

FROM THE BEGINNING: A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Notes For Week One: In The Beginning (The Book Of Genesis)

Each week, we'll take a look at one or two books of the Old Testament. We'll read some key scriptures that help us understand what each book is about, will discuss what they teach us about God, and what we could learn from them. From the beginning, God knew what we needed, and his purpose has always been to send Jesus so that everyone may have the chance to know him.

God Created The Heavens & The Earth (Genesis 1-3)

The opening chapters of Genesis show us God's viewpoint as he created the world, created humanity, and saw events unfold. We also see the contrast between human straying and God's faithfulness. As we look at what happened in the beginning, we'll set aside the world's debates (such as evolution and creation), instead focusing on what these scriptures tell us about God.

As we read the account of the creation, we often see "and God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1). In the beginning, the earth was formless and meaningless, yet God gave both form and meaning to this world. From there, he brings light, then brings plant life, brings the lights in the sky, and gives life to the many kinds of animals. Finally God creates humanity and gives us life and breath and waits for us to reach out for him and find him (Acts 17:26-28).

When God creates the first humans, he puts them in a garden he makes for them (Genesis 2). He gives Adam the breath of life, a touch of God's closeness; then he supplies the garden with water, and asks Adam to take care of it. God also provides him with a helper and friend, just as he provides each of us with many helpers and friends in the body of Jesus. For a while, things remain idyllic.

Yet human nature being what it is, Adam and Eve are deceived and sin, and they hide from the Lord (Genesis 3). The first consequence of sin is to separate us from God; and it also harms human relationships. So what follows are not punishments, rather they are the consequences of sin. Sin produces wounds, and in turn produces more hurt and further offenses.

Only God has the cure for sin, and only our God can heal the wounds and cleanse us. In Romans, Paul tells us how the trespass of one man brought judgment and death; yet Jesus with his perfect sacrifice brought redemption and overflowing grace (Romans 5:15-17).

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: Look at what God made on each 'day' - why was each of these things 'good'? What do each of them tell us about God? What does the garden and the images of it tell us about God's nature? Consider the things God tells Adam and Eve will happen after they eat the fruit - how are these natural consequences?

God & Humanity (Genesis 4-9)

The trespass of Adam and Eve brought a flood of sin and its consequences. At the same time, we see God ready to pour out his grace. Even when God must send a flood of water to 'start over,' we see his grace in protecting Noah, a person who walked faithfully with God, and in giving him the sign of the covenant he makes in the aftermath.

As we still endure today, henceforth humanity lived in a fallen world (Genesis 4-8). Sin was already 'crouching at the door,' and even murder soon arises, bringing further consequences. Yet God shows grace even to Cain, allowing him not only to live, but gives him a mark of protection. And even beginning with Abel, we see what God was looking for. Those who walk faithfully with God, like Enoch (5:24) and Noah (6:9), find favor in the eyes of the Lord.

So when God is grieved by the wickedness of humanity, he takes care of Noah; and for the first time he also preserves a 'remnant' of those who have turned to him. We also see the dilemma God faces even today: He is a holy God who cannot be near uncleanness, yet he is a loving God who longs to be near us and to give us life.

After the flood, God gives the survivors the sign of the rainbow (Genesis 9). This is also a sign of the covenant he makes with Noah and his family, promising his care and his forbearance with human ways. Many centuries later, God reaffirmed this promise through Isaiah (Isaiah 54:9-10), and since then he has also given us the sign of a new covenant, the sign of Jesus on the cross, the promise that now is the time of his favor.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: Based on what we see in Genesis, what does it mean to 'walk faithfully with God'? What does God's treatment of Cain tell us about God? What does the flood and God's care for Noah show us about God's nature? Why is the rainbow an appropriate sign of God's covenant? What does it mean to us today?

From Noah To Joseph (Overview Of Genesis 10-50)

After the covenant God made with Noah, humanity began once more to spread out across the earth. Then we see God's call to Abraham (Abram), a person who walked by faith, and the covenant God made with him and his descendants. In taking an overview of their times, we will notice what they tell us about God and the purposes of his heart.

Humankind is soon scattered over the face of the earth (Genesis 10-12). As their wandering and erring increases, so also God's willingness increased to show them the grace they needed. Once more he finds someone who walked in faithfulness, who shows a simple trust in God, in Abram. In his call of Abram we again see God's readiness to share his grace with all nations (12:1-3), and we see God's promise that knowing him himself is his greatest gift to us (15:1).

The rest of our overview will serve simply as a starting point for further study of Genesis. Abraham's times show a variety of situations, and they show Abraham making faithful decisions and also occasionally making mistakes (Genesis 13-23). From God's call, Abraham left behind a secure life in Harran and lived as a nomad in Canaan.

The book of Hebrews describes Abraham and the other Old Testament examples of faith as living as strangers in this world (Hebrews 11:13-16). Abraham already understood that this world was not his home; Hebrews tells us he was longing for a better country - a heavenly one.

Through Isaac, Esau, and Jacob we see traces of this same perspective (Genesis 24-36). Yet we see a sharper contrast between human nature and God's nature. Esau never understands what it means to know God; while Jacob is highly flawed, yet he in his own way trusted in God and he

faithfully accepted God's promises and passed them along to the next generation. God blesses Jacob and Rebekah in spite of their scheming, yet at times they also experience the consequences.

Joseph's times show us a contrast on a deeper level, and they show us the vastness of God's understanding and his faithfulness and his compassion (Genesis 37-50). Human ways are shortsighted and narrowly focused on our own desires. Yet as we read about Joseph, God shows the many dimensions of his understanding and his faithful care. In its way, this is a mere foretaste of the concern for everyone that we see God shows us in Jesus.

The Old Testament reminds us that from the beginning God has always had in mind to give us all the chance to know him (Isaiah 46:9-13). God is the Beginning who gives us life; he is the End, our true home and his inheritance for each of us. Human intentions and motivations are ever-changing and can often be mere whims, yet the purposes of God's heart have always been the same, and his desire for each of us to know him will stand forever.

We may be easily distracted and wander away from God, and we fall far short of the glory of God; yet our Heavenly Father is always near, he has brought his words near, and he has brought his righteousness and his care near through Jesus.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: Notice all the things God asked Abraham to do. Why did he ask him to do each of these, and what is he also saying to us? What do we see about God's nature in the way he deals with Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Jacob? Look at the events in Joseph's life and what God was doing with them. Who does God show his care to, both with their physical needs and spiritual needs? What does this tell us about God?

- Mark Garner, December 2016

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Notes For Week Two: Our Redeemer Will Walk With Us (The Book Of Exodus)

Genesis has shown us God's desire to be with us, and the obstacles that human nature creates. At the end of Genesis, the Israelites were in favorable times; yet as Exodus opens, this has completely changed. In Exodus, we see God hearing the cries of the afflicted, setting them free from oppression, and walking with them through the desert in spite of their frequent straying.

God Hears The Cries Of The Afflicted (Exodus 1-4)

When the Israelites fell into hard times in Egypt, God was well aware of the oppression and mistreatment they had to endure; and he heard their cries. Likewise, God understands the sorrow and distraction and confusion our spirits must undergo in this unbelieving world, and he promises us too that he will save those who call on him in truth.

Exodus opens by reminding us of how things can quickly change (Exodus 1). When there is a new king to whom neither God nor Joseph means anything (1:6-13), sad times come for the Israelites. They are gradually reduced to slavery, and soon face the execution of their newborn sons. We won't face such extremes, yet even in our own times God allows many good things and many bad things to happen, so we may understand that our hope is always in him alone.

Yet God has already begun to redeem them, as we see when Moses is rescued when he is drawn out of the water (Exodus 2). His family's faith and their care for him lead to God to provide an unexpected savior for the helpless boy (2:1-10). Not only disregarding her father's orders, the compassionate daughter of the Pharaoh also provides a good, caring home for him - in the Pharaoh's place; an irony from God to reassure us of his care for us.

Moses later had to flee from Egypt, yet after a long stay in the desert God's call to Moses comes (Exodus 3-4). His voice from within the bush tells Moses and us several things (3:2-10). God is holy, he knows what is in our hearts, he sees us in our miseries and in our joys, and he wants to give us what we really need. He came to Moses not only to break Egypt's chains, but also to take his people to a better place; just as he hopes to do for us.

As Moses expresses his reservations, God tells him his name, I Am Who I Am (3:11-15). This simple announcement that God is I AM carries meaning deeper than the words can express. God has always been God, he will always be our holy and compassionate God, and he will be the same God forever (see also Hebrews 13:8).

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does the chain of events that leads to Moses' rescue show us about God's character? Why might God have waited so long to call him, and waited so long to help the Israelites? What might it mean that God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush? What do we learn from what he says to Moses? What does God referring to himself as "I AM" tell us about him?

Out Of Egypt (Exodus 5-14)

Next we see how God brings the Israelites out of Egypt. The series of plagues reassures the Israelites of God's strength and also gives the Egyptians a chance to see the futility of their false gods compared with the majesty of the living God. Then comes the Passover, a foreshadowing of Jesus' sacrificial ministry; and then God rescues them from peril and takes them across the sea.

There is a long series of confrontations between Moses and Pharaoh, yet it is God at the center of them (Exodus 5-11). From the start, God promises redemption to give Moses reassurance through the coming ordeal (6:6-7). God makes this promise personal, emphasizing that they will be his own people, that God will personally break the Egyptians' yoke - just as he breaks the yokes of the accuser when we turn our hearts to Jesus.

As one example of what Moses faced, Pharaoh's response to the plague of frogs shows us human cleverness and hardened hearts (8:6-15). In this case, in his increasing stubbornness the king needlessly allows the Egyptians to face an extra day of the plague. God patiently gave Pharaoh several chances, yet after that we see God hardening the king's heart himself.

The final plague, the death of Egypt's firstborn, brings God's Passover (Exodus 12-13). God tells the Israelites what they can do so that he can 'pass over' their homes. They are to care for a lamb for two weeks, then sacrifice it and put its blood on the tops and sides of their doorframes (12:5-14). God has already made this Passover sacrifice for us, so we may put Jesus' blood on the doorframes of our hearts, so we may not die spiritually (see, for example, Matthew 26:26-28).

When Pharaoh finally lets them go, the Israelites end up facing him once again, so God helps them cross the sea on foot (Exodus 14). They panic, though, when they see the Egyptian army approaching, so Moses reassures them that the Lord would fight for them, so they simply should be still, and walk by faith (14:10-22). Then God shows them how, as he instructs Moses to raise his staff, and the waters divide so they could cross the sea as if it were dry ground.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: Do each of the plagues have any particular significance? If so, what does it tell us about God's nature? Why does God give Pharaoh several chances to soften his heart, then later God hardens it himself? Besides the blood on the doorframes, what other details of the Passover might be hints or shadows of Jesus' sacrifice? Why did God allow the Israelites to face peril and fear by the sea?

God's Holiness & His Covenant (Overview Of Exodus 15-40)

Now the Israelites are free from Egypt forever. Yet new problems quickly arise as they find themselves in new conditions. They occasionally grumble and doubt God's care for them; and sadly, this will soon become a recurring trend. Yet at the same time, God continually reminds them of his understanding of their needs and his care for them.

In the aftermath of their rescue at the Red Sea, there is rejoicing, yet also growing pains among the Israelites (Exodus 15-18). They sing of God's unfailing love, and they praise him for guiding them each step (15:13, 15:17-18). Though right now they are contented, they will soon be called to learn that God is still with them, even when appearances may say otherwise.

They begin to complain over and over again, yet in God's compassion he gives them bread (manna, 16:1-5), meat (16:11-15), and water (17:3-7). God would continue doing this for them, giving them chance after chance to 'get' his awareness and his care for them. He does the same for us, since he understands how easily we are distracted and how quickly we lose heart. As long as we keep our hearts open to him, he will keep giving us the grace we need.

The next section of Exodus tells us about the covenant God makes at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19-31). The 'Ten Commandments' tell us about God's holiness, and even by proclaiming them he once more reminds us of his desire to live near us (20:1-20). As we saw in Genesis, God's precepts are neither arbitrary nor random; rather they tell us how he can keep us near.

The rest of this section contains instructions that may at first seem obscure, yet each in its way shows us something about God and who he is. Many of them have to do with the tabernacle that the Israelites would build, a promise of God's closeness.

The contrast between human nature and God's nature is again seen in the incident of the 'golden calf' (Exodus 32-34). God openly expresses his grief at the Israelites' idolatry, Moses in despair breaks the tablets of the covenant, and this time there have to be some consequences for the Israelites, since they have profaned God's holiness.

Yet we see how God's holiness and his mercy fit together (33:14-19). His close conversations with Moses reveal both, and they also show us God's kindness to Moses in using events to help Moses understand God's nature. In this exchange, God also expresses his eagerness to show his compassion and mercy to us, when we simply allow him to. Moreover, after this God once more would write his words on new tablets. Even though Israel has broken the covenant, God has not.

Exodus concludes with a description of the tabernacle being set up (Exodus 35-40). For many years, this humble tabernacle would be a reminder of God's willingness to dwell among his people, a sign of his eagerness to give them atonement for their sins, and an invitation to learn more about who our God is. Finally, he gives them another reassurance that he is with them, with the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night leading them (40:36-38).

We no longer have these tangible reminders of God's presence; yet he has given us more lasting signs, imperishable guarantees in giving us food and drink from heaven through Jesus (John 6:47-58). Jesus brought bread and poured out blood that bring us eternal life, that redeem us, that renew us day by day, that give us food and drink for our souls.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: How does God use the people's complaints and their needs to teach them about himself? What do each of the 'ten commandments' tell us about God's holiness and his nature? Why would God give us such a detailed description of the tabernacle and its furnishings? What do we learn about God in his response to the 'golden calf'? Compare the scriptures above from Exodus 15 with the closing scripture in Exodus 40 - what do these tell us about God and his intentions?

- Mark Garner, December 2016

The unclean cannot come into contact with God's holiness, with the sad results we see with Nadab and Abihu.

Holiness means more than purity or cleanness. It refers to things that belong to God, or to things that do not belong to this world (such as God himself). God 'puts his name' on holy things; and they, like him, should not come into contact with uncleanness. Another way to understand the difference: cleanness is an absence of 'bad' things, while holiness is the presence God and his 'goodness'. One of the glories of Jesus' sacrifice is that he did both of these for us at once.

Many of the laws of cleanness and holiness may make more sense in view of their intent (the laws in Leviticus 11-15 focus largely on cleanness, while those in Leviticus 17-22 focus largely on holiness).

In the middle of this section, God discusses the Day Of Atonement (Leviticus 16). On this day, once a year, the high priest followed an elaborate procedure to make sacrifices for himself and for all of the people. Notice also how careful the priest must be in the presence of God's holiness (16:13); and we see the blood it takes merely to atone for one more year. With vivid imagery, Hebrews 13:11-14 tells us about the significance of this day for believers in Jesus.

The book concludes by describing holy days, special years, and principles of the covenant that are each significant in their own way (Leviticus 23-27). Just as one example, God's year of 'jubilee' is in many ways a parallel of what Jesus did for all of us (25:13-24). Notice also the patient reminder that even in this world, nothing really belongs to us, and at the same time the reminder that God can give us the spiritual nourishment we need.

Finally we see God's promise to walk among us (26:11-13), a promise that is there for us too, a promise that has even deeper meaning in Jesus.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What led to the joy and reverence we see in Leviticus 9? Describe in your own words what cleanness and holiness mean to God. What does the Day of Atonement tell us about God's nature and what his holiness means? Pick a couple of the laws in Leviticus, and discuss what they tell us about God, and what he means by holiness and cleanness. What does his promise in 26:11-13 mean to us?

In The Desert (Overview Of Numbers)

God's original intention was to take the Israelites into Canaan only a little more than a year from leaving Egypt. In spite of their frequent grumbling and occasional straying into idolatry, God is still ready to take them in; and he gives them a preview of what the land looks like. Yet this time, the community becomes hard-hearted and turns back, leading to forty years of wandering.

