as a prophet and judge?
- Research the Philistine god Dagon.

### **Lesson #1**

### **United Kingdom**

- Explore why Samuel and Kings were originally one book. When and why were they separated?
- Read 1 Samuel 2. Explore the origins of the song of Hanna.
- Research the transition between the high priest families in 1 Samuel from the house of Eli to the house of Zadok. Who are Ahimelech and Abiathar, and what was their destiny?

**Lesson #2**

**United Kingdom**

- Read 1 Samuel 4 - 7. Research memetic magic and how it plays out in the ark's travels.
- Read 1 Samuel 15. What are the implications of 15:35 if we read this literally? What are the implications for the orthodox understanding that the writer is personifying God?
- Read 1 Samuel 18-20. Explore how the love of Jonathan and David (18:1-5) is being used in theological conversations regarding same-sex relationships. How do the various arguments strike you?

**Lesson #3**

**United Kingdom**

- Research the difficulties regarding the name "Jesse." Is it possibly a title rather than a proper name?
- Find the battle locations from 17:1-2 on a map.
- Examine the various interpretations of how to reconcile the name "Goliath" in 1 Samuel 17 and 2 Samuel 21:19.

**Lesson #4**

**United Kingdom**

- Read 1 Samuel 28. Explore belief in Sheol. When and why did the concept of heaven and hell appear? How does this movement toward heaven and hell reflect a decline in deuteronomistic theology?
- Explore the possible meanings and origin of "Zion." What is its connection to "Zionism?"
- Find a map of original size of Jerusalem at David's conquest. What size city is it?

**Lesson #5**

**United Kingdom**

- Read 2 Samuel 6. What does the story of Uzzah teach us about God's holiness? How do we reconcile that message with the incarnation? With the crucifixion?
- Uriah is a Hittite. Who are the Hittites?
- Explore the biblical use of the word "feet" as a euphemism for genitals.

**Lesson #6**

**United Kingdom**

- Read 1 Kings 1. Notice God is not mentioned in this succession account. Read 1 Kings 3. This bloody chapter is a backdrop to Solomon's prayer for wisdom (3:3-15). Knowing this same succession struggle will take place following Solomon's death (11:14-12:35), how do these chapters change our view of David's legacy and Solomon's "wisdom?" How do these questions relate to Deuteronomy 8?
- Examine diagrams and size estimates of the Temple. How large a footprint did it have?
- Research how Solomon's prayer incorporates the concept of "divine condescension."
- Research the meanings of "sacrament." Is the Temple a sacrament? Why or why not?

**Lesson #7**

**United Kingdom**

- Research the religious practices of followers of Chermosh and Molech.

**Lesson #1**

**Divided Kingdom: Israel**

- Explore the history of Shechem as a sacred site.
- 1 Kings 12 - 2 Kings 16 is a major division of the original Samuel-Kings composition. Research the number of divisions of that original work and the resources the writer used to create them all.

**Lesson #2**

**Divided Kingdom: Israel**

- Explore "paraleipomenon" and it's relation to Chronicles. Where is Chronicles found in the Hebrew canon? Why does this location makes sense?
- 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah originally formed one book. How do we know this?
- Read 1 Kings 13:1-14:20. What do commentators say about the lying prophet in 13:11-34?

**Lesson #3**

**Divided Kingdom: Israel**

- Read the other great stories of Elijah: the widow of Zarephath (17:8-15) and encountering God (19:1-18). Research various translations of "gentle whisper" in 19:12. Specially look for translations which read "sound of sheer silence." How does this change the meaning?
- Explore the history of various limping dances throughout the world. What are the religious implications of these dances?

**Lesson #4**

**Divided Kingdom: Israel**

- Research the various interpretations of Elijah being carried off into heaven (2 Kgs 2:1-12) and Elisha cursing the 42 boys (2 Kgs 2:23-25). Is more being communicated by these passages than first appears?
- Find information about the Sryian rain god Hadad and his temple beneath the Omayyad Mosque. What other gods were a part of this culture's pantheon?

**Lesson #5**

**Divided Kingdom: Israel**

- Explore the various Christian definitions and responses to usury and bank loans? What are the arguments for and against making loans with interest?
- Amos 5 is written in "qina" or "quinah" meter. Research this meter in Hebrew poetry.
- Research Amos 5:13 as a possible marginal comment included in the text.

**Lesson #6**

**Divided Kingdom: Israel**

- Read John Wesley's sermon "On Working Out Our Own Salvation." What is the relationship between our readings today and the theological concept of prevenient grace?

**Lesson #7**

**Divided Kingdom: Israel**

- Research the legacies of Shalmaneser and Sargon II of Assyria. How widespread was the Kingdom at its height?

**Lesson #1**

**Divided Kingdom: Judah**

- Research why King Jeroahaz' full name is shortened in scripture to Ahaz.
- What is the meaning of Isaiah 7:14 in the context of the Syro-Ephraimite War?
- Compare the 2 Kings 16:1-9 passage to the 2 Chronicles 28:1-21 version. Why are there differences in the two accounts?

