



THE WORD OF GOD IN REVIEW

LIFE APPLICATION NOTES OVERVIEW

The Table of Contents

1.	Genesis	6
2.	Exodus	11
3.	Leviticus	15
4.	Numbers	20
5.	Deuteronomy	24
6.	Joshua	28
7.	Judges	33
8.	Ruth	38
9.	1 Samuel	41
10.	2 Samuel	46
11.	1 Kings	50
12.	2 Kings	55
13.	1 Chronicles	60
14.	2 Chronicles	64
15.	Ezra	69
16.	Nehemiah	73
17.	Esther	77
18.	Job	81
19.	Psalms	86
20.	Proverbs	90
21.	Ecclesiastes	94
22.	Song of Solomon	98
23.	Isaiah	101
24.	Jeremiah	105
25.	Lamentations	109
26.	Ezekiel	112
27.	Daniel	116
28.	Hosea	120

29.	Joel	124
30.	Amos	127
31.	Obadiah	131
32.	Jonah	134
33.	Micah	138
34.	Nahum	142
35.	Habakkuk	145
36.	Zephaniah	148
37.	Haggai	151
38.	Zechariah	154
39.	Malachi	158

The New Testament

1.	Matthew	162
2.	Mark	167
3.	Luke	171
4.	John	176
5.	Acts (of the Apostles)	181
6.	Romans	186
7.	1 Corinthians	190
8.	2 Corinthians	194
9.	Galatians	198
10.	Ephesians	202
11.	Philippians	206
12.	Colossians	209
13.	1 Thessalonians	212
14.	2 Thessalonians	215
15.	1 Timothy	218
16.	2 Timothy	221
17.	Titus	224

18. Philemon	227
19. Hebrews	230
20. James	234
21. 1 Peter	237
22. 2 Peter	241
23. 1 John	244
24. 2 John	248
25. 3 John	250
26. Jude	252
27. Revelation	254

Forward

Thousands of Life Application notes help explain God's Word and challenge you to apply the truth of Scripture to life.

Personality profiles highlight over 100 important Bible characters.

Book introductions provide vital statistics, overview, and timeline to help you understand the message of each book.

Engulf yourself with the Word of God as you delight in the passages in understanding and inspiration.

The Historical Books

GENESIS

Genesis means “beginnings” or “origin,” and it unfolds the record of the beginning of the world, of human history, of family, of civilization, of salvation. It is the story of God’s purpose and plan for his creation. As the book of beginnings, Genesis sets the stage for the entire Bible. It reveals the person and nature of God (Creator, Sustainer, Judge, Redeemer); the value and dignity of human beings (made in God’s image, saved by grace, used by God in the world); the tragedy and consequences of sin (the fall, separation from God, judgment); and the promise and assurance of salvation (covenant, forgiveness, promised Messiah).

God. That’s where Genesis begins. All at once we see him creating the world in a majestic display of power and purpose, culminating with a man and woman made like himself (Genesis 1:26-27). But before long sin entered the world, and Satan was unmasked. Bathed in innocence, creation was shattered by the fall (the willful disobedience of Adam and Eve). Fellowship with God was broken, and evil began weaving its destructive web. In rapid succession, we read how Adam and Eve were expelled from the beautiful garden, their first son turned murderer, and evil bred evil until God finally destroyed everyone on earth except a small family led by Noah, the only godly person left.

As we come to Abraham on the plains of Canaan, we discover the beginning of God’s covenant people and the broad strokes of his salvation plan: salvation comes by faith, Abraham’s descendants will be God’s people, and the Savior of the world will come through this chosen nation. The stories of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph that follow are more than interesting biographies. They emphasize the promises of God and the proof that he is faithful. The people we meet in Genesis are simple, ordinary people, yet through them, God did great things. These are vivid pictures of how God can and does use all kinds of people to accomplish his good purposes. . . even people like you and me.

Read Genesis and be encouraged. There is hope! No matter how dark the world situation seems God has a plan. No matter how insignificant or useless you feel, God loves you and wants to use you in his plan. No matter how sinful and separated from God you are, his salvation is available. Read Genesis. . . and hope!

THE BLUEPRINT

A. THE STORY OF CREATION (Genesis 1:1-2:3)

God created the sky, seas, and land. He created the plants, animals, fish, and birds. But he created human beings in his own image. At times, others may treat us disrespectfully. But we can be certain of our dignity and worth because we have been created in the image of God.

B. THE STORY OF ADAM (Genesis 2:4-5:32)

When Adam and Eve were created by God, they were without sin. But they became sinful when they disobeyed God and ate some fruit from the tree. Through Adam and Eve we learn about the destructive power of sin and its bitter consequences.

1. Adam and Eve
2. Cain and Abel
3. Adam's descendants

C. THE STORY OF NOAH (Genesis 6:1-11:32)

Noah was spared from the destruction of the flood because he obeyed God and built the ark. Just as God protected Noah and his family, he still protects those who are faithful to him today.

1. The flood
2. Repopulating the earth
3. The tower of Babel

D. THE STORY OF ABRAHAM (Genesis 12:1-25:18)

Abraham was asked to leave his country, wander in Canaan, wait years for a son, and then sacrifice him as a burnt offering. Through these periods of sharp testing, Abraham remained faithful to God. His example teaches us what it means to live a life of faith.

1. God promises a nation to Abram
2. Abram and Lot
3. God promises a son to Abram
4. Sodom and Gomorrah

5. Birth and near sacrifice of Isaac
6. Isaac and Rebekah
7. Abraham dies

E. THE STORY OF ISAAC (Genesis 25:19-28:9)

Isaac did not demand his own way. He did not resist when he was about to be sacrificed, and he gladly accepted a wife chosen for him by others. Like Isaac, we must learn to put God's will ahead of our own.

1. Jacob and Esau
2. Isaac and Abimelech
3. Jacob gets Isaac's blessing

F. THE STORY OF JACOB (Genesis 28:10-36:43)

Jacob did not give up easily. He faithfully served Laban for over 14 years. Later, he wrestled with God. Although Jacob made many mistakes, his hard work teaches us about living a life of service for our Lord.

1. Jacob starts a family
2. Jacob returns home

G. THE STORY OF JOSEPH (Genesis 37:1-50:26)

Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers and unjustly thrown into prison by his master. Through the life of Joseph, we learn that suffering, no matter how unfair, can develop strong character in us.

1. Joseph is sold into slavery
2. Judah and Tamar
3. Joseph is thrown into jail
4. Joseph is placed in charge of Egypt
5. Joseph and his brothers meet in Egypt
6. Jacob's family moves to Egypt
7. Jacob and Joseph die in Egypt

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Beginnings

EXPLANATION: Genesis explains the beginning of many important realities: the universe, earth, people, sin, and God's plan of salvation.

IMPORTANCE: Genesis teaches us that the earth is well made and good. Mankind is special to God and unique. God creates and sustains all life.

THEME: Disobedience

EXPLANATION: People are always facing great choices. Disobedience occurs when people choose not to follow God's plan of living.

IMPORTANCE: Genesis explains why men are evil: they choose to do wrong. Even great Bible heroes failed God and disobeyed.

THEME: Sin

EXPLANATION: Sin ruins people's lives. It happens when we disobey God.

IMPORTANCE: Living God's way makes life productive and fulfilling.

THEME: Promises

EXPLANATION: God makes promises to help and protect mankind. This kind of promise is called a "covenant."

IMPORTANCE: God kept his promises then, and he keeps them now. He promises to love us, accept us, forgive us.

THEME: Obedience

EXPLANATION: The opposite of sin is obedience. Obeying God restores our relationship to him.

IMPORTANCE: The only way to enjoy the benefits of God's promises is to obey him.

THEME: Prosperity

EXPLANATION: Prosperity is deeper than mere material wealth. True prosperity and fulfillment come as a result of obeying God.

IMPORTANCE: When people obey God, they find peace with him, with others, and with themselves.

THEME: Israel

EXPLANATION: God started the nation of Israel in order to have a dedicated people who would (1) keep his ways alive in the world, (2) proclaim to the world what he is really like, and (3) prepare the world for the birth of Christ.

IMPORTANCE: God is looking for people today to follow him. We are to proclaim God's truth and love to all nations, not just our own. We must be faithful to carry out the mission God has given us.

TIMELINE

Creation

Noah undated

Abram born 2166 B.C. (2000 B.C.)

Abram enters Canaan 2091 (1925)

Isaac born 2066 (1900)

Jacob and Esau born 2006 (1840)

Jacob flees to Haran 1929 (1764)

Joseph born 1915 (1750)

Joseph sold into slavery 1898 (1733)

Joseph rules Egypt 1885 (1720)

Joseph dies 1805 (1640)

EXODUS

OVERVIEW: GET UP. . . leave. . . take off—these words are good ones for those trapped or enslaved. Some resist their marching orders, however, preferring present surroundings to a new, unknown environment. It's not easy to trade the comfortable security of the known for an uncertain future. But what if God gives the order to move? Will we follow his lead? Exodus describes a series of God's calls and the responses of his people.

Four hundred years had passed since Joseph moved his family to Egypt. These descendants of Abraham had now grown to over two million strong. To Egypt's new Pharaoh, these Hebrews were foreigners, and their numbers were frightening. Pharaoh decided to make them slaves so they wouldn't upset his balance of power. As it turned out, that was his biggest mistake, for God then came to the rescue of his people.

Through a series of strange events, a Hebrew boy named Moses became a prince in Pharaoh's palace and then an outcast in a desert land. God visited Moses in the mysterious flames of a burning bush, and, after some discussion, Moses agreed to return to Egypt to lead God's people out of slavery. Pharaoh was confronted, and, through a cycle of plagues and promises made and broken, Israel was torn from his grasp.

It was no easy task to mobilize this mass of humanity, but they marched out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and into the desert behind Moses and the pillars of cloud and fire. Despite continual evidence of God's love and power, the people complained and began to yearn for their days in Egypt. God provided for their physical and spiritual needs with food and a place to worship, but he also judged their disobedience and unbelief. Then in the dramatic Sinai meeting with Moses, God gave his laws for right living.

God led Moses and the nation of Israel, and he wants to lead us as well. Is he preparing you, like Moses, for a specific task? He will be with you; obey and follow. Is he delivering you from an enemy or a temptation? Trust him, and do what he says. Have you heard his clear moral directions? Read, study, and obey his Word. Is he calling you to true worship? Discover God's presence in your life, in your home, and in the body of assembled believers. Exodus is the exciting story of God's guidance. Read with the determination to follow God wherever he leads.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. ISRAEL IN EGYPT (Exodus 1:1-12:30)

When the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, God heard their cries and rescued them. We can be confident that God still hears the cries of his people. Just as he delivered the Israelites from their captors, he delivers us from sin, death, and evil.

1. Slavery in Egypt
2. God chooses Moses
3. God sends Moses to Pharaoh
4. Plagues strike Egypt
5. The Passover

B. ISRAEL IN THE DESERT (Exodus 12:31-18:27)

After crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites became quarrelsome and discontent. Like the Israelites, we find it easy to complain and be dissatisfied. Christians still have struggles, but we should never allow difficulties and unpleasant circumstances to turn us away from trusting God.

1. The exodus
2. Crossing the sea
3. Complaining in the desert

C. ISRAEL AT SINAI (Exodus 19:1-40:38)

God revealed his law to the Israelites at Sinai. Through the law, they learned more about what God is like and how he expected his people to live. The law is still instructional for us, for it exposes our sin and shows us God's standard for living.

1. Giving the law
2. Tabernacle instructions
3. Breaking the law
4. Tabernacle construction

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Slavery

EXPLANATION: The Israelites were slaves for 400 years. Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, oppressed them cruelly. They prayed to God for deliverance from this system.

IMPORTANCE: Like the Israelites, we need both human and divine leadership to escape from the slavery of sin. After their escape, the memory of slavery helped the Israelites learn to treat others generously. We need to stand against those who oppress others.

THEME: Rescue/Redemption

EXPLANATION: God rescued Israel through the leader Moses and through mighty miracles. The Passover celebration was an annual reminder of their escape from slavery.

IMPORTANCE: God delivers us from the slavery of sin. Jesus Christ celebrated the Passover with his disciples at the Last Supper and then went on to rescue us from sin by dying in our place.

THEME: Guidance

EXPLANATION: God guided Israel out of Egypt by using the plagues, Moses' heroic courage, the miracle of the Red Sea, and the Ten Commandments. God is a trustworthy guide.

IMPORTANCE: Although God is all-powerful and can do miracles, he normally leads us by wise leadership and team effort. His words give us the wisdom to make daily decisions and govern our lives.

THEME: Ten Commandments

EXPLANATION: God's law system had three parts. The Ten Commandments were the first part, containing the absolutes of spiritual and moral life. The civil law was the second part, giving the people rules to manage their lives. The ceremonial law was the third part, showing them patterns for building the tabernacle and regular worship.

IMPORTANCE: God was teaching Israel the importance of choice and responsibility. When they obeyed the conditions of the law, he blessed them; if they forgot or disobeyed, he punished them or allowed calamities to come. Many great countries of the world base their laws on the moral system set up in the book of Exodus. God's moral law is valid today.

THEME: The Nation

EXPLANATION: God founded the nation of Israel to be the source of truth and salvation to all the world. His relationship to his people was loving yet firm. The Israelites had no army, schools, governors, mayors, or police when they left Egypt. God had to instruct them in their constitutional laws and daily practices. He showed them how to worship and how to have national holidays.

IMPORTANCE: Israel's newly formed nation had all the behavioral characteristics of Christians today. We are often disorganized, sometimes rebellious, and sometimes victorious. God's Person and Word are still our only guide. If our churches reflect his leadership, they will be effective in serving him.

TIMELINE

Joseph dies 1805 B.C. (1640 B.C.)
Moses born 1526 (1350)
Exodus from Egypt 1446 (1280)
Ten Commandments given 1445 (1279)
Israel enters Canaan 1406 (1240)
Judges begin to rule 1375 (1220)

Leviticus

PURPOSE: A handbook for the priests and Levites outlining their duties in worship, and a guidebook of holy living for the Hebrews

AUTHOR: Moses

DATE OF EVENTS: 1445—1444 B.C.

SETTING: At the foot of Mount Sinai. God is teaching the Israelites how to live as holy people.

KEY VERSE: “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2).

KEY PEOPLE: Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, Ithamar

KEY PLACE: Mount Sinai

SPECIAL FEATURE: Holiness is mentioned more times (152) than in any other book of the Bible..

OVERVIEW: “GOD seems so far away. . . if only I could see or hear him.” Have you ever felt this way—struggling with loneliness, burdened by despair, riddled with sin, overwhelmed by problems? Made in God’s image, we were created to have a close relationship with him; and when fellowship is broken, we are incomplete and need restoration. Communion with the living God is the essence of worship. It is vital, touching the very core of our lives. Perhaps this is why a whole book of the Bible is dedicated to worship. After Israel’s dramatic exit from Egypt, the nation was camped at the foot of Mount Sinai for two years to listen to God (Exodus 19 to Numbers 10). It was a time of resting, teaching, building, and meeting with him face to face. Redemption in Exodus is the foundation for cleansing, worship, and service in Leviticus.

The overwhelming message of Leviticus is the holiness of God—“Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). But how can unholy people approach a holy God? The answer—first sin must be dealt with. Thus the opening chapters of Leviticus give detailed instructions for offering sacrifices, which were the active symbols of repentance and obedience. Whether bulls, grain, goats, or sheep, the sacrificial offerings had to be perfect, with no defects or bruises—pictures of the ultimate sacrifice to come, Jesus, the Lamb of God. Jesus has come and opened the way to God by giving up his life as the final sacrifice in our place. True worship and oneness with God begin as we confess our sin and accept Christ as the only one who can redeem us from sin and help us approach God.

In Leviticus, sacrifices, priests, and the sacred Day of Atonement opened the way for the Israelites to come to God. God’s people were also to worship him with their lives. Thus we read of purity laws (Leviticus 11-15) and rules for daily living

concerning family responsibilities, sexual conduct, relationships, worldliness (Leviticus 18-20), and vows (Leviticus 27). These instructions involve one's holy walk with God, and the patterns of spiritual living still apply today. Worship, therefore, has a horizontal aspect—that is, God is honored by our lives as we relate to others.

The final emphasis in Leviticus is celebration. The book gives instructions for the feasts. These were special, regular, and corporate occasions for remembering what God had done, giving thanks to him, and rededicating lives to his service (Leviticus 23). Our Christian traditions and holidays are different, but they are necessary ingredients of worship. We too need special days of worship and celebration with our brothers and sisters to remember God's goodness in our lives.

As you read Leviticus, rededicate yourself to holiness, worshiping God in private confession, public service, and group celebration.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. WORSHIPING A HOLY GOD (Leviticus 1:1-17:16)

God provided specific directions for the kind of worship that would be pleasing to him. These instructions teach us about the nature of God and can help us develop a right attitude toward worship. Through the offerings we learn of the seriousness of sin and the importance of bringing our sins to God for forgiveness.

1. Instructions for the offerings
2. Instructions for the priests
3. Instructions for the people
4. Instructions for the altar

B. LIVING A HOLY LIFE (Leviticus 18:1-27:34)

God gave clear standards for living a holy life to the Israelites. They were to be separate and distinct from the pagan nations around them. In the same way, all believers should be separated from sin and dedicated to God. God still wants to remove sin from the lives of his people.

1. Standards for the people
2. Rules for priests
3. Seasons and festivals

4. Receiving God's blessing

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Sacrifice/Offering

EXPLANATION: There are five kinds of offerings that fulfill two main purposes: one to show praise, thankfulness, and devotion; the other for atonement, the covering and removal of guilt and sin. Animal offerings demonstrated that the person was giving his or her life to God by means of the life of the animal.

IMPORTANCE: The sacrifices (offerings) were for worship and forgiveness of sin. Through them we learn about the cost of sin, for we see that we cannot forgive ourselves. God's system says that a life must be given for a life. In the Old Testament, an animal's life was given to save the life of a person. But this was only a temporary measure until Jesus' death paid the penalty of sin for all people forever.

THEME: Worship

EXPLANATION: Seven feasts were designated religious and national holidays. They were often celebrated in family settings. These events teach us much about worshiping God in both celebration and quiet dedication.

IMPORTANCE: God's rules about worship set up an orderly, regular pattern of fellowship with him. They allowed times for celebration and thanksgiving as well as for reverence and rededication. Our worship should demonstrate our deep devotion.

THEME: Health

EXPLANATION: Civil rules for handling food, disease, and sex were taught. In these physical principles, many spiritual principles were suggested. Israel was to be different from the surrounding nations. God was preserving Israel from disease and community health problems.

IMPORTANCE: We are to be different morally and spiritually from the unbelievers around us. Principles for healthy living are as important today as in Moses' time. A healthy environment and a healthy body make our service to God more effective.

THEME: Holiness

EXPLANATION: Holy means “separated” or “devoted.” God removed his people from Egypt; now he was removing Egypt from the people. He was showing them how to exchange Egyptian ways of living and thinking for his ways.

IMPORTANCE: We must devote every area of life to God. God desires absolute obedience in motives as well as practices. Though we do not observe all the worship practices of Israel, we are to have the same spirit of preparation and devotion.

THEME: Levites

EXPLANATION: The Levites and priests instructed the people in their worship. They were the ministers of their day. They also regulated the moral, civil, and ceremonial laws and supervised the health, justice, and welfare of the nation.

IMPORTANCE: The Levites were servants who showed Israel the way to God. They provide the historical backdrop for Christ, who is our High Priest and yet our servant. God’s true servants care for all the needs of their people.

TIMELINE

Joseph dies 1805 B.C. (1640 B.C.)

SLAVERY IN EGYPT

Exodus from Egypt 1446 (1280)

Ten Commandments given 1445 (1279)

Israel camps at Mount Sinai 1444 (1278)

Moses dies, Canaan entered 1406 (1240)

Judges begin to rule 1375 (1220)

United kingdom under Saul 1050 (1045)

Numbers

OVERVIEW: EVERY parent knows the shrill whine of a young child—a slow, high-pitched complaint that grates on the eardrums and aggravates the soul. The tone of voice is difficult to bear, but the real irritation is the underlying cause—discontentment and disobedience. As the “children” of Israel journeyed from the foot of Mount Sinai to the land of Canaan, they grumbled, whined, and complained at every turn. They focused on their present discomforts. Faith had fled, and they added an extra 40 years their trip.

Numbers, which records the tragic story of Israel’s unbelief, should serve as a dramatic lesson for all of God’s people. God loves us and wants the very best for us. He can and should be trusted. Numbers also gives a clear portrayal of God’s patience. Again and again he withholds judgment and preserves the nation. But his patience must not be taken for granted. His judgment will come. We must obey.

As Numbers begins, the nation of Israel was camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. The people had received God's laws and were preparing to move. A census was taken to determine the number of men fit for military service. Next, the people were set apart for God. God was making the people, both spiritually and physically, ready to receive their inheritance.

But then the complaining began. First, the people complained about the food. Next, it was over Moses' authority. God punished some people but spared the nation because of Moses' prayers. The nation then arrived at Kadesh, and spies were sent into Canaan to assess its strength. Ten returned with fearful stories of giants. Only Caleb and Joshua encouraged them to "go up and take possession of the land" (Numbers 13:28). The minority report fell on deaf ears full of the ominous message of the majority. Because of their unbelief, God declared that the present generation would not live to see the promised land. Thus the "wanderings" began. During these desert wanderings there was a continuous pattern of grumbling, defiance, discipline, and death. How much better it would have been to have trusted God and entered his land! Then the terrible waiting began—waiting for the old generation to die off and waiting to see if the new generation could faithfully obey God.

Numbers ends as it begins, with preparation. This new generation of Israelites were numbered and sanctified. After defeating numerous armies, they settle the east side of the Jordan River. Then they faced their greatest test: to cross the river and possess the beautiful land God promised them.

The lesson is clear. God's people must trust him, moving ahead by *faith*, if they are to claim his promised land.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY (Numbers 1:1-10:10)

As part of their preparations, the Lord gave strict guidelines to the Israelites regarding purity in the camp. He wanted them to have a life-style distinct from the nations around them. He wanted them to be a holy people. Similarly, we should concern ourselves with purity in the church.

1. The first census of the nation
2. The role of the Levites
3. The purity of the camp

4. Receiving guidance for the journey

B. FIRST APPROACH TO THE PROMISED LAND (Numbers 10:11-14:45)

The Israelites were prevented from entering the promised land because of their unbelief. Throughout history, God's people have continued to struggle with lack of faith. We must prevent unbelief from gaining a foothold in our lives, for it will keep us from enjoying the blessings that God has promised.

1. The people complain
2. Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses
3. The spies incite rebellion

C. WANDERING IN THE DESERT (Numbers 15:1-21:35)

When the people complained against God and criticized Moses they were severely punished. Over 14,000 people died as a result of rebellion against Moses. As a result of Korah's rebellion, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram and their households died, along with 250 false priests. Dissatisfaction and discontent, if allowed to remain in our lives, can easily lead to disaster. We should refrain from complaining and criticizing our leaders.

1. Additional regulations
2. Many leaders rebel against Moses
3. Duties of priests and Levites
4. The new generation

D. SECOND APPROACH TO THE PROMISED LAND (Numbers 22:1-36:13)

The Moabites and Midianites could not get Balaam to curse Israel, but they did get him to give advice on how to draw the Israelites to idol worship. Balaam knew what was right, but he gave in to the temptation of material rewards and sinned. Knowing what is right alone is never enough. We must also do what is right.

1. The story of Balaam
2. The second census of the nation
3. Instructions concerning offerings
4. Vengeance on the Midianites
5. The Transjordan tribes
6. Camped on the plains of Moab

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Census

EXPLANATION: Moses counted the Israelites twice. The first census organized the people into marching units to better defend themselves. The second prepared them to conquer the country east of the Jordan River.

IMPORTANCE: People have to be organized, trained, and led to be effective in great movements. It is always wise to count the cost before setting out on some great undertaking. When we are aware of the obstacles before us we can more easily avoid them. In God's work, we must remove barriers in our relationships with others so that our effectiveness is not diminished.

THEME: Rebellion

EXPLANATION: At Kadesh, 12 spies were sent out into the land of Canaan to report on the fortifications of the enemies. When the spies returned, 10 said that they should give up and go back to Egypt. As a result, the people refused to enter the land. Faced with a choice, Israel rebelled against God. Rebellion did not start with an uprising, but with griping and murmuring against Moses and God.

IMPORTANCE: Rebellion against God is always a serious matter. It is not something to take lightly, for God's punishment for sin is often very severe. Our rebellion does not usually begin with all-out warfare, but in subtle ways—with griping and criticizing. Make sure your negative comments are not the product of a rebellious spirit.

TIMELINE

Joseph dies 1805 B.C. (1640 B.C.)

SLAVERY IN EGYPT

Exodus from Egypt 1446 (1280)

Ten Commandments given 1445 (1279)

First census 1444 (1278)

First spy mission 1443 (1277)

DESERT WANDERINGS

Second census, Balaam prophesies 1407 (1241)

Joshua appointed, Canaan entered 1406 (1240)

Judges begin to rule 1375 (1220)
United kingdom under Saul 1050 (1045)

Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy is written in the form of a treaty between a king and his vassal state typical of the second millennium B.C. It calls Israel to remember who God is and what he has done. Lacking faith, the old generation had wandered for 40 years and died in the desert. They left Egypt behind, but never knew the promised land. Then on the east bank of the Jordan River, Moses prepared the sons and daughters of that faithless generation to possess the land. After a brief history lesson emphasizing God's great acts on behalf of his people, Moses reviewed the law. Then he restated the covenant—God's contract with his people.

The lessons are clear. Because of what God has done, Israel should have hope and follow him; because of what he expects, they should listen and obey; because of who he is, they should love him completely. Learning these lessons will prepare them to possess the promised land.

As you hear the message of Deuteronomy, remember how God has expressed his kindness in your life, and then commit yourself anew to trust, love, and obey him.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR US: MOSES' FIRST ADDRESS (Deut. 1:1-4:43)

Moses reviewed the mighty acts of God for the nation of Israel. Remembering God's special involvement in our lives gives us hope and encouragement for the future.

B. PRINCIPLES FOR GODLY LIVING: MOSES' SECOND ADDRESS (Deut. 4:44-28:68)

Obedying God's laws brought blessings to the Israelites and disobeying brought misfortune. This was part of the written agreement God made with his people. Although we are not part of this covenant, the principle holds true: obedience and disobedience carry inevitable consequences in this life and the next.

1. The Ten Commandments
2. Love the Lord your God
3. Laws for proper worship
4. Laws for ruling the nation
5. Laws for human relationships
6. Consequences of obedience and disobedience

C. A CALL FOR COMMITMENT TO GOD: MOSES' THIRD ADDRESS (Deut. 29:1-30:20)

Moses called the people to commitment. God still calls us to be committed to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

D. THE CHANGE IN LEADERSHIP: MOSES' LAST DAYS (Deut. 31:1-34:12)

Although Moses made some serious mistakes, he had lived uprightly and carried out God's commands. Moses died with integrity. We too may make some serious mistakes, but that should not stop us from living with integrity and godly commitment.

MEGATHEMES

THEME: History

EXPLANATION: Moses reviewed the mighty acts of God whereby he liberated Israel from slavery in Egypt. He recounted how God had helped them and how the people had disobeyed.

IMPORTANCE: By reviewing God's promises and mighty acts in history, we can learn about his character. We come to know God more intimately through understanding how he has acted in the past. We can also avoid mistakes in our own lives through learning from Israel's past failures.

THEME: Laws

EXPLANATION: God reviewed his laws for the people. The legal contract between God and his people had to be renewed by the new generation about to enter the promised land.

IMPORTANCE: Commitment to God and his truth cannot be taken for granted. Each generation and each person must respond afresh to God's call for obedience.

THEME: Love

EXPLANATION: God's faithful and patient love is portrayed more often than his punishment. God shows his love by being faithful to his people and his promises. In response, God desires love from the heart, not merely legalistically keeping his law.

IMPORTANCE: God's love forms the foundation for our trust in him. We trust him because he loves us. Because God loves us, we should maintain justice and respect.

THEME: Choices

EXPLANATION: God reminded his people that in order to ratify his agreement they must choose the path of obedience. A personal decision to obey would bring benefits to their lives; rebellion would bring severe calamity.

IMPORTANCE: Our choices make a difference. Choosing to follow God benefits us and improves our relationships with others. Choosing to abandon God's ways brings harm to ourselves and others.

THEME: Teaching

EXPLANATION: God commanded the Israelites to teach their children his ways. They were to use ritual, instruction, and memorization to make sure their children understood God's principles and passed them on to the next generation.

IMPORTANCE: Quality teaching for our children must be a priority. It is important to pass on God's truth to future generations in our traditions. But God desires that his truth be in our hearts and minds and not merely in our traditions.

TIMELINE

Joseph dies 1805 B.C. (1640 B.C.)

Exodus from Egypt 1446 (1280)

Ten Commandments given 1445 (1279)

DESERT WANDERINGS

Moses' death; Israelites enter Canaan 1406 (1240)

Judges begin to rule 1375 (1220)

United kingdom under Saul 1050 (1045)

Joshua

OVERVIEW: REMEMBER the childhood game “follow the leader”? The idea was to mimic the antics of the person in front of you in the line of boys and girls winding through the neighborhood. Being a follower was all right, but being leader was the most fun, creating imaginative routes and tasks for everyone else to copy.

In real life, great leaders are rare. Often, men and women are elected or appointed to leadership positions, but then falter or fail to act. Others abuse their power to satisfy their egos, crushing their subjects and squandering resources. But without faithful, ethical, and effective leaders, people wander.

For 40 years, Israel had journeyed a circuitous route through the desert, but *not* because they were following their leader. Quite the opposite was true—with failing faith, they had refused to obey God and to conquer Canaan. So they wandered. Finally

y, the new generation was ready to cross the Jordan and possess the land. Having distinguished himself as a man of faith and courage (he and Caleb gave the minority spy report recorded in Numbers 13:30-14:9), Joshua was chosen to be Moses’ successor. This book records Joshua’s leadership of the people of God as they finish their march and conquer the promised land. Joshua was a brilliant military leader and a strong spiritual influence. But the key to his success was his submission to God. When God spoke, Joshua listened and obeyed. Joshua’s obedience served as a model. As a result, Israel remained faithful to God throughout Joshua’s lifetime.

The book of Joshua is divided into two main parts. The first narrates the events surrounding the conquest of Canaan. After crossing the Jordan River on dry ground, the Israelites camped near the mighty city of Jericho. God commanded the people to conquer Jericho by marching around the city 13 times, blowing trumpets, and shouting. Because they followed God’s unique battle strategy, they won

(Joshua 6). After the destruction of Jericho, they set out against the small town of Ai. Their first attack was driven back because one of the Israelites (Achan) had sinned (Joshua 7). After the men of Israel stoned Achan and his family—purging the community of its sin—the Israelites succeeded in capturing Ai (Joshua 8). In their next battle against the Amorites, God even made the sun stand still to aid them in their victory (Joshua 10). Finally, after defeating other assorted Canaanites led by Jabin and his allies (Joshua 11), they possessed most of the land.

Part two of the book of Joshua records the assignment and settlement of the captured territory (Joshua 13-22). The book concludes with Joshua's farewell address and his death (Joshua 23-24).

Joshua was committed to obeying God, and this book is about obedience. Whether conquering enemies or settling the land, God's people were required to do it God's way. In his final message to the people, Joshua underscored the importance of obeying God. "So be very careful to love the LORD your God" (Joshua 23:11), and "choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. . . . But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:15). Read Joshua and make a fresh commitment to obey God today. Decide to follow your Lord wherever he leads and whatever it costs.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. ENTERING THE PROMISED LAND (Joshua 1:1-5:12)

Joshua demonstrated his faith in God as he took up the challenge to lead the nation. The Israelites reaffirmed their commitment to God by obediently setting out across the Jordan River to possess the land. As we live the Christian life, we need to cross over from the old life to the new, put off our selfish desires, and press on to possess all God has planned for us. Like Joshua and Israel, we need courageous faith to live the new life.

1. Joshua leads the nation
2. Crossing the Jordan

B. CONQUERING THE PROMISED LAND (Joshua 5:13-12:24)

Joshua and his army moved from city to city, cleansing the land of its wickedness by destroying every trace of idol worship. Conflict with evil is inevitable, and we should be as merciless as Israel in destroying sin in our lives.

1. Joshua attacks the center of the land
2. Joshua attacks the southern kings
3. Joshua attacks the northern kings
4. Summary of conquests

C. DIVIDING THE PROMISED LAND (Joshua 13:1-24:33)

Joshua urged the Israelites to continue to follow the Lord and worship him alone. The people had seen God deliver them from many enemies and miraculously provide for all their needs, but they were prone to wandering from the Lord. Even though we may have experienced God at work in our lives, we too must continually renew our commitment to obey him above all other authority and to worship him alone.

1. The tribes receive their land
2. Special cities are set aside
3. Eastern tribes return home
4. Joshua's farewell to the leaders

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Success

EXPLANATION: God gave success to the Israelites when they obeyed his master plan, not when they followed their own desires. Victory came when they trusted in him rather than in their military power, money, muscle, or mental capacity.

IMPORTANCE: God's work done in God's way will bring his success. The standard for success, however, is not to be set by the society around us but by God's Word. We must adjust our minds to God's way of thinking in order to see his standard for success.

THEME: Faith

EXPLANATION: The Israelites demonstrated their faith by trusting God daily to save and guide them. By noticing how God fulfilled his promises in the past, they developed strong confidence that he would be faithful in the future.

IMPORTANCE: Our strength to do God's work comes from trusting him. His promises reassure us of his love and that he will be there to guide us in the decisions and struggles we face. Faith begins with believing he can be trusted.

THEME: Guidance

EXPLANATION: God gave instructions to Israel for every aspect of their lives. His law guided their daily living and his specific marching orders gave them victory in battle.

IMPORTANCE: Guidance from God for daily living can be found in his Word. By staying in touch with God, we will have the needed wisdom to meet the great challenges of life.

THEME: Leadership

EXPLANATION: Joshua was an example of an excellent leader. He was confident in God's strength, courageous in the face of opposition, and willing to seek God's advice.

IMPORTANCE: To be a strong leader like Joshua we must be ready to listen and to move quickly when God instructs us. Once we have his instructions, we must be diligent in carrying them out. Strong leaders are led by God.

THEME: Conquest

EXPLANATION: God commanded his people to conquer the Canaanites and take all their land. Completing this mission would have fulfilled God's promise to Abraham and brought judgment on the evil people living there. Unfortunately, Israel never finished the job.

IMPORTANCE: Israel was faithful in accomplishing their mission at first, but their commitment faltered. To love God means more than being enthusiastic about him. We must complete all the work he gives us and apply his instructions to every corner of our lives.

TIMELINE

Exodus from Egypt 1446 B.C. (1280 B.C.)

CONQUEST OF CANAAN

Israelites enter Canaan 1406 (1240)

Judges begin to rule 1375 (1220)

THE DAYS OF THE JUDGES

United kingdom under Saul 1050 (1045)

David becomes king 1010

Judges

OVERVIEW: REAL heroes are hard to find these days. Modern research and the media have made the foibles and weaknesses of our leaders very apparent; we search in vain for men and women to emulate. The music, movie, and sports industries produce a steady stream of “stars” who shoot to the top and then quickly fade from view.

Judges is a book about heroes—12 men and women who delivered Israel from her oppressors. These judges were not perfect; in fact, they included an assassin, a sexually promiscuous man, and a person who broke all the laws of hospitality. But they were submissive to God, and God used them.

Judges is also a book about sin and its consequences. Like a minor cut or abrasion that becomes infected when left untreated, sin grows and soon poisons the whole body. The book of Joshua ends with the nation taking a stand for God, ready to experience all the blessings of the promised land. After settling in Canaan, however, the Israelites lost their spiritual commitment and motivation. When Joshua and the elders died, the nation experienced a leadership vacuum, leaving them without a strong central government. Instead of enjoying freedom and prosperity in the promised land, Israel entered the dark ages of her history.

Simply stated, the reason for this rapid decline was sin—individual and corporate. The first step away from God was incomplete obedience (Judges 1:11-2:5); the Israelites refused to eliminate the enemy completely from the land. This led to intermarriage and idolatry (Judges 2:6-3:7) and everyone doing “as he saw fit” (Judges 17:6). Before long the Israelites became captives. Out of their desperation they begged God to rescue them. In faithfulness to his promise and out of his loving-kindness, God would raise up a judge to deliver his people and, for a time, there would be peace. Then complacency and disobedience would set in, and the cycle would begin again.

The book of Judges spans a period of over 325 years, recording six successive periods of oppression and deliverance, and the careers of 12 deliverers. Their captors included the Mesopotamians, Moabites, Philistines, Canaanites, Midianites, and Ammonites. A variety of deliverers—from Othniel to Samson—were used by God to lead his people to freedom and true worship. God’s

deliverance through the judges is a powerful demonstration of his love and mercy toward his people.

As you read the book of Judges, take a good look at these heroes from Jewish history. Take note of their dependence on God and obedience to his commands. Observe Israel's repeated downward spiral into sin, refusing to learn from history and living only for the moment. But most of all, stand in awe of God's mercy as he delivers his people over and over again.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. THE MILITARY FAILURE OF ISRAEL (Judges 1:1-3:6)

The tribes had compromised God's command to drive out the inhabitants of the land. Incomplete removal of evil often means disaster in the end. We must beware of compromising with wickedness.

1. Incomplete conquest of the land
2. Disobedience and defeat

B. THE RESCUE OF ISRAEL BY THE JUDGES (Judges 3:7-16:31)

Repeatedly we see the nation of Israel sinning against God and God allowing suffering to come upon the land and the people. Sin always has its consequences. Where there is sin we can expect suffering to follow. Rather than living in an endless cycle of abandoning God and then crying out to him for rescue, we should seek to live a consistent life of faithfulness.

1. First period: Othniel
2. Second period: Ehud and Shamgar
3. Third period: Deborah and Barak
4. Fourth period: Gideon, Tola, and Jair
5. Fifth period: Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon
6. Sixth period: Samson

C. THE MORAL FAILURE OF ISRAEL (Judges 17:1-21:25)

Despite the efforts of Israel's judges, the people still would not turn wholeheartedly to God. They all did whatever they thought was best for themselves. The result was the spiritual, moral, and political decline of the nation.

Our lives will also fall into decline and decay unless we live by the guidelines God has given us.

1. Idolatry in the tribe of Dan
2. War against the tribe of Benjamin

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Decline COMPROMISE

EXPLANATION: Whenever a judge died, the people faced decline and failure because they compromised their high spiritual purpose in many ways. They abandoned their mission to drive all the people out of the land, and they adopted the customs of the people living around them.

IMPORTANCE: Society has many rewards to offer those who compromise their faith: wealth, acceptance, recognition, power, and influence. When God gives us a mission, it must not be polluted by a desire for approval from society. We must keep our eyes on Christ who is our Judge and Deliverer.

THEME: Decay/Apostasy

EXPLANATION: Israel's moral downfall had its roots in the fierce independence that each tribe cherished. It led to everyone doing whatever seemed good in his own eyes. There was no unity in government or in worship. Law and order broke down. Finally idol worship and man-made religion led to the complete abandoning of faith in God.

IMPORTANCE: We can expect decay when we value anything more highly than God. If we value our own independence more than dedication to God, we have placed an idol in our hearts. Soon our lives become temples to that god. We must constantly regard God's first claim on our lives and all our desires.

THEME: Defeat/Oppression

EXPLANATION: God used evil oppressors to punish the Israelites for their sin, to bring them to the point of repentance, and to test their allegiance to him.

IMPORTANCE: Rebellion against God leads to disaster. God may use defeat to bring wandering hearts back to him. When all else is stripped away, we recognize the importance of serving only him.

THEME: Repentance

EXPLANATION: Decline, decay, and defeat caused the people to cry out to God for help. They vowed to turn from idolatry and to turn to God for mercy and deliverance. When they repented, God delivered them.

IMPORTANCE: Idolatry gains a foothold in our hearts when we make anything more important than God. We must identify modern idols in our hearts, renounce them, and turn to God for his love and mercy.

THEME: Deliverance/Heroes

EXPLANATION: Because Israel repented, God raised up heroes to deliver his people from their path of sin and the oppression it brought. He used many kinds of people to accomplish this purpose by filling them with his Holy Spirit.

IMPORTANCE: God's Holy Spirit is available to all people. Anyone who is dedicated to God can be used for his service. Real heroes recognize the futility of human effort without God's guidance and power.

TIMELINE

Exodus from Egypt 1446 B.C. (1280 B.C.)

Israelites enter Canaan 1406 (1240)

Period of the judges begins 1375 (1220)

Othniel 1367,327 (1202,162)

Ehud 1309,229 (1184,104)

Deborah 1209,169 (1192,152)

Gideon 1162,122 (1146,106)

Samuel born 1105 (1083)

Samson 1075,055 (1083,063)

Saul anointed king 1050 (1045)

David becomes king 1010

Ruth

OVERVIEW: WHEN someone says, “Let me tell you about my mother-in-law,” we expect some kind of negative statement or humorous anecdote because the mother-in-law caricature has been a standard centerpiece of ridicule or comedy. The book of Ruth, however, tells a different story. Ruth loved her mother-in-law, Naomi. Recently widowed, Ruth begged to stay with Naomi wherever she went, even though it would mean leaving her homeland. In heartfelt words Ruth said, “Your people will be my people and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). Naomi agreed, and Ruth traveled with her to Bethlehem.

Not much is said about Naomi except that she loved and cared for Ruth. Obviously, Naomi’s life was a powerful witness to the reality of God. Ruth was drawn to her—and to the God she worshiped. In the succeeding months and years, God led this young Moabite widow to a man named Boaz, whom she eventually married. As a result, she became the great-grandmother of David and an ancestor in the line of the Messiah. What a profound impact Naomi’s life made!