The opening chapters see the community preparing to enter the new land (Numbers 1-10). In the Jewish Bible, the book we call Numbers is aptly named "In The Desert," for that is where it begins, and sadly where it ends. Yet throughout the book we can see God's faithfulness, as throughout all their journeys he guides them with the cloud (9:17-22), showing us his care for them each step and his desire to be with his people.

Yet there are already ominous signs (Numbers 11-12). The community becomes discontented about the food, and to add to the sadness Aaron and Miriam become critical of Moses. In both cases, we see God's 'anger,' yet this not the kind of anger humans feel. Rather, we see once again

reminders of God's holiness dwelling near them, and in both cases we see God desiring to show them mercy when they allowed him to.

All this was a prelude to their final decision to turn aside from the path God had in mind for them (Numbers 13-14). When the scouts return from exploring Canaan and give their report, the people refuse to go (14:1-9). When they persist in their hardness of heart, and when they show contempt for God, the Lord must reluctantly deny almost the whole generation the chance to enter the new land (14:20-23; see also Psalm 95:6-11).

Inevitably, more troubles follow, as their hardness leads to more restlessness and discontent (Numbers 15-17). When some of the Israelites openly rebel against Moses, more drastic consequences arise. Yet even as they must begin the long years of wandering, God continues graciously giving them procedures for offerings and cleansings (Numbers 18-19).

Thus we see the slow passing of the old generation (Numbers 20-27). Miriam and Aaron pass away, and Moses himself learns that he will not cross over to Canaan (Numbers 20). Even as we see the community being winnowed, we see both God's holiness and his grace, such as in the outbreak of snakebites and his mercy afterwards to those who acknowledged their sin (21:4-9).

As a sidelight, we see next the plotting of Balaam (a 'prophet' for hire) and Balak, king of Moab (Numbers 22-24). Balak pays Balaam to put a 'curse' on Israel, leading God to teach Balaam several lessons, and in the end this curse failed (24:5-7a). Yet they next try a distraction that works and leads many of the Israelites astray (Numbers 25), causing more of them to die (Balaam himself would die later, in Numbers 31, as a result of his part in this).

Finally we see Moses' concern for Israel's future, and his humility in asking God to appoint someone faithful to be a 'shepherd' for the people; so God reassures him that he will use Joshua to guide them in the future (27:15-18).

The book then continues with more thoughts about offerings, holy days, and vows, quite similar to what we find also in Leviticus (Numbers 28-30). Then as the community nears the conclusion of its wandering, there is a look back and a look forward (Numbers 31-36).

Psalm 78 gives us another perspective on the ways we see God's holiness and his faithfulness during the days in the desert (Psalm 78:14-25). The Israelites needed water, so he made water flow in the desert. They doubted his ability to provide for them, so he spread a table for them in the wilderness. In his mercy, he provides us too with all the grain of heaven we want.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does the 'cloud' tell us about God's nature? Are there parallels for us too? Given the many ways the Israelites had already disobeyed God, why does he now deny them another chance to enter Canaan? Why does he choose to make them wander, instead of simply destroying them? In their forty years in the desert, what do we see that tells us about God's nature?

- Mark Garner, December 2016

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**Notes For Week Four: There Is No One Like God (The Book Of Deuteronomy)
Wherever You Go (The Book Of Joshua)**

After the long years in the desert, the Israelites are again about to enter Canaan. The book of Deuteronomy takes both a look back and a look ahead, describing all that God has done and all that God will do. Then in Joshua, we see God's frequent reminders that he will be with them, wherever they go, and he gives them his simple call to walk by faith.

There Is No One Like God (Overview Of Deuteronomy)

Deuteronomy ties together spiritual teaching, events, and the Levitical laws, to help the Israelites understand who God really is, and to teach them that God's call for them was much more than merely taking them to a physical land. Each of these teachings gives us some things to consider, and each of them has parallels for us in our relationship with God.

Moses reminds the Israelites that God had carried them each step (see 1:29-31), and God has always carried us too (Deuteronomy 1-4). God knows that the people are prone to straying and wandering, so he assures them that whenever they seek him from the heart, they will find him (Deuteronomy 4:29-33). And he asks them simply to acknowledge him alone as God (4:39)

The next section tells us about the heart of the covenant, the reasons behind God's words and his call to walk with him (Deuteronomy 5-11). The well-known scripture to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul, and his reminder to put his commandments on their hearts, takes even deeper significance through Jesus (Deuteronomy 6:4-6).

Likewise, the description of the good land that God is giving them has parallels for us too (Deuteronomy 8:6-9). The images of flowing water reminds us of the "living water" and the grace that flow from Jesus; and the images of fruit and crops reminds us of the spiritual fruit that God gives us. So as Moses ironically says, What does God ask of us, except to learn to walk with him, for his paths are good for our spirits (Deuteronomy 10:12-14, see also Isaiah 48:17-18).

The following section describes the covenant God makes with them, a living covenant, a covenant that teaches us about God's holiness and his desire to keep us near (Deuteronomy 12-26). As we've seen in Leviticus, many of these laws at first may seem obscure, yet they are not arbitrary, and many of them have figurative parallels in our relationship with God today.

Deuteronomy closes with Israel renewing the covenant, and with Moses describing many aspects of God's nature to comfort and encourage the people (Deuteronomy 27-34). Some of the things God asks them to do will be fulfilled in Joshua, yet the call is the same, the call to choose the path of life, the path of walking with our God.

God did not make things difficult, for he has brought his words near (Deuteronomy 30:11-14, Romans 10:5-9). He is our life, and he asks us to love him and hold fast to him (Deut. 30:19-20).

God found us in the desert too and cares for us (Deuteronomy 32:10-11), and Jesus came on the clouds for us too, so he could deliver us from spiritual foes and to be our everlasting refuge (Deuteronomy 33:26-27).

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: How does God carry us each day? What does it mean to 'acknowledge' God? How does what God says in Deuteronomy 6 apply to us today? How does the scripture in Deuteronomy 8 describe what we have in Jesus? Look at some of the laws in Deuteronomy 12-26: what do they tell us about God's nature? Look at some of the blessings in Deut. 32: how are these fulfilled in Jesus?

Wherever You Go (Overview Of Joshua)

The book of Joshua describes how God led the Israelites into Canaan. God often reassures Joshua that wherever he goes, God will be with him and the people; and this promise is fulfilled throughout the book. We also see their dependence on God's grace and his presence. In Jesus, the meaning of Joshua takes place on a spiritual level, rather than on a literal level.

The first step was to take the Israelites across the Jordan (Joshua 1-5). On a practical level, this was a significant obstacle, and on a spiritual level it also called them to leave behind the desert, and to make the psychological decision to move into the land and face new obstacles. So God often reiterates his promise to Joshua, Do not be afraid, for God will be with you (Joshua 1:7-9). This has obvious parallels in our own walk of faith as well.

Before they cross the Jordan, we see an example of how God can do many things in a single sequence of events. As Israel needs to put their faith in God, we also see Rahab's walk of faith (Joshua 2:8-14). Not only was it a gift of grace to the scouts for God to lead them to her, but even more it was a gift of grace to Rahab.

In the whole city of Jericho, God saw one seeking heart, and he brought to her the scouts who needed safety. The rest of Jericho was just as fearful of God as Rahab was, yet their fear of their king was greater, so they put their faith in their fortified walls and their human weapons. Yet Rahab knew that if she turned her heart to God, she would no longer need to be afraid of him.

Next God enables them to cross the river on dry ground, similarly as he had done at the Red Sea (Joshua 3:14-17). God will then ask them to pick some stones from the riverbed, and set them up at Gilgal (Joshua 4). Several things also happen at Gilgal (Joshua 5); the young men are circumcised to 'roll away the reproach of Egypt' (thus the name for Gilgal), they celebrate the Passover, and then from that time the manna stops, for from then on they eat the crops of Canaan.

Upon entering the new land (Joshua 6-12), they must first face the imposing walls of Jericho. God instructs them to walk around the city over and over, for them to reflect on their own weakness and the city's strength (Joshua 6:1-5), so that they can see that only God could give them the victory.

Some of the events that follow show the contrast between human weakness and God's faithfulness (see what happens at Jericho and Ai in Joshua 7-8, and with the Gibeonites in Joshua

9-10). Along the way, Joshua follows the instructions on Mount Ebal that Moses had given, and he reads all the words of God as reminder to the people (Joshua 8:34-35).

Then there are inheritances for everyone (Joshua 13-21). Their inheritances were mere tracts of physical earth, so it needed to be allocated among them (Joshua 13:6-8). Our inheritance is imperishable, and there is more than enough to give us all that we need (Ephesians 1:13-18). All of the Lord's promises are fulfilled to Israel (Joshua 21:43-45); and God has made even better promises to us, and they are fulfilled in Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:20-22).

The book concludes with a call to walk by faith (Joshua 22-24). Joshua reminds them again of all that God has done for them: the care he shows them, how he delivered them, the many blessings both tangible and spiritual; so he asks them to set aside their false gods and idols, and choose God (Joshua 24:13-17).

As we see Israel moving to a new land, Hebrews reminds us that they had not yet received what God had always wanted to give them - for he had planned something better for us and for them too: a better covenant and better promises and full redemption and a heavenly land where we can be with God (Hebrews 11:39-12:2).

So just as Joshua had reminded the Israelites long ago, God calls us today to fix our eyes on Jesus, and to set aside this world's hindrances, its false hopes, its empty reasoning, and its meaningless distractions. As we fix our eyes on Jesus, we can contemplate his glory and his compassion and all that he endured to bring us the grace we need and to give us hope in him. Even as he suffered on the cross, he had the joy set before him of reconciling us with our God.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What might 'crossing the Jordan' mean to us? What do the events of Joshua 2 tell us about God and his nature? What might the 'walls of Jericho' mean for us? Take a look at Joshua 7-10, and see what any of these events tell us about God's faithfulness. Contrast the inheritance Israel received, and the inheritance we have in Jesus. What does the call to live by faith in Joshua 24 mean to us today?

- *Mark Garner, January 2017*

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**Notes For Week Five: In Those Days (The Book Of Judges);
Refuge Under God's Wings (The Book Of Ruth)**

The book of Judges describes an unusual, and sometimes troubling, era in Israel. During this long era, Israel lived without kings nor other earthly rulers, which led to some strange days indeed. During this frequently chaotic period, we see the comforting story of Ruth and Naomi. The book of Ruth tells of hope in difficult times, and of God's compassion for those who seek him.

In Those Days (Overview Of Judges)

The book of Judges describes a unique time in Israel's history, when they were no under direct control of a foreign nation, and also had no central government of their own. In one sense, this was God's ideal, for he wants us to seek him for his own sake, rather than following human authority. Yet at the same time we will see some troubling aspects of human nature.

In Judges, we see a recurring cycle (Judges 1-2). The book opens by telling us about Joshua's death, and then the obstacles that the Israelites faced in occupying Canaan (see 1:27-36). The resulting situation is not surprising, and it shows us the contrast between human nature and God. An angel reproves the assembly for not breaking down the altars of the Canaanites, and warns them about the snares these will cause (2:1-5)

Their wandering hearts lead them into a cycle that we see throughout the book of Judges (2:12-19). After a time of faithfulness, they are drawn to one or more of the Canaanite idols (or to the earthly things they hoped to obtain by serving them). When their hearts become hardened, God gives them over to the hands of one of the neighboring tribes, to help them see their vulnerability.

When they finally realized this, God would raise up a 'judge' or 'leader' (the Hebrew word has no direct equivalent; it means something like a recognized or trusted leader or adviser). So for a time, things would go well; yet sooner or later their hearts wander again, repeating the cycle. Likewise, we too may have our own cycles in our relationship with God.

The times of the 'judges' begin with Othniel, a nephew of Caleb, and then continue for many generations (Judges 3-16). When Deborah was Israel's 'judge,' she called upon Barak to deliver the land from a Canaanite army (4:1-9). Barak's response is often criticized, yet he is simply acknowledging his need to be reassured that God will be with him, (rather than a need for extra soldiers); and the blessing of Deborah's presence at the battle will give him this reassurance.

Likewise, Gideon is quite timid when God calls him to lead the Israelites (6:7-18). Gideon repeatedly asks God for reassurance; and when he is finally ready to destroy the altars of the town's idols, he again asks God for more 'signs' to reassure him again before he takes Israel into battle (6:36-40). So when in turn, God asks him to lead a much smaller force, Gideon is ready.

Other 'judges' were rash like Jephthah, or even brutish like Samson, who in the end needed to be humbled before he could finally deliver Israel from the Philistines. Yet the book of Hebrews tells us that God turned their weaknesses into strength (Hebrews 11:32-34); for this is one of the lessons from the book of Judges. God simply asks us to give him our mustard seed of faith.

Yet Judges closes with a series of remarkably unpleasant events (Judges 17-21). These events go from bad to worse to even more distressing; and from time to time the laconic human writer simply remarks that "in those days, Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit (17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25). We first see a man steal money from his mother, then receive her blessing to build an idolatrous shrine, with the help of a wayward Levite. They are in turn assaulted by marauders.

The worst events begin with chapter 19, beginning with the account of another headstrong, callous Levite, and leads up to most of Israel nearly destroying the tribe of Benjamin (who for their own part act with extreme folly), with this problem being handled with further atrocious measures.

All of this shows us human nature and human weakness, and our need for God every moment (Romans 7:18-25). One misjudgment can quickly lead to others; one offense can easily provoke other offenses, good intentions can be so easily distorted; and human nature cannot stop these vicious circles. Yet, as Paul says, Jesus has delivered us from spiritual death, and God gives us his Spirit to live within us (Romans 8:1-2).

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: In what ways could the recurring cycle in Judges parallel our relationship with God? What does this cycle show us about God? What does God's relationship with each of the 'judges' teach us about God's nature? What kinds of signs does God give us today? What does the time of the 'judges' tell us about human nature, and about God's nature?

Refuge Under God's Wings (Overview Of Ruth)

We now turn to Ruth, which shows us a different side of the distressing era of the judges, a moving story of how God cared for some faithful souls during their times of sadness and loss. Without any famous leaders, with no dramatic miracles, no memorable battles, the book of Ruth can often be neglected. Yet for those very reasons, it is a book that many of us can relate to.

The story centers on Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth, who in a time of trouble promises her, 'where you go, I will go' (Ruth 1). Naomi, her husband and two sons had fallen on sad times. They left Judah because of a famine, and settled in Moab - yet one by one Naomi's husband and both sons pass away, leaving her with their Moabite wives. Human nature may be inclined to ask whose fault this was, yet God saw it as an occasion to show his compassion (John 9:1-3).

After Naomi persuades one of the Moabite women to return home, Ruth instead explains her eagerness to accompany Naomi back to Judah, saying 'Your God will be my God' (1:15-18). For Ruth not only cares for Naomi, but also what Naomi has shown her became the starting point for her finding the living God. Without any guarantees, Ruth leaves a secure earthly situation so that she can come closer with God.

As Naomi continues to struggle with sadness and confusion, she and Ruth must return to Judah and find refuge (Ruth 2). Yet throughout the rest of the book, we see God's hand and his faithful care. Ruth goes to glean in the fields, and she finds favor with the field's owner, a gentle man who notices Ruth's faithful spirit, and who reassures her that God will give her refuge under his wings (2:10-12; Psalm 61:2-4).

When she returns home, Naomi casually asks her where she had gleaned, only to be astonished and thankful that God had led her daughter-in-law to one of her own close relatives, Boaz (2:19-20), one of her family's 'guardian-redeemers.'

The idea of a guardian-redeemer (Ruth 3-4) has obvious parallels with our Heavenly Redeemer Jesus. Boaz's kindness with Ruth, and Naomi's promise that he will not rest until the matter is settled (3:9-13, 3:18), remind us also of Jesus' perfect faithfulness, and how he endured pain and rejection and abuse to reconcile us with God.

The book concludes with an outpouring of God's grace (4:14-17). His blessings flow to Boaz, Ruth, and Naomi; and they give encouragement to the town and remind them of God's compassion. And they lead to promises and spiritual blessings for the future too, for now we read that the son of Ruth the Moabite will become the grandfather of David.