**Lesson #2**

**Divided Kingdom: Judah**

- Compare Josiah's reforms to those during the reign of Jehoash (12:9-16).
- Research what is happening with Assyria during Josiah's reign which makes it possible for the reform to take place.

**Lesson #3**

**Divided Kingdom: Judah**

- Research when and why the theories of Proto-Isaiah, Deutero-Isaiah, and Trito-Isaiah developed. Are there other theories?
- Read John Wesley's sermon "The One Needful Thing," noting how he uses this passage.
- Research the Hebrew word chazon (חֲזוֹן) that is translated "vision."

**Lesson #4**

**Divided Kingdom: Judah**

- Research Marduk-Baladan (also known as Merodach-baladan or Marduk-aplaidina). How long did his rebellion last? How strong was the state of Assyria at this point? How did the rebellion end?

**Lesson #5**

**Divided Kingdom: Judah**

- Explore the many ways yokes are used in scripture. When is a yoke used as a positive symbol? What do we learn about being yoked to someone or something?  
- Although the NIV does not reflect it, this passage spells the Babylonian King's name as "Nebuchadnezzar" rather than "Nebuchadrezzar," a common spelling in other parts of scripture. What is the significance of the two forms of spelling? (The Hebrew spelling of Jeremiah is also different in this passage.)

**Lesson #6**

**Divided Kingdom: Judah**

- Read and research the symbolism of Ezekiel 1-3. Use this knowledge to read chapter 10. Ezekiel's description of God's glory leaving the Temple is the prophet's answer to those who have claimed God will not allow the Temple to fall.

**Lesson #7**

**Divided Kingdom: Judah**

- Study the rise of Assyria under King Assurbanipal and its fall under his successor, King Ashur-etil-ilani. Note the Assyrian artistic achievements during the era of peace.  
- Research the Jewish holiday Tisha B'Av. What could the Christian church gain by adding this day to our calendar?

**Lesson #1**

**Babylonian Exile**

- Read about the book of Susanna, which is written during the exile. Can you see any correlation between its contents and the experiences of the exile?  
- Research interest in reclaiming lament in Christian worship

**Lesson #2**

**Babylonian Exile**

- Research the construction of the book of Job, written by at least three different people. Why is Elihu's speech found between Job's demands (31:40) and God's answer (38:1)?  
- Examine the various opinions offered on the character of Satan in chapters 1-2. Why is Satan in the heavenly court talking to God?  
- Read the Book of Judith, another text written during this exilic period.

**Lesson #3**

**Babylonian Exile**

- Research the apocryphal books of 1 & 2 Esdras. Were they written during the exile?  
- Explore the term "the ingathering of Israel" and its current implications.

**Lesson #4**

**Babylonian Exile**

- Read Daniel 7 and commentaries on the apocalyptic language in second half of Daniel.  
- Research various theories on when Daniel is written. How does each suggested date change the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream?  
- Explore how the Greek world was split between Alexander's generals following his death.

**Lesson #5**

**Babylonian Exile**

- What passages do the majority of Jews believe refer to the Messiah? How is Jesus doing at fulfilling these prophecies?

- Read the book of Tobit or a summary of its content. If Tobit is written during the exile, how does that influence its interpretation?

### **Lesson #6**

### **Babylonian Exile**

- Why are the Medes and Persian empires so often listed together instead of separate?
- Read the apocryphal story of Bel and the Dragon or at least commentaries on it. Are there themes in this story that indicate it is written during the Babylonian exile?

### **Lesson #7**

### **Babylonian Exile**

- Enjoy God's creation and be aware of the Holy Spirit.

### **Lesson #1**

### **Return and Restoration**

- How large was the Persian Empire at its peak compared to the Babylonian?
- Explore the "Fertile Crescent" route the exiles most likely used to return to Israel. How long would have such a trip taken?
- Research why many scholars believe the "Priestly source" of the documentary hypothesis theory is constructed during this post-exilic period, as well as the final redaction of the Torah.

### **Lesson #2**

### **Return and Restoration**

- What is the origin of the term Zionism? Can this return be viewed as a form of Zionism?
- Read Isaiah 61:1-3 with an awareness of the context of restoration and returning exiles. Why did Jesus choose to read it to announce his ministry (Lk 4:16-21)?

### **Lesson #3**

### **Return and Restoration**

- Explore the difference in size and scope of this second Temple compared to the first.
- Research the development of Satan in the post-exilic era. Why did this topic grow in importance during this time?

### **Lesson #4**

### **Return and Restoration**

- Research the book "1 Esdras." How does it contribute to our understanding of Ezra?
- Explore the growing acceptance of the Torah by the Samaritans during this period. When did the anti-Samaritan sentiment take root in Jerusalem?

### **Lesson #5**

### **Return and Restoration**

- Explore the meaning of the names in this story: Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon, Chilion, Orpah, Ruth, and Boaz. How do these names provide additional insight into the story?
- Compare this story with Genesis 38 story of Tamar and Judah. What do you think of the suggestion the writer of Ruth creates a faithful version of Tamar to celebrate mixed marriage?
- Read the book of Esther. Although the writer never mentions God, Esther's marriage to a gentile saves the Jewish people.