The book of Ruth is also the story of God’s grace in the midst of difficult circumstances. Ruth’s story occurred during the time of the judges—a period of disobedience, idolatry, and violence. Even in times of crisis and deepest despair, there are those who follow God and through whom God works. No matter how discouraging or antagonistic the world may seem, there are always people who follow God. He will use anyone who is open to him to achieve his purposes. Ruth was a Moabitess and Boaz was a descendant of Rahab, a former prostitute from Jericho. Nevertheless, their offspring continued the family line through which the Messiah came into our world.

Read this book and be encouraged. God is at work in the world, and he wants to use you. God could use you, as he used Naomi, to bring family and friends to him.

THE BLUEPRINT

When we first meet Ruth, she is a destitute widow. We follow her as she joins God’s people, gleans in the grain-fields, and risks her honor at the threshing floor of Boaz. In the end, we see Ruth becoming the wife of Boaz. What a picture of how we come to faith in Christ. We begin with no hope and are rebellious aliens with no part in the kingdom of God. Then as we risk everything by putting our

faith in Christ, God saves us, forgives us, rebuilds our lives, and gives us blessings that will last through eternity. Boaz's redeeming of Ruth is a picture of Christ redeeming us.

1. Ruth remains loyal to Naomi (Ruth 1:1-22)
2. Ruth gleans in Boaz's field (Ruth 2:1-23)
3. Ruth follows Naomi's plan (Ruth 3:1-18)
4. Ruth and Boaz are married (Ruth 4:1-22)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Faithfulness

EXPLANATION: Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi as a daughter-in-law and friend is a great example of love and loyalty. Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz are also faithful to God and his laws. Throughout the story we see God's faithfulness to his people.

IMPORTANCE: Ruth's life was guided by faithfulness toward God and showed itself in loyalty toward the people she knew. To be loyal and loving in relationships, we must imitate God's faithfulness in our relationships with others.

THEME: Kindness

EXPLANATION: Ruth showed great kindness to Naomi. In turn, Boaz showed kindness to Ruth—a despised Moabite woman with no money. God showed his kindness to Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz by bringing them together for his purposes.

IMPORTANCE: Just as Boaz showed his kindness by buying back land to guarantee Ruth and Naomi's inheritance, so Christ showed his kindness by dying for us to guarantee our eternal life. God's kindness should motivate us to love and honor him.

THEME: Integrity

EXPLANATION: Ruth showed high moral character by being loyal to Naomi, by her clean break from her former land and customs, and by her hard work in the fields. Boaz showed integrity in his moral standards, his honesty, and by following through on his commitments.

IMPORTANCE: When we have experienced God’s faithfulness and kindness, we should respond by showing integrity. Just as the values by which Ruth and Boaz lived were in sharp contrast to those of the culture portrayed in Judges, so our lives should stand out from the world around us.

THEME: Protection

EXPLANATION: We see God’s care and protection over the lives of Naomi and Ruth. His supreme control over circumstances brings them safety and security. He guides the minds and activities of people to fulfill his purpose.

IMPORTANCE: No matter how devastating our present situation may be, our hope is in God. His resources are infinite. We must believe that he can work in the life of any person—whether that person is a king or a stranger in a foreign land. Trust his protection.

THEME: Prosperity/Blessing

EXPLANATION: Ruth and Naomi came to Bethlehem as poor widows, but they soon became prosperous through Ruth’s marriage to Boaz. Ruth became the great-grandmother of King David. Yet the greatest blessing was not the money, the marriage, or the child; it was the quality of love and respect between Ruth, Boaz, and Naomi.

IMPORTANCE: We tend to think of blessings in terms of prosperity rather than the high-quality relationships God makes possible for us. No matter what our economic situation, we can love and respect the people God has brought into our lives. In so doing, we give and receive blessings. Love is the greatest blessing.

1 Samuel

OVERVIEW: “RUNNERS take your marks,” the starter barks his signal, and the crowd turns quiet attention to the athletes walking toward the line. “Get set,” . . . in position now, muscles tense, nervously anticipating the sound of the gun. It resounds! And the race begins. In any contest, the start is important, but the finish is even more crucial. Often a front-runner will lose strength and fade to the middle of the pack. And there is the tragedy of the brilliant beginner who sets the pace for a time, but does not even finish. He quits the race burned out, exhausted, or injured.

First Samuel is a book of great beginnings. . . and tragic endings. It begins with Eli as high priest during the time of the judges. As a religious leader, Eli certainly must have begun his life with a close relationship to God. In his communication with Hannah, and in his training of her son Samuel, he demonstrated a clear understanding of God's purposes and call (1 Samuel 1; 1 Samuel 3). But his life ended in ignominy as his sacrilegious sons were judged by God and the sacred ark of the covenant fell into enemy hands (1 Samuel 4). Eli's death marked the decline of the influence of the priesthood and the rise of the prophets in Israel.

Samuel was dedicated to God's service by his mother, Hannah. He became one of Israel's greatest prophets. He was a man of prayer who finished the work of the judges, began the school of the prophets, and anointed Israel's first kings. But even Samuel was not immune to finishing poorly. Like Eli's family, Samuel's sons turned away from God; they took bribes and perverted justice. The people rejected the leadership of the judges and priests and clamored for a king "as all the other nations have" (1 Samuel 8:5).

Saul also started quickly. A striking figure, this handsome (1 Samuel 9:2) and humble (1 Samuel 9:21; 1 Samuel 10:22) man was God's choice as Israel's first king (1 Samuel 10:24). His early reign was marked by leadership (1 Samuel 11) and bravery (1 Samuel 14:46-48). But he disobeyed God (1 Samuel 15), became jealous and paranoid (1 Samuel 18-19), and finally had his kingship taken away from him by God (1 Samuel 16). Saul's life continued steadily downward. Obsessed with killing David (1 Samuel 20-30), he consulted a medium (1 Samuel 28) and finally committed suicide (1 Samuel 31).

Among the events of Saul's life is another great beginner—David. A man who followed God (1 Samuel 13:14; 1 Samuel 16:7), David ministered to Saul (1 Samuel 16), killed Goliath (1 Samuel 17), and became a great warrior. But we'll have to wait until the book of 2 Samuel to see how David finished.

As you read 1 Samuel, note the transition from theocracy to monarchy, exult in the classic stories of David and Goliath, David and Jonathan, David and Abigail, and watch the rise of the influence of the prophets. But in the midst of reading all the history and adventure, determine to run your race as God's person from start to finish.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. ELI AND SAMUEL (1 Samuel 1:1-7:17)

We see a vivid contrast between young Samuel and Eli's sons. Eli's sons were selfish, but Samuel was helpful. Eli's sons defrauded people, but Samuel grew in wisdom and gave the people messages from God. As an adult, Samuel became a prophet, priest, and judge over Israel. A person's actions reflect his character. This was true of Samuel and Eli's sons. It is also true of us. Strive, like Samuel, to keep your heart pure before God.

1. Samuel's birth and childhood
2. War with the Philistines

B. SAMUEL AND SAUL (1 Samuel 8:1-15:35)

Saul showed great promise. He was strong, tall, and modest. God's Spirit came upon him, and Samuel was his counselor. But Saul deliberately disobeyed God and became an evil king. We must not base our hopes or future on our potential. Instead, we must consistently obey God in all areas of life. God evaluates obedience, not potential.

1. Saul becomes king of Israel
2. God rejects Saul for disobedience

C. SAUL AND DAVID (1 Samuel 16:1-31:13)

David quickly killed Goliath, but waited patiently for God to deal with Saul. Although David was anointed to be Israel's next king, he had to wait years to realize this promise. The difficult circumstances in life and the times of waiting often refine, teach, and prepare us for the future responsibilities God has for us.

1. Samuel anoints David
2. David and Goliath
3. David and Jonathan become friends
4. Saul pursues David
5. Saul's defeat and death

MEGATHEMES

THEME: King

EXPLANATION: Because Israel suffered from corrupt priests and judges, the people wanted a king. They wanted to be organized like the surrounding nations. Though it was against his original purpose, God chose a king for them.

IMPORTANCE: Establishing a monarchy did not solve Israel's problems. What God desires is the genuine devotion of each person's mind and heart to him. No government or set of laws can substitute for the rule of God in your heart and life.

THEME: God's Control

EXPLANATION: Israel prospered as long as the people regarded God as their true king. When the leaders strayed from God's law, God intervened in their personal lives and overruled their actions. In this way, God maintained ultimate control over Israel's history.

IMPORTANCE: God is always at work in this world, even when we can't see what he is doing. No matter what kinds of pressures we must endure or how many changes we must face, God is ultimately in control of our situation. Being confident of God's sovereignty, we can face the difficult situations in our lives with boldness.

THEME: Leadership

EXPLANATION: God guided his people using different forms of leadership: judges, priests, prophets, kings. Those whom he chose for these different offices, such as Eli, Samuel, Saul, and David, portrayed different styles of leadership. Yet the success of each leader depended on his devotion to God, not his position, leadership style, wisdom, age, or strength.

IMPORTANCE: When Eli, Samuel, Saul, and David disobeyed God, they faced tragic consequences. Sin affected what they accomplished for God and how some of them raised their children. Being a real leader means letting God guide all aspects of your activities, values, and goals, including the way you raise your children.

THEME: Obedience

EXPLANATION: For God, "to obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Samuel 15:22). God wanted his people to obey, serve, and follow him with a whole heart rather

than to maintain a superficial commitment based on tradition or ceremonial systems.

IMPORTANCE: Although we are free from the sacrificial system of the Jewish law, we may still rely on outward observances to substitute for inward commitment. God desires that all our work and worship be motivated by genuine, heartfelt devotion to Him.

THEME: God's Faithfulness

EXPLANATION: God faithfully kept the promises he made to Israel. He responded to his people with tender mercy and swift justice. In showing mercy, he faithfully acted in the best interest of his people. In showing justice, he was faithful to his word and perfect moral nature.

IMPORTANCE: Because God is faithful, he can be counted on to be merciful toward us. Yet God is also just, and he will not tolerate rebellion against him. His faithfulness and unselfish love should inspire us to dedicate ourselves to him completely. We must never take his mercy for granted.

TIMELINE

Judges begin to rule 1375 B.C. (1220 B.C.)
Samuel born 1105 (1083)
Saul born 1080; Samson becomes judge 1075 (1083)
Saul becomes king 1050 (1045)
David born 1040
David anointed; Goliath slain 1025
David becomes king over Judah 1010
David becomes king over all Israel 1003
Solomon becomes king 970
The kingdom is divided 930

2 Samuel

OVERVIEW: THE CHILD enters the room with long gown flowing, trailing well behind her high-heeled shoes. The wide-brimmed hat rests precariously atop her head, tilted to the right, and the long necklace swings like a pendulum as she walks. Following close is the “man.” His fingernails peek out of the coat sleeves that are already pushed upward six inches. With feet shuffling in the double-sized boots, his unsteady steps belie his confident smile. Children at play, dressing up—they copy Mom and Dad, having watched them dress and walk. Models. . . everyone has them. . . people we emulate, people who are our ideals. Unconsciously, perhaps, we copy their actions and adopt their ideas.

Among all the godly role models mentioned in the Bible, there is probably no one who stands out more than King David. Born halfway between Abraham and Jesus,

he became God's leader for all of Israel and the ancestor of the Messiah. David was "a man after *God's* own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). What are the personal qualities that David possessed that pleased God?

The book of 2 Samuel tells David's story. As you read, you will be filled with excitement as he is crowned king over Judah and then king over all of Israel (2 Samuel 5:1-5), praising God as he brings the ark of the covenant back to the tabernacle (2 Samuel 6:1-23) and exulting as he leads his armies to victory over all their enemies and completes the conquest of the promised land begun by Joshua (2 Samuel 8-10). David was a man who accomplished much.

But David was human, and there were those dark times when he stumbled and fell into sin. The record of lust, adultery, and murder is not easy to read (2 Samuel 11-13) and reveals that even great people who try to follow God are susceptible to temptation and sin.

Godliness does not guarantee an easy and carefree life. David had family problems—his own son incited the entire nation to rebellion and crowned himself king (2 Samuel 14:1-18:33). And greatness can cause pride, as we see in David's sinful act of taking a census in order to glory in the strength of his nation (2 Samuel 24:1-25). But the story of this fallen hero does not end in tragedy. Through repentance, his fellowship and peace with God were restored, but he had to face the consequences of the sins he committed (2 Samuel 12-20). These consequences stayed with him the rest of his life as a reminder of his sinful deeds and his need for God.

As you read 2 Samuel, look for David's Godlike characteristics—his faithfulness, patience, courage, generosity, commitment, honesty—as well as other God-honoring characteristics such as modesty and penitence. Valuable lessons can be learned from his sins and from his repentance. You, like David, can become a person after God's own heart.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. DAVID'S SUCCESSES (2 Samuel 1:1-10:19)

David took the fractured kingdom that Saul had left behind and built a strong, united power. Forty years later, David would turn this kingdom over to his son Solomon. David had a heart for God. He was a king who governed God's people by God's principles, and God blessed him greatly. We may not have David's

earthly success, but following God is, ultimately, the most successful decision we can make.

1. David becomes king over Judah
2. David becomes king over Israel
3. David conquers the surrounding nations

B. DAVID'S STRUGGLES (2 Samuel 11:1-24:25)

David sinned with Bathsheba and then tried to cover his sin by having her husband killed. Although he was forgiven for his sin, the consequences remained—he experienced trouble and distress, both with his family and with the nation. God is always ready to forgive, but we must live with the consequences of our actions. Covering up our sin will only multiply sin's painful consequences.

1. David and Bathsheba
2. Turmoil in David's family
3. National rebellion against David
4. The later years of David's rule

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Kingdom Growth

EXPLANATION: Under David's leadership, Israel's kingdom grew rapidly. With the growth came many changes: from tribal independence to centralized government, from the leadership of judges to a monarchy, from decentralized worship to worship at Jerusalem.

IMPORTANCE: No matter how much growth or how many changes we experience, God provides for us if we love him and highly regard his principles. God's work done in God's way never lacks God's supply of wisdom and energy.

THEME: Personal Greatness

EXPLANATION: David's popularity and influence increased greatly. He realized that the Lord was behind his success because he wanted to pour out his kindness on Israel. David regarded God's interests as more important than his own.

IMPORTANCE: God graciously pours out his favor on us because of what Christ has done. God does not regard personal greatness as something to be used selfishly, but as an instrument to carry out his work among his people. The greatness we should desire is to love others as God loves us.

THEME: Justice

EXPLANATION: King David showed justice, mercy, and fairness to Saul's family, enemies, rebels, allies, and close friends alike. His just rule was grounded in his faith in and knowledge of God. God's perfect moral nature is the standard for justice.

IMPORTANCE: Although David was the most just of all Israel's kings, he was still imperfect. His use of justice offered hope for a heavenly, ideal kingdom. This hope will never be satisfied in the heart of man until Christ, the Son of David, comes to rule in perfect justice forever.

THEME: Consequences of Sin

EXPLANATION: David abandoned his purpose as leader and king in time of war. His desire for prosperity and ease led him from triumph to trouble. Because David committed adultery with Bathsheba, he experienced consequences of his sin that ruined both his family and the nation.

IMPORTANCE: Temptation quite often comes when a person's life is aimless. We sometimes think that sinful pleasures and freedom from God's restraint will bring us a feeling of vitality; but sin creates a cycle of suffering that is not worth the fleeting pleasures it offers.

THEME: Feet of Clay

EXPLANATION: David not only sinned with Bathsheba, he murdered an innocent man. He neglected to discipline his sons when they got involved in rape and murder. This great hero showed a lack of character in some of his most important personal decisions. The man of iron had feet of clay.

IMPORTANCE: Sin should never be considered as a mere weakness or flaw. Sin is fatal and must be eradicated from our lives. David's life teaches us to have compassion for all people, including those whose sinful nature leads them into

sinful acts. It serves as a warning to us not to excuse sin in our own lives, even in times of success.

TIMELINE

Judges begin to rule 1375 B.C. (1220 B.C.)
Saul becomes king 1050 (1045)
Saul dies; David is king over Judah 1010
David becomes king over all Israel 1003
David and Bathsheba sin 997 (?)
Solomon born 991; David's census 980 (?)
David dies; Solomon made king 970
The kingdom is divided 930

1 Kings

OVERVIEW: "I DON'T CARE what anyone says, I'm going to do it!" he yells at his mother as he storms out of the house.

This is a familiar scene in our society. The words change, but the essential message is the same. . . the person is *not* open to advice because his mind is closed. Some advice may be sought, but it is heeded only if it reinforces the decision already made or is an easier path to take. It is human nature to reject help and to do things *our way*.

A much wiser approach is to seek, hear, and heed the advice of good counselors. Solomon, the world's wisest man, urges this in Proverbs (see 1 Kings 11:14; 1 Kings 15:22; 1 Kings 24:6). How ironic that his son and successor, Rehoboam, listened instead to foolish advice, with devastating results. At Rehoboam's inauguration, he was petitioned by the people to be a kind and generous ruler. The older men counseled him to "be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favorable answer" (1 Kings 12:7). But Rehoboam agrees to the cruel words

of his peers who urge him to be harsh. As a result, Rehoboam split the kingdom. Learn from Rehoboam's mistake. Commit yourself to seeking and following wise counsel.

The main events of 1 Kings are David's death, Solomon's reign, the division of the kingdom, and Elijah's ministry. As Solomon ascended the throne, David charged him to obey God's laws and to walk "in his ways" (1 Kings 2:3). This Solomon did; and when given the choice of gifts from God, he humbly asked for discernment (1 Kings 3:9). As a result, Solomon's reign began with great success, including the construction of the temple—his greatest achievement. Unfortunately, Solomon took many pagan wives and concubines who eventually turned his heart away from the Lord to their false gods (1 Kings 11:1-4).

Rehoboam succeeded Solomon and had the opportunity to be a wise, compassionate, and just king. Instead, he accepted the poor advice of his young friends and attempted to rule with an iron hand. But the people rebelled, and the kingdom split with ten tribes in the north (Israel) ruled by Jeroboam, and only Judah and Benjamin remaining with Rehoboam. Both kingdoms wove a path through the reigns of corrupt and idolatrous kings with only the clear voice of the prophets continuing to warn and call the nation back to God.

Elijah is surely one of the greatest prophets, and 1 Kings 17-22 feature his conflict with wicked Ahab and Jezebel in Israel. In one of the most dramatic confrontations in history, Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel. In spite of incredible opposition, Elijah stood for God and proves that *one plus God* is a majority. If God is on our side, no one can stand against us (Romans 8:31).

THE BLUEPRINT

A. THE UNITED KINGDOM (1 Kings 1:1-11:43)

Solomon was a botanist, zoologist, architect, poet, and philosopher. He was the wisest king in the history of Israel, but his wives led to the introduction of false gods and false worship in Israel. It is good for us to have wisdom, but that is not enough. The highest goal in life is to obey the Lord. Patient obedience to God should characterize our lives.

1. Solomon becomes king
2. Solomon's wisdom
3. Solomon builds the temple

4. Solomon's greatness and downfall

B. THE DIVIDED KINGDOM (1 Kings 12:1-22:53)

When the northern kingdom of Israel was being led by wicked kings, God raised up a prophet to proclaim his messages. Elijah single-handedly challenged the priesthood of the state religion and had them removed in one day. Through the dividing of the kingdom and the sending of Elijah, God dealt with the people's sin in powerful ways. Sin in our lives is graciously forgiven by God. However, the sin of an unrepentant person will be handled harshly. We must turn from sin and turn to God to be saved from judgment.

1. Revolt of the northern tribes
2. Kings of Israel and Judah
3. Elijah's ministry
4. Kings of Israel and Judah

MEGATHEMES

THEME: The King

EXPLANATION: Solomon's wisdom, power, and achievements brought honor to the Israelite nation and to God. All the kings of Israel and Judah were told to obey God and to govern according to his laws. But their tendency to abandon God's commands and to worship other gods led them to change the religion and government to meet their personal desires. This neglect of God's law led to their downfall.

IMPORTANCE: Wisdom, power, and achievement do not ultimately come from any human source; they are from God. No matter what we lead or govern, we can't do well when we ignore God's guidelines. Whether or not we are leaders, effectiveness depends upon listening and obeying God's Word. Don't let your personal desires distort God's Word.

THEME: The Temple

EXPLANATION: Solomon's temple was a beautiful place of worship and prayer. This sanctuary was the center of Jewish religion. It was the place of God's special presence and housed the ark of the covenant containing the Ten Commandments.

IMPORTANCE: A beautiful house of worship doesn't always guarantee heartfelt worship of God. Providing opportunities for true worship doesn't ensure that it will happen. God wants to live in our hearts, not just meet us in a sanctuary.

THEME: Other gods

EXPLANATION: Although the Israelites had God's law and experienced his presence among them, they became attracted to other gods. When this happened, their hearts became cold to God's law, resulting in the ruin of families and government, and eventually leading to the destruction of the nation.

IMPORTANCE: Through the years, the people took on the false qualities of the false gods they worshiped. They became cruel, power-hungry, and sexually perverse. We tend to become what we worship. Unless we serve the true God, we will become slaves to whatever takes his place.

THEME: The Prophet's Message

EXPLANATION: The prophet's responsibility was to confront and correct any deviation from God's law. Elijah was a bolt of judgment against Israel. His messages and miracles were a warning to the evil and rebellious kings and people.

IMPORTANCE: The Bible, the truth in sermons, and the wise counsel of believers are warnings to us. Anyone who points out how we deviate from obeying God's Word is a blessing to us. Changing our lives in order to obey God and get back on track often takes painful discipline and hard work.

THEME: Sin and Repentance

EXPLANATION: Each king had God's commands, a priest or prophet, and the lessons of the past to draw him back to God. All the people had the same resources. Whenever they repented and returned to God, God heard their prayers and forgave them.

IMPORTANCE: God hears and forgives us when we pray—if we are willing to trust him and turn from sin. Our desire to forsake our sin must be heartfelt and sincere. Then he will give us a fresh start and a desire to live for him.

TIMELINE

David becomes king 1010 B.C.
Solomon becomes king 970
Temple completed 959
The kingdom divides 930
Shishak invades Jerusalem 925
Asa becomes king of Judah 910
Elijah begins his ministry 875
Ahab becomes king of Israel 874
Jehoshaphat becomes king of Judah 872
Ben-Hadad attacks Samaria 857
Ahab dies in battle 853

2 Kings

OVERVIEW: SPARKLING as it crashes against boulders along its banks, the river swiftly cascades toward the sea. The current grabs, pushes, and tugs at leaves and logs, carrying them along for the ride. Here and there a sportsman is spotted in a kayak or a canoe, going with the flow. Gravity pulls the water, and the river pulls the rest. . . downward. Suddenly, a silver missile breaks the surface and darts upstream, and then another. Oblivious to the swirling opposition, the shining salmon swim against the stream. They must go upstream, and nothing will stop them from reaching their destination.

The current of society's river is flowing fast and furious, pulling downward everything in its way. It would be easy to float along with the current. But God calls us to swim against the flow. It will not be easy, and we may be alone, but it will be right.

In the book of 2 Kings, we read of evil rulers, rampant idolatry, and a complacent populace—certainly pulling downward. Despite the pressure to conform, to turn from the Lord and to serve only self, a minority of chosen people moved the opposite direction, toward God. The Bethel prophets and others, as well as two righteous kings, spoke God's word and stood for him. As you read 2 Kings, watch these courageous individuals. Catch the strength and force of Elijah and Elisha and the commitment of Hezekiah and Josiah, and determine to be one who swims against the current!

Second Kings continues the history of Israel, halfway between the death of David and the death of the nation. Israel had been divided (1 Kings 12), and the two kingdoms had begun to slide into idolatry and corruption toward collapse and captivity. Second Kings relates the sordid stories of the 12 kings of the northern

kingdom (called Israel) and the 16 kings of the southern kingdom (called Judah). For 130 years, Israel endures the succession of evil rulers until they were conquered by Shalmaneser of Assyria and led into captivity in 722 B.C. (2 Kings 17:6). Of all the kings in both the north and south, only two—Hezekiah and Josiah—were called good. Because of their obedience to God and the spiritual revivals during their reigns, Judah stood for an additional 136 years until falling to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

Throughout this dark period, the Bible mentions 30 prophets who proclaimed God's message to the people and their leaders. Most notable of these fearless people of God are Elijah and Elisha. As Elijah neared the end of his earthly ministry, Elisha asked for a double portion of his beloved mentor's spirit (2 Kings 2:9). Soon after, Elijah was taken to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11), and Elisha became God's spokesman to the northern kingdom. Elisha's life was filled with signs, proclamations, warnings, and miracles. Four of the most memorable are the flowing oil (2 Kings 4:1-7), the healing of the Shunammite woman's son (2 Kings 4:8-37), the healing of Naaman's leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-27), and the floating axhead (2 Kings 6:1-7).

Even in the midst of terrible situations, God will have his faithful minority, his remnant (2 Kings 19:31). He desires courageous men and women to proclaim his truth.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. THE DIVIDED KINGDOM (2 Kings 1:1-17:41)

Although Israel had the witness and power of Elisha, the nation turned from God and was exiled to Assyria. Assyria filled the northern kingdom with people from other lands. There has been no return from this captivity—it was permanent. Such is the end of all who shut God out of their lives.

1. Elisha's ministry
2. Kings of Israel and Judah
3. Israel is exiled to Assyria

B. THE SURVIVING KINGDOM (2 Kings 18:1-25:30)

The northern kingdom was destroyed, and prophets were predicting the same fate for Judah. What more could cause the nation to repent? Hezekiah and Josiah were

able to stem the tide of evil. They both repaired the temple and gathered the people for the Passover. Josiah eradicated idolatry from the land, but as soon as these good kings were gone, the people returned again to living their own way instead of God's way. Each individual must believe and live for God in his or her family, church, and nation.

1. Kings of Judah
2. Judah is exiled to Babylon

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Elisha

EXPLANATION: The purpose of Elisha's ministry was to restore respect for God and his message, and he stood firmly against the evil kings of Israel. By faith, with courage and prayer, he revealed not only God's judgment on sin, but also his mercy, love, and tenderness toward faithful people.

IMPORTANCE: Elisha's mighty miracles showed that God controls not only great armies, but also events in everyday life. When we listen to and obey God, he shows us his power to transform any situation. God's care is for all who are willing to follow him. He can perform miracles in our lives.

THEME: Idolatry

EXPLANATION: Every evil king in both Israel and Judah encouraged idolatry. These false gods represented war, cruelty, power, and sex. Although they had God's law, priests, and prophets to guide them, these kings sought priests and prophets whom they could manipulate to their own advantage.

IMPORTANCE: An idol is any idea, ability, possession, or person that we regard more highly than God. We condemn Israel and Judah for foolishly worshiping idols, but we also worship other gods—power, money, physical attractiveness. Those who believe in God must resist the lure of these attractive idols.

THEME: Evil Kings GOOD Kings

EXPLANATION: Only 20 percent of Israel and Judah's kings followed God. The evil kings were short-sighted. They thought they could control their nations' destinies by importing other religions, forming alliances with pagan nations, and

enriching themselves. The good kings had to spend most of their time undoing the evil done by their predecessors.

IMPORTANCE: Although the evil kings led the people into sin, the priests, princes, heads of families, and military leaders all had to cooperate with the evil plans and practices in order for them to be carried out. We cannot discharge our responsibility to obey God by blaming our leaders. We are responsible to know God's Word and obey it.

THEME: God's Patience

EXPLANATION: God told his people that if they obeyed him they would live successfully; if they disobeyed, they would be judged and destroyed. God had been patient with the people for hundreds of years. He sent many prophets to guide them. And he gave ample warning of coming destruction. But even God's patience has limits.

IMPORTANCE: God is patient with us. He gives us many chances to hear his message, to turn from sin, and to believe him. His patience does not mean he is indifferent to how we live, nor does it mean we can ignore his warnings. His patience should make us want to come to him now.

THEME: Judgment

EXPLANATION: After King Solomon's reign, Israel lasted 209 years before the Assyrians destroyed it; Judah lasted 345 years before the Babylonians took Jerusalem. After repeated warnings to his people, God used these evil nations as instruments for his justice.

IMPORTANCE: The consequences of rejecting God's commands and purpose for our lives are severe. He will not ignore unbelief or rebellion. We must believe in him and accept Christ's sacrificial death on our behalf, or we will be judged also.

TIMELINE

Kingdom divides 930 B.C.

Ahab dies in battle 853

Elijah's ministry transfers to Elisha 848

Jehu becomes king of Israel 841

Joash becomes king of Judah 835

Elisha's ministry ends 797
Jeroboam II becomes king of Israel 793
Amos's ministry begins 760
Hosea's ministry begins 753
Micah's ministry begins 742
Isaiah's ministry begins 740
Israel (northern kingdom) falls 722
Hezekiah becomes king of Judah 715
Josiah becomes king of Judah 640
Jeremiah's ministry begins 627
Book of the Law found in the temple 622
First captivity of Judah; Daniel taken 605
Second captivity of Judah; Ezekiel taken 597
Judah (southern kingdom) falls 586

1 Chronicles

OVERVIEW: IN THE WIDE shade of the ageless oak, a mother watches her toddler discover acorns, leaves, and dandelions. Nearby, her mother, aunt, and uncle spread the checkerboard cloth over park tables and cover it with bowls and platters of fried chicken, potato salad, baked beans, and assorted family recipes. The clanging of Grandpa's and Dad's horseshoes against stakes regularly pierces the air and mixes with cheers, laughs, and shouts of the teenagers' touch football game. A family reunion—a sunny afternoon filled with four generations and miscellaneous kids, parents, and second cousins once-removed.

These meetings are important. . . touching and connecting with other branches of the family tree, tracing one's personal history back through time and culture, seeing physical reflections (her eyes, his nose), remembering warm traditions. Knowing one's genetical and relational path provides a sense of identity, heritage, and destiny.

It is with this same high purpose that the writer of Chronicles begins his unifying work with an extensive genealogy. He traces the roots of the nation in a literary family reunion from Adam onward, recounting its royal line and the loving plan of a personal God. We read 1 Chronicles and gain a glimpse of God at work through his people for generations. If you are a believer, these people are your ancestors too. As you approach this part of God's Word, read their names with awe and respect, and gain new security and identity in your relationship with God.

The previous book, 2 Kings, ends with both Israel and Judah in captivity, surely a dark age for God's people. Then follows Chronicles (1 and 2 Chronicles were originally one book). Written after the captivity, it summarizes Israel's history, emphasizing the Jewish people's spiritual heritage in an attempt to unify the nation. The chronicler is selective in his history telling. Instead of writing an exhaustive work, he carefully weaves the narrative, highlighting spiritual lessons and teaching moral truths. In Chronicles the northern kingdom is virtually ignored, David's triumphs—not his sins—are recalled, and the temple is given great prominence as the vital center of national life.

First Chronicles begins with Adam, and, for nine chapters, the writer gives us a “Who’s Who” of Israel’s history with special emphasis on David’s royal line. The rest of the book tells the story of David—the great man of God, Israel’s king—who served God and laid out the plans for the construction of and worship in the temple.

First Chronicles is an invaluable supplement to 2 Samuel and a strong reminder of the necessity for tracing our roots, and thus rediscovering our foundation. As you read 1 Chronicles, trace your own godly heritage, thank God for your spiritual forefathers, and recommit yourself to passing on God’s truth to the next generation.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. THE GENEALOGIES OF ISRAEL (1 Chron. 1:1-9:44)

The long list of names that follows presents a history of God’s work in the world from Adam through Zerubbabel. Some of these names remind us of stories of great faith, and others of tragic failure. About most of the people named, however, we know nothing. But those who died unknown to us are known by God. God will also remember us when we die.

1. Ancestry of the nation
2. The tribes of Israel
3. Returnees from exile in Babylon

B. THE REIGN OF DAVID (1 Chron. 10:1-29:30)

David loved the Lord and wanted to build a temple to replace the tabernacle, but God denied his request. David’s greatest contribution to the temple would not be the construction, but the preparation. We may be unable to see the results of our labors for God in our lifetime, but David’s example helps us understand that we serve God so *he* will see *his* results, not so we will see ours.

1. David becomes king over all of Israel
2. David brings the ark to Jerusalem
3. David’s military exploits
4. David arranges for the building of the temple

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Israel's history

EXPLANATION: By retelling Israel's history in the genealogies and the stories of the kings, the writer laid down the true spiritual foundation for the nation. God kept his promises and we are reminded of them in the historical record of his people, leaders, prophets, priests, and kings.

IMPORTANCE: Israel's past formed a reliable basis for reconstructing the nation after the exile. Because God's promises are revealed in the Bible, we can know God and trust him to keep his word. Like Israel, we should have no higher goal in life than devoted service to God.

THEME: God's people

EXPLANATION: By listing the names of people in Israel's past, God established Israel's true heritage. They were all one family in Adam, one nation in Abraham, one priesthood under Levi, and one kingdom under David. The national and spiritual unity of the people were important to the rebuilding of the nation.

IMPORTANCE: God is always faithful to his people. He protects them in every generation and provides leaders to guide them. Because God has been at work throughout the centuries, his people can trust him to work in the present. You can rely on his presence today.

THEME: David, the king

EXPLANATION: The story of David's life and his relationship with God showed that he was God's appointed leader. David's devotion to God, the law, the temple, true worship, the people, and justice sets the standard for what God's chosen king should be.

IMPORTANCE: Jesus Christ came to earth as a descendant of David. One day he will rule as king over all the earth. His strength and justice will fulfill God's ideal for the king. He is our hope. We can experience God's kingdom now by giving Christ complete control of our lives.

THEME: True worship

EXPLANATION: David brought the ark of the covenant to the tabernacle at Jerusalem to restore true worship to the people. God gave the plans for building the temple, and David organized the priests to make worship central to all Israel.

IMPORTANCE: The temple stood as the throne of God on earth, the place of true worship. God's true throne is in the hearts of his people. When we acknowledge him as the true king over our lives, true worship takes place.

THEME: The priests

EXPLANATION: God ordained the priests and Levites to guide the people in faithful worship according to his law. By leading the people in worship according to God's design, the priests and Levites were an important safeguard to Israel's faith.

IMPORTANCE: For true worship to remain central in our lives, God's people need to take a firm stand for the ways of God recorded in the Bible. Today, all believers are priests for one another, and we should encourage each other to faithful worship.

TIMELINE

Saul becomes king 1050 B.C. (1045 B.C.)
Saul dies; David becomes king over Judah 1010
David becomes king over all Israel 1003
David captures Jerusalem 1000
David captures Rabbah 997 (?)
David's census 980 (?)
Solomon becomes king 970
The kingdom divides 930

2 Chronicles

OVERVIEW: THE slide clicks, and our eyes focus on the image flashed onto the screen in the darkened sanctuary. “This idol,” explains the missionary, “is made of stone and is worshiped daily. The natives believe that this will guarantee good crops and healthy children.” With condescending smiles, we wonder at their ignorance. How could anyone worship an object? Idols are for the naive and the superstitious! But after the presentation we return home to *our* idols of wealth, prestige, or self-fulfillment. If we put anything in God’s place, we worship it, despite what we profess with our lips.

Our experience parallels Israel’s. They were chosen by God to represent him on earth. But too often they forgot the truth and their calling, stumbling blindly after idols as the neighboring nations did. Then prophets, priests, and judgment would push them abruptly back to God, the one true God. Second Chronicles relates this sordid history of Judah’s corrupt and idolatrous kings. Here and there a good king would arise in Judah, and for a time there would be revival, but the downward spiral would continue—ending in chaos, destruction, and captivity.

The chronicler writes this volume to bring the nation back to God by reminding them of their past. Only by following God would they prosper! As you read 2 Chronicles you will catch a vivid glimpse of Judah’s history (the history of Israel, the northern kingdom, is virtually ignored), and you will see the tragic results of idolatry. Learn the lessons of the past: determine to get rid of any idols in your life and to worship God alone.

Second Chronicles continues the history of 1 Chronicles. David’s son, Solomon, was inaugurated as king. Solomon built the magnificent temple in Jerusalem, thus fulfilling his father’s wish and last request (2 Chron. 2-5). Solomon enjoyed a peaceful and prosperous reign of 40 years that made him world famous. After Solomon died, his son Rehoboam assumed the throne, and his immaturity divided the kingdom.

In Judah, there were a few good kings and many evil ones. The writer of Chronicles faithfully records their achievements and failures, noting how each king measured up to God’s standard for success. Clearly a good king obeyed God’s laws, eliminated the places of idol worship, and made no alliances with other nations. Judah’s good kings include Asa, Jehoshaphat, Uzziah (Azariah),

Hezekiah, and Josiah. Of its many evil ones, Ahaz and Manasseh were perhaps the worst. Eventually the nation was conquered and taken captive, and the temple was destroyed.

The writer's purpose was to reunite the nation around the true worship of God after the captivity. In these pages, he reminds the people of their past. He clearly broadcasts his message through one of the best-known verses in Scripture, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14). As you read 2 Chronicles, listen to God's voice and obey him; and receive his redemptive, healing touch.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. THE REIGN OF SOLOMON (2 Chron. 1:1-9:31)

Solomon achieved much in business and government, but most important, he was the man God used to build the glorious temple. This beautiful building was the religious center of the nation. It symbolized the unity of all the tribes, the presence of God among them, and the nation's high calling. We may achieve great things in life, but we must not neglect any effort that will help nurture God's people or bring others into God's kingdom. It is easy for us to get the wrong perspective on what's really important in life.

1. Solomon asks for wisdom
2. Solomon builds the temple
3. Solomon dedicates the temple
4. Solomon's riches and wisdom

B. THE KINGDOM OF JUDAH (2 Chron. 10:1-36:23)

Throughout the reigns of 20 kings, the nation of Judah wavered between obedience to God and apostasy. The reigning king's response to God determined the spiritual climate of the nation and whether or not God would send judgment upon his people. Our personal history is shaped by our response to God. Just as Judah's failure to repent brought them captivity in Babylon, so the abuse of our high calling by sinful living will ultimately bring us catastrophe and destruction.

1. The northern tribes revolt

2. History of apostasy and reform
3. Judah is exiled to Babylon

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Temple

EXPLANATION: The temple was the symbol of God's presence and the place set aside for worship and prayer. Built by Solomon from the plans God gave to David, the temple was the spiritual center of the nation.

IMPORTANCE: As Christians meet together to worship God, they experience the presence of God in a way that no individual believer could. For the dwelling place of God is the people of God. The body of Christ is God's temple.

THEME: Peace

EXPLANATION: As Solomon and his descendants were faithful to God, they experienced victory in battle, success in government, and peace with other nations. Peace was the result of the people being unified and loyal to God and his law.

IMPORTANCE: Only God can bring true peace. God is greater than any enemy, army, or nation. Just as Israel's faithful response was key to her peace and survival as a nation, so our obedience to God as individuals and nations is vital to peace today.

THEME: Prayer

EXPLANATION: After Solomon died, David's kingdom was divided. When a king led the Israelites into idolatry, the nation suffered. When the king and his people prayed to God for deliverance and they turned from their sinful ways, God delivered them.

IMPORTANCE: God still answers prayer today. We have God's promise that if we humble ourselves, seek him, turn from our sin, and pray, God will hear, heal, and forgive us. If we are alert, we can pray for God's guidance before we get into trouble.

THEME: Reform

EXPLANATION: Although idolatry and injustice were common, some kings turned to God and led the people in spiritual revival—renewing their commitment to God and reforming their society. Revival included the destruction of idols, obedience to the law, and the restoration of the priesthood.

IMPORTANCE: We must constantly commit ourselves to obeying God. We are never secure in what others have done before us. Each generation of believers must rededicate themselves to the task of carrying out God's will in their own lives as well as in society.

THEME: National collapse

EXPLANATION: In 586 B.C. the Babylonians completely destroyed Solomon's beautiful temple. The formal worship of God was ended. The Israelites had abandoned God. As a result, God brought judgment upon his people and they were carried off into captivity.

IMPORTANCE: Although our disobedience may not be as blatant as Israel's, quite often our commitment to God is insincere and casual. When we forget that all our power, wisdom, and wealth come from God and not ourselves, we are in danger of the same spiritual and moral collapse that Israel experienced.

TIMELINE

Solomon becomes king 970 B.C.
Temple built 966 959
The kingdom divides 930
Asa becomes king of Judah 910
Jehoshaphat becomes king of Judah 872
Ahab killed in battle 853
Athaliah seizes the throne 841
Uzziah becomes king of Judah 792
Israel (northern kingdom) falls 722
Hezekiah becomes king of Judah 715
Sennacherib taunts Hezekiah 701
Josiah becomes king 640
Book of the Law found 622
Judah (southern kingdom) falls 586
Cyrus's decree 538

Ezra

OVERVIEW: NAME the truly great men and women of your lifetime. Celebrities, including politicians, war heroes, sports figures, and maybe your parents and special friends come to mind. You remember them because of certain acts or character qualities. Now, name some Biblical heroes—figures etched into your life through countless sermons and church school lessons. This list

undoubtedly includes many who served God faithfully and courageously. Does your list include Ezra? Far from being well known, this unheralded man of God deserves to be mentioned in any discussion of greatness.

Ezra was a priest, a scribe, and a great leader. His name means “help,” and his whole life was dedicated to serving God and God’s people. Tradition says that Ezra wrote most of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Psalm 119, and that he led the council of 120 men who formed the Old Testament canon. He centers the narrative of the book of Ezra around God and his promise that the Jews would return to their land, as promised by Jeremiah (see the note on +Ezra 1:1). This message formed the core of Ezra’s life. The last half of the book gives a very personal glimpse of Ezra. His knowledge of Scripture and his God-given wisdom were so obvious to the king that he appointed Ezra to lead the second emigration to Jerusalem, to teach the people God’s Word, and to administer national life (Ezra 7:14-26).

Ezra not only knew God’s Word, he believed and obeyed it. Upon learning of the Israelites’ sins of intermarriage and idolatry, Ezra fell in humility before God and prayed for the nation (Ezra 9:1-15). Their disobedience touched him deeply (Ezra 10:1). His response helped lead the people back to God.