The Lord is gracious and compassionate; no one can fathom his greatness (Psalm 145). As this Psalm reminds us, his words and his heavenly kingdom and the purposes of his heart endure through all ages. God's promises are trustworthy, for he has made all of them Yes in Jesus; and he is righteous in his ways, for he has brought his righteousness near in Jesus too. The Lord our God gave us life and breath, and he is near to all who call on him in truth.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What could have led Ruth to be so eager to go with Naomi? Read through the book, and note all the ways that God probably has acted behind the scenes. Would Naomi and Ruth been aware of these? What does this teach us about God's ways? In what ways is Jesus our guardian-redeemer? Notice all the people God blesses in one situation - what does this tell us about him?

- *Mark Garner, January 2017*

**FROM THE BEGINNING:
A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**Notes For Week Six: But The Lord Looks At The Heart (The Book Of 1 Samuel);
Exalted Be God, The Rock (The Book Of 2 Samuel)**

The books of 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel tell us about a period of transition and significant changes in Israel. We will read about the life and the quiet faith of Samuel, the erratic reign of Saul, and the memorable times of David. Yet the message of these books is about God himself. God looks at the heart, so things look very different to him; and he is our only Rock who endures forever.

But The Lord Looks At The Heart (Overview Of 1 Samuel)

In the book of 1 Samuel, we see God's hand as he works in individual lives at the same time as he also shows his glory and gives grace to the Israelites. This book can help us understand what it means for God to look at the heart, especially with the contrast between Saul and David. It can also teach us some things about God's nature and his presence.

Samuel's birth is an outpouring of God's grace, not only on Hannah, but also on Israel (1 Samuel 1-3). Samuel would be called to a difficult ministry that would take faith, patience, self-control, and humility. Samuel would replace the well-intentioned yet weak Eli, then guide Israel through its spiritual difficulties, and then would give way to Israel's first king. So God chose Hannah to be his mother, for it was in her heart to give over her son's whole life to God (1:27-28).

In Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving and praise, we see echoes of Samuel's own faithfulness, and we also see a preview of the themes in both 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel (2:1-3, 2:6-8, see also Isaiah 26:3-9). There is no Rock like God, who is and who was and who always will be a Rock of truth and understanding and mercy. And as she also prays, the Lord is a God who knows our hearts, and he desires to lift up the poor in spirit from the ash heap and bring us near.

The travels of the ark of God begin with a careless decision by Eli's sons (1 Samuel 4-6). During a battle, Israel puts false hope in the ark as a physical object, and they are badly defeated (4:4-5, 4:9-10); this also leads to the end of Eli's family. The triumphant Philistines likewise treat the ark as a mere object, putting it in Dagon's temple, where they get a surprise (5:1-4). They cautiously return the ark to Israel, where it stays in Kiriath Jearim for 20 years (6:21-7:2).

This turn of events induces the Israelites to turn back to God, and Samuel leads them in a time of cleansing; yet soon they become restless, resulting in Saul being made king (1 Samuel 7-15). Samuel first encourages the Israelites to confess their sins and to get rid of their false gods. Even as they are doing this, the Philistines begin an attack, yet Samuel calmly prays and offers a sacrifice. So God panics the Philistines and makes it easy for Israel to chase them away (7:3-12).

Yet in spite of this, soon afterwards the Israelites tell Samuel that they want a king 'such as all the nations have' (8:4-9). Samuel is dismayed, yet he prays to God, who reassures Samuel that it is really God himself whom they have rejected. Samuel faithfully follows God's instructions, and soon Saul is made Israel's first king.

At first, Saul does fairly well. Outwardly, he is strong and tall, and at the beginning he is gracious to his detractors. Yet Saul is a man of action alone, so he becomes careless and rash at

the wrong times, and presumptuously offers the sacrifice meant for Samuel to make (13:8-14). Samuel tells Saul that God will soon replace him, and this impression is confirmed by further ill-advised decisions (see chapter 15).

As Samuel had foreseen, God now seeks out someone after his own heart (1 Samuel 16-18). God leads Samuel to Jesse's family, and as Samuel looks over Jesse's sons, God reminds him not to look at outward appearances, for God looks at the heart. The youngest son David is the one God has called, and Samuel is told to anoint him (16:6-12).

Saul's mind and heart are now constantly in turmoil, and Israel faces another crisis with Philistia. As we look at the familiar story of Goliath and David, take note of what Saul saw and what David saw (17:23-26, 17:32-39, 17:45). Saul saw Goliath as a trained, intimidating warrior, while David saw him as a blasphemer challenging God himself. Saul and Goliath both saw David as weak and unprepared, yet David knows God and relies on God being with him.

Even after this, and though he had been anointed king, David had to live in exile (1 Samuel 19-31). Saul relentlessly hunted him down, he was turned away by the Philistines when he sought refuge, he had to hide in caves. David may have made a few mistakes along the way, yet he continues walking by faith, and he is even gracious to Saul when he has the chance to harm his persecutor (26:9-11). Compare this what we read about Jesus in scriptures like John 19:33-37.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does God's grace to Hannah tell us about God's nature? What spiritual parallels may we see (consider Matthew 19:29-30)? What do the ark's travels teach us about God's presence? What does it show us about God that he let the Israelites have a king? What does the story of David and Goliath tell us about God? Why would God let David go into exile after anointing him as king?

Exalted Be God, The Rock (Overview Of 2 Samuel)

After Saul's death, conflicts still continue before David is finally recognized as king of Israel. After this comes a period of outward prosperity and success for Israel, though more importantly we see David's focus on God's presence. Yet, these times do not last. David begins to be distracted and he stumbles, and this in turn leads the nation into some troubled times.

After some more unnecessary bloodshed, David is at last recognized as king of Israel (2 Samuel 1-5). The book opens with David's lament over Saul and Saul's son Jonathan; and after Ish-Bosheth (also one of Saul's sons) puts up a resistance, and some misdeeds by David's unruly commander Joab, things settle down. After assuming the throne, David takes the Jebusite city of Jerusalem, which also becomes known as the City Of David, and is made Israel's capital (5:6-10).

A 'golden age' begins, yet the main focus should be on David's relationship with God (2 Samuel 6-10). David now sends for the ark of God to be brought to Jerusalem (see 6:2), and this is met with considerable rejoicing. Yet the Israelites soon receive a shock - a brief stumble leads to one of the attendants taking hold of the ark, resulting in his death.

David is distressed and frightened, yet he thinks about God's holiness, and when he hears that the ark has brought grace to the home where it was left, he once more decides to bring the ark of God to Jerusalem (6:9-15). This time David and Israel treat the ark with reverence and caution, while all the time rejoicing.

As David grows in appreciation and reverence of God, he seeks counsel from the prophet Nathan about building a temple for God (see 7:1-2). Nathan soon brings back God's promise that it will be not David, but his son, who may build the temple (7:11b-13), and he also promises that he will preserve David's line, a promise ultimately fulfilled in Jesus.

David's response and his prayer help us see why, in spite of his misdeeds, God valued him as 'a person after his own heart' (7:18-24). David openly expresses his awareness that he hasn't earned nor deserved any of God's blessings, and he accepts them all as gifts of God's grace. Moreover, we see David's genuine awe of God.

Yet after things have fallen together so well, there are soon times of trouble (2 Samuel 11-24). A series of bad decisions begins, when David begins by giving into a distraction that could have been easily been avoided, compounds it with immorality, scheming, and this eventually leads to murder by hire (chapter 11). When David finally realizes what he has done, he is deeply regretful, which we see in Psalm 51, and he remains king and he remains faithful.

Sadly, though, this apparently seems to be a catalyst for other distressing events. David's son Amnon assaults his half-sister, and is killed by Tamar's full brother Absalom (chapter 13). The ensuing series of events is full of sadness, culminating with David being chased out of Jerusalem by his son Absalom (chapter 15), despite all the favor and mercy David had shown him. Later, the rebel Sheba launches another revolt against David.

During all this, David is often gracious to those who oppose him; yet after things have settled down, he makes another serious mistake by asking Joab to make a census of Israelites who could become soldiers. Once more, David deeply regrets it, and he puts his fate in God's hands (see 24:14). David has always been well aware of his flaws, and he openly acknowledges that God alone is worthy of honor and glory.

God is our Rock, and who is a Rock like him (Psalm 18:1-2, 18:6-10, 18:30-31; see also 2 Samuel 22)? This psalm is full of images of God's majesty and his care for us when we call on him in truth. He 'mounts the cherubim' and 'rides on the wings of the wind' to be near those who put our hope and trust in him. He reaches down his hand from on high, and draws us out of deep floodwaters, spiritual foes that are too strong for us. Truly, who is God besides the Lord?

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What do we learn about God in the ark's trip to Jerusalem? Are there any parallels for us? Why does God tell David that his son would build the temple? What does this say about God? Are there any parallels for us? Comparing David's mistakes with Saul's, what does it show about God's nature that he rejects Saul as king, yet not David? What do the images in Psalm 18 tell us about God?

- Mark Garner, January 2017

FROM THE BEGINNING: A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Notes For Week Seven: If The Lord Is God Follow Him (The Book Of 1 Kings) Open Their Eyes To The Lord (The Book Of 1 Kings)

The books of 1 Kings begin with Solomon succeeding David, then tell us about the kingdom splitting in two, the cycles these divided kingdoms follow, and describe their fall. Let again the focus is on God's desire to have a relationship with his people. In 1 Kings, Elijah calls to Israel, 'if the Lord is God, follow him' then in 2 Kings, we see Elisha's plea with God to open their eyes.

1 Kings: The Lord Is God Follow Him (Overview Of 1 Kings)

As 1 Kings opens, David is dying, and Israel faces a succession crisis. David rallies himself to guide things calmly, and has Solomon recognized as king. Things soon stabilize, and Solomon's closeness with God also becomes evident. Yet things begin to decline badly, as Solomon's heart becomes hardened, and the nation divides into two. This in turn sets off two sad cycles.

The turbulent transition from David to Solomon involves new troublemakers and also old ones (1 Kings 1-2). David's restless son Adonijah considers himself the heir, and he rounds up some equally restless supporters (1:5-7). They celebrate their decision by arranging an impressive procession and a lavish party, thinking that in this way Adonijah will be automatically accepted.

When David finds out, his response is calm and faithful (1:32-35). In contrast with Adonijah's pomp and pageantry, he directs Solomon simply to ride David's own mule to see Zadok and Nathan to be quietly anointed king. The calming symbol of Solomon on David's personal mule, as opposed to Adonijah's chariots, helps the people see that Solomon's anointing is from God.

Afterwards (chapter 2), David tells Solomon to decide what to do with Joab and Shimei (see 2 Sam. 16:5-8), while he also has to deal with Adonijah and the priest Abiathar. Solomon pardons Abiathar due to the tough times he had shared with David. Joab has gone too far, and his end comes quickly. The others get a second chance, yet they both make bad decisions. David had never taken revenge, so he may have been concerned about them causing problems for Solomon.

After all this comes a time of stability and peace, and most of all a time when we can see Solomon's relationship with God. Solomon builds the temple for God's Name in Jerusalem (1 Kings 3-9; we'll read more about this next week in Chronicles). Early in his reign, Solomon walks in faith and in humility, as we see when he chooses the gift of wisdom from God, instead of asking for wealth (3:5-10).

For a good while, this gift helps Solomon remain close with God. Upon completing the temple, in Solomon's prayer we also see echoes of David's faith and his deep awareness of God's majesty and his glory and his graciousness (8:27-30). As with several other significant events in 1 Kings, we'll read more about this next time in Chronicles.

Yet again when things seem to be going so well, the sad times begin (1 Kings 10-14). Solomon's heart begins to wander (as we'll see in a few weeks when we look at Ecclesiastes) and he accumulates massive wealth, builds himself a lavish throne, collects large numbers of chariots and horses, and worst of all becomes uncontrollably drawn to idolatrous women (10:18-11:13). He begins to openly worship their idols and also becomes an oppressive ruler.

This provokes a permanent split (chapter 12, we'll read more in Chronicles); as Jeroboam leads the northern tribes away from Judah. To make things even worse, Jeroboam decides to make new 'gods' for Israel to worship, hoping they might cut their ties with Judah once for all.

Thus two cycles begin (1 Kings 15-22). In Judah in the south, Rehoboam's son and his successor are both faithless and feeble rulers. When Asa becomes king (chapter 15, we'll read more in Chronicles) he becomes the first of several kings in Judah to institute religious reforms, getting rid of idols and calling the people to worship God.

In Israel to the north, there is a more gruesome cycle. Jeroboam's dynasty is short-lived, for his heir Nadab is struck down by the rebel Baasha, who makes himself king. This happens over and over again in Israel, and each king would worship Jeroboam's idols. Two more kings are killed by usurpers before a stronger king, Omri, establishes himself and moves the capital to Samaria, a more prominent and better defensible city. Yet Omri 'sinned more than all those before him.'

□ The kingdom of Judah was in the south of Israel, with the capital in Jerusalem. All of the monarchs except one were legitimate descendants of David. The kingdom in the north, including most of the other tribes, kept the name Israel, which can be confusing. After the capital was moved to Samaria, the nation was often called by that name too. Moreover, since Ephraim became the dominant tribe, northern Israel was sometimes called Ephraim.

In the troubled times of Omri's successor Ahab and his wife Jezebel, Elijah brought truth and consolation for the faithful in Israel, while God gave him reassuring signs of his care (17:1-24, 18:1-4). When he was pursued, he crossed the Jordan to live in a ravine where ravens brought him food. Later when he again had to move, God led him to the Phoenician city of Sidon where a humble, lonely believer lived, and where Elijah could give her God's grace and comfort as well.

Elijah is often remembered for the assembly on Mount Carmel, where he calls Israel to stop wavering, and follow God (18:19-21). After God demonstrates his majesty, the people briefly turn to God (18:38-39), yet Elijah soon faces even more trouble (19:1-16). God's gentleness with Elijah in the cave is a reminder of God's nature. Ahab does humble himself once, long enough to avoid the worst (21:20-29), yet he cannot remain faithful, and he soon dies in battle.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: How do we see God's hand in preserving the succession of Solomon? What can we learn from Solomon's early years, as well as from his decline? What do they show us about God's nature? What can we learn about God from his relationship with Elijah?

Open Their Eyes* □ *ord (Overview Of* □ *in* □ *s)

After Ahab dies, Elijah is taken to heaven. Elisha then takes his place, to provide consolation for the faithful. Yet Israel descends further into idolatry, briefly slowed by Jehu's bloodstained reforms, and soon falls to Assyria. Likewise, Judah eventually falls to Babylon. This week, we'll focus mostly on Israel, since we'll see more details about Judah next week in Chronicles.

We first meet Elisha in 1 Kings 19 when he becomes Elijah's servant, and in his days God would continue using him as a voice of truth (2 Kings 1-8). After a final confrontation with Ahab's successor, Elijah is granted the blessing of being taken into heaven. Elisha stays with him to the end, and God grants him a 'double portion' of the spirit he had given to Elijah (2:9-14). So we see more of God's compassionate miracles, just as we saw in the days of Elijah (chapters 4 □ 5).

Yet things keep getting worse in Israel. A strong army from Aram attacks, and Samaria is surrounded by horses and chariots (6:15). This is when Elisha prays on behalf of his terrified servant, 'Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see (6:16-17). When God opens the servant's eyes, he is comforted by the realization of God's strength and his closeness. In the same way, Jesus often calls us to open our eyes and look at things from God's viewpoint, rather than the world's.

After God pours out his grace on the Israelites and their faithless king, we soon come to two kings who left mixed legacies: Jehu and Joash (2 Kings 9-12). We see Joash become king of Judah at a very young age (chapters 11 and 12, we'll read more next week in Chronicles), and he soon carries out the same kinds of reforms we saw with Asa. Yet he later turned to idols and abandoned God, coming to a sad end.

Jehu is a hot-tempered commander, who is later referred to as a 'maniac,' and is anointed by Elisha to become king of Israel and carry out some grim instructions (9:6-10, 10:28-31). Jehu kills Jezebel and the rest of Ahab's family, along with the idolatrous king of Judah and all the servants of Baal; yet Jehu also worshiped the golden calves. God had called this violent man to do a violent task, since things had apparently become unbearable for the few faithful left in Israel.