### **Lesson #6**

### **Return and Restoration**

- Read John Wesley's sermon "A Caution Against Bigotry."
- Research modern archeological findings on Nineveh. What is meant by the "Assyrian Triangle?"

### **Lesson #7**

### **Return and Restoration**

- Research the location of the walls and gates described in Nehemiah 2:13-15.

## Appendix B

Approximate Timeline of Biblical Events, Persons. (*Estimated Dates That Books Are Written*)

- 2000 Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah/Rachel, Joseph  
 1700 Joseph's family enters Egypt  
 1260 Moses leads escape from Egypt  
 1220 Joshua leads people into Canaan (*Ten Commandments*)  
 The Judges  
 1060 Samuel  
 1020 Development of Unified Hebrew Nation, First Temple Built  
 Kings: Saul, David (1010-970), Solomon (970-931); Prophet Nathan.  
 (*Torah Written Down from Oral Traditions*)
- 931 United Hebrew Kingdom Divided into Northern Kingdom of Israel and southern  
 Kingdom of Judah  
 (931-911) King Jeroboam I of Israel; Prophet Ahijah  
 (931-914) King Rehoboam of Judah; Prophet Shemaiah  
 (914-911) King Abijah of Judah  
 (911-910) King Nadab of Israel  
 (911-870) King Asa of Judah  
 (910-887) King Baasha of Israel  
 (887-886) King Elah of Israel  
 (886-886) King Zimri of Israel  
 (886-875) King Omri of Israel; Prophet Jehu  
 (875-853) King Ahab of Israel; Prophet Elijah  
 (870-851) King Jehoshaphat of Judah; Prophet Jehu  
 (853-852) King Ahaziah of Israel; Prophet Elijah  
 (852-841) King Jehoram of Israel, son of Ahab; Prophet Elisha  
 (851-843) King Jehoram of Judah, son of Jehoshaphat; Prophet Elijah  
 (843-842) King Ahaziah of Judah; Prophet Jehu  
 (842-802) King Joash of Judah; Prophets Jehoiada, Joel, Zechariah  
 (841-814) King Jehu of Israel; Prophet Elisha  
 (814-806) King Jehoahaz of Israel  
 (806-791) King Jehoash of Israel; Prophet Elisha  
 (802-776) King Amziah of Judah  
 (791-750) King Jeroboam II of Israel; Prophets Hosea, Amos (*Amos*)  
 (776-736) King Uzziah of Judah; Prophets Zechariah, Amos, Isaiah, Hosea (*Hosea*)  
 (750-749) King Zachariah of Israel  
 (749-749) King Shallum of Israel  
 (749-739) King Menahem of Israel  
 (739-737) King Pekahiah of Israel; Prophet Micah  
 (737-732) King Pekah of Israel; Prophet Micah  
 (736-730) King Jotham of Judah; Prophets Isaiah, Micah, Hosea  
 (732-722) King Hoshea of Israel; Prophets Micah, Hosea  
 (730-715) King Ahaz of Judah; Prophets Isaiah, Micah
- 722 Fall of Northern Kingdom of Israel to Assyria  
 (715-687) King Hezekiah of Judah; Prophets Nahum, Isaiah, Micah, Hosea.  
 (*Isaiah 1-39*)  
 (687-642) King Manasseh of Judah; Prophet unnamed (*Micah*)  
 (642-640) King Amon of Judah

- (640-609) King Josiah of Judah; Prophets Huldah, Zephaniah, Jeremiah  
(*Zephaniah, Nahum*)
- (609-609) King Jehahaz of Judah
- (609-598) King Jehoiakim of Judah; Prophet Jeremiah (Habakkuk)
- (598-597) King Jeholachin
- (598-587) King Zedekiah of Judah; Prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah, Obadiah)
- 587 Fall of Southern Kingdom to Babylon (Ezekiel)  
Temple destroyed, Exile to Babylon (Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel)
- 539 Babylonia conquered by Persia; Prophet Isaiah of Babylon (1 & 2 Kings, Isaiah 40-66)
- 538 Cyrus allows freed Jews to return to Judah; Prophets Haggai, Zechariah (Job)
- 516 Second Temple dedicated (Haggai, Zechariah)
- 440 Walls around Jerusalem rebuilt; Prophet Malachi (Malachi, Ruth, Jonah)
- 389 Ezra reads the Law; Prophet Joel (Joel, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Nehemiah, Ezra)
- 333 Alexander the Great conquers Persia and Palestine  
(Song of Solomon, Lamentations completed)
- 250 Hebrew Scriptures translated into Greek, called *The Septuagint*. (Proverbs completed)
- 198 Seleucid Kings rule Syria and Palestine (Ecclesiastes)
- 167 Jews revolt, led by Maccabees (Daniel, Esther, Psalms completed)
- 63 Romans capture Jerusalem
- 37 Herod the Great appointed King over Palestine
- 4 Birth of Jesus
- 30 Crucifixion and Resurrection
- 33 Conversion of Saul/Paul
- 50-63 New Testament letters written
- 63 Death of Paul
- 65-150 Gospels and other New Testament books written