Second Chronicles ends with Cyrus, king of Persia, asking for volunteers to return to Jerusalem to build a house for God. Ezra continues this account (Ezra 1:1-3 is almost identical to 2 Chron. 36:22-23) as two caravans of God’s people were returning to Jerusalem. Zerubbabel, the leader of the first trip, was joined by 42,360 pilgrims who journeyed homeward (Ezra 2). After arriving, they began to build the altar and the temple foundations (Ezra 3). But opposition arose from the local inhabitants, and a campaign of accusations and rumors temporarily halted the project (Ezra 4). During this time, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the people (Ezra 5). Finally, Darius decreed that the work should proceed unhindered (Ezra 6).

After a 58-year gap, Ezra led a group of Jews from Persia. Armed with decrees and authority from Artaxerxes I, Ezra’s task was to administer the affairs of the land (Ezra 7-8). Upon arriving, he learned of intermarriage between God’s people and their pagan neighbors. He wept and prayed for the nation (Ezra 9). Ezra’s example of humble confession led to national revival (Ezra 10). Ezra, a man of God and a true hero, was a model for Israel, and he is a fitting model for us.

Read Ezra, the book, and remember Ezra, the man—a humble, obedient helper. Commit yourself to serving God as he did, with your exiles returns to the land

THE BLUEPRINT

A. THE RETURN LED BY ZERUBBABEL (Ezra 1:1-6:22)

Finally given the chance to return to their homeland, the people started to rebuild the temple, only to be stopped by opposition from their enemies. God’s work in the world is not without opposition. We must not get discouraged and quit, as the returning people did at first, but continue on boldly in the face of difficulties, as they did later with the encouragement from the prophets.

1. The first group of
2. The people rebuild the temple whole life.

B. THE RETURN LED BY EZRA (Ezra 7:1-10:44)

Ezra returned to Jerusalem almost 80 years after Zerubbabel, only to discover that the people had married pagan or foreign spouses. This polluted the religious purity of the people and endangered the future of the nation. Believers today must be careful not to threaten their walk with God by taking on the practices of unbelievers.

1. The second group of exiles returns to the land
2. Ezra opposes intermarriage

MEGATHEMES

THEME: The Jews return

EXPLANATION: By returning to the land of Israel from Babylon, the Jews showed their faith in God’s promise to restore them as a people. They returned not only to their homeland, but also to the place where their forefathers had promised to follow God.

IMPORTANCE: God shows his mercy to every generation. He compassionately restores his people. No matter how difficult our present “captivity,” we are never far from his love and mercy. He restores us when we return to him.

THEME: Rededication

EXPLANATION: In 536 B.C., Zerubbabel led the people in rebuilding the altar and laying the temple foundation. They reinstated daily sacrifices and annual feasts, and rededicated themselves to a new spiritual worship of God.

IMPORTANCE: In rededicating the altar, the people were recommitting themselves to God and his service. To grow spiritually, our commitment must be reviewed and renewed often. As we rededicate ourselves to God, our lives become altars to him.

THEME: Opposition

EXPLANATION: Opposition came soon after the altar was built and the temple foundation laid. Enemies of the Jews used deceit to hinder the building for over six years. Finally, there was a decree to stop the building altogether. This opposition severely tested their wavering faith.

IMPORTANCE: There will always be adversaries who oppose God's work. The life of faith is never easy. But God can overrule all opposition to his service. When we face opposition, we must not falter or withdraw, but keep active and patient.

THEME: God's Word

EXPLANATION: When the people returned to the land, they were also returning to the influence of God's Word. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah helped encourage them while Ezra's preaching of Scripture built them up. God's Word gave them what they needed to do God's work.

IMPORTANCE: We also need the encouragement and direction of God's Word. We must make it the basis for our faith and actions to finish God's work and fulfill our obligations. We must never waver in our commitment to hear and obey his Word.

THEME: Faith and action

EXPLANATION: The urging of Israel's leaders motivated the people to complete the temple. Over the years, they had intermarried with idol-worshippers and adopted their pagan practices. Their faith, tested and revived, also led them to remove these sins from their lives.

IMPORTANCE: Faith led them to complete the temple and to remove sin from their society. As we trust God with our hearts and minds, we must also act by completing our daily responsibilities. It is not enough to say we believe; we must make the changes God requires.

TIMELINE

Jerusalem destroyed; exiles go to Babylon 586 B.C.
Babylon overthrown by Cyrus 539
Exiles return to Jerusalem 538
Temple construction begins 536
Temple work halted 530
Darius I becomes king of Persia 522
Temple work resumed MESSAGES of Haggai, Zechariah 520
Temple completed 516
Ezra comes to Jerusalem 458
Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem 445

Nehemiah

OVERVIEW: “WHAT this church needs is. . . !” “I can’t believe our government officials. If I were there I would. . . !” “Our schools are really in bad shape. Someone ought to do something!”

Grippers, complainers, self-proclaimed prophets, and “armchair quarterbacks” abound. It is easy to analyze, scrutinize, and *talk* about all the problems in the world. But we really need people who will not just discuss a situation, but will *do* something about it!

Nehemiah saw a problem and was distressed. Instead of complaining or wallowing in self-pity and grief, he took action. Nehemiah knew that God wanted him to motivate the Jews to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls, so he left a responsible position in the Persian government to do what God wanted. Nehemiah knew God could use

his talents to get the job done. From the moment he arrived in Jerusalem, everyone knew who was in charge. He organized, managed, supervised, encouraged, met opposition, confronted injustice, and kept going until the walls were built. Nehemiah was a man of action.

As the story begins, Nehemiah was talking with fellow Jews who reported that the walls and gates of Jerusalem were in disrepair. This was disturbing news, and rebuilding those walls became Nehemiah's burden. At the appropriate time, Nehemiah asked King Artaxerxes for permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild its fallen walls. The king approved.

Armed with royal letters, Nehemiah traveled to Jerusalem. He organized the people into groups and assigned them to specific sections of the wall (Neh. 3). The construction project was not without opposition, however. Sanballat, Tobiah, and others tried to halt the work with insults, ridicule, threats, and sabotage. Some of the workers became fearful; others became weary. In each case, Nehemiah employed a strategy to frustrate the enemies—prayer, encouragement, guard duty, consolidation (Neh. 4).

But a different problem arose—an internal one. Rich Jews were profiteering off the plight of their working countrymen. Hearing of their oppression and greed, Nehemiah confronted the extortioners face to face (Neh. 5). Then, with the walls almost complete, Sanballat, Tobiah, and company tried one last time to stop Nehemiah. But Nehemiah stood firm, and the wall was finished in just 52 days. What a tremendous monument to God's love and faithfulness. Enemies and friends alike knew that God had helped (Neh. 6).

After building the walls, Nehemiah continued to organize the people, taking a registration and appointing gatekeepers, Levites, and other officials (Neh. 7). Ezra led the city in worship and Bible instruction (Neh. 8-9). This led to a reaffirmation of faith and religious revival as the people promised to serve God faithfully (Neh. 10-11).

Nehemiah closes with the listing of the clans and their leaders, the dedication of the new wall of Jerusalem, and the purging of sin from the land (Neh. 12-13). As you read this book, watch Nehemiah in action—and determine to be a person on whom God can depend to *act* for him in the world.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. REBUILDING THE WALL (Neh. 1:1-7:73)

Nehemiah's life is an example of leadership and organization. Giving up a comfortable and wealthy position in Persia, he returned to the fractured homeland of his ancestors and rallied the people to rebuild Jerusalem's wall. In the face of opposition, he used wise defense measures to care for the people and to keep the project moving. To accomplish more for the sake of God's kingdom, we must pray, persevere, and sacrifice, as did Nehemiah.

1. Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem
2. Nehemiah leads the people

B. REFORMING THE PEOPLE (Neh. 8:1-13:31)

After the wall was rebuilt, Ezra read the law to the people, bringing about national repentance. Nehemiah and Ezra were very different people, yet God used them both to lead the nation. Remember, there is a place for you in God's work even if you're different from most other people. God uses each person in a unique way to accomplish his purposes.

1. Ezra renews the covenant
2. Nehemiah establishes policies

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Vision

EXPLANATION: Although the Jews completed the temple in 516 B.C., the city walls remained in shambles for the next 70 years. These walls represented power, protection, and beauty to the city of Jerusalem. They were also desperately needed to protect the temple from attack and to ensure the continuity of worship. God put the desire to rebuild the walls in Nehemiah's heart, giving him a vision for the work.

IMPORTANCE: Does God have a vision for us? Are there "walls" that need to be built today? God still wants his people to be united and trained to do his work. As we recognize deep needs in our world, God can give us the vision and desire to "build." With that vision, we can mobilize others to pray and put together an action plan.

THEME: Prayer

EXPLANATION: Both Nehemiah and Ezra responded to problems with prayer. When Nehemiah began his work, he recognized the problem, immediately prayed, and then acted on the problem.

IMPORTANCE: Prayer is still God's mighty force in solving problems today. Prayer and action go hand in hand. Through prayer, God guides our preparation, teamwork, and diligent efforts to carry out his will.

THEME: Leadership

EXPLANATION: Nehemiah demonstrated excellent leadership. He was spiritually ready to heed God's call. He used careful planning, teamwork, problem solving, and courage to get the work done. Although he had tremendous faith, he never avoided the extra work necessary for good leadership.

IMPORTANCE: Being God's leader is not just gaining recognition, holding a position, or being the boss. It requires planning, hard work, courage, and perseverance. Positive expectations are never a substitute for doing the difficult work. And in order to lead others, you need to listen for God's direction in your own life.

THEME: Problems

EXPLANATION: After the work began, Nehemiah faced scorn, slander, and threats from enemies, as well as fear, conflict, and discouragement from his own workers. Although these problems were difficult, they did not stop Nehemiah from finishing the work.

IMPORTANCE: When difficulties come, there is a tendency for conflict and discouragement to set in. We must recognize that there are no triumphs without troubles. When problems arise, we must face them squarely and press on to complete God's work.

THEME: Repentance/Revival

EXPLANATION: Although God had enabled them to build the wall, the work wasn't complete until the people rebuilt their lives spiritually. Ezra instructed the

people in God's Word. As they listened, they recognized the sin in their lives, admitted it, and took steps to remove it.

IMPORTANCE: Recognizing and admitting sin is not enough; revival must result in reform, or it is merely the expression of enthusiasm. God does not want halfhearted measures. We must not only remove sin from our lives, but also ask God to move into the center of all we do.

TIMELINE

Jerusalem destroyed; exiles go to Babylon 586 B.C.

First exiles return to Jerusalem 538

Temple completed 516

Xerxes becomes king of Persia 486

Artaxerxes I becomes king of Persia 465

Ezra comes to Jerusalem 458

Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem; wall completed 445

Nehemiah returns to Babylon 433

Nehemiah goes back to Jerusalem 432 Malachi begins his ministry 430 (?)

Esther

OVERVIEW: DRAMA, power, romance, intrigue—this is the stuff of which best-selling novels are made. But far from a modern piece of fiction, those words describe a true story, lived and written centuries ago. More than entertaining reading, it is a story of the profound interplay of God's sovereignty and human will. God prepared the place and the opportunity, and his people, Esther and Mordecai, chose to act.

The book of Esther begins with Queen Vashti refusing to obey an order from her husband, King Xerxes. She was subsequently banished, and the search began for a new queen. The king sent out a decree to gather together all the beautiful women in the empire and bring them into the royal harem. Esther, a young Jewish woman, was one of those chosen to be in the royal harem. King Xerxes was so pleased with Esther that he made her his queen.

Meanwhile, Mordecai, Esther's older cousin, became a government official and during his tenure foiled an assassination plot. But the ambitious and self-serving Haman was appointed second-in-command in the empire. When Mordecai refused to bow in reverence to him, Haman became furious and determined to destroy Mordecai and all the Jews along with him.

To accomplish his vengeful deed, Haman deceived the king and persuaded him to issue an edict condemning the Jews to death. Mordecai told Queen Esther about this edict, and she decided to risk her life to save her people. Esther asked King Xerxes and Haman to be her guests at a banquet. During the feast, the king asked Esther what she really wanted, and he promised to give her anything. Esther simply invited both men to another banquet the next day.

That night, unable to sleep, the king was flipping through some records in the royal archives when he read of the assassination plot that Mordecai thwarted. Surprised to learn that Mordecai had never been rewarded for this deed, the king asked Haman what should be done to properly thank a hero. Haman thought the king must be talking about him, and so he described a lavish reward. The king agreed, but to Haman's shock and utter humiliation, he learned that Mordecai was the person to be so honored.

During the second banquet, the king again asked Esther what she desired. She replied that someone has plotted to destroy her and her people, and she named Haman as the culprit. Immediately the king sentenced Haman to die on the gallows that he had built for Mordecai.

In the final act of this true-life drama, Mordecai was appointed to Haman's position, and the Jews were guaranteed protection throughout the land. To celebrate this historic occasion, the feast of Purim was established.

Because of Queen Esther's courageous act, a whole nation was saved. Seeing her God-given opportunity, she seized it! Her life made a difference. Read Esther and watch for God at work in *your* life. Perhaps he has prepared you to act in "such a time as this" (Esther 4:14).

THE BLUEPRINT

The book of Esther is an example of God's divine guidance and care over our lives. God's sovereignty and power are seen throughout this book. Although we may question certain circumstances in our lives, we must have faith that God is in

control, working through both the pleasant and difficult times so that we can serve him effectively.

1. Esther becomes queen (Esther 1:1-2:23)
2. The Jews are threatened (Esther 3:1-4:17)
3. Esther intercedes for the Jews (Esther 5:1-8:17)
4. The Jews are delivered (Esther 9:1-10:3)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: God's sovereignty

EXPLANATION: The book of Esther tells of the circumstances that were essential to the survival of God's people in Persia. These "circumstances" were not the result of chance, but of God's grand design. God is sovereign over every area of life.

IMPORTANCE: With God in charge, we can take courage. He can guide us through the circumstances we face in our lives. We should expect God to display his power in carrying out his will. As we unite our life's purposes to God's purpose, we benefit from his sovereign care.

THEME: Racial hatred

EXPLANATION: The Jews in Persia had been a minority since their deportation from Judah 100 years earlier. Haman was a descendant of King Agag, an enemy of the Jews. Lust for power and pride drove Haman to hate Mordecai, Esther's cousin. Haman convinced the king to kill all the Jews.

IMPORTANCE: Racial hatred is always sinful. We must never condone it in any form. Every person on earth has intrinsic worth because God created mankind in his image. Therefore, God's people must stand against racism whenever and wherever it occurs.

THEME: Deliverance

EXPLANATION: On February 28th, the Jews celebrate the feast of Purim, which symbolizes God's deliverance. *Purim* means "lots", such as those used by Haman to set the date for the extermination of all Jews from Persia. But God overruled, using Queen Esther to intercede on behalf of the Jews.

IMPORTANCE: Because God is in control of history, he is never frustrated by any turn of events or action of man. He is able to save us from the evil of this world and deliver us from sin and death. Because we trust God, we are not to fear what people may do to us; instead, we are to be confident in God's control.

THEME: Action

EXPLANATION: Faced with death, Esther and Mordecai set aside their own fear and took action. Esther risked her life by asking King Xerxes to save the Jews. They were not paralyzed by fear.

IMPORTANCE: When outnumbered and powerless, it is natural for us to feel helpless. Esther and Mordecai resisted this temptation and acted with courage. It is not enough to know that God is in control; we must act with self-sacrifice and courage to follow God's guidance.

THEME: Wisdom

EXPLANATION: The Jews were a minority in a world hostile to them. It took great wisdom for Mordecai to survive. Serving as a faithful official of the king, Mordecai took steps to understand and work with the Persian law. Yet he did not compromise his integrity.

IMPORTANCE: It takes great wisdom to survive in a non-believing world. In a setting which is for the most part hostile to Christianity, we can demonstrate wisdom by giving respect to what is true and good and by humbly standing against what is wrong.

TIMELINE

Jerusalem destroyed EXILES go to Babylon 586 B.C.

First exiles return to Jerusalem 538

Temple completed 516

Xerxes becomes king of Persia 486

Esther becomes queen 479

Haman's decree to destroy the Jews 474

First feast of Purim 473

Haman's decree to destroy the Jews 474

First feast of Purim 473

Artaxerxes I becomes king 465
Second group of exiles returns to Jerusalem 458
Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem 445

THE POETIC BOOKS

Job

OVERVIEW: TREES snap like toothpicks or fly upward, wrenched from the earth. Whole rooftops sail, cars tumble like toys, walls collapse, and a mountain of water jumps the shore and engulfs the land. A hurricane cuts and tears, and only solid foundations survive her unbridled fury. But those foundations can be used for rebuilding after the storm.

For any building, the foundation is critical. It must be deep enough and solid enough to withstand the weight of the building and other stresses. Lives are like buildings, and the quality of their foundation will determine the quality of the whole. Too often inferior materials are used, and when tests come, lives crumble.

Job was tested. With a life filled with prestige, possessions, and people, he was suddenly assaulted on every side, devastated, stripped down to his foundation. But his life was built on God, and he endured.

Job, the book, tells the story of Job, the man of God. It is a gripping drama of riches-to-rags-to-riches, a theological treatise about suffering and divine sovereignty, and a picture of faith that endures. As you read Job, analyze your life and check your foundation. And may you be able to say that when all is gone but God, he is enough.

Job was a prosperous farmer living in the land of Uz. He had thousands of sheep, camels, and other livestock, a large family, and many servants. Suddenly Satan, the accuser, came before God claiming that Job was trusting God only because he was wealthy and everything was going well for him. And so the testing of Job's faith began.

Satan was allowed to destroy Job's children, servants, livestock, herdsman, and home; but Job continued to trust in God. Next Satan attacked Job physically, covering him with painful sores. Job's wife told him to curse God and die (Job 2:9), but Job suffered in silence.

Three of Job's friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, came to visit him. At first they silently grieved with Job. But when they began to talk about the reasons for Job's tragedies, they told him that sin had caused his suffering. They told him to confess his sins and turn back to God. But Job maintained his innocence.

Unable to convince Job of his sin, the three men fell silent (Job 32:1). At this point, another voice—the young Elihu—entered the debate. Although his argument also failed to convince Job, it prepared the way for God to speak.

Finally, God spoke out of a mighty storm. Confronted with the great power and majesty of God, Job fell in humble reverence before God—speechless. God rebuked Job's friends, and the drama ended with Job restored to happiness and wealth.

It is easy to think that we have all the answers. In reality, only God knows exactly why things happen as they do, and we must submit to him as our Sovereign. As you read this book, emulate Job and decide to trust God no matter what happens.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. JOB IS TESTED (Job 1:1-2:13)

Job, a wealthy and upright man, lost his possessions, his children, and his health. Job did not understand why he was suffering. Why does God allow his children to suffer? Although there is an explanation, we may not know it while we are here on earth. In the meantime, we must always be ready for testing in our lives.

B. THREE FRIENDS ANSWER JOB (Job 3:1-31:40)

Job's friends wrongly assumed that suffering always came as a result of sin. With this in mind, they tried to persuade Job to repent of his sin. But the three friends were wrong. Suffering is not always a direct result of personal sin. When we experience severe suffering, it may not be our fault, so we don't have to add to our pain by feeling guilty that some hidden sin is causing our trouble.

1. First round of discussion
2. Second round of discussion
3. Third round of discussion

C. A YOUNG MAN ANSWERS JOB (Job 32:1-37:24)

A young man named Elihu, who had been listening to the entire conversation, criticized the three friends for being unable to answer Job. He said that although Job was a good man, he had allowed himself to become proud, and God was punishing him in order to humble him. This answer was partially true because suffering does purify our faith. But God is beyond our comprehension and we cannot know why he allows each instance of suffering to come into our lives. Our part is simply to remain faithful.

D. GOD ANSWERS JOB (Job 38:1-41:34)

God himself finally answered Job. God is in control of the world and only he understands why the good are allowed to suffer. This only becomes clear to us when we see God for who he is. We must courageously accept what God allows to happen in our lives and remain firmly committed to him.

E. JOB IS RESTORED (Job 42:1-17)

Job finally learned that when nothing else was left, he had God, and that was enough. Through suffering, we learn that God is enough for our lives and our future. We must love God regardless of whether he allows blessing or suffering to come to us. Testing is difficult, but the result is often a deeper relationship with

God. Those who endure the testing of their faith will experience God's great rewards in the end.

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Suffering

EXPLANATION: Through no fault of his own, Job lost his wealth, children, and health. Even his friends were convinced that Job had brought this suffering upon himself. For Job, the greatest trial was not the pain or the loss; it was not being able to understand why God allowed him to suffer.

IMPORTANCE: Suffering can be, but is not always, a penalty for sin. In the same way, prosperity is not always a reward for being good. Those who love God are not exempt from trouble. Although we may not be able to understand fully the pain we experience, it can lead us to rediscover God.

THEME: Satan's attacks

EXPLANATION: Satan attempted to drive a wedge between Job and God by getting Job to believe that God's governing of the world was not just and good. Satan had to ask God for permission to take Job's wealth, children, and health away. Satan was limited to what God allowed.

IMPORTANCE: We must learn to recognize and not fear Satan's attacks because Satan cannot exceed the limits that God sets. Don't let any experience drive a wedge between you and God. Although you can't control how Satan may attack, you can always choose how you will respond when it happens.

THEME: God's goodness

EXPLANATION: God is all-wise and all-powerful. His will is perfect, yet he doesn't always act in ways that we understand. Job's suffering didn't make sense because everyone believed good people were supposed to prosper. When Job was at the point of despair, God spoke to him, showing him his great power and wisdom.

IMPORTANCE: Although God is present everywhere, at times he may seem far away. This may cause us to feel alone and to doubt his care for us. We should

serve God for who he is, not what we feel. He is never insensitive to our suffering. Because God is sufficient, we must hold on to him.

THEME: Pride

EXPLANATION: Job's friends were certain that they were correct in their judgment of him. God rebuked them for their pride and arrogance. Man's wisdom is always partial and temporary, so undue pride in our own conclusions is sin.

IMPORTANCE: We must be careful not to judge others who are suffering. We may be demonstrating the sin of pride. We must be cautious in maintaining the certainty of our own conclusions about how God treats us. When we congratulate ourselves for being right, we become proud.

THEME: Trusting

EXPLANATION: God alone knew the purpose behind Job's suffering, and yet he never explained it to Job. In spite of this, Job never gave up on God—even in the midst of suffering. He never placed his hope in his experience, his wisdom, his friends, or his wealth. Job focused on God.

IMPORTANCE: Job showed the kind of trust we are to have. When everything is stripped away, we are to recognize that God is all we ever really had. We should not demand that God explain everything. God gives us himself, but not all the details of his plans. We must remember that this life, with all its pain, is not our final destiny.

Psalms

OVERVIEW: “HI, how are you?” “Fine.” Not exactly an “in-depth” discussion, this brief interchange is normal as friends and acquaintances pass and briefly touch each other with a cliché or two. Actually, clichés are a way of life, saturating sentences and permeating paragraphs. But if this is the essence of their communication, the relationship will stall on a superficial plateau. Facts and opinions also fill our verbiage. These words go deeper, but the true person still lies hidden beneath them. In reality, it is only when honest feelings and emotions are shared that real people can be known, loved, and helped.

Often, patterns of superficial communication spill over into our talks with God. We easily slide through well-worn lines recited for decades, or we quickly toss a cliché or two at God and call it prayer. There is no doubt that God hears and understands these feeble attempts, but by limiting the depth of our communication, we become shallow in our relationship with him. But God knows us, and he wants to have genuine communication with us.

At the center of the Bible is the book of Psalms. This great collection of songs and prayers expresses the heart and soul of humanity. In them, the whole range of human experiences is expressed. There are no clichés in this book. Instead, David and the other writers honestly pour out their true feelings, reflecting a dynamic, powerful, and life-changing friendship with God. The psalmists confess their sins, express their doubts and fears, ask God for help in times of trouble, and praise and worship him.

As you read the book of Psalms, you will hear believers crying out to God from the depths of despair, and you will hear them singing to him in the heights of celebration. But whether despairing or rejoicing, you will always hear them sharing honest feelings with their God. Because of the honesty expressed by the psalmists, men and women throughout history have come, again and again, to the book of Psalms for comfort during times of struggle and distress. And with the psalmists, they have risen from the depths of despair to new heights of joy and praise as they also discovered the power of God's everlasting love and forgiveness. Let the honesty of the psalmists guide you into a deep and genuine relationship with God.

THE BLUEPRINT

BOOK I PSALMS Psalm 1:1-41:13

While the psalms are not organized by topic, it is helpful to compare the dominant themes in each section of the psalms to the five books of Moses. This first collection of psalms, mainly written by David, is similar to the book of Genesis. Just as Genesis tells how mankind was created, fell into sin, and was then promised redemption, many of these psalms discuss humans as blessed, fallen, and redeemed by God.

BOOK II PSALMS Psalm 42:1-72:20

This collection of psalms, mainly written by David and the sons of Korah, is similar to the book of Exodus. Just as Exodus describes the nation of Israel, many of these psalms describe the nation as ruined and then recovered. As God rescued the nation of Israel, he also rescues us. We do not have to work out solutions first, but we can go to God with our problems and ask him to help.

BOOK III PSALMS Psalm 73:1-89:52

This collection of psalms, mainly written by Asaph or Asaph's descendants, is similar to the book of Leviticus. Just as Leviticus discusses the tabernacle and God's holiness, many of these psalms discuss the temple and God's enthronement. Because God is almighty, we can turn to him for deliverance. These psalms praise God because he is holy, and his perfect holiness deserves our worship and reverence.

BOOK IV PSALMS Psalm 90:1-106:48

This collection of psalms, mainly written by unknown authors, is similar to the book of Numbers. Just as Numbers discusses the relationship of the nation of Israel to surrounding nations, these psalms often mention the relationship of God's overruling kingdom to the other nations. Because we are citizens of the kingdom of God, we can keep the events and troubles of earth in their proper perspective.

BOOK V PSALMS Psalm 107:1-150:6

This collection of psalms, mainly written by David, is similar to the book of Deuteronomy. Just as Deuteronomy was concerned with God and his Word, these psalms are anthems of praise and thanksgiving for God and his Word. Most of the psalms were originally set to music and used in worship. We can use these psalms today as they were used in the past, as a hymnbook of praise and worship. This is a book that ought to make our hearts sing.

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Praise

EXPLANATION: Psalms are songs of praise to God as our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. Praise is recognizing, appreciating, and expressing God's greatness.

IMPORTANCE: Focusing our thoughts on God moves us to praise him. The more we know him, the more we can appreciate what he has done for us.

THEME: God's power

EXPLANATION: God is all-powerful; and he always acts at the right time. He is sovereign over every situation. God's power is shown by the ways he reveals himself in creation, history, and his Word.

IMPORTANCE: When we feel powerless, God can help us. His strength can overcome the despair of any pain or trial. We can always pray that he will deliver, protect, and sustain us.

THEME: Forgiveness

EXPLANATION: Many psalms are intense prayers asking God for forgiveness. God forgives us when we confess our sin and turn from it.

IMPORTANCE: Because God forgives us, we can pray to him honestly and directly. When we receive his forgiveness, we move from alienation to intimacy, from guilt to love.

THEME: Thankfulness

EXPLANATION: We are grateful to God for his personal concern, help, and mercy. Not only does he protect, guide, and forgive us, but his creation provides everything we need.

IMPORTANCE: When we realize how we benefit from knowing God, we can fully express our thanks to him. By thanking him often, we develop spontaneity in our prayer life.

THEME: Trust

EXPLANATION: God is faithful and just. When we put our trust in him, he quiets our hearts. Because he has been faithful throughout history, we can trust him in times of trouble.

IMPORTANCE: People can be unfair and friends may desert us. But we can trust God. Knowing God intimately drives away doubt, fear, and loneliness.

Proverbs

OVERVIEW: ALPHABET letters, vowels, and consonants, formed into words, sentences, paragraphs, and books—spoken, lectured, signed, whispered, written, and printed. From friendly advice to impassioned speeches and from dusty volumes to daily tabloids, messages are sent and received with each sender trying to impart knowledge. . . and wisdom.

Woven into human fabric is the desire to learn and understand. Our minds set us apart from animals, and we analyze, conceptualize, theorize, discuss, and debate everything from science to the supernatural. And we build schools, institutes, and universities where learned professors can teach us about the world and about life.

Knowledge is good, but there is a vast difference between “knowledge” (having the facts) and “wisdom” (applying those facts to life). We may amass knowledge, but without wisdom, our knowledge is useless. We must learn how to *live out* what we know.

The wisest man who ever lived, Solomon, left us a legacy of written wisdom in three volumes—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. In these books, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he gives practical insights and guidelines for life.

In the first of these three volumes, Solomon passes on his practical advice in the form of proverbs. A proverb is a short, concise sentence that conveys moral truth. The book of Proverbs is a collection of these wise statements. The main theme of Proverbs, as we might expect, is the nature of true wisdom. Solomon writes, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and

discipline” (Proverbs 1:7). He then proceeds to give hundreds of practical examples of how to live according to godly wisdom.

Proverbs covers a wide range of topics, including youth and discipline, family life, self-control and resisting temptation, business matters, words and the tongue, knowing God, marriage, seeking the truth, wealth and poverty, immorality, and, of course, wisdom. These proverbs are short poems (usually in couplet form), containing a holy mixture of common sense and timely warnings. Although they are not meant to teach doctrine, a person who follows their advice will walk closely with God. The word “proverb” comes from a Hebrew word that means “to rule or to govern,” and these sayings, reminders, and admonitions provide profound advice for governing our lives.

As you read Proverbs, understand that knowing God is the key to wisdom. Listen to the thoughts and lessons from the world’s wisest man, and apply these truths to your life. Don’t just read these proverbs; act on them!

THE BLUEPRINT

A. WISDOM FOR YOUNG PEOPLE (Proverbs 1:1-9:18)

Solomon instructed the young people of his day like a father giving advice to his child. While many of these proverbs are directed toward young people, the principles supporting them are helpful to all believers, male and female, young and old. Anyone beginning his or her journey to discover more of wisdom will benefit greatly from these wise sayings.

B. WISDOM FOR ALL PEOPLE (Proverbs 10:1-24:34)

Solomon wanted to impart wisdom to all people, regardless of their age, sex, or position in society. These short, wise sayings give us practical wisdom for daily living. We should study them diligently and integrate them into our life.

C. WISDOM FOR THE LEADERS (Proverbs 25:1-31:31)

In addition to the proverbs that Solomon collected, the men of Hezekiah collected many proverbs that Solomon and others wrote. While most of these are general in nature, many are directed specifically to the king and those who dealt with the king. These are particularly useful for those who are leaders or aspire to be leaders.

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Wisdom

EXPLANATION: God wants his people to be wise. Two kinds of people portray two contrasting paths of life. The fool is the wicked, stubborn person who hates or ignores God. The wise person seeks to know and love God.

IMPORTANCE: When we choose God's way, he grants us wisdom. His Word, the Bible, leads us to live rightly, have right relationships, and make right decisions.

THEME: Relationships

EXPLANATION: Proverbs gives us advice for developing our personal relationships with friends, family members, and coworkers. In every relationship, we must show love, dedication, and high moral standards.

IMPORTANCE: To relate to people, we need consistency, tact, and discipline to use the wisdom God gives us. If we don't treat others according to the wisdom God gives, our relationships will suffer.

THEME: Speech

EXPLANATION: What we say shows our real attitude toward others. How we talk reveals what we're really like. Our speech is a test of how wise we have become.

IMPORTANCE: To be wise in our speech we need to use self-control. Our words should be honest and well-chosen.

THEME: Work

EXPLANATION: God controls the final outcome of all we do. We are accountable to carry out our work with diligence and discipline, not laziness.

IMPORTANCE: Because God evaluates how we live, we should work purposefully. We must never be lax or self-satisfied in using our skills.

THEME: Success

EXPLANATION: Although people work very hard for money and fame, God views success as having a good reputation, moral character, and the spiritual devotion to obey him.

IMPORTANCE: A successful relationship with God counts for eternity. Everything else is perishable. All our resources, time, and talents come from God. We should strive to use them wisely.

Ecclesiastes

OVERVIEW: THE MOLDED bunny lies in the basket, surrounded by green paper “grass.” With Easter morning eyes wide with anticipation, the little boy carefully lifts the chocolate figure and bites into one of the long ears. But the sweet taste fades quickly, and the child looks again at the candy in his hand. It’s hollow!

Empty, futile, hollow, nothing. . . the words ring of disappointment and disillusionment. Yet this is the life-experience of many. Grasping the sweet things—possessions, experience, power, and pleasure—they find nothing inside. Life is empty, meaningless. . . and they despair.

Almost 3,000 years ago, Solomon spoke of this human dilemma; but the insights and applications of his message are relevant in our time. Ecclesiastes, Solomon’s written sermon, is an analysis of life’s experiences and a critical essay about its meaning. In this profound book, Solomon takes us on a mental journey through his life, explaining how everything he tried, tested, or tasted was “meaningless”—useless, irrational, pointless, foolish, and empty—an exercise in futility. And remember, these words are from one who “had it all”—tremendous intellect, power, and wealth. After this biographical tour, Solomon made his triumphant conclusion: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil” (Eccles. 12:13-14).

When Solomon became king, he asked God for wisdom (2 Chron. 1:7-12), and he became the wisest man in the world (1 Kings 4:29-34). He studied, taught, judged, and wrote. Kings and leaders from other nations came to Jerusalem to learn from him. But with all of his practical insight on life, Solomon failed to heed his own advice, and he began a downward spiral. Near the end of his life, Solomon looked back with an attitude of humility and repentance. He took stock of the world as he had experienced it, hoping to spare his readers the bitterness of learning through personal experience that everything apart from God is empty, hollow, and meaningless.

Although the tone of Ecclesiastes is negative and pessimistic, we must not conclude that the only chapter worth reading and applying is the last one, where he draws his conclusions. In reality, the entire book is filled with practical wisdom (how to accomplish things in the world and stay out of trouble) and spiritual wisdom (how to find and know eternal values). Solomon had a very honest approach to life. All of his remarks relating to the futility of life are there for a purpose—to lead people to seek true happiness in God alone. He was not trying to destroy all hope, but to direct our hopes to the only One who can truly fulfill them. Solomon affirms the value of knowledge, relationships, work, and pleasure, but only *in their proper place*. All of these temporal things in life must be seen in light of the eternal.

Read Ecclesiastes and learn about life. Hear the stern warnings and dire predictions, and commit yourself to remember your Creator now (Eccles. 12:1).

THE BLUEPRINT

Ecclesiastes shows that certain paths in life lead to emptiness. This profound book also helps us discover true purpose in life. Such wisdom can spare us from the emptiness that results from a life without God. Solomon teaches that people will not find meaning in life in knowledge, money, pleasure, work, or popularity. True satisfaction comes from knowing that what we are doing is part of God's purpose for our lives. This is a book that can help free us from our scramble for power, approval, and money, and draw us closer to God.

1. Solomon's personal experience (Eccles. 1:1-2:26)
2. Solomon's general observations (Eccles. 3:1-5:20)
3. Solomon's practical counsel (Eccles. 6:1-8:17)
4. Solomon's final conclusion (Eccles. 9:1-12:14)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Searching

EXPLANATION: Solomon searched for satisfaction almost as though he was conducting a scientific experiment. Through this process, he discovered that life without God is a long and fruitless search for enjoyment, meaning, and fulfillment. True happiness is not in our power to accumulate or attain because we always want more than we can have. In addition, there are circumstances beyond our control that can snatch away our possessions or attainments.

IMPORTANCE: People are still searching. Yet the more they try to get, the more they realize how little they really have. No pleasure or happiness is possible without God. Without him, satisfaction is a lost search. Above everything we should strive to know and love God. He gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy.

THEME: Emptiness

EXPLANATION: Solomon shows how empty it is to pursue the pleasures that this life has to offer rather than a relationship with an eternal God. The search for pleasure, wealth, and success is ultimately disappointing. Nothing in the world can fill the emptiness and satisfy the deep longings in our restless hearts.

IMPORTANCE: The cure for emptiness is to center on God. His love also can fill the emptiness of human experience. Fear God throughout your life and fill your life with serving God and others rather than with selfish pleasures.

THEME: Work

EXPLANATION: Solomon tried to shake people's confidence in their own efforts, abilities, and wisdom and to direct them to faith in God as the only sound basis for living. Without God, there is no lasting reward or benefit in hard work.

IMPORTANCE: Work done with the wrong attitude will leave us empty. But work accepted as an assignment from God can be seen as a gift. Examine what you expect from your efforts. God gives you abilities and opportunities to work so that you can use your time well.

THEME: Death

EXPLANATION: The certainty of death makes all merely human achievements futile. God has a plan for human destiny that goes beyond life and death. The reality of aging and dying reminds each individual of the end to come when God will judge each person's life.

IMPORTANCE: Because life is short, we need wisdom that is greater than this world can offer. We need the words of God. If we listen to him, his wisdom spares us the bitterness of futile human experience and gives us a hope that goes beyond death.

THEME: Wisdom

EXPLANATION: Human wisdom doesn't contain all the answers. Knowledge and education have their limits. To understand life, we need the wisdom that can be found only in God's Word to us—the Bible.

IMPORTANCE: When we realize that God will evaluate all that we do, we should learn to live wisely, remembering that he is present each day, and learn to obey his guidelines for living. But in order to have God's wisdom, we must first get to know and honor him.

Song of Songs

OVERVIEW: SATURATED with stories of sexual escapades, secret rendezvous, and extramarital affairs, today's media preach that immorality means freedom, perversion is natural, and commitment is old-fashioned. Sex, created by God and pronounced good in Eden, has been twisted, exploited, and turned into an urgent,

illicit, casual, and self-gratifying activity. Love has turned into lust, giving into getting, and lasting commitment into “no strings attached.”

In reality, sexual intercourse, the physical and emotional union of male and female, should be a holy means of celebrating love, producing children, and experiencing pleasure, protected by the commitment of marriage.

God thinks sex is important, and Scripture contains numerous guidelines for its use and warnings about its misuse. And sex is always mentioned in the context of a loving relationship between husband and wife. Perhaps the highlight of this is Song of Songs, the intimate story of a man and a woman, their love, courtship, and marriage. Solomon probably wrote this “song” in his youth, before being overtaken by his own obsession with women, sex, and pleasure.

A moving story, drama, and poem, Song of Songs features the love dialogue between a simple Jewish maiden (the Shulammite woman) and her lover (Solomon, the king). They describe in intimate detail their feelings for each other and their longings to be together. Throughout the dialogue, sex and marriage are put in their proper, God-given perspective.

There has been much debate over the meaning of this song. Some say it is an allegory of God’s love for Israel and/or for the church. Others say it is a literal story about married love. But in reality, it is both—an historical story with two layers of meaning. On one level we learn about love, marriage, and sex; and on the other level we see God’s overwhelming love for his people. As you read Song of Songs, remember that you are loved by God, and commit yourself to seeing life, sex, and marriage from his point of view.

THE BLUEPRINT

Song of Songs is a wedding song honoring marriage. The most explicit statements on sex in the Bible can be found in this book. It has often been criticized through the centuries because of its sensuous language. The purity and sacredness of love represented here, however, are greatly needed in our day where distorted attitudes about love and marriage are commonplace. God created sex and intimacy, and they are holy and good when enjoyed within the bounds of marriage. A husband and wife honor God when they love and enjoy each other.

1. The wedding day (Song 1:1-2:7)

2. Memories of courtship (Song 2:8-3:5)
3. Memories of engagement (Song 3:6-5:1)
4. A troubling dream (Song 5:2-6:3)
5. Praising the bride's beauty (Song 6:4-7:9 a)
6. The bride's tender appeal (Song 7:9 b-8:4)
7. The power of love (Song 8:5-14)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Sex

EXPLANATION: Sex is God's gift to his creatures. He endorses sex, but restricts its expression to those committed to each other in marriage.

IMPORTANCE: God wants sex to be motivated by love and commitment, not lust. It is for mutual pleasure, not selfish enjoyment.

THEME: Love

EXPLANATION: As the relationship developed, the beauty and wonder of a romance unfolded between Solomon and his bride. The intense power of love affected the hearts, minds, and bodies of the two lovers.

IMPORTANCE: Because love is such a powerful expression of feeling and commitment between two people, it is not to be regarded casually. We are not to manipulate others into loving us, and love should not be prematurely encouraged in a relationship.

THEME: Commitment

EXPLANATION: The power of love requires more than the language of feeling to protect it. Sexual expression is such an integral part of our selfhood that we need the boundary of marriage to safeguard our love. Marriage is the celebration of daily commitment to each other.

IMPORTANCE: While romance keeps a marriage interesting, commitment keeps romance from dwindling away. The decision to commit yourself to your spouse alone *begins* at the marriage altar. It must be maintained day by day.

THEME: Beauty

EXPLANATION: The two lovers praise the beauty they see in each other. The language they use shows the spontaneity and mystery of love. Our praise should not be limited to physical beauty; beautiful personality and moral purity should also be praised.

IMPORTANCE: Our love for our spouse makes him or her appear beautiful. It is the inner qualities that keep love alive. Don't just look for physical attractiveness in a spouse. Look for the qualities that don't fade with time—spiritual commitment, integrity, sensitivity, and sincerity.

THEME: Problems

EXPLANATION: Over time, feelings of loneliness, indifference, and isolation came between Solomon and his bride. During those times, love grew cold and barriers were raised.

IMPORTANCE: Through careful communication, lovers can be reconciled, commitment can be renewed, and romance refreshed. Don't let walls come between you and your partner. Take care of problems while they are still small.

THE PROPHETS

Isaiah

OVERVIEW: SLOWLY he rose, and the crowd fell silent. Those at the back leaned forward, straining to hear. The atmosphere was electric. He spoke, and his carefully chosen words flew like swift arrows and found their mark. The great man, a spokesman for God, was warning. . . and condemning. The crowd became restless—shifting positions, clenching fists, and murmuring. Some agreed with his message, nodding their heads and weeping softly. But most were angry, and they began to shout back insults and threats.