In Israel's last years (2 Kings 13-17), the only meager stability comes from God's promise to Jehu that four generations of his descendants would take the throne. The third, Jeroboam II, was a strong earthly king and a good military king, yet he was thoroughly idolatrous. After Jeroboam II, Samaria becomes a throne of blood (chapter 15), as king after king is struck down.

The inevitable collapse of Israel under the Assyrians is followed by the resettlement of Samaria (chapter 17). The Assyrians deported many of the Israelites and brought in other captives from different nations, leaving them all in this confusing situation.

In Judah, there is good news and bad news (2 Kings 18-25). Three more reformer kings try to call the Judeans to return to God - Azariah (or Azariah, chapter 15), Hezekiah (chapters 18-20), and Josiah (chapters 22-23). Yet none of these reforms take root, leading to Judah and Jerusalem also falling, this time to Babylon (chapter 25, we'll read more about all this in Chronicles).

Each of these reformers was at least able to provide comfort and encouragement for faithful believers in God, yet no amount of outward reforms could have turned everyone's hearts to God. Yet this should not be discouraging - rather, it can encourage us, for God has always wanted to know each of us personally. We don't need to wait for others, for when we pray for him to open our eyes, he can help us see him more clearly. God is always near, waiting for us to seek him.

In Ephesians, Paul offers a prayer for open eyes (Ephesians 1:17-23). He prays for us to let God to enlighten the 'eyes of our hearts' so that we may know the hope to which God calls us, the hope in unseen and imperishable things. He also prays for us to let God help us know the fullness of Jesus, who fills everything in every way, and who reconciles all things with God.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does it tell us about God that he granted Elisha's request for a 'double portion'? What can we learn from Elisha's request to 'open their eyes'? What might have led God reluctantly to send Jehu on his grim task? What couldn't the Judean reformers accomplish, and what purpose did they serve? What can we learn from this?

- Mark Garner, January 2011

**FROM THE BEGINNING:
A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**Notes For Week Eight: God's Holiness & Human History (1 Chronicles);
The Eyes Of The Lord Range Throughout The Earth (2 Chronicles)**

The books of Chronicles take a second look at the historical era we've just read about in Samuel and Kings. They primarily describe the history of Judah, and there is also a different emphasis. In the first book, it focuses on the interaction between our holy God and weak humans. In the second, we see how God looks for those who seek him with their hearts.

God's Holiness & His Faithful Promises (Overview Of 1 Chronicles)

The first book of Chronicles roughly parallels 1 and 2 Samuel, covering the times of David and finishing with the accession of Solomon. It assumes that we are familiar with the significant events in Samuel, and it takes a different viewpoint. The emphasis is on God's holiness, and his faithful promises to us, both then and now.

The lengthy genealogies remind us that generation after generation, God is always the same God (1 Chronicles 1-9). As we read the names of Adam, Seth, Enosh and the others (1:1-4) and when we read the names from Noah to Abraham (1:17-27), this reminds us that each of these persons was a living being, and God desired a personal relationship with each of them.

The next several chapters follow Judah, Levi, and the other tribes. Like the opening chapter, these remind us of the promises God made long ago and that he still fulfills today. Even Esau's descendants are included in chapter 1, as a reminder that God's promises come by grace.

The middle of 1 Chronicles covers David's years as king (1 Chronicles 10-21; see also 2 Samuel). It goes into detail about David bringing the ark to Jerusalem, and in his praise to God we can see his desire to be even closer with God (16:7-14). God quietly reminds us to 'seek his face always' (that is, to let him show us who he is) and to remember what he does for each of us.

We see again God's promises to David about the temple and David's descendants, promises that could only be appreciated by someone who walked by faith instead of living for this world; and we see David's prayer of reverence and joy before God (chapter 17).

The last section talks about worshipping our holy God (1 Chronicles 22-29). David knows that he will not see the temple, yet he is joyful that it will happen, and he makes sure that Solomon will have what he needs to build 'a house for God's Name' (22:5-12).

This expression reminds us that the structure will only have meaning because his Name (I Am) will dwell there - that is, our I Am will dwell there, his Presence is with us. In Jesus, this promise is fulfilled more deeply, for "the place the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name" (Deuteronomy 12:11) and where he calls us to make our offerings, is now in our hearts.

David makes arrangements for the roles of the Levites, priests, musicians, gatekeepers, treasurers, and overseers, just as we read about the body of Jesus having many parts, yet we are one before our holy God. David's final prayer (29:10-20) helps us understand why God called him 'a man after his own heart' in spite of all of David's grievous mistakes. Truly everything we have comes from God, and he gives it all because of his love for us, not because of anything we have done.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What do the genealogies tell us about God? What do we learn from the ark's coming to Jerusalem? What do God's promises in chapter 17 tell us about God? Describe what it means to be 'a house for God's Name' and what it means for us. What does 1 Chronicles show us about God's holiness?

The Eyes Of The Lord Range Throughout The Earth (Overview Of 2 Chronicles)

After the 'golden days' in Solomon's early reign, we see many sad times for Judah. Yet we also see God's faithfulness in looking for those who seek him, his graciousness in calling them his own, and his holiness that stands out in contrast with human ways. We cannot attain holiness with human efforts, yet God calls us his own when we walk in his light.

The first part of 2 Chronicles tells us about Solomon's relationship with God and the building of the temple (2 Chronicles 1-9). We see Solomon's humble request for wisdom in overseeing the kingdom (1:7-12), and God's eagerness to give him the wealth and fame he hadn't even asked for, since Solomon had asked for something he and the kingdom needed, instead of for himself.

After carrying out the many procedures involved in building the temple, and a description of the temple's furnishings, we see Solomon's prayer of dedication (6:18-21, 6:40-42). The young king expresses some comforting truths about God, his vastness, and our need for him to be near us. He rejoices in knowing that God will 'come to his resting place.'

Solomon's sad spiritual decline in his later years was also a prelude to even sadder times under Rehoboam and Jeroboam (2 Chronicles 10-13). Because of Solomon's idolatry, God decided to split the kingdom (see 1 Kings 11), and his harshness in later years also becomes clear when the kingdom divides (chapter 10). Given the choice between rescinding some of Solomon's harsher orders and making things even harder for the people, Rehoboam chooses poorly.

Rehoboam did learn some practical knowledge from his father, for in some ways he is an effective ruler. Yet, while Jeroboam is busy setting up idols for northern Israel to worship, Rehoboam adopts some of Solomon's worst habits, and accumulates many wives and concubines. His son Abijah was much the same (see also 1 Kings 15:1-4), yet whenever they had their good moments, God poured out his grace for these faithless kings (12:12-14, 13:18).

God patiently searches for hearts who seek him, both now and then (2 Chronicles 14-28). Asa, Judah's first reformer, risks his throne by removing the widespread idols in Judah (14:2-6), and God sends a prophet to encourage him to continue (15:1-8). Yet as Asa becomes powerful, he comes to a sad end (16:7-13). When he makes the mistake of sending temple treasures to the king of Aram, another prophet reproves the king, who responds badly and hardens his heart.

This prophet's counsel, and his promise that God can strengthen the hearts of those who seek him in truth, hold true today. Only God can protect our hearts from the world's distractions and its temptations and its empty thinking.

Asa is followed by Jehoshaphat, whose times again show us the contrast between human nature and God's nature. Jehoshaphat is naïve yet faithful, often making bad decisions yet quick to acknowledge God (chapters 17-20, notice what 20:14-18 tells us about God). After him come three idolatrous monarchs who were close with the notorious kings Omri and Ahab of Israel.

Another reformer comes, the youth Joash (22:10-24:27). His aunt Jehoshaba saves his life, and her husband Jehoiada, a faithful priest, advises the king. Yet after many years of faithfulness and

restoring the temple, Joash suddenly turns away from God after Jehoiada and Jehosheba are gone. When Jehoiada's son calls Joash to return to God, the king has him killed. He becomes so oppressive that his own officials decide to murder him. Judah then continues to drift.

Yet as God also does for us all, he gives them another chance to return to him . . . and another chance (2 Chronicles 29-35). Both Hezekiah and Josiah instituted sweeping reforms, yet these in themselves could not change anyone's hearts, nor could they fix Judah itself. They did give everyone another chance to seek God. Likewise, we can only give those we care for every chance to know God, and reassure them that God will be eagerly waiting when they come to him.

Hezekiah's father Ahaz had been idolatrous and cruel, yet Hezekiah's reforms start as soon as he became king (29:3-6). Hezekiah's call to the Passover (chapter 30) shows us God's holiness and the joy it gives him whenever we give him just a mustard seed of faith. Circumstances force them to observe it in the 'wrong' month, yet God gives them the grace they need. Hezekiah even sends couriers to the northern tribes, and as a result many people turn their hearts to God.

Later, Hezekiah realizes that many of the northern visitors had forgotten to purify themselves, so he offers a prayer for them, and God gives them healing. Yet even as Hezekiah walks in faith, Judah faces severe physical danger from the Assyrians, so he prays and consults the prophet Isaiah, so God delivers Jerusalem (32:16-22). Hezekiah had his weaknesses; success also made him prideful, yet he allowed God to deliver him from spiritual danger (32:24-26).

In Manasseh we see the worst of human nature, yet in him and in Josiah we can see God's holiness (2 Chronicles 33-35). Manasseh was the most idolatrous and murderous king of Judah (33:1-6), yet his moving turnaround shows how God's grace overflows when we turn to him (33:10-16). Truly God's ways and thoughts are far higher than human ways and thoughts.

Josiah, Judah's last reformer, like Hezekiah, institutes thorough reforms, shows his reverence for God, and encourages the Judeans to worship God. Yet his reforms too could only bring comfort to the faithful and give another chance for the faithless. After Josiah, Judah's end came after a series of four idolatrous and ineffective kings.

So God decided to 'start over', allowing the Babylonians to conquer Judah and Jerusalem, and taking captive many Judeans to Babylon (2 Chronicles 36). Yet this is not punishment for punishment's sake, and God gives them hope for the future. The last few verses will be repeated in Ezra, when a remnant returns to Judea, as a remnant is always turning their hearts back to God.

God's words do not come back to him empty (Isaiah 55:6-11). His ways are far higher than ours, and God looks beyond the appearances. Instead of using numbers or outward results, God searches our hearts and reassures us that we are his. As the rains nourish the earth and bring life wherever they fall, God's words will bring life to those who open our hearts to him.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does Solomon's request and his prayer, and God's response to them, teach us about God? Why does God pour out his grace on the faithless when they turn to him, even briefly? What should we learn from the reformer kings? What does 2 Chronicles teach us about God's nature and his holiness?

- Mark Garner, February 2017

**FROM THE BEGINNING:
A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**Notes For Week Nine: A Remnant Returns (The Book Of Ezra);
God Rebuilds The Ruins (The Book Of Nehemiah)**

Chronicles ended with God allowing Judah to be overrun by Babylon, and many of the Judeans being taken captive. Yet this was to give each of the Judeans the chance to have a new start in their relationship with God. In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we see God bringing a 'remnant' back to Judah, and the ways he helps them rebuild physically and spiritually.

A Remnant Returns (Overview Of Ezra)

Even as God needed to send Judah into exile, he had already prepared the way for a remnant to return. In Ezra we see a remnant physically returning to Jerusalem, yet even more importantly, we see many of the Judeans returning to God himself. We also see God's patience with the returning exiles, as he guides them from one step to the next.

Ezra begins the same way that Chronicles ends, with Cyrus's* proclamation allowing for the Judean exiles to return to Jerusalem and Judah (Ezra 1-2). Fifty years after the fall of Jerusalem, and seventy years after the first group of captives were taken to Babylon**, the exiles have been living under unbelieving rulers, and have had time to reflect on what God means to them.

* The Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC, and took many Judeans as captives. Since then, Babylon has now fallen to Persia and their ally Media in 538 BC (this is described in Daniel 5). The Persians had a different policy towards smaller nations than the Babylonians did, as we'll see. Cyrus is known to history as 'Cyrus the Great' of Persia. This proclamation was made in 536 BC.

** Babylon took the first group of captives in 606 BC, and the second group in 597 BC. We'll read more about these later in the prophets.

The king's proclamation shows the ways that God is providing for those who return. Cyrus announces that any of God's people may go up to Jerusalem (1:1-6), and moreover it provides for generous supplies and large amounts of money. We've seen God do this before for those who walk in faith, and he does the same for us in less obvious ways. These promises would have reassured those who returned to take up some imposing tasks.

Rather than rebuilding as an earthly nation would, God calls them to rebuild the temple first, instead of beginning with the city walls (Ezra 3-6). Ezra describes their fear of being attacked, yet they rejoice in rebuilding the altar (3:2-3) and laying a new foundation (3:11). So God is at the same time rebuilding their hearts and their faith in him.

Yet it does not take long for opposition to begin (4:4-5), and soon the Judeans become intimidated. For fifteen years, the work is abandoned. After allowing them this respite, God sends the faithful prophets Haggai and Zechariah, as well as the capable Zerubbabel to guide the rebuilding (5:1-2). As the opposition mounts, God once more sends them help from Darius, who is now king of Persia, and who carefully investigates the claims and Cyrus's original decree.

Soon the temple is now completed; and after giving them a period of rest, Ezra comes to teach God's words and to institute some reforms (Ezra 7-10). It is now 458 BC, and Artaxerxes is now king of Persia. The hand of the Lord was on Ezra, and God moves the king to show him favor (7:6-7). We'll also see Artaxerxes in Nehemiah.

Yet Ezra must undertake a hazardous journey, since he and his associates are taking a large amount of silver and gold with them. Uncomfortable with asking the king for military protection, Ezra asks everyone to pray for guidance and protection from God (8:21-25).

Ezra's times also show us God's understanding, for Ezra was well suited to be patient and gentle with the Judeans, who still needed a lot of instruction even in basic matters. When he uncovers some severe errors, instead of lashing out, Ezra takes up their mistakes as his own, and offers another humble prayer for God's forgiveness and his guidance.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What do the circumstances leading up to Cyrus's proclamation show us about God's nature and his care for us? How is God teaching his people as he has them begin with the temple? What can we learn from Ezra's relationship with God? How do the events in Ezra parallel our walk of faith in Jesus today? What do they show us about God?

God Rebuilds The Ruins (Overview Of Nehemiah)

Next God sends Nehemiah to Jerusalem. Nehemiah is best known for helping the Judeans to rebuild the city walls; yet as with Ezra, this was also a time when God continued to rebuild the ruins in their hearts. Moreover, the wall is also a metaphor for helping one another spiritually and looking out for one another in the body of Jesus.

Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem in 444 BC, almost fifteen years after Ezra (Nehemiah 1-2). When he hears that there are still many struggles in Judah, especially that Jerusalem's walls are still in ruins, Nehemiah prays for God to allow him to go to Jerusalem (1:3-9). Nehemiah held a key position under Artaxerxes, who again shows favor to his trusted servant.

Though they at once face opposition, Nehemiah reassures them that God will be with them (2:20), and they begin to rebuild the city walls (Nehemiah 3-7). As the rebuilding begins, we can see God's hand at work, helping them to work together, prominent persons and little-known persons, and some whose usual professions range from goldsmiths to perfume-makers.

More opposition soon arises, from threats to mocking and intimidation (4:1-3). Yet as they walk by faith, God strengthens their hearts and through Nehemiah he teaches them how to watch out for one another (4:16-18). In the same way, God can do this for us too; for we often need someone to caution us about spiritual dangers, or someone to blow a trumpet to call attention to someone in need, or someone to remind us of God's words.

Meanwhile, God continues to rebuild their hearts (Ch.5). As Nehemiah tries to help the poor, he finds out that some of the nobles and officials are profiting from their hardships, so he encourages them not to charge any interest, and he himself gives up many of the privileges his

own position would have given him. When even more opposition arises (6:1-9), Nehemiah responds calmly, and soon the walls are completed (6:15).