Such was the life of a prophet.

The “office” of prophet was instituted during the days of Samuel, the last of the judges. Prophets stood with the priests as God’s special representatives. The prophet’s role was to speak for God, confronting the people and their leaders with God’s commands and promises. Because of this confrontational stance and the continuing tendency of people to disobey God, true prophets usually were not very popular. But though their message often went unheeded, they faithfully and forcefully proclaimed the truth.

The book of Isaiah is the first of the writings of the Prophets in the Bible; and Isaiah, the author, is generally considered to be the greatest prophet. He was probably reared in an aristocratic home and was married to a prophetess. In the beginning of his ministry he was well-liked. But, like most prophets, he soon became unpopular because his messages were so difficult to hear. He called the people to turn from their lives of sin and warned them of God’s judgment and punishment. Isaiah had an active ministry for 60 years before he was executed during Manasseh’s reign (according to tradition). As God’s special messenger to Judah, Isaiah prophesied during the reigns of several of its rulers. Many of those messages are recorded in his book: Uzziah and Jotham, Isaiah 1-6; Ahaz, Isaiah 7-14; and Hezekiah, Isaiah 15-39.

The first half of the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 1-39) contains scathing denunciations and pronouncements as he calls Judah, Israel, and the surrounding nations to repent of their sins. However, the last 27 chapters (Isaiah 40-66) are filled with consolation and hope as Isaiah unfolds God’s promise of future blessings through his Messiah.

As you read Isaiah, imagine this strong and courageous man of God, fearlessly proclaiming God’s word, and listen to his message in relation to your own life—*return, repent, and be renewed*. Then trust in God’s *redemption* through Christ and *rejoice*. Your Savior has come, and he’s coming again!

THE BLUEPRINT

A. WORDS OF JUDGMENT (Isaiah 1:1-39:8)

The 39 chapters in the first half of Isaiah generally carry the message of judgment for sin. Isaiah brings the message of judgment to Judah, Israel, and the surrounding

pagan nations. Judah had a form of godliness, but in their hearts they were corrupt. Isaiah's warnings were intended to purify the people by helping them understand God's true nature and message. However, they ignored the repeated warnings that Isaiah brought. We need not repeat their error; rather, we should heed the prophetic voice.

1. The sins of Israel and Judah
2. Judgment against pagan nations
3. God's purpose in judgment
4. Jerusalem's true and false hopes
5. Events during the reign of Hezekiah

B. WORDS OF COMFORT (Isaiah 40:1-66:24)

The 27 chapters in the second half of Isaiah generally bring a message of forgiveness, comfort, and hope. This message of hope looks forward to the coming of the Messiah. Isaiah speaks more about the Messiah than does any other Old Testament prophet. He describes the Messiah as both a suffering servant and a sovereign Lord. The fact that the Messiah was to be both a suffering servant and a sovereign Lord could not be understood clearly until New Testament times. Based on what Jesus Christ has done, God freely offers forgiveness to all who turn to him in faith. This is God's message of comfort to us because those who heed it find eternal peace and fellowship with him.

1. Israel's release from captivity
2. The future Redeemer
3. The future kingdom

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Holiness

EXPLANATION: God is highly exalted above all his creatures. His moral perfection stands in contrast to evil people and nations. God is perfect and sinless in all his motives and actions, so he is in perfect control of his power, judgment, love, and mercy. His holy nature is our yardstick for morality.

IMPORTANCE: Because God is without sin, he alone can help us with our sin. It is only right that we regard him as supreme in power and moral perfection. We

must never treat God as common or ordinary. He alone deserves our devotion and praise. He is always truthful, fair, and just.

THEME: Punishment

EXPLANATION: Because God is holy, he requires his people to treat others justly. He promised to punish Israel, Judah, and other nations for faithless immorality and idolatry. True faith had degenerated into national pride and empty religious rituals.

IMPORTANCE: We must trust in God alone and fulfill his commands. We cannot forsake justice nor give in to selfishness. If we harden our hearts against his message, punishment will surely come to us.

THEME: Salvation

EXPLANATION: Because God's judgment is coming, we need a Savior. No man or nation can be saved without God's help. Christ's perfect sacrifice for our sins is foretold and portrayed in Isaiah. All who trust God can be freed from their sin and restored to him.

IMPORTANCE: Christ died to save us from our sin. We cannot save ourselves. He is willing to save all those who turn from their sin and come to him. Salvation is from God alone. No amount of good works can earn it.

THEME: Messiah

EXPLANATION: God will send the Messiah to save his people. He will set up his own kingdom as the faithful Prince of Peace who rules with righteousness. He will come as sovereign Lord, but he will do so as a servant who will die to take away sins.

IMPORTANCE: Our trust must be in the Messiah, not in ourselves or in any nation or power. There is no hope unless we believe in him. Trust Christ fully and let him rule in your life as your sovereign Lord.

THEME: Hope

EXPLANATION: God promises comfort, deliverance, and restoration in his future kingdom. The Messiah will rule over his faithful followers in the age to come. Hope is possible because Christ is coming.

IMPORTANCE: We can be refreshed because there is compassion for those who repent. No matter how bleak our situation or how evil the world is, we must continue to be God's faithful people who hope for his return.

TIMELINE

Amos becomes a prophet 760 B.C.
Hosea becomes a prophet 753
Micah becomes a prophet 742
Isaiah becomes a prophet 740
Ahaz becomes king of Judah 735
Hoshea becomes king of Israel 732
Israel falls to the Assyrians 722
Hezekiah becomes king of Judah 715
Sennacherib surrounds Jerusalem 701
Manasseh becomes king of Judah 697
Isaiah's ministry ends 681
Josiah becomes king of Judah 640

Jeremiah

OVERVIEW: WHAT is success? Most definitions include references to achieving goals and acquiring wealth, prestige, favor, and power. "Successful" people enjoy the good life—being financially and emotionally secure, being surrounded by admirers, and enjoying the fruits of their labors. They are leaders, opinion makers, and trendsetters. Their example is emulated; their accomplishments are noticed. They know who they are and where they are going, and they stride confidently to meet their goals.

By these standards, Jeremiah was a miserable failure. For 40 years he served as God's spokesman to Judah; but when Jeremiah spoke, nobody listened. Consistently and passionately he urged them to act, but nobody moved. And he certainly did not attain material success. He was poor and underwent severe deprivation to deliver his prophecies. He was thrown into prison (Jeremiah 37) and

into a cistern (Jeremiah 38), and he was taken to Egypt against his will (Jeremiah 43). He was rejected by his neighbors (Jeremiah 11:19-21), his family (Jeremiah 12:6), the false priests and prophets (Jeremiah 20:1-2; Jeremiah 28:1-17), friends (Jeremiah 20:10), his audience (Jeremiah 26:8), and the kings (Jeremiah 36:23). Throughout his life, Jeremiah stood alone, declaring God's messages of doom, announcing the new covenant, and weeping over the fate of his beloved country. In the eyes of the world, Jeremiah was not a success.

But in God's eyes, Jeremiah was one of the most successful people in all of history. Success, as measured by God, involves obedience and faithfulness. Regardless of opposition and personal cost, Jeremiah courageously and faithfully proclaimed the word of God. He was obedient to his calling. Jeremiah's book begins with his call to be a prophet. The next 38 chapters are prophecies about Israel (the nation united) and Judah (the southern kingdom). Jeremiah 2-20 are general and undated, and Jeremiah 21-39 are particular and dated. The basic theme of Jeremiah's message is simple: "Repent and turn to God, or he will punish." But then, because the people rejected this warning, Jeremiah moved to predicting specifically the destruction of Jerusalem. This terrible event is described in Jeremiah 39. Jeremiah 40-45 describe events following Jerusalem's fall. The book concludes with prophecies concerning a variety of nations (Jeremiah 46-52).

As you read Jeremiah, feel with him as he agonizes over the message he must deliver, pray with him for those who refuse to respond to the truth, and watch his example of faith and courage. Then commit yourself to being successful in God's eyes.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. GOD'S JUDGMENT ON JUDAH (Jeremiah 1:1-45:5)

Jeremiah confronts many people with their sins: kings, false prophets, those at the temples, and those at the gates. A lack of response made Jeremiah wonder if he was doing any good at all. He often felt discouraged and sometimes bitter. To bring such gloomy messages to these people was a hard task. We too have a responsibility to bring this news to a fallen world: those who continue in their sinful ways are eternally doomed. Although we may feel discouraged at the lack of response, we must press on to tell others about the consequences of sin and the hope that God offers. Those who tell people only what they want to hear are being unfaithful to God's message.

1. The call of Jeremiah
2. Jeremiah condemns Judah for her sins
3. Jeremiah prophesies destruction
4. Jeremiah accuses Judah's leaders
5. Restoration is promised
6. God's promised judgment arrives

B. GOD'S JUDGMENT ON THE NATIONS (Jeremiah 46:1-52:34)

Jeremiah lived to see many of his prophecies come true—most notably the fall of Jerusalem. The fulfillment of this and other prophecies against the foreign nations came as a result of sin. Those who refuse to confess their sin bring judgment upon themselves.

1. Prophecies about foreign nations
2. The fall of Jerusalem

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Sin

EXPLANATION: King Josiah's reformation failed because the people's repentance was shallow. They continued in their selfishness and worship of idols. All the leaders rejected God's law and will for the people. Jeremiah lists all their sins, predicts God's judgment, and begs for repentance.

IMPORTANCE: Judah's deterioration and disaster came from their callous disregard and disobedience of God. When we ignore sin and refuse to listen to God's warning, we invite disaster. Don't settle for half measures in removing sin.

THEME: Punishment

EXPLANATION: Because of sin, Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple was ruined, and the people were captured and carried off to Babylon. The people were responsible for their destruction and captivity because they refused to listen to God's message.

IMPORTANCE: Unconfessed sin brings God's full punishment. It is useless to blame anyone else for our sin—we are accountable to God before anyone else. We must answer to him for how we live.

THEME: God is Lord of all

EXPLANATION: God is the righteous Creator. He is accountable to no one but himself. He wisely and lovingly directs all creation to fulfill his plans, and he brings events to pass according to his timetable. He is Lord over all the world.

IMPORTANCE: Because of God's majestic power and love, our only duty is to submit to his authority. By following his plans, not our own, we can have a loving relationship with him and serve him with our whole hearts.

THEME: New hearts

EXPLANATION: Jeremiah predicted that after the destruction of the nation, God would send a new shepherd, the Messiah. He would lead them into a new future, a new covenant, and a new day of hope. He would accomplish this by changing their sinful hearts into hearts of love for God.

IMPORTANCE: God still restores his people by renewing their hearts. His love can transform the problems created by sin. We can have assurance of a new heart by loving God, trusting Christ to save us, and repenting of our sin.

THEME: Faithful service

EXPLANATION: Jeremiah served God faithfully for 40 years. During that time the people ignored, rejected, and persecuted him. Jeremiah's preaching was unsuccessful by human standards, yet he did not fail in his task. He remained faithful to God.

IMPORTANCE: People's acceptance or rejection of us is not the measure of our success. God's approval alone should be our standard for service. We must bring God's message to others even when we are rejected. We must do God's work even if it means suffering for it.

TIMELINE

Zephaniah becomes a prophet 640 B.C.

Jeremiah becomes a prophet 627
King Josiah killed in battle 609
Daniel taken captive 605
Ezekiel begins to prophesy in Babylonia 593
Judah falls: Jerusalem destroyed; Jeremiah's ministry ends 586
First exiles return to Judah 538

Lamentations

OVERVIEW: TEARS are defined simply as “drops of salty fluid flowing from the eyes.” They can be caused by irritation or laughter but are usually associated with weeping, sorrow, and grief. When we cry, friends wonder what’s wrong and try to console us. Babies cry for food, and children cry at the loss of a pet; adults cry when confronted with trauma and death.

Jeremiah’s grief ran deep. Called the “weeping prophet,” his tears flowed from a broken heart. As God’s spokesman, he knew what lay ahead for Judah, his country, and for Jerusalem, the capital and “the city of God.” God’s judgment would fall and destruction would come. And Jeremiah wept. His tears were not self-centered, mourning over personal suffering or loss. He wept because the people had rejected their God—the God who had made them, loved them, and sought repeatedly to bless them. Jeremiah’s heart was broken because he knew that the selfishness and sinfulness of the people would bring them much suffering and an extended exile. Jeremiah’s tears were tears of empathy and sympathy. His heart was broken with those things that break God’s heart.

Jeremiah's two books focus on one event—the destruction of Jerusalem. The book of Jeremiah predicts it, and Lamentations looks back on it. Known as the book of tears, Lamentations is a dirge, a funeral song written for the fallen city of Jerusalem.

What makes a person cry says a lot about that person—whether he or she is self-centered or God-centered. The book of Lamentations allows us to see what made Jeremiah sorrowful. As one of God's choice servants, he stands alone in the depth of his emotions, his care for the people, his love for the nation, and his devotion to God.

What causes your tears? Do you weep because your selfish pride has been wounded, or because the people around you sin against and reject the God who loves them dearly? Do you weep because you have lost something that gives you pleasure, or because people all around you will suffer for their sinfulness? Our world is filled with injustice, poverty, war, and rebellion against God, all of which should move us to tears and to action. Read Lamentations and learn what it means to grieve with God.

THE BLUEPRINT

Jeremiah grieves deeply because of the destruction of Jerusalem and the devastation of his nation. But in the middle of the book, in the depths of his grief, there shines a ray of hope. God's compassion is ever-present. His faithfulness is great. Jeremiah realizes that it is only the Lord's mercy that has prevented total annihilation. This book shows us the serious consequences of human sin and how we can still have hope in the midst of tragedy because God is able to turn it around for good. We see the timeless importance of prayer and confession of sin. We will all face tragedy in our lives. But in the midst of our afflictions, there is hope in God.

1. Jeremiah mourns for Jerusalem (Lament. 1:1-22)
2. God's anger at sin (Lament. 2:1-22)
3. Hope in the midst of affliction (Lament. 3:1-66)
4. God's anger is satisfied (Lament. 4:1-22)
5. Jeremiah pleads for restoration (Lament. 5:1-22)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Destruction of Jerusalem

EXPLANATION: Lamentations is a sad funeral song for the great capital city of the Jews. The temple has been destroyed, the king is gone, and the people are in exile. God had warned that he would destroy them if they abandoned him. Now, afterwards, the people realize their condition and confess their sin.

IMPORTANCE: God's warnings are justified. He does what he says he will do. His punishment for sin is certain. Only by confessing and renouncing our sin can we turn to him for deliverance. How much better to do so before his warnings are fulfilled.

THEME: God's mercy

EXPLANATION: God's compassion was at work even when the Israelites were experiencing the affliction of their Babylonian conquerors. Although the people had been unfaithful, God's faithfulness was great. He used this affliction to bring his people back to him.

IMPORTANCE: God will always be faithful to his people. His merciful, refining work is evident even in affliction. At those times, we must pray for forgiveness and then turn to him for deliverance.

THEME: Sin's consequences

EXPLANATION: God was angry at the prolonged rebellion by his people. Sin is the cause of their misery, and destruction is the result of their sin. The destruction of the nation shows the vanity of human glory and pride.

IMPORTANCE: To continue in rebellion against God is to invite disaster. We must never trust our own leadership, resources, intelligence, or power more than God. If we do, we will experience consequences similar to Jerusalem's.

THEME: Hope

EXPLANATION: God's mercy in sparing some of the people offers hope for better days. One day, the people will be restored to a true and fervent relationship with God.

IMPORTANCE: Only God can deliver us from sin. Without him there is no comfort or hope for the future. Because of Christ's death for us and his promise to return, we have a bright hope for tomorrow.

Ezekiel

OVERVIEW: A computer can be programmed to respond at your command. And by conditioning a dog with rewards and punishments, you can teach it to obey. But as every parent knows, children are not so easily taught. People have wills and must choose to submit, to follow the instructions of their parents and leaders. Surely discipline is part of the process—boys and girls should know the consequences of disobedience—but there is a choice to be made. They are not machines or animals.

God's children must learn to obey their heavenly Father. Created in his image, they have a choice, and God allows them to choose.

Ezekiel was a man who chose to obey God. Although he was a priest (Ezekiel 1:3), he served as a Jewish "street preacher" in Babylon for 22 years, telling everyone about God's judgment and salvation, and calling them to repent and obey. And Ezekiel *lived* what he preached. During his ministry God told him to illustrate his messages with dramatic object lessons. Some of these acts included (1) lying on his side for 390 days during which he could eat only one eight-ounce meal a day cooked over manure, (2) shaving his head and beard, and (3) showing no sorrow when his wife died. He obeyed and faithfully proclaimed God's word.

God may not ask you to do anything quite so dramatic or difficult; but if he did, would you do it?

The book of Ezekiel chronicles the prophet's life and ministry. Beginning with his call as a prophet and commissioning as a "watchman for the house of Israel" (Ezekiel 1-3), Ezekiel immediately began to preach and demonstrate God's truth, as he predicted the approaching siege and destruction of Jerusalem (Ezekiel 4-24). This devastation would be God's judgment for the people's idolatry. Ezekiel challenged them to turn from their wicked ways. In the next section, he spoke to the surrounding nations, prophesying that God would judge them for their sins as well (Ezekiel 25-32). The book concludes with a message of hope, as Ezekiel proclaimed the faithfulness of God and foretold the future blessings for God's people (Ezekiel 33-48).

As you read this exciting record, watch Ezekiel fearlessly preach the word of God to the exiled Jews in the streets of Babylon and hear the timeless truth of God's love and power. Think about each person's responsibility to trust God, and about the inevitability of God's judgment against idolatry, rebellion, and indifference. Then commit yourself to obey God, whatever, wherever, and whenever he asks.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. MESSAGES OF DOOM (Ezekiel 1:1-24:27)

While Jeremiah was prophesying in Jerusalem that the city would soon fall to the Babylonians, Ezekiel was giving the same message to the captives who were already in Babylon. Like those in Jerusalem, the captives stubbornly believed that Jerusalem would not fall and that they would soon return to their land. Ezekiel warned them that punishment was certain because of their sins and that God was purifying his people. God will always punish sin, whether we believe it or not.

1. Ezekiel's call and commission
2. Visions of sin and judgment
3. Punishment is certain

B. MESSAGES AGAINST FOREIGN NATIONS (Ezekiel 25:1-32:32)

Ezekiel condemns the sinful actions of seven nations. The people in these nations were saying that God was obviously too weak to defend his people and the city of

Jerusalem. But God was allowing his people to be defeated in order to punish them for their sins. These pagan nations, however, would face a similar fate, and then they would know that God is all-powerful. Those who dare to mock God today will also face a terrible fate.

C. MESSAGES OF HOPE (Ezekiel 33:1-48:35)

After the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel delivered messages of future restoration and hope for the people. God is holy, but Jerusalem and the temple had become defiled. The nation had to be cleansed through 70 years of captivity. Ezekiel gives a vivid picture of the unchangeable holiness of God. We too must gain a vision of the glory of God, a fresh sense of his greatness, as we face the struggles of daily life.

1. Restoring the people of God
2. Restoring the worship of God

MEGATHEMES

THEME: God's holiness

EXPLANATION: Ezekiel saw a vision that revealed God's absolute moral perfection. God was spiritually and morally superior to members of Israel's corrupt and compromising society. Ezekiel wrote to let the people know that God was also present in Babylon, not just in Jerusalem.

IMPORTANCE: Because God is morally perfect, he can help us live above our tendency to compromise with this world. When we focus on his greatness, he gives us the power to overcome sin and to reflect his holiness.

THEME: Sin

EXPLANATION: Israel had sinned, and God's punishment came. The fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile were used by God to correct the rebels and draw them back from their sinful way of life. Ezekiel warned them that not only was the nation responsible for sin, but each individual was also accountable to God.

IMPORTANCE: We cannot excuse ourselves from our responsibilities before God. We are accountable to God for our choices. Rather than neglect him, we must

recognize sin for what it is—rebellion against God—and choose to follow him instead.

THEME: Restoration

EXPLANATION: Ezekiel consoles the people by telling them that the day will come when God will restore those who turn from sin. God will be their King and Shepherd. He will give his people a new heart to worship him, and he will establish a new government and a new temple.

IMPORTANCE: The certainty of future restoration encourages believers in times of trial. But we must be faithful to God because we love him, not merely for what he can do for us. Is our faith in *him* or merely in our future benefits?

THEME: Leaders

EXPLANATION: Ezekiel condemned the shepherds (unfaithful priests and leaders) who led the people astray. By contrast, he served as a caring shepherd and a faithful watchman to warn the people about their sin. One day God's perfect Shepherd, the Messiah, will lead his people.

IMPORTANCE: Jesus is our perfect leader. If we truly want him to lead us, our devotion must be more than talk. If we are given the responsibility of leading others, we must take care of them even if it means sacrificing personal pleasure, happiness, time, or money. We are responsible for those we lead.

THEME: Worship

EXPLANATION: An angel gave Ezekiel a vision of the temple in great detail. God's holy presence had departed from Israel and the temple because of sin. The building of a future temple portrays the return of God's glory and presence. God will cleanse his people and restore true worship.

IMPORTANCE: All of God's promises will be fulfilled under the rule of the Messiah. The faithful followers will be restored to perfect fellowship with God and with one another. To be prepared for this time, we must focus on God. We do this through regular worship. Through worship we learn about God's holiness and the changes we must make in how we live.

TIMELINE

Jeremiah becomes a prophet to Judah 627 B.C.
Daniel taken captive to Babylon 605
Ezekiel taken captive to Babylon 597
Ezekiel becomes a prophet to exiles 593
Judah falls; Jerusalem destroyed 586
Ezekiel's ministry ends 571
Babylon overthrown by Cyrus 539
First exiles return to Judah 538

Daniel

OVERVIEW: AN EARTHQUAKE shakes the foundation of our security; a tornado blows away a lifetime of treasures; an assassin's bullet changes national history; a drunk driver claims an innocent victim; a divorce shatters a home. International and personal tragedies make our world seem a fearful place, overflowing with evil and seemingly out of control. And the litany of bombings, coups, murders, and natural disasters could cause us to think that God is absent or impotent. "Where is God?" we cry, engulfed by sorrow and despair.

Twenty-five centuries ago, Daniel could have despaired. He and thousands of his countrymen had been deported to a foreign land after Judah was conquered. Daniel found himself facing an egocentric despot and surrounded by idolaters. Instead of giving in or giving up, this courageous young man held fast to his faith in his God. Daniel knew that despite the circumstances, God was sovereign and was working out his plan for nations and individuals. The book of Daniel centers around this profound truth—the sovereignty of God.

After a brief account of Nebuchadnezzar's siege and defeat of Jerusalem, the scene quickly shifts to Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Misha-el, and Azariah (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego). These men held prominent positions within the Babylonian government. Daniel, in particular, held such a position because of his ability to interpret the king's dreams that tell of God's unfolding plan (Daniel 2 and Daniel 4). Sandwiched between the dreams is the fascinating account of Daniel's three friends and the furnace (Daniel 3). Because they refused to bow down to an image of gold, they were condemned to a fiery death. But God intervened and spared their lives.

Belshazzar ruled Babylon after Nebuchadnezzar, and Daniel 5 tells of his encounter with God's message written on a wall. Daniel, who was summoned to

interpret the message, predicted Babylon's fall to the Medes and Persians. This prediction came true that very night, and Darius the Mede conquered the Babylonian kingdom.

Daniel became one of Darius's most trusted advisers. His privileged position angered other administrators, who plotted his death by convincing the king to outlaw prayer. In spite of the law, Daniel continued to pray to his sovereign Lord. As a result, he was condemned to die in a den of hungry lions. Again, God intervened and saved him, shutting the mouths of the lions (Daniel 6).

The book concludes with a series of visions that Daniel had during the reigns of Belshazzar (Daniel 7-8), Darius (Daniel 9), and Cyrus (Daniel 10-12). These dreams dramatically outline God's future plans, beginning with Babylon and continuing to the end of the age. They give a preview of God's redemption and have been called the key to all Biblical prophecy.

God is sovereign. He was in control in Babylon, and he has been moving in history, controlling the destinies of people ever since. And he is here now! Despite news reports or personal stress, we can be confident that God is in control. As you read Daniel, watch God work and find your security in his sovereignty.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. DANIEL'S LIFE (Daniel 1:1-6:28)

Daniel and his three friends chose not to eat the king's food. They did not bow down to the king's image, even under penalty of death. Daniel continued to pray even though he knew he might be noticed and sentenced to death. These men are inspiring examples for us of living a faithful life in a sinful world. When we face trials, we can expect God to remain present with us through our trials. May God grant us the same courage to remain faithful under pressure.

B. DANIEL'S VISIONS (Daniel 7:1-12:13)

These visions gave the captives added confidence that God is in control of history. They were to wait patiently and in faith and not to worship the gods of Babylon or accept their way of life. God still rules over human activities. Evil will be overcome, so we should wait patiently and not give in to the temptations and pressures of the sinful way of life around us.

MEGATHEMES

THEME: God is in control

EXPLANATION: God is all-knowing, and he is in charge of world events. God overrules and removes rebellious leaders who defy him. God will overcome evil; no one is exempt. But he will deliver the faithful who follow him.

IMPORTANCE: Although nations vie for world control now, one day Christ's kingdom will replace and surpass the kingdoms of this world. Our faith is sure because our future is secure in Christ. We must have courage and put our faith in God who controls everything.

THEME: Purpose in life

EXPLANATION: Daniel and his three friends are examples of dedication and commitment. They determined to serve God regardless of the consequences. They did not give in to pressures from an ungodly society because they had a clear purpose in life.

IMPORTANCE: It is wise to make trusting and obeying God alone our true purpose in life. This will give us direction and peace in spite of the circumstances or consequences. We should disobey anyone who asks us to disobey God. Our first allegiance must be to God.

THEME: Perseverance

EXPLANATION: Daniel served for 70 years in a foreign land that was hostile to God, yet he did not compromise his faith in God. He was truthful, persistent in prayer, and disinterested in power for personal glory.

IMPORTANCE: In order to fulfill your life's purpose, you need staying power. Don't let your Christian distinctives become blurred. Be relentless in your prayers, stay firm in your integrity, and be content to serve God wherever he puts you.

THEME: God's faithfulness

EXPLANATION: God was faithful in Daniel's life. He delivered him from prison, from a den of lions, and from enemies who hated him. God cares for his people and deals patiently with them.

IMPORTANCE: We can trust God to be with us through any trial because he promises to be there. Because he has been faithful to us, we should remain faithful to him.

TIMELINE

Daniel taken captive to Babylon 605

Ezekiel becomes a prophet to exiles 593

Judah falls; Jerusalem is destroyed; Jeremiah's ministry ends 586

Daniel's first vision 553

Babylon overthrown; Daniel thrown to lions 539

First exiles return to Judah 538

Daniel's ministry ends 536

Hosea

OVERVIEW: GROOMSMEN stand at attention as the music swells and the bride begins her long walk down the aisle, arm in arm with her father. The smiling, but nervous, husband-to-be follows every step, his eyes brimming with love. Then happy tears are shed, vows stated, and families merged. A wedding is a joyous celebration of love. It is the holy mystery of two becoming one, of beginning life together, and of commitment. Marriage is ordained by God and illustrates his relationship with his people. Thus, there is perhaps no greater tragedy than the violation of those sacred vows.

God told Hosea to find a wife, and told him ahead of time that she would be unfaithful to him. Although she would bear many children, some of these offspring would be fathered by others. In obedience to God, Hosea married Gomer. His relationship with her, her adultery, and their children became living, prophetic examples to Israel.

The book of Hosea is a love story—real, tragic, and true. Transcending the tale of young man and wife, it tells of God’s love for his people and the response of his “bride.” A covenant had been made and God had been faithful. His love was steadfast and his commitment unbroken. But Israel, like Gomer, was adulterous and unfaithful, spurning God’s love and turning instead to false gods. Then after warning of judgment, God reaffirmed his love and offered reconciliation. His love and mercy were overflowing, but justice would be served.

The book begins with God’s marriage instructions to Hosea. After Hosea’s marriage, children were born, and each given a name signifying a divine message (Hosea 1). Then, as predicted, Gomer left Hosea to pursue her lusts (Hosea 2). But Hosea (whose name means “salvation”) found her, redeemed her, and brought her home again, fully reconciled (Hosea 3). Images of God’s love, judgment, grace, and mercy were woven into their relationship. Next, God outlined his case against the people of Israel—their sins would ultimately cause their destruction (Hosea 4; Hosea 6; Hosea 7; Hosea 12) and would rouse his anger, resulting in punishment (Hosea 5; Hosea 8-10; Hosea 12-13). But even in the midst of Israel’s immorality, God was merciful and offered hope, expressing his infinite love for his people (Hosea 11) and the fact that their repentance would bring about blessing (Hosea 14).

The book of Hosea dramatically portrays our God's constant and persistent love. As you read this book, watch the prophet submit himself willingly to his Lord's direction; grieve with him over the unfaithfulness of his wife and his people; and hear the clear warning of judgment. Then reaffirm your commitment to being God's person, faithful in your love and true to your vows.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. HOSEA'S WAYWARD WIFE (Hosea 1:1-3:5)

Hosea was commanded by God to marry a woman who was unfaithful in marriage and would cause him many heartaches. Just as Gomer lost interest in Hosea and ran after other lovers, we too can easily lose appreciation for our special relationship with God and pursue dreams and goals that do not include him. When we compromise our Christian life-styles and adopt the ways of the world, we are being unfaithful.

B. GOD'S WAYWARD PEOPLE (Hosea 4:1-14:9)

God wanted the people in the northern kingdom to turn from their sin and return to worshipping him alone, but they persisted in their wickedness. Throughout the book, Israel is described as ignorant of God, with no desire to please him. Israel did not understand God at all, just as Gomer did not understand Hosea. Like a loving husband or patient father, God wants people to know him and to turn to him daily.

1. Israel's sinfulness
2. Israel's punishment
3. God's love for Israel

MEGATHEMES

THEME: The nation's sin

EXPLANATION: Just as Hosea's wife, Gomer, was unfaithful to him, so the nation of Israel had been unfaithful to God. Israel's idolatry was like adultery. They sought illicit relationships with Assyria and Egypt in pursuit of military might, and they mixed Baal worship with the worship of God.

IMPORTANCE: Like Gomer, we can chase after other loves—love of power, pleasure, money, or recognition. The temptations in this world can be very seductive. Are we loyal to God, remaining completely faithful, or have other loves taken his rightful place?

THEME: God's judgment

EXPLANATION: Hosea solemnly warned Judah against following Israel's example. Because Judah broke the covenant, turned away from God, and forgot her Maker, she experienced a devastating invasion and exile. Sin has terrible consequences.

IMPORTANCE: Disaster surely follows ingratitude toward God and rebellion. The Lord is our only true refuge. If we harden our hearts against him, there is no safety or security anywhere else. We cannot escape God's judgment.

THEME: God's love

EXPLANATION: Just as Hosea went after his unfaithful wife to bring her back, so the Lord pursues us with his love. His love is tender, loyal, unchanging, and undying. No matter what, God still loves us.

IMPORTANCE: Have you forgotten God and become disloyal to him? Don't let prosperity diminish your love for him or let success blind you to your need for his love.

THEME: Restoration

EXPLANATION: Although God will discipline his people for sin, he encourages and restores those who have repented. True repentance opens the way to a new beginning. God forgives and restores.

IMPORTANCE: There is still hope for those who turn back to God. No loyalty, achievement, or honor can be compared to loving him. Turn to the Lord while the offer is still good. No matter how far you have strayed, God is willing to bring you back.

TIMELINE

Jeroboam II becomes king of Israel 793 B.C.

Amos becomes a prophet 760
Hosea becomes a prophet; King Zechariah of Israel is killed 753
King Shallum of Israel is killed 752
Tiglath-Pileser III invades Israel 743
Micah becomes a prophet to Judah 742
Isaiah becomes a prophet to Judah 740
Israel (northern kingdom) falls 722
Hosea's ministry ends 715

Joel

OVERVIEW: A single bomb devastates a city, and the world is ushered into the nuclear age. A split atom. . . power and force such as we have never seen.

At a launch site, rockets roar and a payload is thrust into space. Discoveries dreamed of for centuries are ours as we begin to explore the edge of the universe.

Volcanos, earthquakes, tidal waves, hurricanes, and tornados unleash uncontrollable and unstoppable force. And we can only avoid them and then pick up the pieces.

Power, strength, might—we stand in awe at the natural and man-made display. But these forces cannot touch the power of omnipotent God. Creator of galaxies, atoms, and natural laws, the sovereign Lord rules all there is and ever will be. How silly to live without him; how foolish to run and hide from him; how ridiculous to disobey him. But we do. Since Eden, we have sought independence from his control, as though we were gods and could control our destiny. And he has allowed our rebellion. But soon *the day of the Lord* will come.

It is about this day that the prophet Joel speaks, and it is the theme of his book. On this day God will judge all unrighteousness and disobedience—all accounts will be settled and the crooked made straight.

We know very little about Joel—only that he was a prophet and the son of Pethuel. He may have lived in Jerusalem because his audience was Judah, the southern kingdom. Whoever he was, Joel speaks forthrightly and forcefully in this short and powerful book. His message is one of foreboding and warning, but it is also filled with hope. Joel states that our Creator, the omnipotent Judge, is also merciful, and he wants to bless all those who trust him.

Joel begins by describing a terrible plague of locusts that covers the land and devours the crops. The devastation wrought by these creatures is but a foretaste of the coming judgment of God, the “day of the LORD.” Joel, therefore, urges the people to turn from their sin and turn back to God. Woven into this message of judgment and the need for repentance is an affirmation of God’s kindness and the blessings he promises for all who follow him. In fact, “everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved” (Joel 2:32).

As you read Joel, catch his vision of the power and might of God and of God’s ultimate judgment of sin. Choose to follow, obey, and worship God alone as your sovereign Lord.

THE BLUEPRINT

The locust plague was only a foretaste of the judgment to come in the day of the Lord. This is a timeless call to repentance with the promise of blessing. Just as the people faced the tragedy of their crops being destroyed, we too will face tragic judgment if we live in sin. But God's grace is available to us both now and in that coming day.

1. The day of the locusts (Joel 1:1-2:27)
2. The day of the Lord (Joel 2:28-3:21)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Punishment

EXPLANATION: Like a destroying army of locusts, God's punishment for sin is overwhelming, dreadful, and unavoidable. When it comes, there will be no food, no water, no protection, and no escape. The day for settling accounts with God for how we have lived is fast approaching.

IMPORTANCE: God is the one with whom we all must reckon—not nature, the economy, or a foreign invader. We can't ignore or offend God forever. We must pay attention to his message now, or we will face his anger later.

THEME: Forgiveness

EXPLANATION: God stood ready to forgive and restore all those who would come to him and turn away from sin. God wanted to shower his people with his love and restore them to a proper relationship with him.

IMPORTANCE: Forgiveness comes by turning from sin and turning toward God. It is not too late to receive God's forgiveness. God's greatest desire is for you to come to him.

THEME: Promise of the Holy Spirit

EXPLANATION: Joel predicts the time when God will pour out his Holy Spirit on all people. It will be the beginning of new and fresh worship of God by those who believe in him, but also the beginning of judgment on all who reject him.

IMPORTANCE: God is in control. Justice and restoration are in his hands. The Holy Spirit confirms God's love for us just as he did for the first Christians (Acts 2). We must be faithful to God and place our lives under the guidance and power of his Holy Spirit.

TIMELINE

King Ahab dies in battle 853 B.C.

Elisha becomes a prophet 848

Jehu becomes king of Israel; Athaliah seizes Judah's throne 841

Joel becomes a prophet? Joash becomes king of Judah 835

Jehoahaz becomes king of Israel 814

Jehoash becomes king of Israel 798

Joel's ministry ends 796?

Amos

OVERVIEW: WHEN we hear, "he's a man of God," the images that most often come to mind are some famous evangelist, a "Reverend," a missionary, or the campus minister—professionals, Christian workers, those who preach and teach the word as a vocation.

Surely Amos was a man of God—a person whose life was devoted to serving the Lord and whose life-style reflected this devotion—but he was a layperson. Herding

sheep and tending sycamore-fig trees in the Judean countryside, Amos was not the son of a prophet; he was not the son of a priest. As a humble shepherd, he could have stayed in Tekoa, doing his job, providing for his family, and worshiping his God. But God gave Amos a vision of the future (Amos 1:2), and told him to take his message to Israel, the northern kingdom (Amos 7:15). Amos obeyed, and thus proved he was a man of God.

Amos's message has had an impact on God's people throughout the centuries, and it needs to be heard today, by individuals and nations. Although they were divided from their southern brothers and sisters in Judah, the northern Israelites were still God's people. But they were living beneath a pious veneer of religion, worshiping idols, and oppressing the poor. Amos, a fiery, fearless, and honest shepherd from the south, confronted them with their sin and warned them of the impending judgment.

The book of Amos opens with this humble shepherd watching his sheep. God then gave him a vision of what was about to happen to the nation of Israel. God condemned all the nations who have sinned against him and harmed his people. Beginning with Aram, he moved quickly through Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab. All were condemned, and we can almost hear the Israelites shouting, "Amen!"

And then, even Judah, Amos's homeland, was included in God's scathing denunciation (Amos 2:4-5). How Amos's listeners must have enjoyed hearing those words! Suddenly, however, Amos turned to the people of Israel and pronounced God's judgment on *them*. The next four chapters enumerate and describe their sins. It is no wonder that Amaziah the priest intervened and tried to stop the preaching (Amos 7:10-13). Fearlessly, Amos continued to relate the visions of future judgment that God gave to him (Amos 8-9). After all the chapters on judgment, the book concludes with a message of hope. Eventually God will restore his people and make them great again (Amos 9:8-15).

As you read Amos's book, put yourself in the place of those Israelites and listen to God's message. Have you grown complacent? Have other concerns taken God's place in your life? Do you ignore those in need or oppress the poor? Picture yourself as Amos, faithfully doing what God calls you to do. You, too, can be God's person. Listen for his clear call and do what he says, wherever it leads.

THE BLUEPRINT

Amos speaks with brutal frankness in denouncing sin. He collided with the false religious leaders of his day and was not intimidated by priest or king. He continued to speak his message boldly. God requires truth and goodness, justice and righteousness, from all people and nations today as well. Many of the conditions in Israel during Amos's time are evident in today's societies. We need Amos's courage to ignore danger and stand against sin.

1. Announcement of judgment (Amos 1:1-2:16)
2. Reasons for judgment (Amos 3:1-6:14)
3. Visions of judgment (Amos 7:1-9:15)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Everyone answers to God

EXPLANATION: Amos pronounced judgment from God on all the surrounding nations. Then he included Judah and Israel. God is in supreme control of all the nations. Everyone is accountable to him.

IMPORTANCE: All people will have to account for their sin. When those who reject God seem to get ahead, don't envy their prosperity or feel sorry for yourself. Remember that we all must answer to God for how we live.

THEME: Complacency

EXPLANATION: Everyone was optimistic, business was booming, and people were happy (except for the poor and oppressed). With all the comfort and luxury came self-sufficiency and a false sense of security. But prosperity brought corruption and destruction.

IMPORTANCE: A complacent present leads to a disastrous future. Don't congratulate yourself for the blessings and benefits you now enjoy. They are from God. If you are more satisfied with yourself than with God, remember that everything is meaningless without him. A self-sufficient attitude may be your downfall.

THEME: Oppressing the poor

EXPLANATION: The wealthy and powerful people of Samaria, the capital of Israel, had become prosperous, greedy, and unjust. Illegal and immoral slavery

came as the result of over-taxation and land-grabbing. There was also cruelty and indifference towards the poor. God is weary of greed and will not tolerate injustice.

IMPORTANCE: God made all people; therefore, to ignore the poor is to ignore those whom God loves and whom Christ came to save. We must go beyond feeling bad for the poor and oppressed. We must act compassionately to stop injustice and to help care for those in need.

THEME: Superficial religion

EXPLANATION: Although many people had abandoned real faith in God, they still pretended to be religious. They were carrying on nominal religious performances instead of having spiritual integrity and practicing heartfelt obedience toward God.

IMPORTANCE: Merely participating in ceremony or ritual falls short of true religion. God wants simple trust in him, not showy external actions. Don't settle for impressing others with external rituals when God wants heartfelt obedience and commitment.

TIMELINE

Jeroboam II becomes king of Israel 793 B.C.

Amos becomes a prophet to Israel 760

Hosea becomes a prophet to Israel 753

King Shallum of Israel is assassinated 752

Amos's ministry ends 750

Isaiah becomes a prophet to Judah 740

Obadiah

OVERVIEW: WRINKLED face, tiny hands with fingernail chips, rolls of new skin, and miniature eyes, nose, and mouth—she’s a newborn. After months of formation, she burst forth into the world and into her family. “She has her mother’s eyes,” “I can sure tell who her parents are,” “Now that’s your nose” . . . relatives and friends gaze into the little face and see her mom and dad. Mother and Father rejoice in their daughter, a miracle, a new member of the family. As loving parents, they will protect, nurture, feed, guide, and discipline her. This is their duty and joy.

God too has children—men and women whom he has chosen as his very own. There have always been individuals marked as his, but with Abraham he promised to build a nation. Israel was to be God’s country, and her people, the Jews, his very own sons and daughters. Through the following centuries, there was discipline and

punishment, but always love and mercy. God, the eternal Father, protected and cared for his children.

Obadiah, the shortest book in the Old Testament, is a dramatic example of God's response to anyone who would harm his children. Edom was a mountainous nation, occupying the region southeast of the Dead Sea including Petra, the spectacular city discovered by archaeologists a few decades ago. As descendants of Esau (Genesis 25:19-27:45), the Edomites were blood relatives of Israel and, like their father, they were rugged, fierce, and proud warriors with a seemingly invincible mountain home. Of all people, they should have rushed to the aid of their northern brothers. Instead, however, they gloated over Israel's problems, captured and delivered fugitives to the enemy, and even looted Israel's countryside.

Obadiah gave God's message to Edom. Because of their indifference to and defiance of God, their cowardice and pride, and their treachery toward their brothers in Judah, they stood condemned and would be destroyed. The book begins with the announcement that disaster was coming to Edom (Obadiah 1:1-9). Despite their "impregnable" cliffs and mountains, they would not be able to escape God's judgment. Obadiah then gave the reasons for their destruction (Obadiah 1:10-14)—their blatant arrogance toward God and their persecution of God's children. This concise prophecy ends with a description of the "day of the LORD," when judgment will fall on all who have harmed God's people (Obadiah 1:15-21).

Today, God's holy nation is his church—all who have trusted Christ for their salvation and have given their lives to him. These men and women are God's born again and adopted children. As you read Obadiah, catch a glimpse of what it means to be God's child, under his love and protection. See how the heavenly Father responds to all who would attack those whom he loves.

THE BLUEPRINT

The book of Obadiah shows the outcome of the ancient feud between Edom and Israel. Edom was proud of its high position, but God would bring her down. Those who are high and powerful today should not be overconfident in themselves, whether they are a nation, a corporation, a church, or a family. Just as Edom was destroyed for its pride, so will anyone who lives in defiance of God.

1. Edom's destruction (Obadiah 1:1-16)
2. Israel's restoration (Obadiah 1:17-21)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Justice

EXPLANATION: Obadiah predicted that God would destroy Edom as punishment for standing by when Babylon invaded Judah. Because of their treachery, Edom's land would be given to Judah in the day when God rights the wrongs against his people.

IMPORTANCE: God will judge and fiercely punish all who harm his people. We can be confident in God's final victory. He is our champion, and we can trust him to bring about true justice.

THEME: Pride

EXPLANATION: Because of their seemingly invincible rock fortress, the Edomites were proud and self-confident. But God humbled them and their nation disappeared from the face of the earth.

IMPORTANCE: All those who defy God will meet their doom as Edom did. Any nation who trusts in its power, wealth, technology, or wisdom more than in God will be brought low. All who are proud will one day be shocked to discover that no one is exempt from God's justice.

Jonah

OVERVIEW: SIN runs rampant in society—daily headlines and overflowing prisons bear dramatic witness to that fact. With child abuse, pornography, serial killings, terrorism, anarchy, and ruthless dictatorships, the world seems to be filled to overflowing with violence, hatred, and corruption. Reading, hearing, and perhaps even experiencing these tragedies, we begin to understand the necessity of God's judgment. We may even find ourselves wishing for vengeance by any means upon the violent perpetrators. Surely they are beyond redemption! But suppose that in the midst of such thoughts, God told you to take the gospel to the worst of the offenders—how would you respond?

Jonah was given such a task. Assyria—a great but evil empire—was Israel's most dreaded enemy. The Assyrians flaunted their power before God and the world through numerous acts of heartless cruelty. So when Jonah heard God tell him to go to Assyria and call the people to repentance, he ran in the opposite direction.

The book of Jonah tells the story of this prophet's flight and how God stopped him and turned him around. But it is much more than a story of a man and a great

fish—Jonah’s story is a profound illustration of God’s mercy and grace. No one deserved God’s favor less than the people of Nineveh, Assyria’s capital.

Jonah knew this. But he knew that God would forgive and bless them if they would turn from their sin and worship him. Jonah also knew the power of God’s message, that even through his own weak preaching, they would respond and be spared God’s judgment. But Jonah hated the Assyrians, and he wanted vengeance, not mercy. So he ran. Eventually, Jonah obeyed and preached in the streets of Nineveh, and the people repented and were delivered from judgment. Then Jonah sulked and complained to God, “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity” (Jonah 4:2). In the end, God confronted Jonah about his self-centered values and lack of compassion, saying, “But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (Jonah 4:11).

As you read Jonah, see the full picture of God’s love and compassion and realize that no one is beyond redemption. The gospel is for all who will repent and believe. Begin to pray for those who seem to be furthest from the kingdom, and look for ways to tell them about God. Learn from the story of this reluctant prophet and determine to obey God, doing whatever he asks and going wherever he leads.

THE BLUEPRINT

Jonah was a reluctant prophet given a mission he found distasteful. He chose to run away from God rather than obey him. Like Jonah, we may have to do things in life that we don’t want to do. Sometimes we find ourselves wanting to turn and run. But it is better to obey God than to defy him or run away. Often, in spite of our defiance, God in his mercy will give us another chance to serve him when we return to him.

1. Jonah forsakes his mission (Jonah 1:1-2:10)
2. Jonah fulfills his mission (Jonah 3:1-4:11)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: God’s sovereignty

EXPLANATION: Although the prophet Jonah tried to run away from God, God was in control. By controlling the stormy seas and a great fish, God displayed his absolute, yet loving guidance.

IMPORTANCE: Rather than running from God, trust him with your past, present, and future. Saying no to God quickly leads to disaster. Saying yes brings new understanding of God and his purpose in the world.

THEME: God's message to all the world

EXPLANATION: God had given Jonah a purpose—to preach to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh. Jonah hated Nineveh, and so he responded with anger and indifference. Jonah had yet to learn that God loves all people. Through Jonah, God reminded Israel of their missionary purpose.

IMPORTANCE: We must not limit our focus to our own people. God wants his people to proclaim his love in words and actions to the whole world. He wants us to be his missionaries wherever we are, wherever he sends us.

THEME: Repentance

EXPLANATION: When the reluctant preacher went to Nineveh, there was a great response. The people repented and turned to God. This was a powerful rebuke to Israel, who thought themselves better and yet refused to respond to God's message. God will forgive all those who turn from their sin.

IMPORTANCE: God doesn't honor sham or pretense. He wants the sincere devotion of each person. It is not enough to share the privileges of Christianity; we must ask God to forgive us and to remove our sin. Refusing to repent is the same as loving our sin.

THEME: God's compassion

EXPLANATION: God's message of love and forgiveness was not for the Jews alone. God loves all the people of the world. The Assyrians didn't deserve it, but God spared them when they repented. In his mercy, God did not reject Jonah for aborting his mission. God has great love, patience, and forgiveness.

IMPORTANCE: God loves each of us, even when we fail him. But he also loves other people, including those not of our group, background, race, or denomination.

When we accept his love, we must also learn to accept all those whom he loves.
We will find it much easier to love others when we love God.

TIMELINE

Jeroboam II becomes king; Jonah becomes a prophet 793 BC

Uzziah (Azariah) becomes king of Judah 792

Jonah preaches to Nineveh 785?

Shalmaneser IV becomes king of Assyria 783

Ashur-dan III becomes king of Assyria 772

Amos becomes a prophet 760

Ashur-Nirari V becomes king of Assyria 754

Jonah's ministry ends 753

Israel falls to Assyria 722

Micah

OVERVIEW: “I HATE YOU!” she screams, and runs from the room. Words from a child, thrown as emotional darts. Perhaps she learned the phrase from Mom and Dad, or maybe it just burst forth from that inner well of “sinful nature.” Whatever the case, hate and love have become society’s bywords, almost tired cliches, tossed carelessly at objects, situations, and even people.

The casual use of such words as “love” and “hate” has emptied them of their meaning. We no longer understand statements that describe a loving God who hates sin. So we picture God as gentle and kind—a cosmic “pushover”; and our concept of what he hates is tempered by our misconceptions and wishful thinking.

The words of the prophets stand in stark contrast to such misconceptions. God’s hatred is real—burning, consuming, and destroying. He hates sin, and he stands as the righteous judge, ready to mete out just punishment to all who defy his rule. God’s love is also real. So real that he sent his Son, the Messiah, to save and accept judgment in the sinner’s place. Love and hate are together—both unending, irresistible, and unfathomable.

In seven short chapters, Micah presents this true picture of God—the almighty Lord who hates sin and loves the sinner. Much of the book is devoted to describing God’s judgment on Israel (the northern kingdom), on Judah (the southern kingdom), and on all the earth. This judgment will come “because of Jacob’s transgression, because of the sins of the house of Israel” (Micah 1:5). And the prophet lists their despicable sins, including fraud (Micah 2:2), theft (Micah 2:8),

greed (Micah 2:9), debauchery (Micah 2:11), oppression (Micah 3:3), hypocrisy (Micah 3:4), heresy (Micah 3:5), injustice (Micah 3:9), extortion and lying (Micah 6:12), murder (Micah 7:2), and other offenses. God's judgment will come.

In the midst of this overwhelming prediction of destruction, Micah gives hope and consolation because he also describes God's love. The truth is that judgment comes only after countless opportunities to repent, to turn back to true worship and obedience—"to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). But even in the midst of judgment, God promises to deliver the small minority who have continued to follow him. He states, "Their king will pass through before them, the LORD at their head" (Micah 2:13). The king, of course, is Jesus; and we read in Micah 5:2 that he will be born as a baby in Bethlehem, an obscure Judean village.

As you read Micah, catch a glimpse of God's anger in action as he judges and punishes sin. See God's love in action as he offers eternal life to all who repent and believe. And then determine to join the faithful remnant of God's people who live according to his will.

THE BLUEPRINT

Micah emphasized the need for justice and peace. Like a lawyer, he set forth God's case against Israel and Judah, their leaders, and their people. Throughout the book are prophecies about Jesus, the Messiah, who will gather the people into one nation. He will be their king and ruler, acting mercifully toward them. Micah makes it clear that God hates unkindness, idolatry, injustice, and empty ritual—and he still hates these today. But God is very willing to pardon the sins of any who repent.

1. The trial of the capitals (Micah 1:1-2:13)
2. The trial of the leaders (Micah 3:1-5:15)
3. The trial of the people (Micah 6:1-7:20)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Perverting faith

EXPLANATION: God will judge the false prophets, dishonest leaders, and selfish priests in Israel and Judah. While they publicly carried out religious ceremonies,

they were privately seeking to gain money and influence. To mix selfish motives with an empty display of religion is to pervert faith.

IMPORTANCE: Don't try to mix your own selfish desires with true faith in God. One day God will reveal how foolish it is to substitute anything for loyalty to him. Coming up with your own private blend of religion will pervert your faith.

THEME: Oppression

EXPLANATION: Micah predicted ruin for all nations and leaders who were oppressive toward others. The upper classes oppressed and exploited the poor. Yet no one was speaking against them or doing anything to stop them. God will not put up with such injustice.

IMPORTANCE: We dare not ask God to help us while we ignore those who are needy and oppressed, or while we silently condone the actions of those who oppress them.

THEME: The Messiah—King of Peace

EXPLANATION: God promised to provide a new king to bring strength and peace to his people. Hundreds of years before Christ's birth, God promised that the eternal king would be born in Bethlehem. It was God's great plan to restore his people through the Messiah.

IMPORTANCE: Christ our king leads us just as God promised. But until his final judgment, his leadership is only visible among those who welcome his authority. We can have God's peace now by giving up our sins and welcoming him as king.

THEME: Pleasing God

EXPLANATION: Micah preached that God's greatest desire was not the offering of sacrifices at the temple. God delights in faith that produces justice, love for others, and obedience to him.

IMPORTANCE: True faith in God generates kindness, compassion, justice, and humility. We can please God by seeking these results in our work, our family, our church, and our neighborhood.

TIMELINE

Hosea becomes a prophet 753 B.C.

Jotham becomes king of Judah 750

Tiglath-Pileser III invades Israel 743

Micah becomes a prophet; Pekahiah becomes king 742

Isaiah becomes a prophet 740

Ahaz becomes king of Judah 735

Israel (the northern kingdom) falls 722

Hosea's ministry ends; Hezekiah becomes king of Judah 715

Sennacherib surrounds Jerusalem 701

Micah's ministry ends 687

Nahum

OVERVIEW: THE SHRILL whistle pierces the air, and all the action on the court abruptly stops. Pointing to the offending player, the referee shouts, “Foul!”

Rules, fouls, and penalties are part of any game and are regulated and enforced vigorously by referees, umpires, judges, and other officials. Every participant knows that boundaries must be set and behavior monitored, or the game will degenerate into chaos.

There are laws in the world as well—boundaries and rules for living established by God. But men and women regularly flaunt these regulations, hiding their infractions or overpowering others and declaring that might makes right. God calls this sin—willful disobedience, rebellion against his control, or apathy. And at times it seems as though the violators succeed—no whistles blow, no fouls are called, and individual dictators rule. The truth is, however, that ultimately justice will be served in the world. God will settle all accounts.

Assyria was the most powerful nation on earth. Proud in their self-sufficiency and military might, they plundered, oppressed, and slaughtered their victims. One hundred years earlier, Jonah had preached in the streets of the great city Nineveh; the people had heard God’s message and had turned from their evil. But generations later, evil was again reigning, and the prophet Nahum pronounced judgment on this wicked nation. Nineveh is called a “city of blood” (Nahum 3:1), a city of cruelty (Nahum 3:19), and the Assyrians are judged for their arrogance (Nahum 1:11), idolatry (Nahum 1:14), murder, lies, treachery, and social injustice (Nahum 3:1-19). Because of their sins, Nahum predicted that this proud and powerful nation would be utterly destroyed. The end came within 50 years.

In this judgment of Assyria and its capital city, Nineveh, God is judging a sinful world. And the message is clear—disobedience, rebellion, and injustice will not

prevail but will be punished severely by a righteous and holy God who rules over all the earth.

As you read Nahum, sense God's wrath as he avenges sin and brings about justice. Then decide to live under his guidance and within his rules, commands, and guidelines for life.

THE BLUEPRINT

Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, is the subject of Nahum's prophecy. The news of its coming destruction was a relief for Judah, who was subject to Assyrian domination. No longer would Judah be forced to pay tribute as insurance against invasions. Judah was comforted to know that God was still in control. Nineveh is an example to all rulers and nations of the world today. God is sovereign over even those who are seemingly invincible. We can be confident that God's power and justice will one day conquer all evil.

1. Nineveh's judge (Nahum 1:1-15)
2. Nineveh's judgment (Nahum 2:1-3:19)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: God judges

EXPLANATION: God would judge the city of Nineveh for its idolatry, arrogance, and oppression. Although Assyria was the leading military power in the world, God would completely destroy this "invincible" nation. God allows no person or power to usurp or scoff at his authority.

IMPORTANCE: Anyone who remains arrogant and resists God's authority will face his anger. No ruler or nation will get away with rejecting him. No individual will be able to hide from his judgment. Yet those who keep trusting God will be kept safe forever.

THEME: God rules

EXPLANATION: God rules over all the earth, even over those who don't acknowledge him. God is all-powerful, and no one can thwart his plans. God will overcome any who attempt to defy him. Human power is futile against God.

IMPORTANCE: If you are impressed by or afraid of any weapons, armies, or powerful people, remember that God alone can truly rescue you from fear or oppression. We must place our confidence in God because he alone rules all of history, all the earth, and our lives.

TIMELINE

Manasseh becomes king of Judah 697 B.C.

Ashurbanipal becomes king of Assyria 669

The fall of Thebes; Nahum becomes a prophet 663

Josiah becomes king of Judah; Zephaniah becomes a prophet 640

Jeremiah becomes a prophet 627

Nineveh falls 612

Assyria completely conquered 609

Babylonians win battle of Carchemish 605

Judah falls to Babylon 586

Habakkuk

OVERVIEW: FROM innocent childhood queries to complex university discussions, life is filled with questions. Asking how and why and when, we probe beneath the surface to find satisfying answers. But not all questions have answers wrapped and neatly tied. These unanswered interrogations create more questions and nagging, spirit-destroying doubt. Some choose to live with their doubts, ignoring them and moving on with life. Others become cynical and hardened. But there are those who reject those options and continue to ask, looking for answers.

Habakkuk was a man who sought answers. Troubled by what he observed, he asked difficult questions. These questions were not merely intellectual exercises or bitter complaints. Habakkuk saw a dying world, and it broke his heart. Why is there evil in the world? Why do the wicked seem to be winning? He boldly and confidently took his complaints directly to God. And God answered. . . with an avalanche of proof and prediction.

The prophet's questions and God's answers are recorded in this book. As we turn the pages, we are immediately confronted with his urgent cries, "How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save?" (Habakkuk 1:2).

In fact, most of the first chapter is devoted to his questions. As chapter two begins, Habakkuk declares that he will wait to hear God's answers to his complaints. Then God begins to speak, telling the prophet to write his answer plainly so that all will see and understand. It may seem, God says, as though the wicked triumph, but eventually they will be judged, and righteousness will prevail. Judgment may not come quickly, but it *will* come. God's answers fill chapter two. Then Habakkuk concludes his book with a prayer of triumph. With questions answered and a new understanding of God's power and love, Habakkuk rejoices in who God is and in what he will do. "Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights" (Habakkuk 3:18-19).

Listen to the profound questions that Habakkuk boldly brings to God, and realize that you can also bring your complaints and inquiries to him. Listen to God's answers and rejoice that he is at work in the world and in your life.

THE BLUEPRINT

When Habakkuk was troubled he brought his concerns directly to God. After receiving God's answers, he responded with a prayer of faith. Habakkuk's example is one that should encourage us as we struggle to move from doubt to faith. We don't have to be afraid to ask questions of God. The problem is not with God and his ways, but with our limited understanding of him.

1. Habakkuk's complaints (Habakkuk 1:1-2:20)
2. Habakkuk's prayer (Habakkuk 3:1-19)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Struggle and doubt

EXPLANATION: Habakkuk asked God why the wicked in Judah were not being punished for their sin. He couldn't understand why a just God would allow such evil to exist. God promised to use the Babylonians to punish Judah. When Habakkuk cried out for answers in his time of struggle, God answered him with words of hope.

IMPORTANCE: God wants us to come to him with our struggles and doubts. But his answers may not be what we expect. God sustains us by revealing himself to us. Trusting him leads to quiet hope, not bitter resignation.

THEME: God's sovereignty

EXPLANATION: Habakkuk asked God why he would use the wicked Babylonians to punish his people. God said that he would also punish the Babylonians after they had fulfilled his purpose.

IMPORTANCE: God is still in control of this world in spite of the apparent triumph of evil. God doesn't overlook sin. One day he will rule the whole earth with perfect justice.

THEME: Hope

EXPLANATION: God is the Creator; he is all-powerful. He has a plan, and he will carry it out. He will punish sin. He is our strength and our place of safety. We can have confidence that he will love us and guard our relationship with him forever.

IMPORTANCE: Hope means going beyond our unpleasant daily experiences to the joy of knowing God. We live by trusting in him, not in the benefits, happiness, or success we may experience in this life. Our hope comes from God.

TIMELINE

Jeremiah becomes a prophet 627 B.C.

Habakkuk becomes a prophet 612

King Josiah dies in battle 609

Daniel taken captive to Babylon 605

Ezekiel a captive in Babylon; Zedekiah becomes king 597

Habakkuk's ministry ends 588

Fall of Judah; Jerusalem destroyed 586

Zephaniah

OVERVIEW: OVERWHELMING grief, prolonged distress, incessant abuse, continual persecution, and imminent punishment breed hopelessness and despair. “If only,” we cry as we search our minds for a way out and look to the skies for rescue. With just a glimmer of hope, we would take courage and carry on, enduring until the end.

Hope is the silver shaft of sun breaking through the storm-darkened sky, words of comfort in the intensive care unit, a letter from across the sea, the first spring bird perched on a snow-covered twig, and the finish line in sight. It is a rainbow, a song, a loving touch. Hope is knowing God and resting in his love.

As God’s prophet, Zephaniah was bound to speak the truth—this he did clearly, thundering certain judgment and horrible punishment for all who would defy the Lord. God’s awful wrath would sweep away everything in the land and destroy it. “ ‘I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth,’ declares the LORD” (Zeph. 1:3). No living thing in the land would escape. And that terrible day was coming soon: “The great day of the LORD is near—near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the LORD will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness” (Zeph. 1:14-15). We can sense the oppression and depression his listeners must have felt. They were judged guilty, and they were doomed.

But in the midst of this terrible pronouncement, there is hope. The first chapter of Zephaniah’s prophecy is filled with terror. In chapter two, however, a whispered promise appears. “Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD’S anger” Zeph. 2:3). And a few verses later we read of a “remnant of the house of Judah” (Zeph. 2:7) who will be restored.

Finally in chapter three, the quiet refrain grows to a crescendo as God’s salvation and deliverance for those who are faithful to him is declared. “Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm” (Zeph. 3:14-15). This is true hope, grounded in the knowledge of God’s justice and in his love for his people.

As you read Zephaniah, listen carefully to the words of judgment. God does not take sin lightly, and it will be punished. But be encouraged by the words of hope—our God reigns, and he will rescue his own. Decide to be part of that faithful remnant of souls who humbly worship and obey the living Lord.

THE BLUEPRINT

Zephaniah warned the people of Judah that if they refused to repent, the entire nation, including the beloved city of Jerusalem, would be lost. The people knew that God would eventually bless them, but Zephaniah made it clear that there would be judgment first, then blessing. This judgment would not be merely punishment for sin, but also a process of purifying the people. Though we live in a fallen world surrounded by evil, we can hope in the perfect kingdom of God to come and we can allow any punishment that touches us now to purify us from sin.

1. The day of wrath (Zeph. 1:1-3:8)
2. The day of hope (Zeph. 3:9-20)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Day of judgment

EXPLANATION: Destruction was coming because Judah had forsaken the Lord. The people worshiped Baal, Molech, and the starry hosts. Even the priests mixed pagan practices with faith in God. God's punishment for sin was on the way.

IMPORTANCE: To escape God's judgment we must listen to him, accept his correction, trust him, and seek his guidance. If we accept him as our Lord, we can escape his condemnation.

THEME: Indifference to God

EXPLANATION: Although there had been occasional attempts at renewal, Judah had no sorrow for her sins. The people were prosperous, and they no longer cared about God. God's demands for righteous living seemed irrelevant to Judah, whose security and wealth made her complacent.

IMPORTANCE: Don't let material comfort be a barrier to your commitment to God. Prosperity can produce an attitude of proud self-sufficiency. The only

antidote is to admit that money won't save us and that we cannot save ourselves. Only God can save us and cure our indifference to spiritual matters.

THEME: Day of cheer

EXPLANATION: The day of judgment will also be a day of cheer. God will judge all those who mistreat his people. He will purify his people, purging away all sin and evil. God will restore his people and give them hope.

IMPORTANCE: When people are purged of sin, there is great relief and hope. No matter how difficult our experience now, we can look forward to the day of celebration when God will completely restore us. It will truly be our day of cheer.

TIMELINE

Zephaniah becomes a prophet; Josiah becomes king of Judah 640 B.C.

Jeremiah becomes a prophet 627

Book of the Law found in the temple 622

Zephaniah's ministry ends 621

Habakkuk becomes a prophet 612

Josiah dies in battle 609

First captives taken to Babylon 605

Babylon's second attack on Judah 597 Judah (the southern kingdom) falls 586

Haggai

OVERVIEW: PRESSURES, demands, expectations, and tasks push in from all sides and assault our schedules. Do this! Be there! Finish that! Call them! It seems as though everyone wants something from us—family, friends, employer, school, church, clubs. Soon there is little left to give, as we run out of energy and time. We find ourselves rushing through life, attending to the necessary, the immediate, and the urgent. The important is all too often left in the dust. Our problem is not the volume of demands or lack of scheduling skills, but values—what is *truly* important to us.

Our values and priorities are reflected in how we use our resources—time, money, strength, and talent. Often our actions belie our words. We say God is number one, but then we relegate him to a lesser number on our “to do” lists.

Twenty-five centuries ago, a voice was heard, calling men and women to the right priorities. Haggai knew what was important and what had to be done, and he challenged God’s people to respond.

In 586 B.C., the armies of Babylon had destroyed the temple in Jerusalem—God’s house, the symbol of his presence with them. In 538 B.C. King Cyrus decreed that Jews could return to their beloved city and rebuild the temple. So they traveled to Jerusalem and began the work. But then they forgot their purpose and lost their priorities, as opposition and apathy brought the work to a standstill (Ezra 4:4-5).

Then Haggai spoke, calling them back to God’s values. “Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?” (Haggai 1:4). The people were more concerned with their own needs than with doing God’s will, and, as a result, they suffered. Then Haggai called them to action: “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,’ says the LORD” (Haggai 1:7-8). And God’s message through his servant Haggai became the catalyst for finishing the work.

Although Haggai is a small book, it is filled with challenge and promise, reminding us of God’s claim on our lives and our priorities. As you read Haggai, imagine him walking the streets and alleys of Jerusalem, urging the people to get back to doing God’s work. And listen to Haggai speaking to you, urging you to reorder your priorities in accordance with God’s will. What has God told you to do? Put all aside and obey him.

THE BLUEPRINT

When the exiles first returned from Babylon, they set about rebuilding the temple right away. Although they began with the right attitudes, they slipped back into wrong behavior, and the work came to a standstill. In the same way, we need to be on guard to keep our priorities straight. Remain active in your service to God and continue to put first things first.

1. The call to rebuild the temple (Haggai 1:1-15)

2. Encouragement to complete the temple (Haggai 2:1-23)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Right priorities

EXPLANATION: God had given the Jews the assignment to finish the temple in Jerusalem when they returned from captivity. After 15 years, they still had not completed it. They were more concerned about building their own homes than finishing God's work. Haggai told them to get their priorities straight.

IMPORTANCE: It is easy to make other priorities more important than doing God's work. But God wants us to follow through and build up his kingdom. Don't stop and don't make excuses. Set your heart on what is right and do it. Get your priorities straight.

THEME: God's encouragement

EXPLANATION: Haggai encouraged the people as they worked. He assured them of the divine presence of the Holy Spirit and of final victory, and instilled in them the hope that the Messiah would reign.

IMPORTANCE: If God gives you a task, don't be afraid to get started. His resources are infinite. God will help you complete it by giving you encouragement from others along the way.

TIMELINE

Babylon overthrown by Cyrus 539

Cyrus's decree allowing the exiles to return 538

Temple construction begins 536

Temple work halted 530

Haggai, Zechariah become prophets; temple work resumed 520

Temple completed 516

Ezra comes to Jerusalem 458

ehemiah comes to Jerusalem 445

Zechariah

OVERVIEW: THE FUTURE—that vast uncharted sea of the unknown, holding joy or terror, comfort or pain, love or loneliness. Some people fear the days to come, wondering what evils lurk in the shadows; others consult seers and future-telling charlatans, trying desperately to discover its secrets. But tomorrow's story is known only to God and to those special messengers, called prophets, to whom God has revealed a chapter or two.

A prophet's primary task was to proclaim the word of the Lord, pointing out sin, explaining its consequences, and calling men and women to repentance and obedience. Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and Amos stand with scores of others who faithfully delivered God's message despite rejection, ridicule, and persecution. And at times they were given prophetic visions foretelling coming events.

Nestled near the end of the Old Testament, among what are known as “minor prophets,” is the book of Zechariah. As one of three postexilic prophets, along with Haggai and Malachi, Zechariah ministered to the small remnant of Jews who had returned to Judah to rebuild the temple and their nation. Like Haggai, he encouraged the people to finish rebuilding the temple, but his message went far beyond those physical walls and contemporary issues. With spectacular apocalyptic imagery and graphic detail, Zechariah told of the Messiah, the One whom God would send to rescue his people and to reign over all the earth. Zechariah is one of our most important prophetic books, giving detailed Messianic references that were clearly fulfilled in the life of Jesus Christ. The rebuilding of the temple, he says, was just the first act in the drama of the end and the ushering in of the Messianic age. Zechariah proclaimed a stirring message of hope to these ex-captives and exiles—their King was coming!

Jesus is Messiah, the promised “great deliverer” of Israel. Unlike Zechariah’s listeners, we can look back at Christ’s ministry and mission. As you study Zechariah’s prophecy, you will see details of Christ’s life that were written 500 years before their fulfillment. Read and stand in awe of our God who keeps his promises. But there is also a future message that has not yet been fulfilled—the return of Christ at the end of the age. As you read Zechariah, therefore, think through the implications of this promised event. *Your King is coming*, and he will reign forever and ever.

God knows and controls the future. We may never see more than a moment ahead, but we can be secure if we trust in him. Read Zechariah and strengthen your faith in God—he alone is your hope and security.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. MESSAGES WHILE REBUILDING THE TEMPLE (Zech. 1:1-8:23)

Zechariah encouraged the people to put away the sin in their lives and to continue rebuilding the temple. His visions described the judgment of Israel’s enemies, the blessings to Jerusalem, and the need for God’s people to remain pure—avoiding hypocrisy, superficiality, and sin. Zechariah’s visions provided hope for the people. We also need to carefully follow the instruction to remain pure until Christ returns again.

1. Zechariah’s night visions
2. Zechariah’s words of encouragement

B. MESSAGES AFTER COMPLETING THE TEMPLE (Zech. 9:1-14:21)

Besides encouragement and hope, Zechariah's messages were also a warning that God's Messianic kingdom would not begin as soon as the temple was complete. Israel's enemies would be judged and the King would come, but God's people would themselves face many difficult circumstances before experiencing the blessing of the Messianic kingdom. We too may face much sorrow, disappointment, and distress before coming into Christ's eternal kingdom.

MEGATHEMES

THEME: God's jealousy

EXPLANATION: God was angry at his people for ignoring his prophets through the years, and he was concerned that they not follow the careless and false leaders who exploited them. Disobedience was the root of their problems and the cause of their misery.

IMPORTANCE: God was jealous for their devotion to him. God is jealous for our devotion. To avoid Israel's ruin, don't walk in their steps. Don't reject God, follow false teachers, or lead others astray. Turn to God, faithfully obey his commands, and make sure you are leading others correctly.

THEME: Rebuild the temple

EXPLANATION: The Jews were discouraged. They were free from exile, yet the temple was not completed. Zechariah encouraged them to rebuild it. God would both protect his workmen and empower them by his Holy Spirit to carry out his work.

IMPORTANCE: More than the rebuilding of the temple was at stake—the people were staging the first act in God's wonderful drama of the end times. Those of us who believe in God must complete his work. To do so we must have the Holy Spirit's help. God will empower us with his Spirit.

THEME: The King is coming

EXPLANATION: The Messiah will come both to rescue people from sin and to reign as king. He will establish his kingdom, conquer all his enemies, and rule over all the earth. Everything will one day be under his loving and powerful control.

IMPORTANCE: The Messiah came as a servant to die for us. He will return as a victorious king. At that time, he will usher in peace throughout the world. Submit to his leadership now to be ready for the King's triumphant return.

THEME: God's protection

EXPLANATION: There was opposition to God's plan in Zechariah's day, and he prophesied future times of trouble. But God's Word endures. God remembers the agreements he makes with his people. He cares for his people and will deliver them from all the world powers that oppress them.

IMPORTANCE: Although evil is still present, God's infinite love and personal care have been demonstrated through the centuries. God keeps his promises. Although our bodies may be destroyed, we need never fear our ultimate destiny if we love and obey him.

TIMELINE

Daniel taken to Babylon 605 B.C.

Ezekiel taken to Babylon 597

Jerusalem falls 586

Babylon overthrown by Cyrus 539

Cyrus's decree allowing the exiles to return 538

Temple construction begins 536

Temple work halted 530

Haggai, Zechariah become prophets; temple work resumed 520

Temple completed 516

Ezra comes to Jerusalem 458

Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem 445

Malachi

OVERVIEW: A VASE shatters, brushed by a careless elbow; a toy breaks, pushed beyond its limit by young fingers; and fabric rips, pulled by strong and angry hands. Spills and rips take time to clean up or repair and money to replace, but far more costly are shattered relationships. Unfaithfulness, untruths, hateful words, and forsaken vows tear delicate personal bonds and inflict wounds not easily healed. Most tragic, however, are broken relationships with God.

God loves perfectly and completely. And his love is a love of action—giving, guiding, and guarding. He is altogether faithful, true to his promises to his chosen people. But consistently they spurn their loving God, breaking the covenant, following other gods, and living for themselves. So the relationship is shattered.

But the breach is not irreparable; all hope is not lost. God can heal and mend and reweave the fabric. Forgiveness is available. And that is grace.

This is the message of Malachi, God's prophet in Jerusalem. His words reminded the Jews, God's chosen nation, of their willful disobedience, beginning with the priests (Malachi 1:1-2:9) and then including every person (Malachi 2:10-3:15). They had shown contempt for God's name (Malachi 1:6), offered false worship

(Malachi 1:7-14), led others into sin (Malachi 2:7-9), broken God's laws (Malachi 2:11-16), called evil "good" (Malachi 2:17), kept God's tithes and offerings for themselves (Malachi 3:8-12), and become arrogant (Malachi 3:13-15). The relationship was broken, and judgment and punishment would be theirs. In the midst of this wickedness, however, there were a faithful few—the remnant—who loved and honored God. God would shower his blessings upon these men and women (Malachi 3:16-18).

Malachi paints a stunning picture of Israel's unfaithfulness that clearly shows them to be worthy of punishment, but woven throughout this message is hope—the possibility of forgiveness. This is beautifully expressed in Malachi 4:2—"But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall."

Malachi concludes with a promise of the coming of "the prophet Elijah," who will offer God's forgiveness to all people through repentance and faith (Malachi 4:5-6).

The book of Malachi forms a bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament. As you read Malachi, see yourself as the recipient of this word of God to his people. Evaluate the depth of your commitment, the sincerity of your worship, and the direction of your life. Then allow God to restore your relationship with him through his love and forgiveness.

THE BLUEPRINT

Malachi rebuked the people and the priests for neglecting the worship of God and failing to live according to God's will. If the priests were unfaithful, how could they lead the people? They had become stumbling blocks instead of spiritual leaders. If the people were divorcing their wives and marrying pagan women, how could they lead their children? Their relationship to God had become inconsequential. When our relationship with God becomes less important than it should be, we can strengthen it by setting aside our sinful habits, thinking often of our Lord, and giving God our best each day.

1. The sinful priests (Malachi 1:1-2:9)
2. The sinful people (Malachi 2:10-3:15)
3. The faithful few (Malachi 3:16-4:6)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: God's love

EXPLANATION: God loves his people even when they ignore or disobey him. He has great blessings to bestow on those who are faithful to him. His love never ends.

IMPORTANCE: Because God loves us so much, he hates hypocrisy and careless living. This kind of living denies him the relationship he wants to have with us. What we give and how we live reflects the sincerity of our love for God.

THEME: The sin of the priests

EXPLANATION: Malachi singled out the priests for condemnation. They knew what God required, yet their sacrifices were unworthy and their service was insincere; they were lazy, arrogant, and insensitive. They had a casual attitude toward the worship of God and observance of God's standards.

IMPORTANCE: If religious leaders go wrong, how will the people be led? We are all leaders in some capacity. Don't neglect your responsibilities or be ruled by what is convenient. Neglect and insensitivity are acts of disobedience. God wants leaders who are faithful and sincere.

THEME: The sin of the people

EXPLANATION: The people had not learned the lesson of the exile, nor had they listened to the prophets. Men were callously divorcing their faithful wives to marry younger pagan women. This was against God's law because it disobeyed his commands about marriage and threatened the religious training of the children. But pride had hardened the hearts of the people.

IMPORTANCE: God deserves our very best honor, respect, and faithfulness. But sin hardens our hearts to our true condition. Pride is unwarranted self-esteem; it is setting your own judgment above God's and looking down on others. Don't let pride keep you from giving God your devotion, money, marriage, and family.

THEME: The Lord's coming

EXPLANATION: God's love for his faithful people is demonstrated by the Messiah's coming. The Messiah will lead the people to the realization of all their fondest hopes. The day of the Lord's coming will be a day of comfort and healing for a faithful few, and a day of judgment for those who reject him.

IMPORTANCE: Christ's first coming refined and purified all those who believe in him. His return will expose and condemn those who are proud, insensitive, or unprepared. Yet God can heal and mend. Forgiveness is available to all who come to him.

TIMELINE

First exiles return to Jerusalem 538

Temple reconstruction begins 536

Haggai, Zechariah become prophets 520

Temple completed 516

Ezra comes to Jerusalem 458

Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem 445

Malachi becomes a prophet 430

THE 4 GOSPELS

Matthew

OVERVIEW: AS the motorcade slowly winds through the city, thousands pack the sidewalks hoping to catch a glimpse. Marching bands with great fanfare announce the arrival, and protective agents scan the crowd and run alongside the limousine. Pomp, ceremony, protocol—modern symbols of position and evidences of importance—herald the arrival of a head of state. Whether they are leaders by birth or election, we honor and respect them.

The Jews waited for a leader who had been promised centuries before by prophets. They believed that this leader—the Messiah (“anointed one”)—would rescue them from their Roman oppressors and establish a new kingdom. As their king, he would rule the world with justice. However, many Jews overlooked prophecies that also spoke of this king as a suffering servant who would be rejected and killed. It is no wonder, then, that few recognized Jesus as the Messiah. How could this humble carpenter’s son from Nazareth be their king? But Jesus was and is the King of all the earth!

Matthew (Levi) was one of Jesus’ 12 disciples. Once he was a despised tax collector, but his life was changed by this man from Galilee. Matthew wrote this Gospel to his fellow Jews to prove that Jesus is the Messiah and to explain God’s kingdom.

Matthew begins his account by giving Jesus’ genealogy. He then tells of Jesus’ birth and early years, including the family’s escape to Egypt from the murderous Herod and their return to Nazareth. Following Jesus’ baptism by John (Matthew 3:17) and his defeat of Satan in the desert, Jesus begins his public ministry by calling his first disciples and giving the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Matthew shows Christ’s authority by reporting his miracles of healing the sick and the demon-possessed, and even raising the dead.

Despite opposition from the Pharisees and others in the religious establishment (Matthew 12-15), Jesus continued to teach concerning the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 16-20). During this time, Jesus spoke with his disciples about his imminent death and resurrection (Matthew 16:21), and revealed his true identity to Peter, James, and John (Matthew 17:1-5). Near the end of his ministry, Jesus entered Jerusalem in a triumphant procession (Matthew 21:1-11). But soon opposition mounted and Jesus knew that his death was near. So he taught his disciples about the future—what they could expect before his return (Matthew 24) and how to live until then (Matthew 25).

In Matthew's finale (Matthew 26-28), he focuses on Jesus' final days on earth—the Last Supper, his prayer in Gethsemane, the betrayal by Judas, the flight of the disciples, Peter's denial, the trials before Caiaphas and Pilate, Jesus' final words on the cross, and his burial in a borrowed tomb. But the story does not end there, for the Messiah rose from the dead—conquering death and then telling his followers to continue his work by making disciples in all nations.

As you read this Gospel, listen to Matthew's clear message: Jesus is the Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords. Celebrate his victory over evil and death, and make Jesus the Lord of your life.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. BIRTH AND PREPARATION OF JESUS, THE KING (Matthew 1:1-4:11)

The people of Israel were waiting for the Messiah, their king. Matthew begins his book by showing how Jesus Christ was a descendant of David. But Matthew goes on to show that God did not send Jesus to be an earthly king, but a heavenly king. His kingdom would be much greater than David's because it would never end. Even at Jesus' birth, many recognized him as a king. Herod, the ruler, as well as Satan, was afraid of Jesus' kingship and tried to stop him, but others worshiped him and brought royal gifts. We must be willing to recognize Jesus for who he really is and worship him as king of our lives.

B. MESSAGE AND MINISTRY OF JESUS, THE KING (Matthew 4:12-25:46)

Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount, directions for living in his kingdom. He also told many parables about the difference between his kingdom and the kingdoms of earth. Forgiveness, peace, and putting others first are some of the characteristics that make one great in the future kingdom of God. And to be great in God's

kingdom, we must live by God's standards right now. Jesus came to show us how to live as faithful subjects in his kingdom.

1. Jesus begins his ministry
2. Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount
3. Jesus performs many miracles
4. Jesus teaches about the kingdom
5. Jesus encounters differing reactions to his ministry
6. Jesus faces conflict with the religious leaders
7. Jesus teaches on the Mount of Olives

C. DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS, THE KING (Matthew 26:1-28:20)

Jesus was formally presented to the nation of Israel, but rejected. How strange for the king to be accused, arrested, and crucified. But Jesus demonstrated his power even over death through his resurrection, and gained access for us into his kingdom. With all this evidence that Jesus is God's Son, we, too, should accept him as our Lord.

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Jesus Christ, the King

EXPLANATION: Jesus is revealed as the King of kings. His miraculous birth, his life and teaching, his miracles, and his triumph over death show his true identity.

IMPORTANCE: Jesus cannot be equated with any person or power. He is the supreme ruler of time and eternity, heaven and earth, humans and angels. We should give him his rightful place as king of our lives.

THEME: The Messiah

EXPLANATION: Jesus was the Messiah, the One for whom the Jews had waited to deliver them from Roman oppression. Yet tragically, they didn't recognize him when he came because his kingship was not what they expected. The true purpose of God's anointed deliverer was to die for all people to free them from sin's oppression.

IMPORTANCE: Because Jesus was sent by God, we can trust him with our lives. It is worth everything we have to acknowledge him and give ourselves to him, because he came to be our Messiah, our Savior.

THEME: Kingdom of God

EXPLANATION: Jesus came to earth to begin his kingdom. His full kingdom will be realized at his return and will be made up of anyone who has faithfully followed him.

IMPORTANCE: The way to enter God's kingdom is by faith—believing in Christ to save us from sin and change our lives. We must do the work of his kingdom now to be prepared for his return.

THEME: Teachings

EXPLANATION: Jesus taught the people through sermons, illustrations, and parables. Through his teachings, he showed the true ingredients of faith and how to guard against a fruitless and hypocritical life.

IMPORTANCE: Jesus' teachings show us how to prepare for life in his eternal kingdom by living properly right now. He lived what he taught, and we too must practice what we preach.

THEME: Resurrection

EXPLANATION: When Jesus rose from the dead, he rose in power as the true king. In his victory over death, he established his credentials as king and his power and authority over evil.

IMPORTANCE: The resurrection shows Jesus' all-powerful life for us—not even death could stop his plan of offering eternal life. Those who believe in Jesus can hope for a resurrection like his. Our role is to tell his story to all the earth so that everyone may share in his victory.