Ezra now teaches God's Word to the assembly (Nehemiah 8-10). They stand outside for hours, listening to Ezra read, with the Levites explaining God's words to them. They are appalled that they've not been following many of God's decrees, but Nehemiah and Ezra reassure them that this is a time to rejoice in knowing God (8:5-12). Later, they assemble again to offer a prayer of praise and reverence to God (Ch.9), and confess their weaknesses and ask God to guide them.

Further reforms are still necessary, as God is always patient with us too (Nehemiah 11-13). At the dedication of the wall, they can look at what God has done for them, and they also realize that they will need God to continue giving them mercy and understanding each step ahead of them. As God continues to cleanse them, he renews us every day too as long as we keep our hearts open.

God made a 'highway' for them, by dealing with obstacles too strong for them, providing what they needed, and by taking them one step at a time. And God has made a highway for the redeemed (Isaiah 35). Even when we are troubled, God can show us blooms and blossoms in the desert, for he can show us truth and grace in hidden places.

Likewise, when we are confused or discouraged, when we turn to God he opens our eyes and our ears, so we can understand what he does for us, and to help us hear his words to comfort us. And he promises that when we seek him in truth, a highway will be there, a highway that human hands couldn't have built, a highway that he will show us, for Jesus came to be the Way we couldn't have found.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does it say about God that he sent Nehemiah at this time? What else has God done for the rebuilding of the wall? What parallels are there today with the rebuilding of the wall? What can we learn from the opposition, and the ways they respond? What can we learn about God from what happens as Ezra reads? How does Nehemiah fit in with the message of Jesus?

- Mark Garner, February 2017

**FROM THE BEGINNING:
A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**Notes For Week Ten: For Such A Time As This (The Book Of Esther);
Our Redeemer Lives (The Book Of Job)**

The book of Esther takes us back to Persia, a couple decades before Ezra and Nehemiah came to Judah. The young Esther is caught in the middle of the scheming and plotting by Persia's powerful individuals, and she learns to live by faith. In Job, we leave the narrative books, as we see Job and his friends trying to make sense of the disastrous events that have befallen him.

For Such A Time As This (Overview Of Esther)

The book of Esther is unusual in that it never uses the name of God, and it doesn't tell us what God is thinking or doing. In this way, it can help us learn how to walk by faith in our own times. Like Esther, we often have to make choices without having a conclusive answer. As Esther was raised to queen 'for such a time as this,' we also have to seek God's guidance each moment.

Esther finds herself in strange days in Persia (Esther 1-3). King Xerxes is well-known in ancient history, a rash, impulsive ruler who was often generous yet who also made disastrous decisions. Xerxes's times are reflected in Esther 1, when he see him giving into a moment's rage and pride to depose his queen, as well as the other misguided choices he will make soon.

When the king's misguided advisers next persuade him into following a bizarre plan to find a new queen, the young Esther is caught in this net (2:8-9, 2:17). God watches out for her, and lets her find favor with the king's attendants as she endures the ordeal Xerxes has in mind; and she receives the very mixed blessing of becoming the queen of the unstable Xerxes.

Her cousin and guardian Mordecai has been anxious for her, and waits each day for news at the king's gate. As a result, he uncovers an assassination attempt on Xerxes; and despite his reservations about his cousin's position, he faithfully reports it (2:21-23). Meanwhile, we see another of the key figures in Persia, the prideful Haman (3:5-10). Accustomed to being worshiped, Haman becomes vengeful when the humble Mordecai will not bow down to him.

Haman's appalling plan to eliminate the Israelites shows us several things about human nature. He has everything one could reasonably (or even unreasonably) ask for, yet he finds one minor inconvenience to be unbearable. Meanwhile, we see Xerxes once more being easily persuaded to do something foolish, when Haman simply tosses him a little flattery. Later, we will see the significance of the 'pur,' the lot they use to choose to carry out Haman's plot.

Though God's name isn't mentioned, we can see how he searches our hearts and strengthens those who seek him in truth (Esther 4-6). Esther is so secluded in the palace that she finds out about the plot only when she hears about Mordecai's distress. As they communicate with notes, God shows Esther the walk by faith ahead of her (4:10-17). She has become queen neither to reward her nor to punish her; rather it was "for such a time as this."

When Esther understands the situation, God strengthens her heart so that she is ready to risk seeing the king, and she also asks Mordecai to have the Jews fast and pray. Then we also see

God's timing, as just at the right time the king is reminded of Mordecai's faithful act that had gone unrecognized - at the very moment that Haman is approaching to ask Xerxes to punish Mordecai (Ch. 6).

The book then concludes with the series of events that leads to the Israelites being delivered from danger (Esther 7-10). As a result, the ensuing celebration is commemorated as Purim, turning the threatening 'lot' into a reminder of God's faithful care for them (9:20-24).

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: Since we are never clearly told exactly what God is doing, when might we be certain? What does this tell us about our own relationship with God? What do we learn about God in the way he handles Xerxes and Haman's scheming? What do we learn about God from what he does for Esther and Mordecai? What do we learn from the way they celebrate Purim?

Our Redeemer Lives (Overview Of Job)

A sudden series of unexpected disasters and terrors comes upon Job, setting up a lengthy discussion between him and some of his friends. The opening scene involving God and Satan is just the prelude to the core ideas of the book, its discussion of the questions that we often ask when we are afflicted or troubled or distressed.

After facing a heartrending series of events, Job asks the natural question, Why? (Job 1-3). Even if Job had been aware of the discussion between God and Satan, he would have asked the same question. He is very sad and confused, and all he can do is to worship and praise God (1:20-22). Three of Job's friends come to comfort him, and their initial response is also their finest hour (2:11-13). They realize that they can do little except be there for Job and to show their sympathy.

After Job initiates a discussion about what has happened, they also raise other significant questions, which are often asked today (Job 4-25). They discuss what innocence and guilt mean, ask questions about what God wants, and whether a man can be righteous. Yet at the center of the lengthy discussion is whether Job has done something wrong, what should he do about what has happened, and of course, why did this happen.

Each of Job's friends begins with good intentions, yet none of them is very helpful. Each of them has some good thoughts, occasionally profound, yet each of them also has some deep misunderstandings of God, and each of them also makes some ridiculous comments. The book of Job is not meant to be analyzed verse by verse; rather it is meant to be read by taking in the different perspectives, to see the difference between God's thoughts and human thinking.

Eliphaz is a rationalist who relies on experience. He is the kindest of Job's friends, yet his God is quite impersonal, a God who simply goes by established procedures. Eliphaz answers everyone's troubles with an 'encouraging' anecdote that suggests that everything will be fine if the sufferer will simply be obedient to God.

Bildad is a theologian who knows that things are true because he was taught them. He has a misplaced confidence in human learning and conventional wisdom. He never changes his mind about anything; and he answers everyone's problems with pat answers, simplistic sayings about

God. Zophar can be very unkind, for he is a moralist who wants to 'set the record straight'. He is convinced that Job has done something to deserve his suffering, and presses Job to confess.

Yet Job's despair is not based on such concerns, for he most of all wants to continue to live in God's presence, to be able to know God in spite of everything. We see this in Job's assurance that his Redeemer lives, and that he will see him (19:23-27). Job himself makes some inaccurate statements, yet he is focused on what matters most, his relationship with God.

As Job continues pondering everything, he raises another question: where does understanding dwell? (Job 26-37). He and his friends are aware that it comes from God, yet they have different perspectives on what this may imply. Job has the same sense of reverence for God that we've seen in David, as he realizes that in this world, we can see only the outer fringes of God's works, God's majesty, and God's care (26:7-14).

After Job's thoughts on where wisdom is found (chapter 28), we then meet another character, Elihu, who gives a lengthy talk. He is the most skilled speaker of Job's friends, and has some deep thoughts of his own; yet these are also interspersed with some considerable misunderstandings of God. The real problem, though, is that Elihu is a resounding gong, a clanging cymbal (1 Corinthians 13:1-2), who professes to have great knowledge but has no love.

Now God speaks 'out of the storm' (Job 38-42). God's exposition is truly profound and is also full of grace and understanding. It is often misperceived as scolding or rebuking Job, yet it is nothing of the kind. Rather, it is meant to reassure Job of what most concerned him, that his God heard him and understood what he was going through.

God reassures Job that he knows 'the way to the abode of light' (38:16-27) and that he can 'walk in the recesses of the deep' and that he can 'satisfy a desolate wasteland.' Likewise, God provides for the donkey (39:5-8) and the ostrich (39:13-18), and teaches them to be content as he made them. All of these things were not to directly answer Job's questions, rather, each of them answers instead what Job's spirit was really asking.

So Job is comforted by seeing his Redeemer, who is our Redeemer too (42:1-5). The epilogue clarifies for us that Job understood some basic truths about God and what was most important, while his friends' thoughts were misguided. Everyone comforts Job, his wealth is restored and he has a new family, yet most of all he is reassured that God was with him in his sufferings.

As Paul also wrote during a time of trouble, we also know whom we have believed (2 Timothy 1:9-12). Jesus calls each of us, he saves us, and he makes us holy when we recognize his voice and follow our heavenly Shepherd. All this comes from Jesus and from our God, not because of anything we have done, rather because of God's grace and compassion. And Paul reassures us too, that our sufferings are no cause for shame, for Jesus is with us to bear our burdens with us.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What is the contrast between the reasoning of Job's friends and God's perspective? What does this tell us about God? What do we learn about God's character from his response to Job? God never explains why Job experienced these disasters - what could we learn from this?

- Mark Garner, February 2017

**FROM THE BEGINNING:
A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**Notes For Week Eleven: The Lord Is Our Shepherd, Our Refuge, Our Hope
(Psalms, Part One)**

The book of Psalms helps us understand the many dimensions of our relationship with God. He is our Shepherd (Psalm 23), our Rock (Psalm 18), our refuge (Psalm 71), our hope all day long (Psalm 25). The Psalms are full of poetic images that engage not only our minds, but also our spirits and our hearts. They show us God's understanding, his compassion, and his mercy for us.

God Knows Us, & He Wants Us To Know Him (Psalm 33 & Psalm 42)

The Psalms cover a wide range of human emotions, from joy to despair, from thanksgiving to fear; and it shows how God can use all of them to help us understand our need for him each step. These two psalms are very different in tone, yet in both we see God's understanding of us and his desire for us to know him. They will also show us some of the kinds of imagery in the psalms.

The idea of singing to the Lord a new song encourages us to think about all that God has done, and it also reminds us that he has made everything new (Psalm 33). God does many things to show us his care and also his wisdom; some of them we are aware of, and there are many others we don't even notice. The images in this psalm describe God's vastness and his majesty, while also showing his mindfulness of us and his awareness of what we really need.

Many of the images are not literal, rather they invite us to ponder what they are really telling us about our God. For example, the image of God gathering the waters of the seas into jars (v.7) helps us to understand that his full grandeur and his glory are truly far much greater than even that would be. The immensity of the universe and the variety of his creations remind us that, as Job said, we can see 'only the outer fringes of his works.'

On the other hand, we know that the purposes of God's heart do stand firm forever - yet this is also a call for us to think about what this really means (v. 11). The purposes that matter most to God, his purposes that will always stand, are with eternal things, his desire to give everyone the chance to know him, his readiness to give us the grace we need when we call on him in truth.

We also see God's care in the way he made us - he forms our hearts (v. 15) and he is aware of all that we say, think, or do. We see the image of him looking down from his heavenly dwelling (v. 13), yet he is near watching over us (v. 18). Our hope is not in our strength nor in our possessions nor in our knowledge, for our hope is in God's unfailing love. Only he can keep our spirits alive in the world's famines and droughts (v. 19).

The next psalm speaks of hope in a time of despair, with its image that "deep calls to deep" comforting us that God can speak to our spirits even in times of sorrow or fear, to remind us of our need for him and to reassure us that he is near (Psalm 42). The opening verses describe our souls' longing for God, the significance of knowing that he is with us, and the awareness that he is what we need most of all.

When our souls are downcast, when we cannot even understand what is going on and may not even understand why we are distressed, we can still pray for 'deep call to deep' (v.7), for God to tell us deep things, perhaps even without words, that speak to the deep needs of our spirits, and that his song may be with us at night to console us (v.8). Our hope is in God, the God of our lives, our Savior, whether we are in peaceful times or are in troubled times.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: How does the image of 'singing a new song' help us to think about God? Other psalms that use this image include Psalm 96 and Psalm 98. See what the images in those (and the rest of the images in Psalm 33) tell us about God. What does 'deep speaks to deep' suggest? What comfort may we find in God, even when our souls are downcast? See also Psalms 62 and 63.

Our Walk With God (Psalm 84 & Psalm 103)

This pair of psalms describes two aspects of our walk with God. The first one shows God guiding and caring for us on our journey, as well as reminding us that our true home has always been with God. The second one contrasts our weakness with God's strength, and his eagerness to give us what we need, as well as the grace he pours out on those who walk in his light.

Each of us has been on a journey, a walk of faith, a 'pilgrimage' to God (Psalm 84). This psalm once more begins with a reminder that the desire of our hearts is to be with God, to be in his dwelling place, which is lovely to the eyes of our hearts. God has found a home for the sparrow (v.3) and for the other animals (there are similar images in Psalm 104), and he has prepared a home for us with him.

As we go on our journey, our strength is in God alone (v.5). Whether his path takes us through valleys or over mountains, God can lead us to springs of living water to renew us inwardly. Although we go from weakness to weakness, God makes his strength perfect in us, to carry us each step (v. 6-7).

This psalm concludes with a couple more images for us to ponder (v.10): better is one day with God than a thousand elsewhere, and better to be a doorkeeper in the house of God than to rule in this world. These are meant to encourage us to contemplate what it means to be in God's house, and how this could be better than anything this world offers.

Beyond the many things God does for us in this world, there are greater blessings for which our souls, our inmost being, praise the Lord (Psalm 103). He forgives us of all our sins, heals us from spiritual wounds, lifts our lives out of the pits we stumbled into, and then crowns us with compassion and even calls us his own special possession, his own children of light, the sheep of his pasture.

This psalm uses a number of images to emphasize God's desire to give us the grace we need, and to reassure us that he does not treat us as our sins deserve (v. 10-12). As high as the heavens are above the earth, and as far as east is from west, so he removes our transgressions (compare also

Micah 7:18-19). These figures of speech help us to appreciate God's readiness to give us what we really need, and his desire to be near us.

Likewise, God remembers how we are formed; creatures made of dust, fragile jars of clay, so he handles us with gentleness and care (v.14). We are here for a little while and then pass away; we will be long forgotten by the world, yet God's love is from everlasting to everlasting with those who revere him and hold fast to him (v. 15-17). This whole world and its objects may be shaken and will soon pass away, yet God and his words and the purposes of his heart will remain forever.

Many of the images in the Psalms are also echoes or shadows of Jesus and what he does for us. The comforting image of God as our shepherd is also seen in Jesus, our good shepherd (Psalm 23, John 10:2-4, 10:14-16). The Lord is our good shepherd who leads us beside quiet waters even during troubled times, and he comforts us with his presence as we must walk through dark valleys or desolate wastelands.

Jesus is our Shepherd who came to live as one of us; he knows us and he knows what we really need. We can recognize his voice, for he speaks words of deep truths and words of overflowing grace. And our good shepherd laid down his life for us to reconcile us with our God, so that we may dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does it mean to dwell in God's house? How do the other images in Psalm 84 help us to understand this, and what do they show us about God? See also Psalm 65. What might it mean to praise God with our souls? What do the other images in Psalm 103 tell us about God's character and what he does for us? How do these psalms we've studied help us understand the message of Jesus?

- *Mark Garner, February 2017*

FROM THE BEGINNING: A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Notes For Week Ten:

Consolation For The Troubled Light For The Path (Psalm 139 & Psalm 119) The Beginning Of Wisdom (The Book Of Proverbs)

We'll conclude our overview of Psalms by looking at a couple more aspects of what this book shows us about our relationship with God. Then we'll look at Proverbs, a book that uses simple everyday situations to show us both how we may see God's truth even in mundane places, and also how these times can help us to look more deeply at the things God teaches us.