TIMELINE

Herod the Great begins to rule 37 B.C.

Jesus is born 6/5 B.C.
Escape to Egypt 5/4 B.C.
Herod the Great dies 4 B.C.
Return to Nazareth 4/3 B.C.
Judea becomes a Roman province A.D. 6
Jesus visits temple as a boy 6/7
Tiberius Caesar becomes emperor 14
Pontius Pilate appointed governor 26
Jesus begins his ministry 26/27
Jesus chooses twelve disciples 28
Jesus feeds 5,000 29
Jesus is crucified, rises again, and ascends 30

See Also:

250 Events in the Life of Christ/A Harmony of the Gospels
The Parables of Jesus
Jesus' Miracles
Comparison of the Four Gospels
Messianic Prophecies and Fulfillments

Mark

OVERVIEW: WE'RE number one! . . . The greatest, strongest, prettiest. . . champions! Daily those proclamations boldly assert claims of supremacy. Everyone wants to be and be with a winner. Losers are those who finish less than first. In direct contrast are the words of Jesus, "And whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:44-45). Jesus *is* the greatest—God incarnate, our Messiah—but he entered history as a servant.

This is the message of Mark. Written to encourage Roman Christians and to prove beyond a doubt that Jesus is the Messiah, Mark presents a rapid succession of vivid pictures of Jesus in action—his true identity revealed by what he does, not necessarily by what he says. It is Jesus on the move.

Omitting the birth of Jesus, Mark begins with John the Baptist's preaching. Then, moving quickly past Jesus' baptism, temptation in the desert, and call of the disciples, Mark takes us directly into Jesus' public ministry. We see Jesus confronting a demon, healing a leper, and forgiving and healing the paralytic lowered into Jesus' presence by friends.

Next, Jesus called Matthew (Levi) and had dinner with him and his questionable associates. This initiated the conflict with the Pharisees and other religious leaders who condemned Jesus for eating with sinners and breaking the Sabbath.

In Mark 4, Mark pauses to give a sample of Jesus' teaching—the parable of the sower and the illustration of the mustard seed—and then plunges back into the action. Jesus calmed the waves, drove out demons, and healed Jairus's daughter.

After returning to Nazareth for a few days and experiencing rejection in his hometown, Jesus commissioned the disciples to spread the Good News everywhere. Opposition from Herod and the Pharisees increased and John the Baptist was beheaded. But Jesus continued to move, feeding 5,000, reaching out to the Syrophenician woman, healing the deaf man, and feeding 4,000.

Finally it was time to reveal his true identity to the disciples. Did they really know who Jesus was? Peter proclaimed him Messiah, but then promptly showed that he did not understand Jesus' mission. After the transfiguration, Jesus continued to teach and heal, confronting the Pharisees about divorce and the rich young man about eternal life. Blind Bartimaeus was healed.

Events moved rapidly toward a climax. The Last Supper, the betrayal, the crucifixion, and the resurrection are dramatically portrayed, along with more examples of Jesus' teachings. Mark shows us Jesus—moving, serving, sacrificing, and saving! As you read Mark, be ready for action, be open for God's move into your life, and be challenged to move into your world to serve.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. BIRTH AND PREPARATION OF JESUS, THE SERVANT (Mark 1:1-13)

Jesus did not arrive unannounced or unexpected. The Old Testament prophets had clearly predicted the coming of a great One, sent by God himself, who would offer salvation and eternal peace to Israel and the entire world. Then came John the Baptist, who announced that the long-awaited Messiah had finally come and would soon be among the people. In God's work in the world today, Jesus does not come unannounced or unexpected. Yet many still reject him. We have the witness of the Bible, but some choose to ignore it, just as many ignored John the Baptist in his day.

B. MESSAGE AND MINISTRY OF JESUS, THE SERVANT (Mark 1:14-13:37)

Jesus had all the power of almighty God—he raised the dead, gave sight to the blind, restored deformed bodies, and quieted stormy seas. But with all this power, Jesus came to mankind as a servant. We can use his life as a pattern for how to live today. As Jesus served God and others, so should we.

1. Jesus' ministry in Galilee
2. Jesus' ministry beyond Galilee
3. Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem

C. DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS, THE SERVANT (Mark 14:1-16:20)

Jesus came as a servant, so many did not recognize or acknowledge him as the Messiah. We, too, must be careful we don't reject God or his will because he doesn't quite fit our image of what God should be.

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Jesus Christ

EXPLANATION: Jesus Christ alone is the Son of God. In Mark, Jesus demonstrates his divinity by overcoming disease, demons, and death. Although he had the power to be king of the earth, Jesus chose to obey the Father and die for us.

IMPORTANCE: When Jesus rose from the dead, he proved that he was God, that he could forgive sin, and that he has the power to change our lives. By trusting in him for forgiveness, we can begin a new life with him as our guide.

THEME: Servant

EXPLANATION: As the Messiah, Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament by coming to earth. He did not come as a conquering king; he came as a servant. He helped mankind by telling them about God and healing them. Even more, by giving his life as a sacrifice for sin, he did the ultimate act of service.

IMPORTANCE: Because of Jesus' example, we should be willing to serve God and others. Real greatness in Christ's kingdom is shown by service and sacrifice. Ambition or love of power or position should not be our motive; instead, we should do God's work because we love him.

THEME: Miracles

EXPLANATION: Mark records more of Jesus' miracles than sermons. Jesus is clearly a man of power and action, not just words. Jesus did miracles to convince the people who he was and to teach the disciples his true identity as God.

IMPORTANCE: The more convinced we become that Jesus is God, the more we will see his power and his love. His mighty works show us he is able to save anyone regardless of his or her past. His miracles of forgiveness bring healing, wholeness, and changed lives to those who trust him.

THEME: Spreading the gospel

EXPLANATION: Jesus directed his public ministry to the Jews first. When the Jewish leaders opposed him, Jesus also went to the non-Jewish world, healing and preaching. Roman soldiers, Syrians, and other Gentiles heard the Good News. Many believed and followed him. Jesus' final message to his disciples challenged them to go into all the world and preach the gospel of salvation.

IMPORTANCE: Jesus crossed national, racial, and economic barriers to spread his Good News. Jesus' message of faith and forgiveness is for the whole world—not just our church, neighborhood, or nation. We must reach out beyond our own people and needs to fulfill the worldwide vision of Jesus Christ that people everywhere might hear this great message and be saved from sin and death.

TIMELINE

Herod the Great begins to rule 37 B.C.
Jesus is born 6/5 B.C.
Escape to Egypt 5/4 B.C.
Herod the Great dies 4 B.C.
Return to Nazareth 4/3 B.C.
Jesus visits temple as a boy A.D. 6/7
Tiberius Caesar becomes emperor 14
John's ministry begins 26
Jesus begins his ministry 26/27
Jesus chooses twelve disciples 28
Jesus feeds 5,000 29
Jesus is crucified, rises again, and ascends 30

Luke

OVERVIEW: EVERY birth is a miracle, and every child is a gift from God. But nearly 20 centuries ago, there was the miracle of miracles. A baby was born, but he was the Son of God. The Gospels tell of this birth, but Dr. Luke, as though he were the attending physician, provides most of the details surrounding this awesome occasion. With divine Father and human mother, Jesus entered history—God in the flesh.

Luke affirms Jesus' divinity, but the real emphasis of his book is to show Jesus' humanity—Jesus, the Son of God, is also the Son of Man. As a doctor, Luke was a man of science, and as a Greek, he was a man of detail. It is not surprising, then,

that he begins by outlining his extensive research and explaining that he is reporting the facts (Luke 1:1-4). Luke also was a close friend and traveling companion of Paul, so he could interview the other disciples, had access to other historical accounts, and was an eyewitness to the birth and growth of the early church. His Gospel and book of Acts are reliable, historical documents.

Luke's story begins with angels appearing to Zechariah and then to Mary, telling them of the upcoming births of their sons. From Zechariah and Elizabeth would come John the Baptist, who would prepare the way for Christ. And Mary would conceive by the Holy Spirit and bear Jesus, the Son of God. Soon after John's birth, Caesar Augustus declared a census, and so Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem, the town of David, their ancient ancestor. There the child was born. Angels announced the joyous event to shepherds, who rushed to the manger. When the shepherds left, they were praising God and spreading the news. Eight days later, Jesus was circumcised and then dedicated to God in the temple, where Simeon and Anna confirmed Jesus' identity as the Savior, their Messiah.

Luke gives us a glimpse of Jesus at age 12—discussing theology with the teachers of the law at the temple (Luke 2:41-52). The next event occurred 18 years later, when we read of John the Baptist preaching in the desert. Jesus came to John to be baptized before beginning his public ministry (Luke 3:1-38). At this point, Luke traces Jesus' genealogy on his stepfather Joseph's side, through David and Abraham back to Adam, underscoring Jesus' identity as the Son of Man.

After the temptation (Luke 4:1-13), Jesus returned to Galilee to preach, teach, and heal (Luke 4:14-21:38). During this time, he began gathering his group of 12 disciples (Luke 5:1-10, 27-29). Later Jesus commissioned the disciples and sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God. When they returned, Jesus revealed to them his mission, his true identity, and what it means to be his disciple (Luke 9:18-62). His mission would take him to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-53), where he would be rejected, tried, and crucified.

While Jesus carried his own cross to Golgotha, some women in Jerusalem wept for him, but Jesus told them to weep for themselves and for their children (Luke 23:28). But Luke's Gospel does not end in sadness. It concludes with the thrilling account of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, his appearances to the disciples, and his promise to send the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:1-53). Read Luke's beautifully written and accurate account of the life of Jesus, Son of Man and Son of God. Then praise God for sending the Savior for all people—our risen and triumphant Lord.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. BIRTH AND PREPARATION OF JESUS, THE SAVIOR (Luke 1:1-4:13)

From an infant who could do nothing on his own, Jesus grew to become completely able to fulfill his mission on earth. He was fully human, developing in all ways like us. Yet he remained fully God. He took no shortcuts and was not isolated from the pressures and temptations of life. There are no shortcuts for us either as we prepare for a life of service to God.

B. MESSAGE AND MINISTRY OF JESUS, THE SAVIOR (Luke 4:14-21:38)

Jesus taught great crowds of people, especially through parables, which are stories with great truths. But only those with ears to hear will understand. We should pray that God's Spirit would help us understand the implications of these truths for our lives so we can become more and more like Jesus.

1. Jesus' ministry in Galilee
2. Jesus' ministry on the way to Jerusalem
3. Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem

C. DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS, THE SAVIOR (Luke 22:1-24:53)

The Savior of the world was arrested and executed. But death could not destroy him, and Jesus came back to life and ascended to heaven. In Luke's careful, historical account, we receive the facts about Jesus' resurrection. We must not only believe that these facts are true, but we must also trust Christ as our Savior. It is shortsighted to neglect the facts, but how sad it is to accept the facts and neglect the forgiveness that Jesus offers to each of us.

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Jesus Christ, the Savior

EXPLANATION: Luke describes how God's Son entered human history. Jesus lived as the perfect example of a human. After a perfect ministry, he provided a perfect sacrifice for our sin so we could be saved.

IMPORTANCE: Jesus is our perfect leader and Savior. He offers forgiveness to all who will accept him as Lord of their lives and believe that what he says is true.

THEME: History

EXPLANATION: Luke was a medical doctor and historian. He put great emphasis on dates and details, connecting Jesus to events and people in history.

IMPORTANCE: Luke gives details so we can believe in the reliability of the history of Jesus' life. Even more important, we can believe with certainty that Jesus is God.

THEME: People

EXPLANATION: Jesus was deeply interested in people and relationships. He showed warm concern for his followers and friends—men, women, and children.

IMPORTANCE: Jesus' love for people is good news for everyone. His message is for all people in every nation. Each one of us has an opportunity to respond to him in faith.

THEME: Compassion

EXPLANATION: As a perfect human, Jesus showed tender sympathy to the poor, the despised, the hurt, and the sinful. No one was rejected or ignored by him.

IMPORTANCE: Jesus is more than an idea or teacher—he cares for you. Only this kind of deep love can satisfy your need.

THEME: Holy Spirit

EXPLANATION: The Holy Spirit was present at Jesus' birth, baptism, ministry, and resurrection. As a perfect example for us, Jesus lived in dependence on the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was sent by God as confirmation of Jesus' authority.

IMPORTANCE: The Holy Spirit is given to enable people to live for Christ. By faith we can have the Holy Spirit's presence and power to witness and to serve.

TIMELINE

Herod the Great begins to rule 37 B.C.

Jesus is born 6/5 B.C.

Escape to Egypt 5/4 B.C.

Herod the Great dies 4 B.C.

Return to Nazareth 4/3 B.C.

Jesus visits temple as a boy A.D. 6/7

Tiberius Caesar becomes emperor 14

John's ministry begins 26

Jesus begins his ministry 26/27

Jesus chooses twelve disciples 28

Jesus feeds 5,000 29

Jesus is crucified, rises again, and ascends 30

See Also:

250 Events in the Life of Christ/A Harmony of the Gospels

The Parables of Jesus

Jesus' Miracles

Comparison of the Four Gospels

Messianic Prophecies and Fulfillments

John

OVERVIEW: HE SPOKE, and galaxies whirled into place, stars burned the heavens, and planets began orbiting their suns—words of awesome, unlimited, unleashed power. He spoke again, and the waters and lands were filled with plants and creatures, running, swimming, growing, and multiplying—words of animating, breathing, pulsing life. Again he spoke, and man and woman were formed, thinking, speaking, and loving—words of personal and creative glory. Eternal, infinite, unlimited—he was, is, and always will be the Maker and Lord of all that exists.

And then he came in the flesh to a speck in the universe called planet earth. The mighty Creator became a part of the creation, limited by time and space and susceptible to aging, sickness, and death. But love propelled him, and so he came to rescue and save those who were lost and to give them the gift of eternity. He is *the Word*; he is Jesus, the Christ.

It is this truth that the apostle John brings to us in this book. John's Gospel is not a life of Christ; it is a powerful argument for the incarnation, a conclusive demonstration that Jesus was, and is, the very heaven-sent Son of God and the only source of eternal life.

John discloses Christ's identity with his very first words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning" (John 1:1-2); and the rest of the book continues the theme. John, the eyewitness, chose eight of Christ's miracles (or signs, as he calls them), to reveal Christ's divine/human nature and his life-giving mission. These signs are (1)

turning water to wine (John 2:1-11), (2) healing the official's son (John 4:46-54), (3) healing the invalid at Bethesda (John 5:1-9), (4) feeding the 5,000 with just a few loaves and fish (John 6:1-14), (5) walking on the water (John 6:15-21), (6) restoring sight to the blind man (John 9:1-41), (7) raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-44), and, after the resurrection, (8) giving the disciples an overwhelming catch of fish (John 21:1-14).

In every chapter Jesus' deity is revealed. And Jesus' true identity is underscored through the titles he is given—Word, the One and Only, Lamb of God, Son of God, true bread, life, resurrection, vine. And the formula is “I am.” When Jesus uses this phrase, he affirms his preexistence and eternal deity. Jesus says, *I am* the bread of life (John 6:35); *I am* the light of the world (John 8:12; John 9:5); *I am* the gate (John 10:7); *I am* the good shepherd (John 10:11, 14); *I am* the resurrection and the life (John 11:25); *I am* the way and the truth and the life (John 14:6); and *I am* the true vine (John 15:1).

The greatest sign, of course, is the resurrection, and John provides a stirring eyewitness account of finding the empty tomb. Then he records various post-resurrection appearances by Jesus.

John, the devoted follower of Christ, has given us a personal and powerful look at Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God. As you read his story, commit yourself to believe in and follow him.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. BIRTH AND PREPARATION OF JESUS, THE SON OF GOD (John 1:1-2:11)

John makes it clear that Jesus is not just a man; he is the eternal Son of God. He is the light of the world because he offers this gift of eternal life to all mankind. How blind and foolish to call Jesus nothing more than an unusually good man or moral teacher. Yet we sometimes act as if this were true when we casually toss around his words and go about living our own way. If Jesus is the eternal Son of God, we should pay attention to his divine identity and life-giving message.

B. MESSAGE AND MINISTRY OF JESUS, THE SON OF GOD (John 2:12-12:50)

Jesus meets with individuals, preaches to great crowds, trains his disciples, and debates with the religious leaders. The message that he is the Son of God receives a mixed reaction. Some worship him, some are puzzled, some shrink back, and some move to silence him. We see the same varied reactions today. Times have changed, but people's hearts remain hard. May we see ourselves in these encounters Jesus had with people, and may our response be to worship and follow him.

1. Jesus encounters belief and unbelief from the people
2. Jesus encounters conflict with the religious leaders
3. Jesus encounters crucial events in Jerusalem

C. DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS, THE SON OF GOD (John 13:1-21:25)

Jesus carefully instructed the disciples how to continue to believe even after his death, yet they could not take it in. After he died and the first reports came back that Jesus was alive, the disciples could not believe it. Thomas is especially remembered as one who refused to believe even when he heard the eyewitness accounts from other disciples. May we not be like Thomas, demanding a physical face-to-face encounter, but may we accept the eyewitness testimony of the disciples that John has recorded in this Gospel.

1. Jesus teaches his disciples
2. Jesus completes his mission

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Jesus Christ, Son of God

EXPLANATION: John shows us that Jesus is unique as God's special Son, yet he is fully God. Because he is fully God, Jesus is able to reveal God to us clearly and accurately.

IMPORTANCE: Because Jesus is God's Son, we can perfectly trust what he says. By trusting him, we can gain an open mind to understand God's message and fulfill his purpose in our lives.

THEME: Eternal life

EXPLANATION: Because Jesus is God, he lives forever. Before the world began, he lived with God, and he will reign forever with him. In John we see Jesus revealed in power and magnificence even before his resurrection.

IMPORTANCE: Jesus offers eternal life to us. We are invited to begin living in a personal, eternal relationship with him that begins now. Although we must grow old and die, by trusting him we can have a new life that lasts forever.

THEME: Belief

EXPLANATION: John records eight specific signs, or miracles, that show the nature of Jesus' power and love. We see his power over everything created, and we see his love of all people. These signs encourage us to believe in him.

IMPORTANCE: Believing is active, living, and continuous trust in Jesus as God. When we believe in his life, his words, his death, and his resurrection, we are cleansed from sin and receive power to follow him. But we must respond to him by believing.

THEME: Holy Spirit

EXPLANATION: Jesus taught his disciples that the Holy Spirit would come after he ascended from earth. The Holy Spirit would then indwell, guide, counsel, and comfort those who follow Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ's presence and power are multiplied in all who believe.

IMPORTANCE: Through God's Holy Spirit we are drawn to him in faith. We must know the Holy Spirit to understand all Jesus taught. We can experience Jesus' love and guidance as we allow the Holy Spirit to do his work in us.

THEME: Resurrection

EXPLANATION: On the third day after he died, Jesus rose from the dead. This was verified by his disciples and many eyewitnesses. This reality changed the disciples from frightened deserters to dynamic leaders in the new church. This fact is the foundation of the Christian faith.

IMPORTANCE: We can be changed as the disciples were and have confidence that our bodies will one day be raised to live with Christ forever. The same power that raised Christ to life can give us the ability to follow Christ each day.

TIMELINE

Herod the Great begins to rule 37 B.C.

Jesus is born 6/5 B.C.

Escape to Egypt 5/4 B.C.

Herod the Great dies 4 B.C.

Return to Nazareth 4/3 B.C.

Judea becomes a Roman province A.D. 6

Tiberius Caesar becomes emperor 14

Pontius Pilate appointed governor 26

Jesus begins his ministry 26/27

Jesus and Nicodemus 27

Jesus chooses twelve disciples 28

Jesus feeds 5,000 29

Jesus is crucified, rises again, and ascends 30

See Also:

250 Events in the Life of Christ/A Harmony of the Gospels

The Parables of Jesus

Jesus' Miracles

Comparison of the Four Gospels

Messianic Prophecies and Fulfillment

SPREADING THE GOSPEL

Acts

OVERVIEW: WITH a flick of the fingers, friction occurs and a spark leaps from match to tinder. A small flame burns the edges and grows, fueled by wood and air. Heat builds, and soon the kindling is licked by orange-red tongues. Higher and wider it spreads, consuming the wood. The flame has become a fire.

Nearly 2,000 years ago, a match was struck in Palestine. At first, just a few in that corner of the world were touched and warmed; but the fire spread beyond Jerusalem and Judea out to the world and to all people. Acts provides an eyewitness account of the flame and fire—the birth and spread of the church. Beginning in Jerusalem with a small group of disciples, the message traveled across the Roman empire. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, this courageous band preached, taught, healed, and demonstrated love in synagogues, schools, homes, marketplaces, and courtrooms, and on streets, hills, ships, and desert roads—wherever God sent them, lives and history were changed.

Written by Luke as a sequel to his Gospel, Acts is an accurate historical record of the early church. But Acts is also a theological book, with lessons and living examples of the work of the Holy Spirit, church relationships and organization, the implications of grace, and the law of love. And Acts is an apologetic work, building a strong case for the validity of Christ's claims and promises.

The book of Acts begins with the outpouring of the promised Holy Spirit and the commencement of the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This Spirit-inspired evangelism began in Jerusalem and eventually spread to Rome, covering most of the Roman empire.

The gospel first went to the Jews; but they, as a nation, rejected it. A remnant of Jews, of course, gladly received the Good News. But the continual rejection of the

gospel by the vast majority of the Jews led to the ever-increasing proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles. This was according to Jesus' plan: the gospel was to go from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). This, in fact, is the pattern that the Acts narrative follows. The glorious proclamation began in Jerusalem (Acts 1-7), went to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8 and following), and to the countries beyond Judea (Acts 11:19; Acts 13:4 and on to the end of Acts). The second half of Acts is focused primarily on Paul's missionary journeys to many countries north of the Mediterranean Sea. He, with his companions, took the gospel first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. Some of the Jews believed, and many of the Gentiles received the Good News with joy. New churches were started, and new believers began to grow in the Christian life.

As you read Acts, put yourself in the place of the disciples—feel with them as they are filled with the Holy Spirit, and thrill with them as they see thousands respond to the gospel message. Sense their commitment as they give every ounce of talent and treasure to Christ. And as you read, watch the Spirit-led boldness of these first-century believers, who through suffering and in the face of death take every opportunity to tell of their crucified and risen Lord. Then decide to be a 20th-century version of those men and women of God.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. PETER'S MINISTRY (Acts 1:1-12:25)

After the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Peter preached boldly and performed many miracles. Peter's actions demonstrate vividly the source and effects of Christian power. Because of the Holy Spirit, God's people were empowered so they could accomplish their tasks. The Holy Spirit is still available to empower believers today. We should turn to the Holy Spirit to give us the strength, courage, and insight to accomplish our work for God.

1. Establishment of the church
2. Expansion of the church

B. PAUL'S MINISTRY (Acts 13:1-28:31)

Paul's missionary adventures show us the progress of Christianity. The gospel could not be confined to one corner of the world. This was a faith that offered hope to all humanity. We too should venture forth and share in this heroic task to witness for Christ in all the world.

1. First missionary journey
2. The council at Jerusalem
3. Second missionary journey
4. Third missionary journey
5. Paul on trial

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Church beginnings

EXPLANATION: Acts is the history of how Christianity was founded and organized and solved its problems. The community of believers began by faith in the risen Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, who enabled them to witness, to love, and to serve.

IMPORTANCE: New churches are continually being founded. By faith in Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit, the church can be a vibrant agent for change. As we face new problems, Acts gives important remedies for solving them.

THEME: Holy Spirit

EXPLANATION: The church did not start or grow by its own power or enthusiasm. The disciples were empowered by God's Holy Spirit. He was the promised Counselor and Guide sent when Jesus went to heaven.

IMPORTANCE: The Holy Spirit's work demonstrated that Christianity was supernatural. Thus the church became more Holy Spirit-conscious than problem-conscious. By faith, any believer can claim the Holy Spirit's power to do Christ's work.

THEME: Church growth

EXPLANATION: Acts presents the history of a dynamic, growing community of believers from Jerusalem to Syria, Africa, Asia, and Europe. In the first century, Christianity spread from believing Jews to non-Jews in 39 cities and 30 countries, islands, or provinces.

IMPORTANCE: When the Holy Spirit works, there is movement, excitement, and growth. He gives us the motivation, energy, and ability to get the gospel to the whole world. How are you fitting into God's plan for expanding Christianity? What is your place in this movement?

THEME: Witnessing

EXPLANATION: Peter, John, Philip, Paul, Barnabas, and thousands more witnessed to their new faith in Christ. By personal testimony, preaching, or defense before authorities, they told the story with boldness and courage to groups of all sizes.

IMPORTANCE: We are God's people, chosen to be part of his plan to reach the world. In love and by faith, we can have the Holy Spirit's help as we witness or preach. Witnessing is also beneficial to us because it strengthens our faith as we confront those who challenge it.

THEME: Opposition

EXPLANATION: Through imprisonment, beatings, plots, and riots, Christians were persecuted by both Jews and Gentiles. But the opposition became a catalyst for the spread of Christianity. Growth during times of oppression showed that Christianity was not the work of humans, but of God.

IMPORTANCE: God can work through any opposition. When severe treatment from hostile unbelievers comes, realize that it has come because you have been a faithful witness and you have looked for the opportunity to present the Good News about Christ. Seize the opportunities that opposition brings.

TIMELINE

Jesus crucified; Pentecost; church begun A.D. 30
Stephen martyred; Paul's conversion 35
Paul returns to Tarsus 38
Barnabas goes to find Paul 43
James martyred; Peter in prison 44
Paul's first missionary journey 46-48
Jerusalem Council 50
Paul's second missionary journey 50-52
Paul's third missionary journey 53-57

Nero becomes emperor 54
Paul imprisoned in Caesarea 57-59
Paul's journey to Rome 59
Paul released from prison 62
Paul martyred 67?
Rome destroys Jerusalem 70

PAUL'S LETTERS

Romans

OVERVIEW: KNOWLEDGEABLE and experienced, the District Attorney makes his case. Calling key witnesses to the stand, he presents the evidence. After discrediting the testimonies of witnesses for the defense by skillfully cross-examining them, he concludes with an airtight summary and stirring challenge for the jury. The announced verdict is no surprise. “Guilty” states the foreman; and justice is served.

The apostle Paul was intelligent, articulate, and committed to his calling. Like a skilled lawyer, he presented the case for the gospel clearly and forthrightly in his letter to the believers in Rome.

Paul had heard of the church at Rome, but he had never been there, nor had any of the other apostles. Evidently the church had been begun by Jews who had come to faith during Pentecost (Acts 2). They spread the faith on their return to Rome, and the church grew.

Although many barriers separated them, Paul felt a bond with these Romans. They were his brothers and sisters in Christ, and he longed to see them face to face. He had never met most of the believers there, yet he loved them. He sent this letter to introduce himself and to make a clear declaration of the faith.

After a brief introduction, Paul presents the facts of the gospel (Romans 1:3) and declares his allegiance to it (Romans 1:16-17). He continues by building an airtight case for the lostness of mankind and the necessity for God’s intervention (Romans 1:18-3:20).

Then Paul presents the Good News—salvation is available to all, regardless of a person’s identity, sin, or heritage. We are saved by *grace* (unearned, undeserved favor from God) through *faith* (complete trust) in Christ and his finished work. Through him we can stand before God justified, “not guilty” (Romans 3:21-5:21). With this foundation Paul moves directly into a discussion of the freedom that comes from being saved—freedom from the power of sin (Romans 6:1-23), freedom from the domination of the law (Romans 7:1-25), freedom to become like Christ and discover God’s limitless love (Romans 8:1-39).

Speaking directly to his Jewish brothers and sisters, Paul shares his concern for them and explains how they fit into God's plan (Romans 9:1-11:12). God has made the way for Jews and Gentiles to be united in the body of Christ—both groups can praise God for his wisdom and love (Romans 11:13-36).

Paul explains what it means to live in complete submission to Christ—using spiritual gifts to serve others (Romans 12:3-8), genuinely loving others (Romans 12:9-21), and being good citizens (Romans 13:1-14). Freedom must be guided by love as we build each other up in the faith, being sensitive and helpful to those who are weak (Romans 14:1-15:4). Paul stresses unity, especially between Gentiles and Jews (Romans 15:5-13). He concludes by reviewing his reasons for writing, outlining his personal plans (Romans 15:22-33), greeting his friends, and giving a few final thoughts and greetings from his traveling companions (Romans 16:1-27).

As you read Romans, reexamine your commitment to Christ and reconfirm your relationships with other believers in Christ's body.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. WHAT TO BELIEVE (Romans 1:1-11:36)

Paul clearly sets forth the foundations of the Christian faith. All people are sinful; Christ died to forgive sin; we are made right with God through faith; this begins a new life with a new relationship with God. Like a sports team that constantly reviews the basics, we will be greatly helped in our faith by keeping close to these foundations. If we study Romans carefully, we will never be at a loss to know what to believe.

1. Sinfulness of mankind
2. Forgiveness of sin through Christ
3. Freedom from sin's grasp
4. Israel's past, present, and future

B. HOW TO BEHAVE (Romans 12:1-16:27)

Paul gives clear, practical guidelines for the believers in Rome. The Christian life is not abstract theology unconnected with life, but it has practical implications that will affect how we choose to behave each day. It is not enough merely to know the gospel; we must let it transform our lives and let God impact every aspect of our lives.

1. Personal responsibility
2. Personal notes

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Sin

EXPLANATION: Sin means refusing to do God's will and failing to do all that God wants. Since Adam's rebellion against God, our nature is to disobey him. Our sin cuts us off from God. Sin causes us to want to live our own way rather than God's way. Because God is morally perfect, just, and fair, he is right to condemn sin.

IMPORTANCE: Each person has sinned, either by rebelling against God or by ignoring his will. No matter what our background or how hard we try to live good and moral lives, we cannot earn salvation or remove our sin. Only Christ can save us.

THEME: Salvation

EXPLANATION: Our sin points out our need to be forgiven and cleansed. Although we don't deserve it, God, in his kindness, reached out to love and forgive us. He provides the way for us to be saved. Christ's death paid the penalty for our sin.

IMPORTANCE: It is good news that God saves us from our sin. But we must believe in Jesus Christ and believe that he forgave our sin in order to enter into a wonderful new relationship with God.

THEME: Growth

EXPLANATION: By God's power, believers are sanctified—made holy. This means we are set apart from sin, enabled to obey and to become more like Christ. When we are growing in our relationship with Christ, the Holy Spirit frees us from the demands of the law and from fear of judgment.

IMPORTANCE: Because we are free from sin's control, the law's demands, and fear of God's punishment, we can grow in our relationship with Christ. By trusting

in the Holy Spirit and allowing him to help us, we can overcome sin and temptation.

THEME: Sovereignty

EXPLANATION: God oversees and cares about his people—past, present, and future. God’s ways of dealing with people are always fair. Because God is in charge of all creation, he can save whomever he wills.

IMPORTANCE: Because of God’s mercy, both Jews and Gentiles can be saved. We all must respond to his mercy and accept his gracious offer of forgiveness. Because he is sovereign, let him reign in your heart.

THEME: Service

EXPLANATION: When our purpose is to give credit to God for his love, power, and perfection in all we do, we can serve him properly. Serving him unifies all believers and enables them to show love and sensitivity to others.

IMPORTANCE: None of us can be fully Christlike by ourselves—it takes the entire body of Christ to fully express Christ. By actively and vigorously building up other believers, Christians can be a symphony of service to God.

1 Corinthians

OVERVIEW: ON A BED of grass, a chameleon's skin turns green. On the earth, it becomes brown. The animal changes to match the environment. Many creatures blend into nature with God-given camouflage suits to aid their survival. It's natural to fit in and adapt to the environment. But followers of Christ are *new creations*, born from above and changed from within, with values and life-styles that confront the world and clash with accepted morals. True believers don't blend in very well.

The Christians in Corinth were struggling with their environment. Surrounded by corruption and every conceivable sin, they felt the pressure to adapt. They knew they were free in Christ, but what did this freedom mean? How should they view idols or sexuality? What should they do about marriage, women in the church, and the gifts of the Spirit? These were more than theoretical questions—the church was being undermined by immorality and spiritual immaturity. The believers' faith was being tried in the crucible of immoral Corinth, and some of them were failing the test.

Paul heard of their struggles and wrote this letter to address their problems, heal their divisions, and answer their questions. Paul confronted them with their sin and their need for corrective action and clear commitment to Christ.

After a brief introduction (1 Cor. 1:1-9), Paul immediately turns to the question of unity (1 Cor. 1:10-4:21). He emphasizes the clear and simple gospel message around which all believers should rally; he explains the role of church leaders; and he urges them to grow up in their faith.

Paul then deals with the immorality of certain church members and the issue of lawsuits among Christians (1 Cor. 5:1-6:8). He tells them to exercise church discipline and to settle their internal matters themselves. Because so many of the problems in the Corinthian church involved sex, Paul denounces sexual sin in the strongest possible terms (1 Cor. 6:9-20).

Next Paul answers some questions that the Corinthians had. Because prostitution and immorality were pervasive, marriages in Corinth were in shambles, and Christians weren't sure how to react. Paul gives pointed and practical answers (1 Cor. 7:1-40). Concerning the question of meat sacrificed to idols, Paul suggests that we show complete commitment to Christ and sensitivity to other believers, especially weaker brothers and sisters (1 Cor. 8:1-11:2).

Paul goes on to talk about worship, and he carefully explains the role of women, the Lord's Supper, and spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 11:3-14:39). Sandwiched in the middle of this section is his magnificent description of the greatest gift—love (1 Cor. 13). Then Paul concludes with a discussion of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1-58), some final thoughts, greetings, and a benediction (1 Cor. 16:1-24).

In this letter Paul confronted the Corinthians about their sins and shortcomings. And 1 Corinthians calls all Christians to be careful not to blend in with the world and accept its values and life-styles. We must live Christ-centered, blameless, loving lives that make a difference for God. As you read 1 Corinthians, examine your values in light of complete commitment to Christ.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. PAUL ADDRESSES CHURCH PROBLEMS (1 Cor. 1:1-6:20)

Without Paul's presence, the Corinthian church had fallen into divisiveness and disorder. This resulted in many problems, which Paul addressed squarely. We must be concerned for unity and order in our local churches, but we should not mistake inactivity for order and cordiality for unity. We too must squarely address problems in our churches.

1. Divisions in the church
2. Disorder in the church

B. PAUL ANSWERS CHURCH QUESTIONS (1 Cor. 7:1-16:24)

The Corinthians had sent Paul a list of questions, and he answered them in a way meant to correct abuses in the church and to show how important it is that they live what they believe. Paul gives us a Christian approach to problem-solving. He analyzed the problem thoroughly to uncover the underlying issue and then highlighted the Biblical values that should guide our actions.

1. Instruction on Christian marriage
2. Instruction on Christian freedom
3. Instruction on public worship
4. Instruction on the resurrection

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Loyalties

EXPLANATION: The Corinthians were rallying around various church leaders and teachers—Peter, Paul, and Apollos. These loyalties led to intellectual pride and created a spirit of division in the church.

IMPORTANCE: Our loyalty to human leaders or human wisdom must never divide Christians into camps. We must care for our fellow believers, not fight with them. Your allegiance must be to Christ. Let him lead you.

THEME: Immorality

EXPLANATION: Paul received a report of uncorrected sexual sin in the church at Corinth. The people had grown indifferent to immorality. Others had misconceptions about marriage. We are to live morally, keeping our bodies ready to serve God at all times.

IMPORTANCE: Christians must never compromise with sinful ideas and practices. We should not blend in with people around us. You must live up to God's standard of morality and not condone immoral behavior even if society accepts it.

THEME: Freedom

EXPLANATION: Paul taught freedom of choice on practices not expressly forbidden in Scripture. Some believers felt certain actions—like eating the meat of animals used in pagan rituals—were corrupt by association. Others felt free to participate in such actions without feeling that they had sinned.

IMPORTANCE: We are free in Christ, yet we must not abuse our Christian freedom by being inconsiderate and insensitive to others. We must never encourage others to do wrong because of something we have done. Let love guide your behavior.

THEME: Worship

EXPLANATION: Paul addressed disorder in worship. People were taking the Lord's Supper without first confessing sin. There was misuse of spiritual gifts and confusion over women's roles in the church.

IMPORTANCE: Worship must be carried out properly and in an orderly manner. Everything we do to worship God should be done in a manner worthy of his high honor. Make sure that worship is harmonious, useful, and edifying to all believers.

THEME: Resurrection

EXPLANATION: Some people denied that Christ rose from the dead. Others felt that people would not physically be resurrected. Christ's resurrection assures us that we will have new, living bodies after we die. The hope of the resurrection forms the secret of Christian confidence.

IMPORTANCE: Since we will be raised again to life after we die, our lives are not in vain. We must stay faithful to God in our morality and our service. We are to live today knowing we will spend eternity with Christ.

2 Corinthians

OVERVIEW: SLITHERING through the centuries, the serpent whispers his smooth-tongued promises, beguiling, deceiving, and tempting—urging men and women to reject God and to follow Satan. Satan's emissaries have been many—false prophets contradicting God's ancient spokesmen, "pious" leaders hurling blasphemous accusations, and heretical teachers infiltrating churches. And the deception continues. Our world is filled with cults, "isms," and ideologies, all claiming to provide the way to God.

Paul constantly struggled with those who would mislead God's people, and he poured his life into spreading the Good News to the uttermost parts of the world. During three missionary trips and other travels, he proclaimed Christ, made converts, and established churches. But often young believers were easy prey for false teachers. False teachers were a constant threat to the gospel and the early church. So Paul had to spend much time warning and correcting these new Christians.

The church at Corinth was weak. Surrounded by idolatry and immorality, they struggled with their Christian faith and life-style. Through personal visits and letters, Paul tried to instruct them in the faith, resolve their conflicts, and solve some of their problems. First Corinthians was sent to deal with specific moral issues in the church and to answer questions about sex, marriage, and tender consciences. That letter confronted the issues directly and was well received by most. But there were false teachers who denied Paul's authority and slandered him. Paul then wrote 2 Corinthians to defend his position and to denounce those who were twisting the truth.

Second Corinthians must have been a difficult letter for Paul to write because he had to list his credentials as an apostle. Paul was reluctant to do so as a humble servant of Christ, but he knew it was necessary. Paul also knew that most of the believers in Corinth had taken his previous words to heart and were beginning to mature in their faith. He affirmed their commitment to Christ.

Second Corinthians begins with Paul reminding his readers of (1) his relationship to them—Paul had always been honest and straightforward with them (2 Cor. 1:12-14), (2) his itinerary—he was planning to visit them again (2 Cor. 1:15-2:3), and (3) his previous letter (2 Cor. 2:4-11). Paul then moves directly to the subject of false teachers (2 Cor. 2:17), and he reviews his ministry among the Corinthians to demonstrate the validity of his message and to urge them not to turn away from the truth (2 Cor. 3:1-7:16).

Paul next turns to the issue of collecting money for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. He tells them how others have given, and he urges them to show their love in a tangible way as well (2 Cor. 8:1-9:15). Paul then gives a strong defense of his authority as a genuine apostle while pointing out the deceptive influence of the false apostles (2 Cor. 10:1-13:13).

As you read this intensely personal letter, listen to Paul's words of love and exhortation, and be committed to the truth of God's Word and prepared to reject all false teaching.

THE BLUEPRINT

In responding to the attacks on his character and authority, Paul explains the nature of Christian ministry and, as an example, openly shares about his ministry. This is an important letter for all who wish to be involved in any kind of Christian ministry, because it has much to teach us about how we should handle our ministries today. Like Paul, those involved in ministry should be blameless, sincere, confident, caring, open, and willing to suffer for the sake of Christ.

1. Paul explains his actions (2 Cor. 1:1-2:11)
2. Paul defends his ministry (2 Cor. 2:12-7:16)
3. Paul defends the collection (2 Cor. 8:1-9:15)
4. Paul defends his authority (2 Cor. 10:1-13:13)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Trials

EXPLANATION: Paul experienced great suffering, persecution, and opposition in his ministry. He even struggled with a personal weakness—a “thorn” in the flesh. Through it all, Paul affirmed God's faithfulness.

IMPORTANCE: God is faithful. His strength is sufficient for any trial. When trials come, they keep us from pride and teach us dependence on God. He comforts us so we can comfort others.

THEME: Church discipline

EXPLANATION: Paul defends his role in church discipline. Neither immorality nor false teaching could be ignored. The church was to be neither too lax nor too severe in administering discipline. The church was to restore the corrected person when he or she repented.

IMPORTANCE: The goal of all discipline in the church should be correction, not vengeance. For churches to be effective, they must confront and solve problems, not ignore them. In everything, we must act in love.

THEME: Hope

EXPLANATION: To encourage the Corinthians as they faced trials, Paul reminded them that they would receive new bodies in heaven. This would be a great victory in contrast to their present suffering.

IMPORTANCE: To know we will receive new bodies offers us hope. No matter what adversity we face, we can keep going. Our faithful service will result in triumph.

THEME: Giving

EXPLANATION: Paul organized a collection of funds for the poor in the Jerusalem church. Many of the Asian churches gave money. Paul explains and defends his beliefs about giving, and he urges the Corinthians to follow through on their previous commitment.

IMPORTANCE: Like the Corinthians, we should follow through on our financial commitments. Our giving must be generous, sacrificial, well planned, and based on need. Our generosity not only helps those in need but enables them to thank God.

THEME: Sound doctrine

EXPLANATION: False teachers were challenging Paul's ministry and authority as an apostle. Paul asserts his authority in order to preserve correct Christian doctrine. His sincerity, his love for Christ, and his concern for the people were his defense.

IMPORTANCE: We should share Paul's concern for correct teaching in our churches. But in so doing, we must share his motivation—love for Christ and people—and his sincerity.

Galatians

OVERVIEW: A FAMILY, executing their carefully planned escape at midnight, dashing for the border. . . a man standing outside prison walls, gulping fresh air, awash in the new sun. . . a young woman with every trace of the ravaging drug gone from her system. . . they are FREE! With fresh anticipation, they can begin life anew.