Comfort For The Hard Pressed Light For The Perplexed (Psalm 139 & Psalm 119)

These two psalms show how God can comfort us whether we are confused or sorrowful, the ways his thoughts give us guidance and hope even in troubled times, and they also encourage us to pray with God any time, any place, about anything that matters to us. Moreover, the imagery of Psalm 119 shows us the many dimensions of God's words.

The first of these psalms tells us how God's knowledge is "too wonderful" for us to understand fully (Psalm 139). God knows everything about us, even our deepest thoughts; and wherever we go, God is near (v. 1-10). Depending on our perspective, this can either frighten us or comfort us. At times we may become so discouraged that nothing in this world can comfort us; and part of us may even want to get away from God himself.

Yet within us, our inmost being is still aware of our need for God, regardless of how confused or troubled we may become. So for David, it is reassuring that whether he goes to the greatest depths or goes to the far side of the sea, God will be there to guide him by the hand.

Further, the darkness cannot hide us from God, since even darkness is as light to him (v. 11-12), since *God is light—in him there is no darkness at all* (1 John 1:5). Likewise, this encourages us as well, especially when we are keenly aware of our need to be near God, when we stray or get lost. The image is also a deliberate paradox, to remind us how deep God's nature and his words really are.

Some memorable verses in the psalm tell us how God's works are wonderful and how precious are his thoughts (v. 13-18). The image of God knitting us together in the womb reminds us of the care he has for each of us, while the image of our days being written in his book tell us of the chance of being with God forever, the destiny he offers each of us. Then the familiar image of grains of sand helps us at least grasp the vastness of God's thoughts and the depth of his words.

Our next psalm is an extended praise of God's Word, as well as a prayer for God to show us the wonderful things in his scriptures, to help us see the light they can give us (Psalm 119). We also see how prayer and studying scripture fit together. We too can pray for God to open our eyes (119:18-20, see also Ephesians 1:18); for we strangers in this world, and its ways are strange to our souls, so our spirits want to learn about God instead.

We need for God both to explain his words and also to keep us on his path, so the psalmist prays for him to give us understanding and to turn our hearts away from the world's useless things

(119:33-37). God's words are meant to tell us far more than what to do and what not to do; so we learn from them and live by them only if we have constant interaction with God, meditating on his truths, and praying for his guidance in everything we may face.

The image of God unfolding his words to us expresses his patience in teaching us, explaining his thoughts one by one, as he lets our hearts absorb them (119:129-132). It also describes the way they give light to our hearts as we come to understand them, and the sense of comfort we can find as we realize that God's thoughts and his mercy and his love are far deeper than we could ever have known.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does it mean that these thoughts are too 'wonderful' for us? What do the images of how God creates us tell us about his nature? Other psalms that use the image of light and the comfort God's words give us include Psalm 18 and Psalm 19. Read more of Psalm 119 - for each few verses, what do they tell us about God and his words? What can they help us to pray for?

The Fear of the Lord (Overview Of Proverbs)

Proverbs often shows us how God's perspectives can be applied even in routine daily living. Yet on a deeper level, the situations it uses also call us to look beyond the surface. Proverbs helps us to see the difference between godly wisdom and worldly knowledge, and it helps us to understand the kind of wisdom that God really wants to give us.

The first several chapters of Proverbs are both a call to seek knowledge from God, and also a discussion of the meaning of knowledge, showing the contrast between the world's ways of thinking compared with God's perspectives (Proverbs 1-9). This is clear from the beginning, with the call for the wise to listen (1:5-9), and the familiar saying that *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* (verse 1), and we will see later the caution not to be 'wise in our own eyes.'

God's wisdom is intended not to bring pride nor self-satisfaction nor earthly fame nor wealth; rather God's understanding is meant to give life (3:5-8, 4:20-26). Since God's thoughts are far higher than ours, he reminds us to trust in him rather than our own understanding; and in turn he promises to bring us spiritual health.

Likewise, we see the familiar call to fix our eyes on God's words, and to give them careful thought, rather than using them as pat answers. We also see the need to let God guard our hearts; for as Jesus himself mentions, what we say and what we do begins with the heart. God's words encourage us to seek his understanding and his grace even in the simplest things.

The introductory section closes with the invitations of wisdom and of folly, who are personified as two different women (Chapter 9). Wisdom has carefully prepared a spiritual meal; she calls us to come in reverence and accept God's teachings, and he will teach us what is good for us. Folly, on the other hand, offers quick fixes, easy ways to feel good and to feel important. Seen this way, the choice isn't so difficult - yet we always need God to keep us on his path.

The rest of the book is the main collection of proverbs for their times and for our times (Proverbs 10-31). In class, we'll only have time for a handful of excerpts, yet these can show us the depth there can be to the simplest-sounding of God's sayings. For example, 10:24-25, 10:28 and 10:30 make better sense when we see them from a spiritual perspective. Likewise, 11:1 goes beyond

economic transactions; for it also calls us not to judge people unfairly by what appearances seem to be - and it is also a reassurance that God himself does not judge by appearances.

Contentment and self-control are common themes in Proverbs (15:14-18). Being contented with what we have can be difficult in many ways, yet by staying close with God we can be content with little, whether it means little wealth or little fame or perhaps having to endure situations not to our liking, when, as Paul writes, we know that Jesus is with us (see Philippians 4:10-13).

The tongue is another familiar subject in Proverbs (18:1-8). The tendency to boast, to gossip, to air our opinions, or to speculate on foolish matters is within all of us, whether we are believers or unbelievers, regardless of our earthly status. The harm caused by aimless talking is a reminder for us to pray whenever we're inclined to speak, and these images help us to see the effects gentle talk may have, compared with the effects of boastful or harsh speech.

Proverbs also gives us frequent counsel for 'fools' and 'sluggards' (26:4-16). The apparent paradox in verses 4-5 is another way these short sayings often call us to look beneath the surface. When faced with someone stubborn and misguided, the choice is not how to convince them, rather to choose between letting them be 'wise in their eyes' or becoming like them ourselves. Perhaps not the best alternatives, yet the choice is clear.

Some of the other images illustrate how persistent the foolish can be - indeed, they are far more sure of themselves than those who patiently seek the truth. Likewise, the images of 'sluggards' are often comical, yet they also illustrate our need to continue seeking God, to let him continue teaching us how to walk in step with his Spirit; rather than thinking we have already learned enough or that we have 'arrived' or that things should now be easier for us.

In Proverbs' personification of wisdom, we also see shadows or echoes of Jesus, who was the Word in the beginning, and who became flesh as one of us (Proverbs 8:22-26, John 1:1-5, 1:14). Before God made the world or its fields, Jesus was with him, just as God's deep understanding was there. Jesus was also constantly at his side, rejoicing in his presence.

Those who find God's wisdom find life, for his words tell us about Jesus and the true life that comes only from walking in his light. Jesus is the light of all humanity, the light of life, full of deep truths and full of the overflowing grace that sustains us each step.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: Describe the difference between God's wisdom and worldly wisdom. What does this tell us about God. What kind of 'life' does God want us to get from following his words? What do the excerpts from Proverbs 10-31 (or pick some others you like) tell us about God's nature, and what do they tell us about our relationship with God?

- Mark Garner, March 2011 □

**FROM THE BEGINNING:
A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**Notes For Week Thirteen: Under The Sun (The Book Of Ecclesiastes)
Like A Lion Among Thorns (Song Of Songs)**

Each of these books is unusual, and each of them is easily misunderstood. Yet each of them helps us understand some aspects of our relationship with God, and help us with our walk of faith in this world. In these books, we can see Solomon's flaws and his bad decisions, yet God can use even these to teach us about his paths and the significance of knowing him.

Under The Sun (Overview Of Ecclesiastes)

Ecclesiastes discusses some deep questions, especially the implications of us being spiritual beings living in mortal bodies in a temporary world. The young Solomon had walked closely with God, yet when he became wealthy and powerful, he drifted away and sought meaning in earthly things. In Ecclesiastes, he looks back, with regrets and with new understanding.

In Kings, we saw how Solomon hardened his heart and wandered from God; and now he tells us about his descent into meaninglessness (Ecclesiastes 1-2). He now sees things pessimistically, and he describes how generations come and go, the ongoing rising and setting of the sun, how 'round and round' everything goes, yet there is nothing new (1:3-11).

The rest of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2 help us understand how Solomon came to this point. He began to use the gift of wisdom to study worldly things, and he began to use his position to undertake many projects, to force many people to hard labor for them, to marry hundreds of wives, and to amass untold wealth and possessions. Yet instead of being content with everything, his heart became embittered and despairing (2:10-11).

So Solomon turns to pondering what it means that God has set eternity in our hearts, while we live in a temporary world (Ecclesiastes 3). The memorable scripture about "a time for everything under the heavens" (3:1-2) describes the wide variety of things that take place every day around the world, and reminds us of our vulnerability and our need for something lasting, something bigger than ourselves.

In spite of all the randomness in this world, the things that God does have meaning, and he can use the good times and the bad times to teach us about who he is and our need for him and what really matters to him (3:10-11, 3:14-15).

The next section of the book looks at a variety of things that happen under the sun (Ecclesiastes 4-10). As a prelude to what follows, Solomon makes some simple observations about human nature, and our tendency to 'chase the wind' and to turn things into competitions. Far better it is to be content with what he have, to choose tranquility rather than pointless toil (4:4-6).

As the book comes to the "conclusion of the matter" (Ecclesiastes 11-12), Solomon first looks back at life under the sun (11:3-8). Going by appearances and relying on human plans will lead

us astray, and demanding answers for every detail will make us hardened. As Galatians tells us, let God teach us how to walk in step with his Spirit, without worrying about results.

So while we still live under the sun, God's call is to remember him, to walk in reverence and to learn from his words; so that our spirits may return to him and be with him forever (12:6-7, 12:13-14).

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: How can we see God's grace and his compassion in Ecclesiastes? Solomon is often pessimistic; what can we learn from this? What does Ecclesiastes tell us about what matters most to God? What else does it tell us about God's nature?

1e 1y 1mon 1Thorns (Overview Of 1on 1Of 1on 1s)

Song of Songs is also often misunderstood. On a literal level, it is series of short sayings (songs) alternately spoken (sung) by a bride and bridegroom and some friends. So on this level, it can help us in some ways with our human relationships (marital or otherwise). Yet on a deeper level, the book is about our relationship with God, about how he makes us 'the Bride of the Lamb.'

As this couple prepares for their wedding, their songs to each other parallel something even more important, the search for unending love and our spirit's need to know God (1:1-3:5). As with the book of Esther, God's name is not mentioned in Song of Songs; yet the book is about God's love for us and the love we can have for God when we understand him. The book is not an allegory - that is, not every symbol has a particular meaning - rather, it is a metaphor for knowing God.

When the young woman desires for her future husband to 'take me away with you' (1:4), this is also a shadow of our inner need to be with our God. Next we see her anxiety, even insecurity, that he may look down at her or that he or others may 'stare' at her, for she has worked long hours outside in the sun, and has been mistreated by her family (1:6-7).

Both in human relationships and in our walk with God, it is common to feel this way. So instead of avoiding her bridegroom, the bride just wants to be near him to be reassured. Likewise, when we feel 'unworthy' of God, or when we are taunted by the accuser, it is much better to talk with God and let him reassure us with his words. *God's perfect love drives out fear 1 John 11*

Now we come to the main theme of the book - Jesus is like a lily among thorns, a light in the darkness, a spring of water in the desert; and God is an apple tree who brings us good fruit whether in or out of season, who gives us shade from the heat of the world's ways (2:2-3). We can also see how this couple see the good points in one another, something we can learn for all of our human relationships as well.

Likewise, there are 'little foxes that ruin the vineyards' (2:15). Little foxes like envy and rivalry and malice can damage any human relationship; while the foxes like worldly thinking and misunderstanding and preconceptions can derail our walk with God. Only God can catch them, and he reassures us to be honest about the things that trouble us or confuse us, so that God can help us understand things more clearly.

In the next part of the book, we see the king's carriage and the wedding procession (3:6-5:1). The use of royal imagery suggests that Solomon may also be the bridegroom in the book. It could also be simply this couple's idealizing each other, but in either case the message of the book is the same. One of the ironies is Solomon's incessant accumulation of wives, highly praising each one yet soon tiring of her - when what he needed all along was to return to God.

Most of the images in Song of Songs are simply poetic descriptions, some of them pleasant, some of them awkward (and can even be uncomfortable to read), while others are merely comical (no one really wants their waistline compared with a mound of grain, 7:2, nor their temples compared with halves of a large piece of fruit, 4:3 and 6:7). Yet these all reflect our deeper desire for God, our need for him.

The rest of the book talks about the couple being together in the gardens, and it is also a shadow of God walking at our side (5:2-8:14). Both in earthly relationships and in our relationship with God, initial expectations and enthusiasm must gradually give way to simple trust and letting God guide us each step.

God will always be there for us, yet human nature is inconstant. God will always love us and will always be eager to be with us; yet from one moment to the next, our fleshly desires may change. Our souls will always long for God (5:6-8), as in the Psalms we saw the deer who is parched from thirst, and our souls fainting when we are too far from God.

God puts us like a seal on his heart, he makes an everlasting covenant with us, and rivers cannot sweep his love away (8:6-7). He makes us his treasured possession, and *neither life nor death . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord* Romans 8:38-39

The gospels occasionally use the image of Jesus as a bridegroom, and Revelation describes us as the 'Bride Of The Lamb' (Revelation 19:6-9, 21:1-6). It describes a different kind of wedding supper, with us dressed in clean linen. God has come to dwell with us, to be our God and to make us the flock of his pasture. And he is making everything new, for his words are eternal truths that reassure us of imperishable things.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does Song of Songs tell us of God's love for us? What does it tell us about his nature? Why would he use this imagery to help us understand some things about him? What does the book teach us about our walk with God?

- Mark Garner, March 2011

FROM THE BEGINNING: A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Notes For Week Fourteen: Your Light Has Come (The Book Of Isaiah)

The book of Isaiah is best known for its prophecies of Jesus, yet it also covers many aspects of God's relationship with us. Many images recur throughout Isaiah that reflect the needs that only God can fill, and many images also help us to understand God's nature. There are many themes in Isaiah worthy of further study—so in class we'll just bring out a few of the main ideas.

The Sure Foundation For Our Times (Overview Of Isaiah 1-39)

In the first part of Isaiah, many of the ideas center around God as the sure foundation for all of our times. Many of the Israelites depended on their outward acts of worship, others trusted in their material possessions, while others relied on human force and strength. God calls them, and us, to set aside our preconceptions and let him help us to see him and his ways more clearly.

Isaiah calls to "Let us walk in the light of the Lord" (Isaiah 1-6), instead of following our own plans and relying on our talents and deeds. Though they were constantly engaged in 'worship', God tells them they do not know him. Yet instead of lashing out, he simply asks them to let him reason with them, so he may 'settle the matter' (1:18-19), so we too may realize that we cannot make ourselves holy or righteous; for God alone can cleanse us and give us what we really need.

So Isaiah calls them to come and go up to the mountain of the Lord (2:3-5), to let him teach us his ways, learn to walk in his paths rather than chasing our own ambitions, set aside our disputes about meaningless things, and let God watch over us and protect our souls (see also 4:5-6). When Isaiah sees God in his temple, he is overwhelmed and humbled; for all of his senses tell him that indeed holy, holy, holy is the Lord (6:1-4).

In the next section of Isaiah, we see God's proclamations that a light has dawned in the world's deep darkness (Isaiah 7-12). The original setting was in a time of national 'crisis', so the sign of Immanuel originally comes in troubled times - both a reassurance for the Judeans at the time and also a promise of the coming of Jesus, our God With Us (7:9-14). God gives chance after chance to the hapless (and idolatrous) King Ahas, yet he ignores Isaiah. Yet his promises still give us hope today.

□ In the kind of squabble that often took place in the era of the divided kingdom, Ephraim (Northern Israel, which was also called Samaria) has allied with Aram (present-day Syria) to attack Judah and its capital Jerusalem. Ahas (king of Judah) eventually panics, and relies on Assyria (at the time one of the world's 'great powers') to defend him - which led Judah into even bigger danger.