Whether fleeing oppression, stepping out of prison, or breaking a strangling habit, freedom means life. There is nothing so exhilarating as knowing that the past is forgotten and that new options await. People yearn to be free.

The book of Galatians is the charter of Christian freedom. In this profound letter, Paul proclaims the reality of our liberty in Christ—freedom from the law and the power of sin, and freedom to serve our living Lord.

Most of the first converts and early leaders in the church were Jewish Christians who proclaimed Jesus as their Messiah. As Jewish Christians, they struggled with a dual identity: their Jewishness constrained them to be strict followers of the law; their newfound faith in Christ invited them to celebrate a holy liberty. They wondered how Gentiles (non-Jews) could be part of the kingdom of heaven.

This controversy tore the early church. Judaizers—an extremist Jewish faction within the church—taught that Gentile Christians had to submit to Jewish laws and traditions *in addition to* believing in Christ. As a missionary to the Gentiles, Paul had to confront this issue many times.

Galatians was written, therefore, to refute the Judaizers and to call believers back to the pure gospel. The Good News is for all people—Jews and Gentiles alike. Salvation is by God’s grace through faith in Christ Jesus *and nothing else*. Faith in Christ means true freedom.

After a brief introduction (Galatians 1:1-5), Paul addresses those who were accepting the Judaizer’s perverted gospel (Galatians 1:6-9). He summarizes the controversy, including his personal confrontation with Peter and other church leaders (Galatians 1:10-2:16). He then demonstrates that salvation is by faith alone by alluding to his conversion (Galatians 2:17-21), appealing to his readers’ own experience of the gospel (Galatians 3:1-5), and showing how the Old Testament teaches about grace (Galatians 3:6-20). Next, he explains the purpose of God’s laws and the relationship between law, God’s promises, and Christ (Galatians 3:21-4:31).

Having laid the foundation, Paul builds his case for Christian liberty. We are saved by faith, not by keeping the law (Galatians 5:1-12); our freedom means that we are free to love and serve one another, not to do wrong (Galatians 5:13-26); and Christians should carry each other’s burdens and be kind to each other (Galatians 6:1-10). In Galatians 6:11-18, Paul takes the pen into his own hand and shares his final thoughts.

As you read Galatians, try to understand this first-century conflict between grace and law, faith and deeds, but also be aware of modern parallels. Like Paul, defend the truth of the gospel and reject all those who would add to or twist this truth. You are *free* in Christ—step into the light and celebrate!

THE BLUEPRINT

In response to attacks from false teachers, Paul wrote to defend his apostleship and to defend the authority of the gospel. The Galatians were beginning to turn from faith to legalism. The struggle between the gospel and legalism is still a crisis. Many today would have us return to trying to earn God's favor through following rituals or obeying a set of rules. As Christians, we are not boxed in, but set free. To preserve our freedom, we must stay close to Christ and resist any who promote subtle ways of trying to earn our salvation.

1. Authenticity of the gospel (Galatians 1:1-2:21)
2. Superiority of the gospel (Galatians 3:1-4:31)
3. Freedom of the gospel (Galatians 5:1-6:18)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Law

EXPLANATION: A group of Jewish teachers insisted that non-Jewish believers must obey Jewish law and traditional rules. They believed a person was saved by following the law of Moses (with emphasis on circumcision, the sign of the covenant), in addition to faith in Christ. Paul opposed them by showing that the law can't save anyone.

IMPORTANCE: We can't be saved by keeping the Old Testament law, even the Ten Commandments. The law served as a guide to point out our need to be forgiven. Christ fulfilled the obligations of the law for us. We must turn to him to be saved. He alone can make us right with God.

THEME: Faith

EXPLANATION: We are saved from God's judgment and penalty for sin by God's gracious gift to us. We receive salvation by faith—trusting in him—not in anything else. Becoming a Christian is in no way based on our initiative, wise choice, or good character. We can be right with God only by believing in him.

IMPORTANCE: Your acceptance with God comes by believing in Christ alone. You must never add to or twist this truth. We are saved by faith, not by the good that we do. Have you placed your whole trust and confidence in Christ? He alone can forgive you and bring you into a relationship with God.

THEME: Freedom

EXPLANATION: Galatians is our charter of Christian freedom. We are not under the jurisdiction of Jewish laws and traditions, nor under the authority of Jerusalem. Faith in Christ brings true freedom from sin and from the futile attempt to be right with God by keeping the law. We are free in Christ, and yet freedom is a privilege.

IMPORTANCE: We are not free to disobey Christ or practice immorality, but we are free to serve the risen Christ. Let us use our freedom to love and to serve, not to do wrong.

THEME: Holy Spirit

EXPLANATION: We become Christians through the work of the Holy Spirit. He brings new life; even our faith to believe is a gift from him. The Holy Spirit instructs, guides, leads, and gives us power. He ends our bondage to evil desires, and he creates in us love, joy, peace, and many other wonderful changes.

IMPORTANCE: When the Holy Spirit leads us, he produces his fruit in us. Just as we are saved by faith, not deeds, we also grow by faith. By believing, we can have the Holy Spirit within us, helping us live for Christ. Obey Christ by following the Holy Spirit's leading.

Ephesians

OVERVIEW: OUR CHURCHES come in all styles and shapes—secret meetings in homes; wide-open gatherings in amphitheaters; worship services packing thousands into a sanctuary while an overflow crowd watches on closed circuit television; handfuls who kneel in urban store-fronts. Buildings will vary, but the church is not confined to four walls. The church of Jesus Christ is *people*, his people, of every race and nation who love Christ and are committed to serving him.

The “church age” began at Pentecost (Acts 2). Born in Jerusalem, the church spread rapidly through the ministry of the apostles and the early believers. Fanned by persecution, the gospel flame then spread to other cities and nations. On three courageous journeys, Paul and his associates established local assemblies in scores of Gentile cities.

One of the most prominent of those churches was at Ephesus. It was established in A.D. 53 on Paul’s homeward journey to Jerusalem. But Paul returned a year later, on his third missionary trip, and stayed there for three years, preaching and teaching with great effectiveness (Acts 19:1-20). At another time, Paul met with

the Ephesian elders, and he sent Timothy to serve as their leader (1 Tim. 1:3). Just a few years later, Paul was sent as a prisoner to Rome. In Rome, he was visited by messengers from various churches, including Tychicus of Ephesus. Paul wrote this letter to the church and sent it with Tychicus. Not written to counteract heresy or to confront any specific problem, Ephesians is a letter of encouragement. In it Paul describes the nature and appearance of the church, and he challenges believers to function as the living body of Christ on earth.

After a warm greeting (Ephes. 1:1-2), Paul affirms the nature of the church—the glorious fact that believers in Christ have been showered with God’s kindness (Ephes. 1:3-8), chosen for greatness (Ephes. 1:9-12), marked with the Holy Spirit (Ephes. 1:13-14), filled with the Spirit’s power (Ephes. 1:15-23), freed from sin’s curse and bondage (Ephes. 2:1-10), and brought near to God (Ephes. 2:11-18). As part of God’s “household,” we stand with the prophets, apostles, Jews, Gentiles, and Christ himself (Ephes. 2:19-3:13). Then, as though overcome with emotion by remembering all that God has done, Paul challenges the Ephesians to live close to Christ, and he breaks into spontaneous praise (Ephes. 3:14-21).

Paul then turns his attention to the implications of being in the body of Christ, the church. Believers should have unity in their commitment to Christ and their use of spiritual gifts (Ephes. 4:1-16). They should have the highest moral standards (Ephes. 4:17-6:9). For the individual, this means rejecting pagan practices (Ephes. 4:17-5:20), and for the family, this means mutual submission and love (Ephes. 5:21-6:9).

Paul then reminds them that the church is in a constant battle with the forces of darkness and that they should use every spiritual weapon at their disposal (Ephes. 6:10-17). He concludes by asking for their prayers, commissioning Tychicus, and giving a benediction (Ephes. 6:18-24).

As you read this masterful description of the church, thank God for the diversity and unity in his family, pray for your brothers and sisters across the world, and draw close to those in your local church.

THE BLUEPRINT

In this letter, Paul explains the wonderful things that we have received through Christ and refers to the church as a body, a temple, a bride, and a soldier. These all illustrate unity of purpose and show how each individual member is a part that must work together with all the other parts. In our own lives, we should work to

eradicate all backbiting, gossip, criticism, jealousy, anger, and bitterness, because these are barriers to unity in the church.

1. Unity in Christ (Ephes. 1:1-3:21)
2. Unity in the body of Christ (Ephes. 4:1-6:24)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: God's purpose

EXPLANATION: According to God's eternal, loving plan, he directs, carries out, and sustains our salvation.

IMPORTANCE: When we respond to Christ's love by trusting in him, his purpose becomes our mission. Have you committed yourself to fulfilling God's purpose?

THEME: Christ the center

EXPLANATION: Christ is exalted as the central meaning of the universe and the focus of history. He is the head of the body, the church. He is the Creator and Sustainer of all creation.

IMPORTANCE: Because Christ is central to everything, his power must be central in us. Begin by placing all your priorities under his control.

THEME: Living church

EXPLANATION: Paul describes the nature of the church. The church, under Christ's control, is a living body, a family, a dwelling. God gives believers special abilities by his Holy Spirit to build the church.

IMPORTANCE: We are part of Christ's body, and we must live in vital union with him. Our conduct must be consistent with this living relationship. Use your God-given abilities to equip believers for service. Fulfill your role in the living church.

THEME: New family

EXPLANATION: Because God through Christ paid our penalty for sin and forgave us, we have been reconciled—brought near to him. We are a new society,

a new family. Being united with Christ means we are to treat one another as family members.

IMPORTANCE: We are one family in Christ, so there should be no barriers, no divisions, no basis for discrimination. We all belong to him, so we should live in harmony with one another.

THEME: Christian conduct

EXPLANATION: Paul encourages all Christians to wise, dynamic Christian living, for with privileges goes family responsibility. As a new community, we are to live by Christ's new standards.

IMPORTANCE: God provides his Holy Spirit to enable us to live his way. To utilize the Spirit's power, we must lay aside our evil desires and draw on the power of his new life. Submit your will to Christ, and seek to love others.

Philippians

OVERVIEW: THE WORD *happiness* evokes visions of unwrapping gifts on Christmas morning, strolling hand in hand with the one you love, being surprised on your birthday, responding with unbridled laughter to a comedian, or vacationing in an exotic locale. Everyone wants to be happy; we make chasing this elusive ideal a lifelong pursuit: spending money, collecting things, and searching for new experiences. But if happiness depends on our circumstances, what happens when the toys rust, loved ones die, health deteriorates, money is stolen, and the party's over? Often happiness flees and despair sets in.

In contrast to *happiness* stands *joy*. Running deeper and stronger, joy is the quiet, confident assurance of God's love and work in our lives—that he will be there no matter what! Happiness depends on happenings, but joy depends on Christ.

Philippians is Paul's joy letter. The church in that Macedonian city had been a great encouragement to Paul. The Philippian believers had enjoyed a very special relationship with Paul, so he wrote them a personal expression of his love and affection. They had brought him great joy (Phil. 4:1). Philippians is also a joyful book because it emphasizes the real joy of the Christian life. The concept of *rejoicing* or *joy* appears sixteen times in four chapters, and the pages radiate this positive message, culminating in the exhortation to "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4).

In a life dedicated to serving Christ, Paul had faced excruciating poverty, abundant wealth, and everything in between. He even wrote this joyful letter from prison. Whatever the circumstances, Paul had learned to be content (Phil. 4:11-12), finding

real joy as he focused all of his attention and energy on knowing Christ (Phil. 3:8) and obeying him (Phil. 3:12-13).

Paul's desire to know Christ above all else is wonderfully expressed in the following words: "What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him. . . . I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Phil. 3:8-10). May we share Paul's aspiration and seek to know Jesus Christ more and more. Rejoice with Paul in Philippians, and rededicate yourself to finding joy in Christ.

THE BLUEPRINT

Although Paul was writing from prison, joy is a dominant theme in this letter. The secret of his joy is grounded in his relationship with Christ. People today desperately want to be happy but are tossed and turned by daily successes, failures, and inconveniences. Christians are to be joyful in every circumstance, even when things are going badly, even when we feel like complaining, even when no one else is joyful. Christ still reigns, and we still know him, so we can rejoice at all times.

1. Joy in suffering (Phil. 1:1-30)
2. Joy in serving (Phil. 2:1-30)
3. Joy in believing (Phil. 3:1-4:1)
4. Joy in giving (Phil. 4:2-23)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Humility

EXPLANATION: Christ showed true humility when he laid aside his rights and privileges as God to become human. He poured out his life to pay the penalty we deserve. Laying aside self-interest is essential to all our relationships.

IMPORTANCE: We are to take Christ's attitude in serving others. We must renounce personal recognition and merit. When we give up our self-interest, we can serve with joy, love, and kindness.

THEME: Self-sacrifice while he was in prison.

EXPLANATION: Christ suffered and died so we might have eternal life. With courage and faithfulness, Paul sacrificed himself for the ministry. He preached the gospel even

IMPORTANCE: Christ gives us power to lay aside our personal needs and concerns. To utilize his power, we must imitate those leaders who show self-denying concern for others. We dare not be self-centered.

THEME: Unity

EXPLANATION: In every church, in every generation, there are divisive influences (issues, loyalties, and conflicts). In the midst of hardships, it is easy to turn on one another. Paul encouraged the Philippians to agree with one another, stop complaining, and work together.

IMPORTANCE: As believers, we should contend against a common enemy, not against one another. When we are unified in love, Christ's strength is most abundant. Keep before you the ideals of teamwork, consideration of others, and unselfishness.

THEME: Christian living

EXPLANATION: Paul shows us how to live successful Christian lives. We can become mature by being so identified with Christ that his attitude of humility and self-sacrifice rules us. Christ is both our source of power and our guide.

IMPORTANCE: Developing our character begins with God's work in us. But growth also requires discipline, obedience, and relentless concentration on our part.

THEME: Joy

EXPLANATION: Believers can have profound contentment, serenity, and peace no matter what happens. This joy comes from knowing Christ personally and from depending on his strength rather than our own.

IMPORTANCE: We can have joy, even in hardship. Joy does not come from outward circumstances but from inward strength. As Christians, we must not rely on what we have or what we experience to give us joy, but on Christ within us.

Colossians

OVERVIEW: REMOVE the head coach, and the team flounders; break the fuel line, and the car won't run; unplugged, the electrical appliance has no power; without the head, the body dies. Whether for leadership, power, or life, connections are vital!

Colossians is a book of connections. Writing from prison in Rome, Paul combatted false teachings, which had infiltrated the Colossian church. The problem was “syncretism,” combining ideas from other philosophies and religions (such as paganism, strains of Judaism, and Greek thought) with Christian truth. The resulting heresy later became known as “Gnosticism,” emphasizing special knowledge (*gnosis* in Greek) and denying Christ as God and Savior. To combat this devious error, Paul stressed Christ's deity—his connection with the Father—and his sacrificial death on the cross for sin. Only by being connected with Christ through faith can anyone have eternal life and only through a continuing connection with him can anyone have power for living. Christ is God incarnate and the *only* way to forgiveness and peace with God the Father. Paul also emphasized believers' connections with each other as Christ's body on earth.

Paul's introduction to the Colossians includes a greeting, a note of thanksgiving, and a prayer for spiritual wisdom and strength for these brothers and sisters in Christ (Col. 1:1-12). He then moves into a doctrinal discussion of the person and work of Christ (Col. 1:13-23), stating that Christ is the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), the Creator (Col. 1:16), the “head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18), and the “beginning and the firstborn from among the dead” (Col. 1:18). His death on the cross makes it possible for us to stand in the presence of God (Col. 1:22).

Paul then explains how the world's teachings are totally empty when compared with God's plan, and he challenges the Colossians to reject shallow answers and to live in union with Christ (Col. 1:24-2:23).

Against this theological backdrop, Paul turns to practical considerations—what the divinity, death, and resurrection of Jesus should mean to all believers (Col. 3:1-

4:6). Because our eternal destiny is sure, heaven should fill our thoughts (Col. 3:1-4), sexual impurity and other worldly lusts should not be named among us (Col. 3:5-8), and truth, love, and peace should mark our lives (Col. 3:9-15). Our love for Christ should also translate into love for others—friends, fellow believers, spouses, children, parents, slaves, and masters (Col. 3:16-4:1). We should constantly communicate with God through prayer (Col. 4:2-4), and we should take every opportunity to tell others the Good News (Col. 4:5-6). In Christ we have everything we need for salvation and for living the Christian life.

Paul had probably never visited Colosse, so he concludes this letter with personal comments about their common Christian associations, providing a living lesson of the connectedness of the body of Christ.

Read Colossians as a book for an embattled church in the first century, but read it also for its timeless truths. Gain a fresh appreciation for Christ as the *fullness* of God and the *only* source for living the Christian life. Know that he is your leader, head, and power source, and make sure of your connection to him.

THE BLUEPRINT

In this letter Paul clearly teaches that Christ has paid for sin, that Christ has reconciled us to God, and that Christ gives us the pattern and the power to grow spiritually. Because Christ is the exact likeness of God, when we learn what he is like, we see what we need to become. Since Christ is Lord over all creation, we should crown him Lord over our lives. Since Christ is the head of the body, his church, we should nurture our vital connection to him.

1. What Christ has done (Col. 1:1-2:23)
2. What Christians should do (Col. 3:1-4:18)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Christ is God

EXPLANATION: Jesus Christ is God in the flesh, Lord of all creation, and Lord of the new creation. He is the expressed reflection of the invisible God. He is eternal, preexistent, omnipotent, equal with the Father. He is supreme and complete.

IMPORTANCE: Because Christ is supreme, our lives must be Christ-centered. To recognize him as God means to regard our relationship with him as most vital and to make his interests our top priority.

THEME: Christ is head of the church

EXPLANATION: Because Christ is God, he is the head of the church, his true believers. Christ is the founder, the leader, and the highest authority on earth. He requires first place in all our thoughts and activities.

IMPORTANCE: To acknowledge Christ as our head, we must welcome his leadership in all we do or think. No person, group, or church can regard any loyalty as more critical than that of loyalty to Christ.

THEME: Union with Christ

EXPLANATION: Because our sin has been forgiven and we have been reconciled to God, we have a union with Christ that can never be broken. In our faith connection with him, we identify with his death, burial, and resurrection.

IMPORTANCE: We should live in constant contact and communication with God. When we do, we all will be unified with Christ and with one another.

THEME: Man-made religion

EXPLANATION: False teachers were promoting a heresy that stressed self-made rules (legalism). They also sought spiritual growth by discipline of the body (asceticism) and visions (mysticism). This search created pride in their self-centered efforts.

IMPORTANCE: We must not cling to our own ideas and try to blend them into Christianity. Nor should we let our hunger for a more fulfilling Christian experience cause us to trust in a teacher, a group, or a system of thought more than in Christ himself. Christ is our hope and our true source of wisdom.

1 Thessalonians

OVERVIEW: SLOWLY they walk, one by one, scattering the leaves and trampling the grass under measured and heavy steps. The minister's words still echoing in their minds, they hear workmen moving toward the terrible place, preparing to cover the casket of their loved one. Death, the enemy, has torn the bonded relationships of family and friends, leaving only memories. . . and tears. . . and loneliness.

But like a golden shaft of sun piercing the winter sky, a singular truth shatters the oppressive gloom—death is not the end! Christ is the victor over death, and there is hope of the resurrection through him.

As with every member of the human family, first-century Christians came face to face with their mortality. Many of them met early deaths at the hands of those who hated Christ and all allied with him. Whether at the hands of zealous Jews (like Paul before his conversion), angry Greeks, or ruthless Roman authorities, persecution included stonings, beatings, crucifixions, torture, and death. To be a follower of Christ meant to give up everything.

Paul established the church in Thessalonica during his second missionary journey (in about A.D. 51). He wrote this letter a short time later to encourage the young believers there. He wanted to assure them of his love, to praise them for their faithfulness during persecution, and to remind them of their hope—the sure return of their Lord and Savior.

Paul begins this letter with a note of affirmation, thanking God for the strong faith and good reputation of the Thessalonians (1 Thes. 1:1-10). Then Paul reviews their relationship—how he and his companions brought the gospel to them (1 Thes. 2:1-12), how they accepted the message (1 Thes. 2:13-16), and how he longed to be with them again (1 Thes. 2:17-20). Because of his concern, Paul sent Timothy to encourage them in their faith (1 Thes. 3:1-13).

Paul then presents the core of his message—exhortation and comfort. He challenges them to please God in their daily living by avoiding sexual immorality (1 Thes. 4:1-8), loving each other (1 Thes. 4:9-10), and living as good citizens in a sinful world (1 Thes. 4:11-12).

Paul comforts the Thessalonians by reminding them of the hope of the resurrection (1 Thes. 4:13-18). Then he warns them to be prepared at all times, for Jesus Christ could return at any moment. When Christ returns, those Christians who are alive and those who have died will be raised to new life (1 Thes. 5:1-11).

Paul then gives the Thessalonians a handful of reminders on how to prepare themselves for the second coming—warn the idle (1 Thes. 5:14), encourage the timid (1 Thes. 5:14), help the weak (1 Thes. 5:14), be patient with everyone (1 Thes. 5:14), be kind to everyone (1 Thes. 5:15), be joyful always (1 Thes. 5:16), pray continually (1 Thes. 5:17), give thanks (1 Thes. 5:18), test everything that is taught (1 Thes. 5:20-21), and avoid evil (1 Thes. 5:22). Paul concludes his letter with two benedictions and a request for prayer.

As you read this letter, listen carefully to Paul’s practical advice for Christian living. And when burdened by grief and overwhelmed by sorrow, take hope in the reality of Christ’s return, the resurrection, and eternal life!

THE BLUEPRINT

Paul and his companions were faithful to bring the gospel to the Thessalonians in the midst of persecution. The Thessalonians had only recently become Christians, and yet they had remained faithful to the Lord, despite the fact that the apostles were not with them. Others have been faithful in bringing God’s Word to us. We must remain faithful and live in the expectation that Christ will return at any time.

1. Faithfulness to the Lord (1 Thes. 1:1-3:13)
2. Watchfulness for the Lord (1 Thes. 4:1-5:28)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Persecution

EXPLANATION: Paul and the new Christians at Thessalonica experienced persecution because of their faith in Christ. We can expect trials and troubles as well. We need to stand firm in our faith in the midst of trials, being strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

IMPORTANCE: The Holy Spirit helps us to remain strong in faith, able to show genuine love to others and maintain our moral character even when we are being persecuted, slandered, or oppressed.

THEME: Paul's ministry

EXPLANATION: Paul expressed his concern for this church even while he was being slandered. Paul's commitment to share the gospel in spite of difficult circumstances is a model we should follow.

IMPORTANCE: Paul not only delivered his message, but gave of himself. In our ministries, we must become like Paul—faithful and bold, yet sensitive and self-sacrificing.

THEME: Hope

EXPLANATION: One day all believers, both those who are alive and those who have died, will be united with Christ. To those Christians who die before Christ's return, there is hope—the hope of the resurrection of the body.

IMPORTANCE: If we believe in Christ, we will live with him forever. All those who belong to Jesus Christ—from throughout history—will be present with him at his second coming. We can be confident that we will be with loved ones who have trusted in Christ.

THEME: Being prepared

EXPLANATION: No one knows the time of Christ's return. We are to live moral and holy lives, ever watchful for his coming. Believers must not neglect daily responsibilities, but always work and live to please the Lord.

IMPORTANCE: The gospel is not only what we believe, but also what we must live. The Holy Spirit leads us in faithfulness, so we can avoid lust and fraud. Live as though you expect Christ's return at any time. Don't be caught unprepared.

2 Thessalonians

OVERVIEW: “BUT I thought he said. . . ,” “I’m sure he meant. . . ,” “It is clear to me that we should. . . ,” “I disagree. I think we must. . . .”

Effective communication is difficult; often the message sent is *not* the message received in the home, marketplace, neighborhood, or church. Even when clearly stated or written, words can be misinterpreted and misunderstood, especially when filtered through the sieve of prejudices and preconceptions.

Paul faced this problem with the Thessalonians. He had written them earlier to help them grow in the faith, comforting and encouraging them by affirming the reality of Christ’s return. Just a few months later, however, word came from Thessalonica that some had misunderstood Paul’s teaching about the second coming. His announcement that Christ could come at any moment had caused some to stop working and just wait, rationalizing their idleness by pointing to Paul’s teaching. Adding fuel to this fire was the continued persecution of the church. Many felt that indeed this must be the “day of the Lord.”

Responding quickly, Paul sent a second letter to this young church. In it he gave further instruction concerning the second coming and the day of the Lord (2 Thes. 2:1-2). Second Thessalonians, therefore, continues the subject of 1 Thessalonians and is a call to continued courage and consistent conduct.

The letter begins with Paul’s trademark—a personal greeting and a statement of thanksgiving for their faith (2 Thes. 1:1-3). He mentions their perseverance in spite of their persecution and trials (2 Thes. 1:4) and uses this situation to broach the subject of Christ’s return. At that time, Christ will vindicate the righteous who endure and will punish the wicked (2 Thes. 1:5-12).

Paul then directly answers the misunderstanding concerning the timing of the events of the end times. He tells them not to listen to rumors and reports that the day of the Lord has already begun (2 Thes. 2:1-2), because a number of events must occur before Christ returns (2 Thes. 2:3-12). Meanwhile, they should stand firm for Christ’s truth (2 Thes. 2:13-15), receive God’s encouragement and hope (2 Thes. 2:16-17), pray for strength and for the spread of the Lord’s message (2 Thes. 3:1-5), and warn those who are idle (2 Thes. 3:6-15). Paul ends with personal greetings and a benediction (2 Thes. 3:16-18).

Almost 2,000 years later, we stand much closer to the time of Christ’s return; but we also would be wrong to see his imminent appearance as an excuse for idle waiting and heavenward gazing. Being prepared for his coming means spreading

the gospel, reaching out to those in need, and building the church, his body. As you read 2 Thessalonians, then, see clearly the reality of his return and your responsibility to live for him until that day.

THE BLUEPRINT

Paul wrote to encourage those who were facing persecution and to correct a misunderstanding about the timing of Christ's return. The teaching about the Lord's return promoted idleness in this young church. The imminent coming of Christ should never make us idle; we should be even more busy—living purely, using our time well, and working for his kingdom. We must work not only during easy times when it is convenient, but also during difficult times. Christians must patiently watch for Christ's return, and work for him while we wait.

1. The bright hope of Christ's return (2 Thes. 1:1-2:17)
2. Living in the light of Christ's return (2 Thes. 3:1-18)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Persecution

EXPLANATION: Paul encouraged the church to persevere in spite of troubles and trials. God will bring victory to his faithful followers and judge those who persecute them.

IMPORTANCE: God promises to reward our faith by giving us his power and helping us bear persecution. Suffering for our faith will strengthen us to serve Christ. We must be faithful to him.

THEME: Christ's return

EXPLANATION: Since Paul had said that the Lord could come at any moment, some of the Thessalonian believers had stopped working in order to wait for Christ.

IMPORTANCE: Christ will return and bring total victory to all who trust in him. If we are ready, we need not be concerned about *when* he will return. We should stand firm, keep working, and wait for Christ.

THEME: Great rebellion

EXPLANATION: Before Christ's return, there will be a great rebellion against God led by the man of lawlessness (the antichrist). God will remove all the restraints on evil before he brings judgment on the rebels. The antichrist will attempt to deceive many.

IMPORTANCE: We should not be afraid when we see evil increase. God is in control, no matter how evil the world becomes. God guards us during Satan's attacks. We can have victory over evil by remaining faithful to God.

THEME: Persistence

EXPLANATION: Because church members had quit working and become disorderly and disobedient, Paul chastised them for their idleness. He called them to show courage and true Christian conduct.

IMPORTANCE: We must never get so tired of doing right that we quit. We can be persistent by making the most of our time and talent. Our endurance will be rewarded.

1Timothy

OVERVIEW: WITHOUT trying, we model our values. Parents in particular demonstrate to their children what they consider important and valuable. "Like father, like son" is not just a well-worn cliché; it is a truth repeated in our homes. And experience proves that children often follow the life-styles of their parents, repeating their successes and mistakes.

Timothy is a prime example of one who was influenced by godly relatives. His mother Eunice and grandmother Lois were Jewish believers who helped shape his life and promote his spiritual growth (2 Tim. 1:5; 2 Tim. 3:15). The first “second generation” Christian mentioned in the New Testament, Timothy became Paul’s protege and pastor of the church at Ephesus. As a young minister, Timothy faced all sorts of pressures, conflicts, and challenges from the church and his surrounding culture. To counsel and encourage Timothy, Paul sent this very personal letter.

Paul wrote 1 Timothy in about A.D. 64, probably just prior to his final Roman imprisonment. Because he had appealed to Caesar, Paul was sent as a prisoner to Rome (see Acts 25-28). Most scholars believe that Paul was released in about A.D. 62 (possibly because the “statute of limitations” had expired), and that during the next few years he was able to travel. During this time, he wrote to Timothy and Titus. Soon, however, Emperor Nero began his campaign to eliminate Christianity. It is believed that during this time Paul was imprisoned again and eventually executed. During this second Roman imprisonment, Paul wrote 2 Timothy. Titus and the two letters to Timothy comprise what are called the “Pastoral Letters.”

Paul’s first letter to Timothy affirms their relationship (1 Tim. 1:2). Paul begins his fatherly advice, warning Timothy about false teachers (1 Tim. 1:3-11) and urging him to hold on to his faith in Christ (1 Tim. 1:12-20). Next, Paul considers public worship, emphasizing the importance of prayer (1 Tim. 2:1-7) and order in church meetings (1 Tim. 2:8-15). This leads to a discussion of the qualifications of church leaders—overseers and deacons. Here Paul lists specific criteria for each office (1 Tim. 3:1-16).

Paul speaks again about false teachers, telling Timothy how to recognize them and respond to them (1 Tim. 4:1-16). Next, he gives practical advice on pastoral care to the young and old (1 Tim. 5:1-2), widows (1 Tim. 5:3-16), elders (1 Tim. 5:17-25), and slaves (1 Tim. 6:1-2). Paul concludes by exhorting Timothy to guard his motives (1 Tim. 6:3-10), to stand firm in his faith (1 Tim. 6:11-12), to live above reproach (1 Tim. 6:13-16), and to minister faithfully (1 Tim. 6:17-21).

First Timothy holds many lessons. If you are a church leader, take note of Paul’s relationship with this young disciple—his careful counsel and guidance. Measure yourself against the qualifications that Paul gives for overseers and deacons. If you are young in the faith, follow the example of godly Christian leaders like Timothy, who imitated Paul’s life. If you are a parent, remind yourself of the profound effect a Christian home can have on family members—a faithful mother and grandmother led Timothy to Christ, and Timothy’s ministry helped change the world.

THE BLUEPRINT

Paul advised Timothy on such practical topics as qualifications for church leaders, public worship, confronting false teaching, and how to treat various groups of people within the church. Right belief and right behavior are critical for anyone who desires to lead or serve effectively in the church. We should all believe rightly, participate in church actively, and minister to one another lovingly.

1. Instructions on right belief (1 Tim. 1:1-20)
2. Instructions for the church (1 Tim. 2:1-3:16)
3. Instructions for leaders (1 Tim. 4:1-6:21)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Sound doctrine

EXPLANATION: Paul instructed Timothy to preserve the Christian faith by teaching sound doctrine and modeling right living. Timothy had to oppose false teachers who were leading church members away from belief in salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

IMPORTANCE: We must know the truth in order to defend it. We must cling to the belief that Christ came to save us. We should stay away from those who twist the words of the Bible for their own purposes.

THEME: Public worship

EXPLANATION: Prayer in public worship must be done with a proper attitude toward God and fellow believers.

IMPORTANCE: Christian character must be evident in every aspect of worship. We must rid ourselves of any anger, resentment, or offensive behavior that might disrupt worship or damage church unity.

THEME: Church leadership

EXPLANATION: Paul gives specific instructions concerning the qualifications for church leaders so that the church might honor God and operate smoothly.

IMPORTANCE: Church leaders must be wholly committed to Christ. If you are a new or young Christian, don't be anxious to become a leader in the church. Seek to develop your Christian character first. Be sure to seek God, not your own ambition.

THEME: Personal discipline

EXPLANATION: It takes discipline to be a leader in the church. Timothy, like all pastors, had to guard his motives, minister faithfully, and live above reproach. Any pastor must keep morally and spiritually fit.

IMPORTANCE: To stay in good spiritual shape, you must discipline yourself to study God's Word and to obey it. Put your spiritual abilities to work!

THEME: Caring church

EXPLANATION: The church has a responsibility to care for the needs of all its members, especially the sick, the poor, and the widowed. Caring must go beyond good intentions.

2 Timothy

OVERVIEW: "FAMOUS last words" is more than a cliché. When notable men and women of influence are about to die, the world waits to hear their final words of insight and wisdom. Then those quotes are repeated worldwide. This is also true with a dying loved one. Gathered at his or her side, the family strains to hear every whispered syllable of blessing, encouragement, and advice, knowing that this will be the final message.

One of the most knowledgeable, influential, and beloved men of history is the apostle Paul. And we have his famous last words.

Paul was facing death. He was not dying of a disease in a sterile hospital with loved ones gathered nearby. He was very much alive, but his condition was terminal. Convicted as a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, Paul lay in a cold Roman prison, cut off from the world, with just a visitor or two and his writing materials. Paul knew that soon he would be executed (2 Tim. 4:6), and so he wrote his final thoughts to his "son" Timothy, passing to him the torch of leadership, reminding him of what was truly important, and encouraging him in the faith. Imagine how Timothy must have read and reread every word—this was the last message from

his beloved mentor, Paul. Because of the situation and the recipient, this is the most intimate and moving of all Paul's letters, and his last.

Paul's introduction is tender, and the love he has for Timothy exudes from every phrase (2 Tim. 1:1-5). He then reminds Timothy of the qualities necessary for a faithful minister of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 1:6-2:13). Timothy should remember his call and use his gifts with boldness (2 Tim. 1:6-12), keep to the truth (2 Tim. 1:13-18), prepare others to follow him in the ministry (2 Tim. 2:1-2), be disciplined and ready to endure hardship (2 Tim. 2:3-7), and keep his eyes and mind focused on Christ (2 Tim. 2:8-13). Paul challenges Timothy to hold to sound doctrine, reject error and avoid godless chatter, correctly handle the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:14-19), and keep his life pure (2 Tim. 2:20-26).

Next, Paul warns Timothy of the opposition that he and other believers would face in the last days from self-centered people who use the church for their own gain and who teach false doctrines (2 Tim. 3:1-9). Paul tells Timothy to be prepared for these unfaithful people by remembering his example (2 Tim. 3:10-11), understanding the real source of the opposition (2 Tim. 3:12-13), and finding strength and power in the Word of God (2 Tim. 3:14-17). Then Paul gives Timothy a stirring charge—to preach the Word (2 Tim. 4:1-4) and to fulfill his ministry until the end (2 Tim. 4:5-8).

Paul concludes with personal requests and items of information. In these final words, he reveals his loneliness and his strong love for his brothers and sisters in Christ (2 Tim. 4:9-22).

There has never been another person like Paul, the missionary apostle. He was a man of deep faith, undying love, constant hope, tenacious conviction, and profound insight. And he was inspired by the Holy Spirit to give us God's message. As you read 2 Timothy, know that you are reading the last words of this great man of God—last words to Timothy and to all who would claim to follow Christ. Recommit yourself to stand courageously for the truth, knowing the Word and being empowered by the Holy Spirit.

THE BLUEPRINT

Paul gives helpful advice to Timothy to remain solidly grounded in Christian service and to endure suffering during the difficult days to come. It is easy for us to serve Christ for the wrong reasons: because it is exciting, rewarding, or personally enriching. Without a proper foundation, however, we will find it easy to quit

during difficult times. All believers need a strong foundation for their service, because Christian service does not get easier as we grow older, and it will become no easier as the time of Christ's return grows closer.

1. Foundations of Christian service (2 Tim. 1:1-2:26)
2. Difficult times for Christian service (2 Tim. 3:1-4:22)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Boldness

EXPLANATION: In the face of opposition and persecution, Timothy was to carry out his ministry without fear or shame. Paul urged him to utilize boldly the gifts of preaching and teaching that the Holy Spirit had given him.

IMPORTANCE: The Holy Spirit helps us to be wise and strong. God honors our confident testimony even when we suffer. To get over our fear of what people might say or do, we must take our eyes off of people and look only to God.

THEME: Faithfulness

EXPLANATION: Christ was faithful to all of us in dying for our sin. Paul was a faithful minister even when he was in prison. Paul urged Timothy to maintain not only sound doctrine but also loyalty, diligence, and endurance.

IMPORTANCE: We can count on opposition, suffering, and hardship as we serve Christ. But this shows that our faithfulness is having an effect on others. As we trust Christ, he counts us worthy to suffer, and he will give us the strength we need to be steadfast.

THEME: Preaching and Teaching

EXPLANATION: Paul and Timothy were active in preaching and teaching the Good News about Jesus Christ. Paul encouraged Timothy not only to carry the torch of truth but also to train others, passing on to them sound doctrine and enthusiasm for Christ's mission.

IMPORTANCE: We must prepare people to transmit God's Word to others so that they in turn might pass it on. Does your church carefully train others to teach?

THEME: Error

EXPLANATION: In the final days before Christ returns, there will be false teachers, spiritual dropouts, and heretics. The remedy for error is to have a solid program for teaching Christians.

IMPORTANCE: Because of deception and false teaching, we must be disciplined and ready to reject error. Know the Word of God as your sure defense against error and confusion.

Titus

OVERVIEW: THE VACUUM produced when a strong leader departs can devastate a movement, organization, or institution. Having been dependent on his or her skill, style, and personality, associates and subordinates flounder or vie for control. Soon efficiency and vitality are lost, and decline and demise follow. Often this pattern is repeated in churches. Great speakers and teachers gather a following, and soon a church is flourishing. It is alive, vital, and effective. Lives are being changed and people led into the kingdom. But when this catalyst leaves or dies, with him or her goes the drive and the heart of the organization.

People flocked to hear Paul's teaching. Educated, articulate, motivated, and filled with the Holy Spirit, this man of faith faithfully proclaimed the Good News throughout the Roman empire—lives were changed and churches begun. But Paul knew that the church must be built on Christ, not on a person. And he knew that eventually he would not be there to build, encourage, discipline, and teach. So he trained young pastors to assume leadership in the church after he was gone. Paul urged them to center their lives and preaching on the Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16-17) and to train others to carry on the ministry (2 Tim. 2:2).

Titus was a Greek believer. Taught and nurtured by Paul, he stood before the leaders of the church in Jerusalem as a living example of what Christ was doing among the Gentiles (Galatians 2:1-3). Like Timothy, he was one of Paul's trusted traveling companions and closest friends. Later he became Paul's special

ambassador (2 Cor. 7:5-16) and eventually the overseer of the churches on Crete (Titus 1:5). Slowly and carefully, Paul developed Titus into a mature Christian and a responsible leader. The letter to Titus was a step in this discipleship process. As with Timothy, Paul told Titus how to organize and lead the churches.

Paul begins with a longer than usual greeting and introduction, outlining the leadership progression—Paul’s ministry (Titus 1:1-3), Titus’s responsibilities (Titus 1:4-5), and those leaders whom Titus would appoint and train (Titus 1:5). Paul then lists pastoral qualifications (Titus 1:6-9) and contrasts faithful overseers with the false leaders and teachers (Titus 1:10-16).

Next, Paul emphasizes the importance of good deeds in the life of the Christian, telling Titus how to relate to the various age groups in the church (Titus 2:2-6). He urges Titus to be a good example of a mature believer (Titus 2:7-8) and to teach with courage and conviction (Titus 2:9-15). He then discusses the general responsibilities of Christians in society—Titus should remind the people of these (Titus 3:1-8), and he should avoid divisive arguments (Titus 3:9-11). Paul concludes with a few matters of itinerary and personal greetings (Titus 3:12-15).

Paul’s letter to Titus is brief, but it is an important link in the discipleship process—helping a young man grow into leadership in the church. As you read this pastoral letter, you will gain insight into the organization and life of the early church, and you will find principles for structuring contemporary churches. But you should also see how to be a responsible Christian leader. Read the letter to Titus and determine, like Paul, to train men and women to lead and teach others.

THE BLUEPRINT

Paul calls for church order and right living on an island known for laziness, gluttony, lying, and evil. The Christians are to be self-disciplined as individuals, and they must be orderly as people who form one body, the church. We need to obey this message in our day when discipline is not respected or rewarded by our society. Although others may not appreciate our efforts, we must live upright lives, obey the government, and control our speech. We should live together peacefully in the church and be living examples of our faith to contemporary society.

1. Leadership in the church (Titus 1:1-16)
2. Right living in the church (Titus 2:1-15)
3. Right living in society (Titus 3:1-15)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: A Good Life

EXPLANATION: The Good News of salvation is that we can't be saved by living a good life; we are saved only by faith in Jesus Christ. But the gospel transforms people's lives, so that they eventually perform good deeds. Our service won't save us, but we are saved to serve.

IMPORTANCE: A good life is a witness to the gospel's power. As Christians, we must have commitment and discipline to serve. Are you putting your faith into action by serving others?

THEME: Character

EXPLANATION: Titus's responsibility in Crete was to appoint elders to maintain proper organization and discipline, so Paul listed the qualities needed for the eldership. Their conduct in their homes revealed their fitness for service in the church.

IMPORTANCE: It's not enough to be educated or to have a loyal following to be Christ's kind of leader. You must have self-control, spiritual and moral fitness, and Christian character. Who you are is just as important as what you can do.

THEME: Church Relationships

EXPLANATION: Church teaching must relate to various groups. Older Christians were to teach and to be examples to younger men and women. People of every age and group have a lesson to learn and a role to play.

IMPORTANCE: Right living and right relationship go along with right doctrine. Treat relationships with other believers as an outgrowth of your faith.

THEME: Citizenship

EXPLANATION: Christians must be good citizens in society, not just in church. Believers must obey the government and work honestly.

IMPORTANCE: How you fulfill your civic duties is a witness to the watching world. Your community life should reflect Christ's love as much as your church life does.

Philemon

OVERVIEW: AT THE FOREMAN'S signal, the giant ball is released, and with dynamite force and a reverberating crash, it meets the wall, snapping bricks like twigs and scattering pieces of mortar. Repeatedly, the powerful pendulum works, and soon the barrier has been reduced to rubble. Then it is carted away so that construction can begin.

Life has many walls and fences that divide, separate, and compartmentalize. Not made of wood or stone, they are personal obstructions, blocking people from each other and from God. But Christ came as the great wall remover, tearing down the sin partition that separates us from God and blasting the barriers that keep us from each other. His death and resurrection opened the way to eternal life to bring all who believe into the family of God (see Ephes. 2:14-18).

Roman, Greek, and Jewish cultures were littered with barriers, as society assigned people to classes and expected them to stay in their place—men and women, slave and free, rich and poor, Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians, pious and pagan. But with the message of Christ, the walls came down, and Paul could declare, “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (Col. 3:11).

This life-changing truth forms the backdrop for the letter to Philemon. One of three personal letters in the Bible, the letter to Philemon is Paul's personal plea for a slave. Onesimus “belonged” to Philemon, a member of the Colossian church and Paul's friend. But Onesimus, the slave, had stolen from his master and run away. He ran to Rome where he met Paul, and there he responded to the Good News and came to faith in Christ (Philemon 1:10). So Paul writes to Philemon and reintroduces Onesimus to him, explaining that he is sending him back, not just as a slave but as a brother (Philemon 1:11-12, 16). Tactfully he asks Philemon to accept and forgive his brother (Philemon 1:10, 14-15, 20). The barriers of the past and the new ones erected by Onesimus's desertion and theft should divide them no longer—they are one in Christ.

This small book is a masterpiece of grace and tact and a profound demonstration of the power of Christ and of true Christian fellowship in action. What barriers are in your home, neighborhood, and church? What separates you from fellow believers—race? status? wealth? education? personality? As with Philemon, God calls you to seek unity, breaking down those walls and embracing your brothers and sisters in Christ.

THE BLUEPRINT

Paul pleads on behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave. Paul's intercession for him illustrates what Christ has done for us. As Paul interceded for a slave, so Christ intercedes for us, slaves to sin. As Onesimus was reconciled to Philemon, so we are reconciled to God through Christ. As Paul offered to pay the debts of a slave, so Christ paid our debt of sin. Like Onesimus, we must return to God our Master and serve him.

1. Paul's appreciation of Philemon (Philemon 1:1-7)
2. Paul's appeal for Onesimus (Philemon 1:8-25)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Forgiveness

EXPLANATION: Philemon was Paul's friend and the legal owner of the slave, Onesimus. Paul asked him not to punish Onesimus, but to forgive and restore him as a new Christian brother.

IMPORTANCE: Christian relationships must be full of forgiveness and acceptance. Can you forgive those who have wronged you?

THEME: Barriers

EXPLANATION: Slavery was widespread in the Roman empire, but no one is lost to God or beyond his love. Slavery was a barrier between people, but Christian love and fellowship are to overcome such barriers.

IMPORTANCE: In Christ we are one family. No walls of racial, economic or political differences should separate us. Let Christ work through you to remove barriers between Christian brothers and sisters.

THEME: Respect

EXPLANATION: Paul was a friend of both Philemon and Onesimus. He had the authority as an apostle to tell Philemon what to do. Yet Paul chose to appeal to his friend in Christian love rather than to order him what to do.

IMPORTANCE: Tactful persuasion accomplishes a great deal more than commands when dealing with people. Remember to exhibit courtesy and respect in your relationships.

Hebrews

OVERVIEW: CONSCIENTIOUS consumers shop for value, the best products for the money. Wise parents desire only the best for their children, nourishing their growing bodies, minds, and spirits. Individuals with integrity seek the best investment of time, talents, and treasures. In every area, to settle for less would be wasteful, foolish, and irresponsible. Yet it is a natural pull to move toward what is convenient and comfortable.

Judaism was not second-rate or easy. Divinely designed, it was the best religion, expressing true worship and devotion to God. The commandments, the rituals, and the prophets described God's promises and revealed the way to forgiveness and salvation. But Christ came, fulfilling the Law and the Prophets, conquering sin, shattering all barriers to God, and freely providing eternal life.

This message was difficult for Jews to accept. Although they had sought the Messiah for centuries, they were entrenched in thinking and worshiping in traditional forms. Following Jesus seemed to repudiate their marvelous heritage and their profound Scriptures. With caution and questions they listened to the gospel, but many rejected it and sought to eliminate this "heresy." Those who did accept Jesus as the Messiah often found themselves slipping back into familiar routines, trying to live a hybrid faith.

Hebrews is a masterful document written to Jews who were evaluating Jesus or struggling with this new faith. The message of Hebrews is that Jesus is better, Christianity is superior, Christ is supreme and completely sufficient for salvation.

Hebrews begins by emphasizing that the old (Judaism) and the new (Christianity) are both religions revealed by God (Hebrews 1:1-3). In the doctrinal section that follows (Hebrews 1:4-10:18), the writer shows how Jesus is superior to angels (Hebrews 1:4-2:18), superior to their leaders (Hebrews 3:1-4:13), and superior to their priests (Hebrews 4:14-7:28). Christianity surpasses Judaism because it has a better covenant (Hebrews 8:1-13), a better sanctuary (Hebrews 9:1-10), and a more sufficient sacrifice for sins (Hebrews 9:11-10:18).

Having established the superiority of Christianity, the writer moves on to the practical implications of following Christ. The readers are exhorted to hold on to

their new faith, encourage each other, and look forward to Christ's return (Hebrews 10:19-25). They are warned about the consequences of rejecting Christ's sacrifice (Hebrews 10:26-31) and reminded of the rewards for faithfulness (Hebrews 10:32-39). Then the author explains how to live by faith, giving illustrations of the faithful men and women in Israel's history (Hebrews 11:1-40) and giving encouragement and exhortation for daily living (Hebrews 12:1-17). This section ends by comparing the old covenant with the new (Hebrews 12:18-29). The writer concludes with moral exhortations (Hebrews 13:1-17), a request for prayer (Hebrews 13:18-19), and a benediction and greetings (Hebrews 13:20-25).

Whatever you are considering as the focus of life, Christ is better. He is the perfect revelation of God, the final and complete sacrifice for sin, the compassionate and understanding mediator, and the *only* way to eternal life. Read Hebrews and begin to see history and life from God's perspective. Then give yourself unreservedly and completely to Christ. Don't settle for anything less.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. THE SUPERIORITY OF CHRIST (Hebrews 1:1-10:18)

The superiority of Christ over everyone and everything is clearly demonstrated by the author. Christianity supersedes all other religions and can never be surpassed. Where can one find anything better than Christ? Living in Christ is having the best there is in life. All competing religions are deceptions or cheap imitations.

1. Christ is greater than the angels
2. Christ is greater than Moses
3. Christ is greater than the Old Testament priesthood
4. The new covenant is greater than the old

B. THE SUPERIORITY OF FAITH (Hebrews 10:19-13:25)

Jews who had become Christians in the first century were tempted to fall back into Judaism because of uncertainty, the security of custom, and persecution. Today believers are also tempted to fall back into legalism, fulfilling minimum religious requirements rather than pressing on in genuine faith. We must strive to live by faith each day.

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Christ Is Superior

EXPLANATION: Hebrews reveals Jesus' true identity as God. Jesus is the ultimate authority. He is greater than any religion or any angel. He is superior to any Jewish leader (such as Abraham, Moses, or Joshua) and superior to any priest. He is the complete revelation of God.

IMPORTANCE: Jesus alone can forgive your sin. He has secured your forgiveness and salvation by his death on the cross. You can find peace with God and real meaning for life by believing in Christ. Don't accept any alternative to or substitute for him.

THEME: High Priest

EXPLANATION: In the Old Testament, the high priest represented the Jews before God. Jesus Christ links us with God. There is no other way to reach God. Because Jesus Christ lived a sinless life, he is the perfect substitute to die for our sin. He is our perfect representative with God.

IMPORTANCE: Jesus guarantees our access to God the Father. He intercedes for us so we can boldly come to the Father with our needs. When we are weak, we can come confidently to God for forgiveness and ask for his help.

THEME: Sacrifice

EXPLANATION: Christ's sacrifice was the ultimate fulfillment of all that the Old Testament sacrifices represented—God's forgiveness for sin. Because Christ is the perfect sacrifice for our sin, our sins are completely forgiven—past, present, and future.

IMPORTANCE: Christ removed sin, which barred us from God's presence and fellowship. But we must accept his sacrifice for us. By believing in him we are no longer guilty, but cleansed and made whole. His sacrifice clears the way for us to have eternal life.

THEME: Maturity

EXPLANATION: Though we are saved from sin when we believe in Christ, we are given the task of going on and growing in our faith. Through our relationship

with Christ we can live blameless lives, be set aside for his special use, and develop maturity.

IMPORTANCE: The process of maturing in our faith takes time. Daily commitment and service produce maturity. When we are mature in our faith, we are not easily swayed or shaken by temptations or worldly concerns.

THEME: Faith

EXPLANATION: Faith is confident trust in God's promises. God's greatest promise is that we can be saved through Jesus.

IMPORTANCE: If you trust in Jesus Christ for your complete salvation, he will transform you completely. A life of obedience and complete trust is pleasing to God.

THEME: Endurance

EXPLANATION: Faith enables Christians to face trials. Genuine faith includes the commitment to stay true to God when we are under fire. Endurance builds character and leads to victory.

IMPORTANCE: You can have victory in your trials if you don't give up or turn your back on Christ. Stay true to Christ and pray for endurance.

APOSTLES' LETTERS

James

OVERVIEW: “MIRACULOUS!” . . . “Revolutionary!” . . . “Greatest ever!” We are inundated by a flood of extravagant claims as we flip the television dial or magazine pages. The messages leap out at us. The products assure that they are new, improved, fantastic, and capable of changing our lives. For only a few dollars, we can have “cleaner clothes,” “whiter teeth,” “glamorous hair,” and “tastier food.” Automobiles, perfume, diet drinks, and mouthwash are guaranteed to bring happiness, friends, and the good life. And just before an election, no one can match the politicians’ promises. But talk is cheap, and too often we soon realize that the boasts were hollow, quite far from the truth.

“Jesus is the answer!” . . . “Believe in God!” . . . “Follow me to church!” Christians also make great claims but are often guilty of belying them with their actions. Professing to trust God and to be his people, they cling tightly to the world and its values. Possessing all the right answers, they contradict the gospel with their lives.

With energetic style and crisp, well-chosen words, James confronts this conflict head-on. It is not enough to talk the Christian faith, he says; we must live it. “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?” (James 2:14). The proof of the reality of our faith is a changed life.

Genuine faith will inevitably produce good deeds. This is the central theme of James’s letter, around which he supplies practical advice on living the Christian life.

James begins his letter by outlining some general characteristics of the Christian life (James 1:1-27). Next, he exhorts Christians to act justly in society (James 2:1-13). He follows this practical advice with a theological discourse on the relationship between faith and action (James 2:14-26). Then James shows the importance of controlling one’s speech (James 3:1-12). In James 3:13-18, James distinguishes two kinds of wisdom, earthly and heavenly. Then he encourages his readers to turn from evil desires and obey God (James 4:1-12). James reproves those who trust in their own plans and possessions (James 4:13-5:6). Finally, he exhorts his readers to be patient with each other (James 5:7-11), to be straightforward in their promises (James 5:12), to pray for each other (James 5:13-18), and to help each other remain faithful to God (James 5:19-20).

This letter could be considered a how-to book on Christian living. Confrontation, challenge, and a call to commitment await you in its pages. Read James and become a *doer* of the Word (James 1:22-25).

THE BLUEPRINT

James wrote to Jewish Christians who had been scattered throughout the Mediterranean world because of persecution. In their hostile surroundings they were tempted to let intellectual agreement pass for true faith. This letter can have rich meaning for us as we are reminded that genuine faith transforms lives. We are encouraged to put our faith into action. It is easy to say we have faith, but true faith will produce loving actions toward others.

1. Genuine religion (James 1:1-27)
2. Genuine faith (James 2:1-3:12)
3. Genuine wisdom (James 3:13-5:20)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Living Faith

EXPLANATION: James wants believers not only to hear the truth, but also to do it. He contrasts empty faith (claims without conduct) with faith that works. Commitment to love and to serve is evidence of true faith.

IMPORTANCE: Living faith makes a difference. Make sure your faith is more than just a statement—it should also result in action. Seek ways of putting your faith to work.

THEME: Trials

EXPLANATION: In the Christian life there are trials and temptations. Successfully overcoming these adversities produces maturity and strong character.

IMPORTANCE: Don't resent troubles when they come. Pray for wisdom; God will supply all that you will need to face persecution or adversity. He will give you patience and keep you strong in times of trial.

THEME: Law of Love

EXPLANATION: We are saved by God’s gracious mercy, not by keeping the law. But Christ gave us a special command, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 19:19). We are to love and serve those around us.

IMPORTANCE: Keeping the law of love shows that our faith is vital and real. When we show love to others, we are overcoming our own selfishness.

THEME: Wise Speech

EXPLANATION: Wisdom shows itself in speech. We are responsible for the destructive results of our talk. The wisdom of God that helps control the tongue can help control all our actions.

IMPORTANCE: Accepting God’s wisdom will affect your speech. Your words will convey true humility and lead to peace. Think before you speak and allow God to give you self-control.

THEME: Wealth

EXPLANATION: James taught Christians not to compromise with worldly attitudes about wealth. Because the glory of wealth fades, Christians should store up God’s treasures through sincere service. Christians must not show partiality to the wealthy, nor be prejudiced against the poor.

IMPORTANCE: All of us are accountable for how we use what we have. We should not hoard wealth, but be generous toward others. In addition, we should not be impressed by the wealthy nor look down on those who are poor.

1 Peter

OVERVIEW: CRUSHED, overwhelmed, devastated, torn—these waves of feelings wash over those who suffer, blinding all vision of hope and threatening to destroy them. Suffering has many forms—physical abuse, debilitating disease, social ostracism, persecution. The pain and anguish tempt a person to turn back, to surrender, to give in.

Many first-century followers of Christ were suffering and being abused and persecuted for believing in and obeying Jesus. Beginning in Jerusalem at the hands of their Jewish brothers, the pattern of persecution spread to the rest of the world—wherever Christians gathered—and climaxed when Rome determined to rid the empire of those who would not bow to Caesar. . . the “Christ-ones.”

Peter knew persecution firsthand. Beaten and jailed, Peter had been threatened often. He had seen fellow Christians die and the church scattered. But he knew Christ, and nothing could shake his confidence in his risen Lord. In this personal context, Peter wrote to the church scattered and suffering for the faith, giving comfort and hope, and urging continued loyalty to Christ.

Peter begins by thanking God for salvation (1 Peter 1:2-6). He explains to his readers that trials will refine their faith (1 Peter 1:7-9). They should believe in spite of their circumstances; for many in past ages believed in God’s plan of salvation, even the prophets of old who wrote about it but didn’t understand it. But now salvation has been revealed in Christ (1 Peter 1:10-13).

In response to such a great salvation, Peter commands them to live holy lives (1 Peter 1:14-16), to reverently fear and trust God (1 Peter 1:17-21), to be honest and loving (1 Peter 2:1-3), and to become like Christ (1 Peter 2:1-3).

Jesus Christ, as “a chosen and precious cornerstone” upon whom the church is to be built (1 Peter 2:4, 6), is also the stone that was rejected, causing those who are disobedient to stumble and fall (1 Peter 2:7-8). But the church, built upon this Stone, is to be God’s holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Next, Peter explains how believers should live during difficult times (1 Peter 2:11-4:11). Christians should be above reproach (1 Peter 2:12-17), imitating Christ in all their social roles—masters and servants, husbands and wives, church members and neighbors (1 Peter 2:18-3:17). Christ should be our model for obedience to God in the midst of great suffering (1 Peter 3:18-4:11).

Peter then outlines the right attitude to have about persecution: expect it (1 Peter 4:12), be thankful for the privilege of suffering for Christ (1 Peter 4:13-18), and trust God for deliverance (1 Peter 4:19).

Next, Peter gives some special instructions—elders should care for God’s flock (1 Peter 5:1-4), younger men should be submissive to those who are older (1 Peter 5:5-6), and everyone should trust God and resist Satan (1 Peter 5:7-11).

Peter concludes by introducing Silas and by giving personal greetings from himself, possibly from the church in Rome, and from Mark (1 Peter 5:12-14).

When you suffer for doing what is right, remember that following Christ is a costly commitment. When persecuted for your faith, rejoice that you have been counted worthy to suffer for Christ. He suffered for us; as his followers, we should expect nothing less. As you read 1 Peter, remember that trials will come to refine your faith. When they come, remain faithful to God.

THE BLUEPRINT

Peter wrote to Jewish Christians who were experiencing persecution for their faith. He wrote to comfort them with the hope of eternal life and to challenge them to continue living holy lives. Those who suffer for being Christians become partners with Christ in his suffering. As we suffer, we must remember that Christ is both our hope in the midst of suffering and our example of how to endure suffering faithfully.

1. God’s great blessings to his people (1 Peter 1:1-2:10)
2. The conduct of God’s people in the midst of suffering (1 Peter 2:11-4:19)
3. The shepherding of God’s people in the midst of suffering (1 Peter 5:1-14)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Salvation

EXPLANATION: Our salvation is a gracious gift from God. God chose us out of his love for us, Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sin, and the Holy Spirit cleansed us from sin when we believed. Eternal life is a wonderful privilege for those who trust in Christ.

IMPORTANCE: Our safety and security are in God. If we experience joy in relationship with Christ now, how much greater will our joy be when he returns and we see him face to face. Such a hope should motivate us to serve Christ with greater commitment.

THEME: Persecution

EXPLANATION: Peter offers faithful believers comfort and hope. We should expect ridicule, rejection, and suffering because we are Christians. Persecution makes us stronger because it refines our faith. We can face persecution victoriously as Christ did, if we rely on him.

IMPORTANCE: Christians still suffer for what they believe. We should expect persecution, but we don't have to be terrified by it. The fact that we will live eternally with Christ should give us the confidence, patience, and hope to stand firm even when we are persecuted.

THEME: God's Family

EXPLANATION: We are privileged to belong to God's family, a community with Christ as the Founder and Foundation. Everyone in this community is related—we are all brothers and sisters, loved equally by God.

IMPORTANCE: Because Christ is the foundation of our family, we must be devoted, loyal, and faithful to him. By obeying him, we show that we are his children. We must accept the challenge to live differently from the society around us.

THEME: Family Life

EXPLANATION: Peter encouraged the wives of unbelievers to submit to their husbands' authority as a means to winning them to Christ. He urged all family members to treat others with sympathy, love, compassion, and humility.

IMPORTANCE: We must treat our families lovingly. Though it's never easy, willing service is the best way to influence loved ones. To gain the strength we need for self-discipline and submission, we need to pray for God's help.

THEME: Judgment

EXPLANATION: God will judge everyone with perfect justice. We all will face God. He will punish evildoers and those who persecute God's people. Those who love him will be rewarded with life forever in his presence.

IMPORTANCE: Because all are accountable to God, we can leave judgment of others to him. We must not hate or resent those who persecute us. We should realize that we will be held responsible for how we live each day.

2 Peter

OVERVIEW: WARNINGS have many forms—lights, signs, sights, sounds, smells, feelings, and written words. With varied focus, their purpose is the same—to advise alertness and caution because of imminent danger. Responses to these warnings will also vary, from disregard and neglect to evasive or corrective action. How a person reacts to a warning is usually determined by the situation and the source. An impending storm is treated differently than an onrushing automobile, and the counsel of a trusted friend is heeded much more than the flippant remark by a stranger or the fearful guess of a child.

Second Peter is a letter of warning—from an authority none other than the courageous, experienced, and faithful apostle. And it is the last communication from this great warrior of Christ. Soon thereafter he would die, martyred for the faith.

Previously Peter had written to comfort and encourage believers in the midst of suffering and persecution—an external onslaught. But three years later, in this letter containing his last words, he wrote to warn them of an internal attack—complacency and heresy. He spoke of holding fast to the nonnegotiable facts of the faith, of growing and maturing in the faith, and of rejecting all who would distort the truth. To follow this advice would ensure Christ-honoring individuals and Christ-centered churches.

After a brief greeting (2 Peter 1:1), Peter gives the antidote for stagnancy and shortsightedness in the Christian life (2 Peter 1:2-11). Then he explains that his days are numbered (2 Peter 1:12-15) and that the believers should listen to his messages and the words of Scripture (2 Peter 1:16-21).

Next, Peter gives a blunt warning about false teachers (2 Peter 2:1-22). They will become prevalent in the last days (2 Peter 2:1-2), they will do or say anything for money (2 Peter 2:3), they will spurn the things of God (2 Peter 2:2, 10-11), they will do whatever they feel like doing (2 Peter 2:12-17), they will be proud and boastful (2 Peter 2:18-19), and they will be judged and punished by God (2 Peter 2:3-10, 20-22).

Peter concludes his brief letter by explaining why he has written it (2 Peter 3:1-18)—to remind them of the words of the prophets and apostles that predicted the coming of false teachers, to give the reasons for the delay in Christ’s return (2 Peter 3:1-13), and to encourage them to beware of heresies and to grow in their faith (2 Peter 3:14-18).

Addressed to those who “have received a faith as precious as ours,” 2 Peter could have been written to us. Our world is filled with false prophets and teachers who claim to have the truth and who clamor for attention and allegiance. Listen carefully to Peter’s message and heed his warning. Determine to grow in your knowledge of Christ and to reject all those who preach anything inconsistent with God’s Word.

THE BLUEPRINT

While Peter wrote his first letter to teach about handling persecution (trials from without), he wrote this letter to teach about handling heresy (trials from within). False teachers are often subtly deceitful. Believers today must still be vigilant against falling into false doctrine, heresy, and cult activity. This letter gives us clues to help detect false teaching.

1. Guidance for growing Christians (2 Peter 1:1-21)
2. Danger to growing Christians (2 Peter 2:1-22)
3. Hope for growing Christians (2 Peter 3:1-18)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Diligence

EXPLANATION: If our faith is real, it will be evident in our faithful behavior. If people are diligent in Christian growth, they won't backslide or be deceived by false teachers.

IMPORTANCE: Growth is essential. It begins with faith and culminates in love for others. To keep growing we need to know God, keep on following him, and remember what he taught us. We must remain diligent in faithful obedience and Christian growth.

THEME: False Teachers

EXPLANATION: Peter warns the church to beware of false teachers. These teachers were proud of their position, promoted sexual sin, and advised against keeping the Ten Commandments. Peter countered them by pointing to the Spirit-inspired Scriptures as our authority.

IMPORTANCE: Christians need discernment to be able to resist false teachers. God can rescue us from their lies if we stay true to his Word, the Bible, and reject those who distort the truth.

THEME: Christ's Return

EXPLANATION: One day Christ will create a new heaven and earth where we will live forever. As Christians, our hope is in this promise. But with Christ's return comes his judgment on all who refuse to believe.

IMPORTANCE: The cure for complacency, lawlessness, and heresy is found in the confident assurance that Christ will return. God is still giving unbelievers time

to repent. To be ready, Christians must keep on trusting and resist the pressure to give up waiting for Christ's return.

1 John

OVERVIEW: “A GOOD MAN. . . yes. . . perhaps one of the best who ever lived. . . but just a man,” say many. Others disagree, claiming that he suffered from delusions of grandeur—a “messiah complex.” And the argument rages over the true identity of this man called Jesus. Suggestions have ranged from “simple teacher” to “egomaniac” and “misguided fool.” Whoever he was, all would agree that Jesus left his mark on history.

Hearing these discussions, even Christians can begin to wonder and doubt. Is Jesus really God? Did he come to save sinners like us? Does God care about me?

First John was written to dispel doubts and to build assurance by presenting a clear picture of Christ. Entering history, Jesus was and is God in the flesh and God in focus—seen, heard, and touched by the author of this letter, John the apostle. John walked and talked with Jesus, saw him heal, heard him teach, watched him die, met him arisen, and saw him ascend. John knew God—he had lived with him and

had seen him work. And John enjoyed fellowship with the Father and the Son all the days of his life.

The elder statesman in the church, John wrote this letter to his “dear children.” In it he presented God as light, as love, and as life. He explained in simple and practical terms what it means to have fellowship with God.

At the same time, false teachers had entered the church, denying the incarnation of Christ. John wrote to correct their serious errors. So, John’s letter is a model for us to follow as we combat modern heresies.

John opens this letter by giving his credentials as an eyewitness of the incarnation and by stating his reason for writing (1 John 1:1-4). He then presents God as “light,” symbolizing absolute purity and holiness (1 John 1:5-7), and he explains how believers can walk in God’s light and have fellowship with him (1 John 1:8-10) with Christ as their defender (1 John 2:1-2). John urges them to obey Christ fully and to love all the members of God’s family (1 John 2:3-17). He warns his readers of “antichrists” and the antichrist who will try to lead them away from the truth (1 John 2:18-29).

In the next section, John presents God as “love”—giving, dying, forgiving, and blessing (1 John 3:1-4:21). God *is* love, and because God loves us, he calls us his children and makes us like Christ (1 John 3:1-2). This truth should motivate us to live close to him (1 John 3:3-6). We can be sure of our family relationship with God when our lives are filled with good deeds and love for others (1 John 3:7-24). Again, John warns of false teachers who twist the truth. We should reject these false teachers (1 John 4:1-6) as we continue to live in God’s love (1 John 4:7-21).

In the last section, John presents God as “life” (1 John 5:1-21). God’s life is in his Son. To have his Son is to have eternal life.

Do you know God? Do you know Christ? Do you know that you have eternal life? First John was written to help you know the reality of God in your life through faith in Christ, to assure you that you have eternal life, and to encourage you to remain in fellowship with the God who is light and love. Read this letter written by one overwhelmed by God’s love, and with renewed confidence, pass on his love to others.

THE BLUEPRINT

John wrote about the most vital aspects of faith so that readers would know Christian truth from error. He emphasizes the basics of faith so that we can be confident in our faith. In our dark world, God is light. In our cold world, God brings the warmth of love. In our dying world, God brings life. When we lack confidence, these truths bring us certainty.

1. God is light (1 John 1:1-2:27)
2. God is love (1 John 2:28-4:21)
3. God is life (1 John 5:1-21)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Sin

EXPLANATION: Even Christians sin. Sin requires God's forgiveness, and Christ's death provides it for us. Determining to live according to God's standards in the Bible shows that our lives are being transformed.

IMPORTANCE: We cannot deny our sin nature, maintain that we are "above" sinning, or minimize the consequences of sin in our relationship with God. We must resist the attraction of sin, yet we must confess when we do sin.

THEME: Love

EXPLANATION: Christ commands us to love others as he loved us. This love is evidence that we are truly saved. God is the Creator of love; he cares that his children love each other.

IMPORTANCE: Love means putting others first and being unselfish. Love is action—showing others we care—not just saying it. To show love we must give sacrificially of our time and money to meet the needs of others.

THEME: Family of God

EXPLANATION: We become God's children by believing in Christ. God's life in us enables us to love our fellow family members.

IMPORTANCE: How we treat others shows who our Father is. Live as a faithful, loving family member.

THEME: Truth and Error

EXPLANATION: Teaching that the physical body does not matter, false teachers encouraged believers to throw off moral restraints. They also taught that Christ wasn't really a man and that we must be saved by having some special mystical knowledge. The result was that people became indifferent to sin.

IMPORTANCE: God is truth and light, so the more we get to know him the better we can keep focused on the truth. Don't be led astray by any teaching that denies Christ's deity or humanity. Check the message; test the claims.

THEME: Assurance

EXPLANATION: God is in control of heaven and earth. Because his word is true, we can have assurance of eternal life and victory over sin. By faith we can be certain of our eternal destiny with him.

IMPORTANCE: Assurance of our relationship with God is a promise, but it is also a way of life. We build our confidence by trusting in God's word and in Christ's provision for our sin.

2 John

OVERVIEW: TRUTH and love are frequently discussed in our world, but seldom practiced.

From politicians to salesmen, people conveniently ignore or conceal facts and use words to enhance positions or sell products. Perjury is common, and integrity and credibility are endangered species. Words, twisted in meaning and torn from context, have become mere tools for ego building. It is not surprising that we have to “swear” to tell the truth.

And what about love? Our world is filled with its words—popular songs, greeting cards, media counselors, and romantic novels shower us with notions and dreams of ethereal, idyllic relationships and feelings. Real love, however, is scarce—selfless giving, caring, sharing, and even dying. We yearn to love and be loved but see few living examples of real love. Plentiful are those who grasp, hoard, and watch out for “number one.”

Christ is the antithesis of society’s prevailing values, that is, falsehood and self-centeredness—for *he is truth and love*, in person. Therefore, all who claim loyalty to him must be committed to these ideals—following the truth and living the truth, reflecting love and acting with love toward one another.

The apostle John had seen Truth and Love firsthand—he had been with Jesus. So affected was this disciple that all of his writings, from the Gospel to the book of Revelation, are filled with this theme—truth and love are vital to the Christian and are inseparable in the Christian life. Second John, his brief letter to a dear friend, is no different. John says to walk in the truth and obey God (2 John 1:4), watch out for deceivers (2 John 1:7), and love God and each other (2 John 1:6).

Second John will take just a few minutes to read, but its message should last a lifetime. As you reflect on these few paragraphs penned by the wise and aged follower of Christ, recommit yourself to being a person of truth, of love, and of obedience.

THE BLUEPRINT

False teachers were a dangerous problem for the church to which John was writing. His warning against showing hospitality to false teachers may sound harsh and unloving to many today. Yet these men were teaching heresy that could seriously harm many believers—for eternity.

1. Watch out for false teachers (2 John 1:1-11)
2. John's final words (2 John 1:12-13)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Truth

EXPLANATION: Following God's Word, the Bible, is essential to Christian living, because God is truth. Christ's true followers consistently obey his truth.

IMPORTANCE: To be loyal to Christ's teaching we must seek to know the Bible, but we may never twist its message to our own needs or purposes, nor encourage others who misuse it.

THEME: Love

EXPLANATION: Christ's command is for Christians to love one another. This is the basic ingredient of true Christianity.

IMPORTANCE: To obey Christ fully, we must believe his command to love others. Helping, giving, and meeting needs put love into practice.

THEME: False Leaders

EXPLANATION: We must be wary of religious leaders who are not true to Christ's teaching. We should not give them a platform to spread false teaching.

IMPORTANCE: Don't encourage those who are opposed to Christ. Politely remove yourself from association with false leaders. Be aware of what's being taught in your church.

3 John

OVERVIEW: At special invitation or with a surprise knock, company arrives and with them comes the promise of soiled floors, extra laundry, dirty dishes, altered schedules, personal expense, and inconvenience. From sharing a meal to providing a bed, *hospitality* costs. . . in time, energy, and money. But how we treat others reflects our true values, what is really important to us. Do we see people as objects or inconveniences, or as unique creations of a loving God? And which is more important to God, a person or a carpet? Perhaps the most effective way to demonstrate God's values and Christ's love to others is to invite and welcome guests into our homes.

For Gaius, hospitality was a habit, and his reputation for friendship and generosity, especially to traveling teachers and missionaries (3 John 1:5), had spread. To affirm and thank Gaius for his Christian life—style, and to encourage him in his faith, John wrote this personal note.

John's format for this letter centers around three men—Gaius, the example of one who follows Christ and loves others (3 John 1:1-8); Diotrephes, the self-proclaimed church leader who does not reflect God's values (3 John 1:9-11); and Demetrius, who also follows the truth (3 John 1:12). John encourages Gaius to practice hospitality, continue to walk in the truth, and do what is right.

Although this is a personal letter, we can “look over the shoulder” of Gaius and apply its lessons to our lives. As you read 3 John, with which man do you identify? Are you a Gaius, generously giving to others? A Demetrius, loving the truth? Or a Diotrephes, looking out for yourself and your “things”? Determine to reflect Christ’s values in your relationships, opening your home and touching others with his love.

THE BLUEPRINT

John wrote to commend Gaius, who was taking care of traveling teachers and missionaries, and to warn against people like Diotrephes, who was proud and refused to listen to spiritual leaders in authority. If we are to live in the truth of the gospel, we must look for ways to support pastors, Christian workers, and missionaries today. All Christians should work together to support God’s work, both at home and around the world.

1. God’s children live by the standards of the gospel (3 John 1:1-12)
2. John’s final words (3 John 1:13-15)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Hospitality

EXPLANATION: John wrote to encourage those who were kind to others. Genuine hospitality for traveling Christian workers was needed then and is still important today.

IMPORTANCE: Faithful Christian teachers and missionaries need our support. Whenever you can extend hospitality to others, it will make you a partner in their ministry.

THEME: Pride

EXPLANATION: Diotrephes not only refused to offer hospitality, but he set himself up as a church boss. Pride disqualified him from being a real leader.

IMPORTANCE: Christian leaders must shun pride and its effects on them. Be careful not to misuse your position of leadership.

THEME: Faithfulness

EXPLANATION: Gaius and Demetrius were commended for their faithful work in the church. They were held up as examples of faithful, selfless servants.

IMPORTANCE: Don't take for granted Christian workers who serve faithfully. Be sure to encourage them so they won't grow weary of serving.

Jude

OVERVIEW: TO PROTECT from harm, to guard from attack, to repulse enemies—for centuries rugged defenders have built walls, launched missiles, and waged wars, expending material and human resources in the battle to save nations and cities. And with total commitment and courageous abandon, individuals have fought for their families. It is a rule of life that we fight for survival, defending with all our strength what is most precious to us, from every real or imagined attack.

God's Word and the gift of eternal life have infinite value and have been entrusted to Christ's faithful followers. There are many people who live in opposition to God and his followers. They twist God's truth, seeking to deceive and destroy the unwary. But God's truth must go forth, carried and defended by those who have committed their lives to God's Son. It is an important task, an awesome responsibility, and a profound privilege to have this commission.

This was Jude's message to Christians everywhere. Opposition would come and godless teachers would arise, but Christians should "contend for the faith" (Jude 1:3) by rejecting all falsehood and immorality (Jude 1:4-19), remembering God's mighty acts of rescue and punishment (Jude 1:5-11, 14-16) and the warnings of the apostles (Jude 1:17-19). His readers are to build up their own faith through prayer (Jude 1:20), keeping close to Christ (Jude 1:21), helping others (Jude 1:22-23), and hating sin (Jude 1:23). Then Jude concludes with a glorious benediction of praise to God (Jude 1:24-25).

How much do you value God's Word, the fellowship of the church, and obedience to Jesus Christ? There are many false teachers waiting to destroy your Christ-centered life, the credibility of God's Word, and the unity of the body of Christ. Read Jude and determine to stand firm in your faith and defend God's truth at all costs. *Nothing* is more valuable.

THE BLUEPRINT

Jude wrote to motivate Christians everywhere to action. He wanted them to recognize the dangers of false teaching, to protect themselves and other believers, and to win back those who had already been deceived. Jude was writing against godless teachers who were saying that Christians could do as they pleased without fear of God's punishment. While few teach this heresy openly in the church today, many in the church act as though this were true. This letter contains a warning against living a nominal Christian life.

1. The danger of false teachers (Jude 1:1-16)
2. The duty to fight for God's truth (Jude 1:17-25)

MEGATHEMES

THEME: False teachers

EXPLANATION: Jude warns against false teachers and leaders who reject the lordship of Christ, undermine the faith of others, and lead them astray. These leaders and any who follow them will be punished.

IMPORTANCE: We must staunchly defend Christian truth. Make sure that you avoid leaders and teachers who distort the Bible to suit their own purposes. Genuine servants of God will faithfully portray Christ in their words and conduct.

THEME: Apostasy

EXPLANATION: Jude also warns against apostasy—turning away from Christ. We are to remember that God punishes rebellion against him. We must be careful not to drift away from a faithful commitment to Christ.

IMPORTANCE: Those who do not seek to know the truth in God's Word are susceptible to apostasy. Christians must guard against any false teachings that

would distract them from the truth preached by the apostles and written in God's Word.

THE FUTURE

Revelation

OVERVIEW: WITH TINY wrinkles and cries, he entered the world and, wrapped in strips of cloth, took his first nap on a bed of straw. Subject to time and to parents, he grew to manhood in Roman-occupied Palestine, his gentle hands becoming strong and calloused in Joseph's woodworking shop. As a man, he walked through the countryside and city, touching individuals, preaching to crowds, and training 12 men to carry on his work. At every step he was hounded by those seeking to rid the world of his influence. Finally, falsely accused and tried, he was condemned to a disgraceful execution by foreign hands. And he died—spat upon, cursed, pierced by nails, and hung heavenward for all to deride. Jesus, the God-man, gave his life completely so that all might live.

At God's appointed time, the risen and ascended Lord Jesus will burst onto the world scene. Then everyone will know that Jesus is Lord of the universe! Those who love him will rejoice, greeting their Savior with hearts overflowing into songs of praise. But his enemies will be filled with fear. Allied with Satan, the enemies of Christ will marshal their legions against Christ and his armies. But who can withstand God's wrath? Christ will win the battle and reign victorious forever! Jesus, the humble suffering Servant, is also the powerful, conquering King and Judge.

Revelation is a book of hope. John, the beloved apostle and eyewitness of Jesus, proclaimed that the victorious Lord would surely return to vindicate the righteous and judge the wicked. But Revelation is also a book of warning. Things were not

as they should have been in the churches, so Christ called the members to commit themselves to live in righteousness.

Although Jesus gave this revelation of himself to John nearly 2,000 years ago, it still stands as a comfort and challenge to God's people today. We can take heart as we understand John's vision of hope—Christ will return to rescue his people and settle accounts with all who defy him.

John begins this book by explaining how he received this revelation from God (Rev. 1:1-20). He then records specific messages from Jesus to the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 2:1-3:22). Suddenly the scene shifts as a mosaic of dramatic and majestic images bursts into view before John's eyes. This series of visions portrays the future rise of evil, culminating in the antichrist (Rev. 4:1-18:24). Then follows John's recounting of the triumph of the King of kings, the wedding of the Lamb, the final judgment, and the coming of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 19:1-22:5). Revelation concludes with the promise of Christ's soon return (Rev. 22:6-21), and John breathes a prayer that has been echoed by Christians through the centuries, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

As you read the book of Revelation, marvel with John at the wondrous panorama of God's revealed plan. Listen as Christ warns the churches, and root out any sin that blocks your relationship with him. Be full of hope, knowing that God is in control, Christ's victory is assured, and all who trust him will be saved.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES (Rev. 1:1-3:22)

The vision John received opens with instructions for him to write to seven churches. He both commends them for their strengths and warns them about their flaws. Each letter was directed to a church then in existence, but also speaks to conditions in the church throughout history. Both in the church and in our individual lives, we must constantly fight against the temptation to become loveless, immoral, lenient, compromising, lifeless, or casual about our faith. The letters make it clear how our Lord feels about these qualities.

B. MESSAGE FOR THE CHURCH (Rev. 4:1-22:21)

This revelation is both a warning to Christians who have grown apathetic and an encouragement to those who are faithfully enduring the struggles in this world. It

reassures us that good will triumph over evil, gives us hope as we face difficult times, and gives guidance when we are wavering in our faith. Christ's message to the church is a message of hope for all believers in every generation.

1. Worshiping God in heaven
2. Opening the seven seals
3. Sounding the seven trumpets
4. Observing the great conflict
5. Pouring out the seven plagues
6. Seizing the final victory
7. Making everything new

MEGATHEMES

THEME: God's Sovereignty

EXPLANATION: God is sovereign. He is greater than any power in the universe. God is not to be compared with any leader, government, or religion. He controls history for the purpose of uniting true believers in loving fellowship with him.

IMPORTANCE: Though Satan's power may temporarily increase, we are not to be led astray. God is all-powerful. He is in control. He will bring his true family safely into eternal life. Because he cares for us, we can trust him with our very lives.

THEME: Christ's Return

EXPLANATION: Christ came to earth as a "Lamb," the symbol of his perfect sacrifice for our sin. He will return as the triumphant "Lion," the rightful ruler and conqueror. He will defeat Satan, settle accounts with all those who reject him, and bring his faithful people into eternity.

IMPORTANCE: Assurance of Christ's return gives suffering Christians the strength to endure. We can look forward to his return as King and Judge. Since no one knows the time when he will appear, we must be ready at all times by keeping our faith strong.

THEME: God's Faithful People

EXPLANATION: John wrote to encourage the church to resist the demands to worship the Roman emperor. He warns all God's faithful people to be devoted only to Christ. Revelation identifies who the faithful people are and what they should be doing until Christ returns.

IMPORTANCE: You can take your place in the ranks of God's faithful people by believing in Christ. Victory is sure for those who resist temptation and make loyalty to Christ their top priority.

THEME: Judgment

EXPLANATION: One day God's anger toward sin will be fully and completely unleashed. Satan will be defeated with all of his agents. False religion will be destroyed. God will reward the faithful with eternal life, but all who refuse to believe in him will face eternal punishment.

IMPORTANCE: Evil and injustice will not prevail forever. God's final judgment will put an end to these. We need to be certain of our commitment to Jesus if we want to escape this great final judgment. No one who rejects Christ will escape God's punishment.

THEME: Hope

EXPLANATION: One day God will create a new heaven and a new earth. All believers will live with him forever in perfect peace and security. Those who have already died will be raised to life. These promises for the future bring us hope.

IMPORTANCE: Our great hope is that what Christ promises will come true. When we have confidence in our final destination, we can follow Christ with unwavering dedication no matter what we must face. We can be encouraged by know that Christ will return.