Our times are usually troubled too, so the great light of Jesus has dawned, to give us hope amidst the world's gloom, and to remind us to look above and walk by faith (9:1-2). Isaiah also uses other images of God and Jesus, such as the Branch who bears spiritual fruit in every season (11:1-3). Jesus came full of the Spirit, and he was full of truth and full of grace (see John 1:14-17); and he searches our hearts and does not judge by appearances.

The next section is a series of visions about Jerusalem (that is, the Israelites) and the surrounding nations (Isaiah 13-24). Many of them remind us that only God's presence and his grace make us any different from anyone else. Isaiah 16:1-5 reminds us to show kindness to the troubled, while

Isaiah 17:5-8 shows us how God looks for 'gleanings' both among the faithless and also among those who consider themselves faithful (as Isaiah often says, a remnant will return).

Scriptures such as 18:4-7 describe God's hope to show his grace to anyone from any nation when they come to him, while Isaiah 21:6-10 reminds us to let God and Jesus be our lookouts, to tell us what is true and what matters most to our Heavenly Father.

God is a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation, and the New Testament uses this image of Jesus as well (Isaiah 28:16-18). God planned wonderful things long ago (25:1); he has destroyed the shroud of spiritual death, and he removes the veils from our hearts when we turn to Jesus (25:7-9, see also 2 Corinthians 3:16-18). With this in mind, Isaiah continues to remind us to trust in God and in his understanding, rather than in our own.

□ We won't have time in class to mention chapters 36-39, which describe some events from the times of Hezekiah, Aha's successor. Chapters 36-37 are a contrast with Aha's response to trouble in Isaiah 7-8.

Isaiah now returns to the theme of walking with God (26:3-9), and helps us understand the peace this can give us even in anxious times (see also 48:17-18), while calling us to walk in reverence and humility. This is echoed as Isaiah describes God as our sure foundation (28:16-18, 33:2-6). □ Knowing that God is near helps us not to panic, and he is a 'rich store' of spiritual nourishment, imperishable things of far greater value than the world's possessions or fame or popularity.

To tie these ideas together, and to introduce the next part of Isaiah (see below, after the interlude in chapters 36-39), Isaiah gives us God's promise that a highway will be there (Isaiah 35), where there will be blossoms of truth in the desert and bubbling springs in the burning sands.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does the image of light tell us about God? What does it tell us about what matters to him? Take note of the many scriptures in Isaiah that use this image, and describe what each of them tells us about God's nature. We've seen many other images in Isaiah so far - take a couple of them, and consider what they also tell us about God's nature and about our relationship with him.

The Time Of God's Favor (Overview Of Isaiah 40-49)

This part of Isaiah blends some new images with more Messianic visions and with many reassurances of God's care for those who seek him. At the same time, we see numerous cautions (and even satire) about worshiping the world's idols and following its ways or its thinking. In contrast, Isaiah shows us how God's thoughts and his ways are far higher than ours.

Many of the images in the next ten chapters tell us of the comfort God wants to give to the afflicted and tired, and Isaiah often contrasts this with the ways that relying on idols and self and earthly thinking harm our souls (Isaiah 40-49). Several times, God parodies idolaters and those who trust in their own energy and their own knowledge (for example, Isaiah 40:18-20, 41:5-7 and 44:9-20; see also 28:13-14, and we'll read part of 46:1-7 below.)

We see instead God making a highway in the desert (40:1-8), a highway that will endure, a highway to knowing him that only God can make (see also 11:15-16, 49:11-12, and 62:10-12), the highway completed by Jesus. God understands how easily we become fearful, so Isaiah also keeps reassuring us that God is with us (41:9-10, see also 43:1-3). He created us, he calls us by name from the farthest corners and from every nation, so he will uphold us with his hand.

Next we see a vision of Jesus that is not only a prophecy, but also a portrait of his nature. He does not shout at us, he does not snuff out 'smoldering wicks'; rather he nurtures them and cares for them (42:1-7, see also 40:11). We also see again the image of light, and also the image of God as the source of life and breath. It also describes Jesus' perseverance in bringing justice to this earth, as he brought the chance for everyone to know our God.

God patiently reminds us that it is he who carries us each step (46:3-9). The Babylonians and Canaanites used to haul around burdensome idols, and our idols today are also a burden to our souls that cannot produce meaning nor true life, so God appeals to trust in him instead of in our own efforts or our strength. For God has made this the day of his salvation (49:8-10), when he helps those who put our faith in him, and he gives us spiritual nourishment even in barren places.

Now we see God's desire to make an everlasting covenant with those who seek him in truth (Isaiah 50-55). In order to do this, surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering (53:4-6), because even as Jesus suffered, he could see the light of life and rejoiced that he was reconciling us with our Heavenly Father (53:11, see also Hebrews 12:1-2).

As God calls us to come to him so that he may make an everlasting covenant of peace with us (see also 54:10), he explains how his thoughts are not our thoughts (55:1-3, 55:8-11). His choicest blessings are freely given to those who seek him in truth; and he calls us to come to him so he may give us true life. As he nourishes the earth with rain and snow, he nourishes our hearts with his words and the bread of Jesus.

God has made everything new (Isaiah 56-66). He sees our ways and our thoughts, yet he will heal us when we open our hearts to him (57:15-19), and he gives us peace and hope in him. His light has come (60:1-2), the true light that we have always needed. And Jesus has made this the time of his favor (61:1-3), when he gives us the crown of knowing him instead of the ashes of earthly possessions and accomplishments, and he gives us a garment of God's own righteousness.

God has made the heavens new and has made the earth new, so that the former things will not be remembered (65:17), so that we will not want to return to our former ways. And when we walk in his light, he will renew us inwardly even as we must endure the sadness and fears of this world.

He is the Lord, there is no other (Isaiah 45:18-25, see also 64:4). God made the earth and everything in it; and he does not speak to us in secret. He has made his truths known and has brought them near in Jesus. So he calls us to come to God, we who are fugitives from this world's emptiness, we who are exiles from the world's futile thinking, we who are afflicted and weary. For in the Lord alone are deliverance and true life and the peace that flows like a river.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does the image of a highway tell us about God and his desire for us to know him? What do each of the prophecies about Jesus tell us about him and his character? Isaiah also often uses the image of water (see also 12:2-3 and 41:17-20) - what does water signify, and what does this image tell us about God? What overall themes in Isaiah help us understand our relationship with God?

- Mark Garner, March 2011 □

**FROM THE BEGINNING:
A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**Notes For Week Fifteen: To Give Us Hope & A Future (The Book Of Jeremiah);
The Lord Is Our Portion (The Book Of Lamentations)**

Jeremiah lived during the final years of Judah, as the Judeans' hardened hearts caused God reluctantly to send the Babylonians to discipline them. Jeremiah is usually remembered for his prophecies of doom; yet even in these we can see God's eagerness to show mercy instead. The message of Jeremiah is about God's desire to give us hope, in spite of the world's appearances.

The Days Are Coming (Overview Of Jeremiah 1-28)

The book of Jeremiah uses many images, symbolic actions, and God's insights into human nature; and it often uses the phrase, "the days are coming." At times, this is to forewarn the Judeans about the discipline they may need to face; while at other times it is to promise them that, even if the city itself falls and they are exiled, God will restore them when they seek him in truth.

Jeremiah often calls everyone to "ask where the good way is," so that God may be able to cleanse and forgive them (Jeremiah 1-6). When God calls Jeremiah to his ministry of prophecy, he reassures the young prophet that he will give him the words to speak (1:9-10), and cautions him about the way people will respond. Jeremiah indeed had to proclaim a foreboding message, yet it was also a message of God's hope that some of them would turn back to him.

This is echoed in Jeremiah's images of "breaking up your unplowed ground" (in our hearts) and his call to "circumcise your hearts" instead of trusting in outward things such as fleshly circumcision (4:1-4). We too may come to a crossroads each day (6:16), whether it involves daily decisions or temptations or anxieties; and in each case God reminds us to ask him, instead of trusting human reasoning, where we may find rest for our souls.

Likewise, God calls us not to trust in outward appearances, as he asks Jeremiah to reproach the Judeans for putting their trust in repeating that, "this is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord" (Jeremiah 7-17, see 7:3-8). Instead of finding false hope in our abilities or our possessions or our strength, Jeremiah reminds us that our only 'boast' is in God and his kindness to us (9:23-24, see also Galatians 6:14-15). God delights in giving us the grace and understanding we need.

Once more we see the contrast between the ways of the nations with God's ways and thoughts (10:1-7). Our own idols today are just like a scarecrow in a field, unable to do satisfy our deep needs, dead weight for our souls to bear. Yet God is not like these things (see also 10:12-16), for he made us and gives us life and breath; he knows our hearts, and he understands what we need.

Another image teaches us the difference between trusting in self compared with trusting the Lord (17:5-8). The person who trusts in his knowledge and his strength may seem strong on the outside, yet inwardly will be like a salt land where nothing can live. Yet the one who trusts in God and does not run ahead will be like a tree planted by the water (17:5-8), nourished inwardly by God even in difficult times.

The familiar image of the potter and the pots introduces the next section of Jeremiah, as God explains once more that his ways are higher than ours (Jeremiah 18-28). To have the spiritual benefits of being in God's hands, we simply need to give him a soft heart, and let him mold us

instead of molding ourselves (18:1-10). The simple illustration of the potter also shows us God's patience with us, and his desire to let us start over when we realize our need for him.

As surely as God lives, we went astray, yet as surely as God lives, he has sent Jesus to be our Shepherd (23:1-8). This scripture ties together several images we've seen in Jeremiah and other books: the days are coming, the sheep who need a shepherd, the righteous Branch Jesus, and God's readiness to bring us back to him when we turn to him.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What do the Scriptures we've read so far tell us about God, and what do they tell us about the foreboding prophecies in Jeremiah? How does each of them show God's grace and also his understanding of us? Read some other excerpts from this section of the book, and consider the same questions about them.

Promises Of Consolation & Restoration (Overview Of Jeremiah 29-52)

Even as the Judeans harden their hearts, God gives them chance after chance to turn back to him. Even when Jerusalem's fall becomes inevitable, we also see God's promises of consolation and restoration. Through all this, Jeremiah endures further trials and continues to walk by faith, leaving a message of hope and of God's desire to pour out his grace on his scattered flock.

The next section of Jeremiah is often referred to as 'the book of consolation,' since in these few chapters we can see the heart of God, and can also much better understand the rest of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 29-33). By this time, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon has now raided Jerusalem twice, seizing many valuable items, and taking many captives into exile*.

* Josiah, the last of Judah's reformer kings, died in 609. Afterwards things went from bad to worse. Nebuchadnezzar's first raid was in 606 BC (when Daniel was taken captive), and his second raid was in 597 BC (when Ezekiel was taken captive). On the third and final time the Babylonians invaded Judah, they destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BC, and took another large group of captives.

So Jeremiah writes to counsel and to reassure the exiles, encouraging them to live their lives in Babylon and not to put believe false promises that things would change suddenly (29:4-7). Here we also see Jeremiah's prophecy that after seventy years in Babylon, they would have the chance to return (29:10, see also 25:11-12, and note also Daniel 9:2).

God's does not punish for punishment's sake; rather he wants to give them hope and the future of returning to him. So he reassures them, that when they seek God with their hearts, they will find him, and he will bring them back (29:11-13). God also promises to heal the 'incurable wounds' that their ways had inflicted, and to rebuild the ruins in their hearts (30:17-18, see also 32:43-44).

This section is highlighted by God's promise of a New Covenant (31:31-34), as we also see in the New Testament (Hebrews 8:7-13 and 10:11-18). These days have come, for Jesus brought us a better covenant and better promises, and he made the perfect sacrifice to reconcile us with God. The image of God writing his words on our hearts emphasizes the personal nature of the relationship he wants with us, for he does not care whether the world considers us great or small.

The next section contains scenes from the final years and the fall of Judah (Jeremiah 34-45). We see further chances for even the hard-hearted, mercy for the faithful (*e.g.* 39:15-18, and see 38:7-13), and further trials for the prophet. As the fall of Jerusalem is imminent, Jeremiah advises the people to surrender to Babylon, for then things will go better for them; yet only a few heed this.

Human nature is weak and unforgiving and blind, yet our Redeemer is strong and gracious and understanding (Jeremiah 46-52). We've seen before the promise would 'restore the fortunes' of Israel, yet we now see his promise to restore the spiritual fortunes of the nations (see 48:42 and 48:47; then 49:4-6). For these days have come too, for Jesus came to give anyone from Moab or Ammon or from the ends of the earth the chance to know God and receive the mercy we all need.

Finally, we see once more the prophet appealing to us to "ask the way to Zion," just to seek God with a humble and contrite heart, and he will make an everlasting covenant with us (50:4-5). Further, he reassures us that God is able and eagerly desires to redeem us from the oppression of the accuser and the chains of the world's thinking, so he may give us rest for our souls (50:33-34).

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: How do we see each of these prophecies fulfilled ultimately in Jesus? What do they teach us about our relationship with God? Overall, what does the book of Jeremiah tell us about God's nature. If you have time, read chapters 29-33, and answer the same questions.

The Lord Is Our Portion (Overview Of Lamentations)

After the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and took captive another group into exile, Jeremiah wrote this lament, an express of godly sorrow over the fall of Judah and the insistence of the Judeans in relying on themselves instead of seeking God. Jeremiah's consolation is that the Lord is his portion, as it is for us today during times of trouble or fear.

Jeremiah opens with lament, "how deserted lies the city" (Lamentations 1, see verse 1; in the Hebrew scriptures, the title of Lamentations is simply, "How".) The city looks bleak with the ruined buildings and the sparse population, yet the real desolation is that God's presence is no longer near. So Jeremiah urges everyone to pour out our hearts like water, to acknowledge our need for God and his grace (Lamentations 2, see verse 19).

For all of Jeremiah's sorrow, he reassures us that "because of God's great love, we are not consumed (Lamentations 3, see verse 22). The Scripture beginning with this verse is the best-known part of the book, with its thoughts that console us when our souls are downcast (see the closing reading below).

In contrast, the prophet reminds the Judeans to look back on the things they once depended on, "how the gold has lost its luster" (Lamentations 4, see verse 1). So Jeremiah's Lamentations conclude with the prayer, for God to restore us to him, and to reassure us of his care for us (Lamentations 5, see verse 21).

God is our portion, our daily bread, who meets the needs of our spirits (Lamentations 3:19-33). When, like the prophet, our souls are downcast, we call to mind what we know about our God. God's compassions are new every morning, for when we let him open our eyes, he will show us truth and grace in unexpected places. He reassures us to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord; for God mourns with us and will show us compassion, for great is his unfailing love.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does Lamentations teach us about God's nature and our relationship with him? What does the book tell us about the message of Jesus?

- Mark Garner, March 2017

**FROM THE BEGINNING:
A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Notes For Week Sixteen: The Heavens Were Opened (The Book Of Ezekiel)

Ezekiel has been taken captive by the Babylonians when God calls him to prophesy. From the first verse, God opens the heavens to give us a deeper look at the purposes of his heart, and to help us understand our relationship with him. Ezekiel's visions are at times complex, obscure, graphic, or even confusing. Yet in each of them we see God's holiness and his understanding.

You Will Know That I Am The Lord (Overview Of Ezekiel 1-32)

The book of Ezekiel is full of vivid images that call us to look beyond the surface and set aside our preconceptions, and let God teach us his ways and his thoughts. We frequently see the phrase that "they will know that I am the Lord," both when we realize our need for God, and when we realize the depths of his care for us.

Ezekiel opens with visions and images of God's glory, his holiness, and his righteousness (Ezekiel 1-9). His first vision (see 1:4-24) is complicated to the point of being almost incomprehensible, with its images of unusual living creatures, intersecting wheels and the eyes that cover them, lightning and more. These sights are meant to be pondered, not analyzed; they are to help us think about God's nature, not his physical appearance.

And as Ezekiel says, all of these images were merely "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord (1:25-2:2); shadows of God's full glory, of the life he provides, of the depths of his understanding. Ezekiel is overwhelmed by these sights and falls facedown, yet God at once reassures him, and the Spirit lifts him back up (see the similarity with Revelation 1:12-18).

As God explains that the path ahead for Ezekiel will be full of 'thorns' and 'scorpions,' he gives the prophet a scroll to eat (2:9-3:3). The words of God taste sweet to those who seek him in truth, yet they also contain laments and words of mourning (see also Revelation 10:8-10). So we often see God's reassurance to Ezekiel that his calling is simply to speak the truths God gives him, knowing that some will listen and many will ignore or reject them (3:27).

After describing the idolatry and spiritual emptiness in Judah, the book turns to the exile and the return that would follow (Ezekiel 10-18). The prophet sees a vision of God's glory leaving the temple, an image of sadness yet also of the radiance that accompanies God's presence (10:1-8), while a 'man in linen' carries away some of the embers from the temple.

Yet God already promises that he will return (11:14-23), for even now his presence is not far away (see verse 23). Even as he must scatter the people, he will be their sanctuary wherever they are sent, and he promises that when they return to him, he will give them a new heart and a new spirit, a promise we will read more about as we proceed in the book.

Even as God uses vivid images to explain his sorrow over their wandering, he expresses his eagerness to re-establish his covenant with them, so that they will know that he is the Lord, a

gracious God (16:62). As he discusses human pride and hardness of spirit, he promises renewal when we turn to him, so we will know that he is the Lord, who gives life (17:22-24). God does not punish for punishment's sake, and he does not want to hurt us (18:31-32).

The next section is a series of divine laments (Ezekiel 19-32), laments over the Israelites and the nations, laments over the things human nature trust in, and images of our need for God. He often says that when we realize that the world has no answers, or we realize that the world's things cannot satisfy our spirits, we will know that he is the Lord. And from time to time, he reassures the straying that he desires to renew them and bring them back to him (e.g. 28:25-26).

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What do we learn about God's nature in this part of Ezekiel? What does it mean for God's 'glory' to leave the temple? What has God promised so far in Ezekiel? Compare these with the promises we have through Jesus. How does the exile to Babylon, and the return, parallel our relationship with God?

An Everlasting Covenant Of Peace (Overview Of Ezekiel 33-48)

As Ezekiel describes the Judeans' future return from exile, and God's promise to renew them, we also see images of our heavenly Shepherd Jesus who gives us a new heart, gives us his Spirit to live within us, and makes a new covenant with those who walk in his light. We also see another perspective about our relationship with God, in the images of a new temple and a new city.

In these comforting promises, and the ways they reassure us of God's care, we can especially see God's desire to give us true life by knowing him, rather than the mere existence that comes from pursuing this world's things (Ezekiel 33-39). This section opens with God renewing his appeal for them to return to him, to choose life (33:10-11).

Without God, we are sheep without a shepherd who are easily led astray; yet God himself is our faithful Shepherd (34:11-16) who looks for us when we wander off in the world's storms or clouds or gloom, and he brings us back to his heavenly pasture when we hear his call. We will know that he is the Lord, for enduring peace comes from him, he breaks off the world's yokes, and sustains us in every season (34:25-31).

Once more we see his promise to gather his sheep and to renew us inwardly, to give us a new heart and a new spirit (36:24-28). This particularly foreshadows Jesus' ministry and how he can renew our minds and sanctify us through and through. The image of God removing our hearts of stone and replacing them with soft hearts also helps us see the closeness he wants to have with us.

We also see these themes when he brings life to the dry bones (37:1-14). Without God's presence, we are mere dry bones inside regardless of what we may look like on the outside. Yet when we open our hearts to our God, he can breathe life into us, and he puts his Spirit in us. Moreover, he makes an everlasting covenant with us, and makes his dwelling place among us (37:26-28), so that we will know that he is the Lord, whose grace overflows to us.

The final section of Ezekiel describes a new city, and has an elaborate description of a new temple (Ezekiel 40-48; see 40:2-4 and compare with Revelation 21:10-11). Then we see God's

glory returning and filling the temple (43:1-7), accompanied by the same images Ezekiel had seen before, accompanied by God's radiance and his desire to live among those who seek him, as Jesus and his Father and the Spirit come and make their home with us (John 14:23).

The river that flows from God is another image that we see also in Revelation (47:2-9 and 47:12, see Revelation 22 below). The river seems at first to be a trickle, yet the more that we let God open our eyes, we can see the depth of God's love and the abundance of his grace for us, and the life that following him gives us. The book closes with the comforting thought that this new city will be called, The Lord Is There (48:35).

God has opened the gates of his heavenly city, and the river of the water of life flows from him and the Lamb, to nourish and renew our spirits even as we endure the drought in this world (Revelation 22:1-7). Likewise, God produces the fruit of the Spirit in every season, and he is our light who guides every step. Indeed, his words are trustworthy and true, and they tell us of imperishable things, and of the purposes of God's heart.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does each of the images in these chapters tell us about God's nature? What do they tell us about what Jesus has done for us? What do these images tell us about our relationship with God?

- *Mark Garner, April 2017*

**FROM THE BEGINNING:
A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Notes For Week Seventeen: The Most High, Who Lives Forever (The Book Of Daniel)

The book of Daniel has two distinct halves. The first part has several straightforward narratives about Daniel and his friends living in Babylon, the trials they face, and their walk of faith in God. The second half has many complex visions that can be hard to understand; yet they teach the same truths: God reigns over all, and his kingdom is an eternal kingdom, not of this world.

God's Kingdom Is An Eternal Kingdom (Overview Of Daniel 1-6)

When he was very young, Daniel was abruptly taken to Babylon. For many years he and his friends served King Nebuchadnezzar and his successors, and depended on God to take care of them. These chapters contain some memorable and encouraging examples of walking by faith, and they also show us the grace that God wanted to share with anyone who would listen.

The first several chapters show us how God gives light to Daniel and his friends in troubled time, and how he also gives light even to Nebuchadnezzar; as Daniel will pray, light dwells with God (Daniel 1-4). Finding themselves in a harsh land, a place full of violence and idolatry, where simple choices pose problems, where they must even adopt new names, God gives favor to Daniel, Hananiah (Shadrach), Mishael (Meshach), and Azariah (Abednego) (1:8-9, 1:19-20).

Yet soon there is a crisis when the king becomes outraged with his advisers, when some of them cannot tell him anything about his dream, and he decides to execute them all (see 2:1-13). Hearing about this, Daniel and his friends do the best and only thing they can, by praying for God to guide them and help them know what to do. God pours out his grace, and as Daniel prays, God reveals deep and hidden things (2:17-23).

When Daniel meets the king, he makes sure that Nebuchadnezzar realizes that Daniel is not a magician nor an enchanter, rather that God alone reveals mysteries (2:27-28). Then he tells the king what his dream was about, and then explains it to Nebuchadnezzar. He saw a statue that foretells of a succession of earthly empires: Babylon (head of gold), Persia (chest and arms of silver), Greece (belly and thighs of bronze), and Rome (legs of iron, feet of iron mixed with clay).

Just as the statue was crushed, one by one these earthly kingdoms would fall, as even the most powerful kingdoms of earth always will. Yet they all fade in comparison with God's kingdom, not an earthly kingdom, rather a spiritual kingdom that cannot be destroyed. God's kingdom does not physically destroy human empires, yet Jesus has "made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Colossians 2:15)

Besides the ways that God takes care of these believers, God also teaches Nebuchadnezzar about who God really is, and shows him patience and grace. Now the king has seen God's wisdom and understanding (2:46-48). Next, after the encouraging story of how God protects Daniel's three friends from the king's displeasure, Nebuchadnezzar then learns about God's strength and his ability to save (3:28-30, though his decree shows he has more to learn).

Finally, the king undergoes some difficult times, and from them he learns about God's mercy and his eagerness for us to know him (4:1-3, 4:34-37). Notice the contrast between these thoughts with Nebuchadnezzar's previous responses.

After Nebuchadnezzar passed away, the remaining kings of Babylon were hard-hearted, and they ignored God and Daniel. Soon Babylon is overthrown by Persia and their allies, the Medes (Daniel 5-6). The end of Babylon comes suddenly, while King Belshazzar and the other prominent Babylonians have a drunken party and defile the articles from God's temple, only to be frightened to see a hand writing on the wall, which proclaims their downfall* (5:18-28).

* Ancient historians describe how Cyrus of Persia had learned that the Babylonian leaders would be distracted, and planned an approach that worked much better than even he expected.

God continues watching over Daniel under Darius the Mede*, who is appointed ruler of Babylon. This king respects Daniel, yet he is tricked by some associates into throwing Daniel into the den with the lions. The next morning, Darius is greatly relieved to learn that Daniel is alive (6:19-22). So he too comes to learn that God is the living God (6:25-27).

* This is a different person from the Persian king Darius, whom we see in Ezra, Haggai, and Zechariah.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: Consider the many ways God helped Daniel. What do they tell us about God? What parallels may we find in our relationship with God? What does God's treatment of Nebuchadnezzar tell us about God? What else can we learn from Nebuchadnezzar's relationship with God? What do we learn about what God's 'kingdom' is about?

The Books Were Opened (Overview Of Daniel 7-12)

The first half of Daniel focused on events in human lives, and what they show us about God. Now, the book turns to dreams and visions that God gives to Daniel, showing the prophet what things look like to God. In particular, many of these visions tell of the coming of Jesus, and of the atonement and cleansing that his ministry would bring.

Daniel's dream parallels Nebuchadnezzar's dream, yet with much more detail (Daniel 7). The lion again is Babylon, and it has wings to represent its swift rise. The lion is made human, as Nebuchadnezzar had learned what it means to know our Creator. The lopsided bear is Persia and the Medes, since the Medes were the lesser party. The bear is hungry; though the Persians could be benevolent administrators to smaller nations, yet they too were harsh with perceived rivals.

Next comes the leopard, the Greeks, renowned for their learning yet who too often used it for inappropriate purposes. It has four heads since its own cities often went to war with one another; and after the death of Alexander the Great his empire was again divided into four parts (which then attacked one another). The iron-toothed beast is Rome, which reveled in trampling other nations, yet was full of internal divisions, as is shown by the horns fighting each other.

This progression of human empires is now followed by the 'Ancient of Days' taking his seat, with a river of holiness and cleansing fire flowing from him (7:9-14). The books are opened, as God reveals his truths, and again the earthly kingdoms are overthrown, to be humbled by 'one like a

son of man.' This dream introduces the following visions, many of which tell us about Jesus and his kingdom, a kingdom that cannot be seen with human eyes (Luke 17:20-21).

Jesus' earthly ministry would bring purification and atonement for many souls from many nations (Daniel 8-12). Some of the visions in this section can be quite difficult to understand, so we'll focus just on a couple of them. Indeed, Daniel himself is often overwhelmed by them.

In 538 BC, just after Babylon had fallen to Persia and the Medes, Daniel is reading Jeremiah's prophecy that explained Jerusalem's fall and promised the chance for restoration in seventy years (9:2-3). This moves Daniel, and he prays for God's mercy, and praises God for his understanding and his holiness (9:17-19).

As he prays, God sends him a new message about seventy 'sevens' to give him a rough idea of when the Anointed One (Messiah) will come (seventy sevens are 490 years, that is, roughly five centuries). While many of the details are obscure, we can read about Jesus making a covenant with many, atoning for human wickedness, and similar images.

The book concludes with Daniel, astonished with everything God has told him, asking the 'man clothed in linen' how long this will take (12:5-10). He answers Daniel that it will take 'a time, times, and half a time'; that is, three and one-half years, the earthly ministry of Jesus. Yet this also signifies the walk of faith that each of us will have in this world; for we too will be purified and God will help us understand when we walk in the light and grace of Jesus.

So he reassures Daniel, simply to 'go your way till the end' (12:13), as Jesus reassures us as well, for he can give us rest for our souls, and he will give us the imperishable inheritance of being with our God.

God understands how difficult it can be sometimes to walk by faith (2 Corinthians 5:1-7). He reassures us that we have an eternal home, not made with human hands nor human knowledge, a home that will always be there. Meanwhile we groan from many things around us and from our own limitations; so God has given us the gift of his Spirit to dwell within us, to reassure us of what he has done for us, a guarantee of God's care for us and a promise of what is to come.

Questions For Discussion Or Earthly Study: What can we learn about God from this section of Daniel? Why would God give Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar essentially the same dream? What does this tell us about God? What do these visions tell us about Jesus and our relationship with God?

- Mark Garner, April 2017

**FROM THE BEGINNING:
A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**Notes For Week Eighteen: Mercy, Not Sacrifice (The Book Of Hosea);
He Will Pour Out His Spirit (The Book Of Joel)**

The book of Hosea shows us the depths of God's faithfulness and of the love he wants to give us. In particular, it focuses on God's desire to show us mercy, rather than making our relationship with him dependent on our own actions. In Joel, during a difficult time God calls the Israelites to return to him, and he promises renewal.

God Desires Mercy, Not Sacrifice (Overview Of Hosea)

Like many of the prophets, Hosea had to endure many sorrows. His wife was chronically unfaithful, yet God called the prophet to be merciful and take her back. The book starts with this situation as a metaphor for our relationship with God, and from there Hosea explains what it means to 'return to the Lord,' and helps us understand what God means by 'mercy, not sacrifice.'

Hosea opens with a contrast between human unfaithfulness and God's faithfulness* (Hosea 1-3). When God calls him to prophesy, he asks Hosea to marry an adulterous women, as an image of the spiritual adultery that was all too common then as it is in any era (1:2). Even their children are given names to represent the sadness God bears: Jezreel (often the site of oppression and massacre), Lo-Ruhamah ('not loved') and Lo-Ammi ('not my people').

* Hosea was written in the days when the kingdoms of Judah and Israel both still existed.

Yet God promises them that, though they have been told that they aren't his people, they will be called children of the living God (1:10-11). Indeed, we may often even tell ourselves that we aren't God's people, yet God reassures us that he accepts us and cares for us, and simply calls us to walk with humility in the grace and love of Jesus.

Once more God tells us of his eagerness to renew us when we let him, his desire to call us his people, and to show his love to us, regardless of our straying and empty ways (2:21-23). Indeed, he has Hosea redeem (to buy back) his straying wife as an example of God's redemption that he brings to those who seek him in truth (3:1-2).

The next section builds on these ideas, and tells us when we feel distant from God or are confused or feel lost, to 'come, let us return to the Lord (Hosea 4-10). The key themes of the book are summarized in Hosea 6:1-6, God's call simply to acknowledge him; for as surely as the sun rises, he will appear; like spring rains that water the earth, he will nourish our spirits with what we need.

God's desire for mercy rather than sacrifice not only reminds us to show mercy to one another, it also reminds us of the basis of our relationship with God. He does want our relationship with him to depend on us making enough sacrifices or 'doing enough,' rather he wants us to trust in him rather than in ourselves, to rely on his love and mercy for us, and to acknowledge in our hearts that he alone is our God, our hope, our life (6:6; see also Matthew 9:9-13 & 12:1-8).

In the closing chapters, we see God's awareness of our flaws and our sins, yet we see images of God healing our waywardness and loving us freely (Hosea 11-14). We again see him describing us as his own children, leading us with 'cords of kindness' and with 'ties of love' rather than with rules or force (11:1-4); and we also see images of God healing us, feeding us, and being gentle with us, for God understands our weaknesses and how easily we can get lost.

And again we see God enduring our sins because of his compassion for us, so he gives us every possible chance to come to him and seek him (11:8-11). As Isaiah says, his ways and his thoughts are far higher than ours. He 'roars' only to call us back so he can settle us back in our home with him, and his 'roar' is the merest echo of God's full strength and majesty.

So in the closing chapter, we see how God forgives our sins, receives us graciously, and pours out spiritual blessings when we acknowledge our need for him, and stop depending on our own strength and our abilities (14:1-5). God waits so patiently for those moments when we sit quietly in his presence, and let him open our eyes so we can see him more clearly and come to know who our God really is.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does the book of Hosea tell us about God's nature? How might it help us in our relationship with God? Look at the scriptures when Jesus quotes Hosea 6 - what do these tell us about God and his nature?

He Will Pour Out His Spirit (Overview Of Joel)

The date when Joel wrote is unknown, though most likely it was in roughly in the same era as Hosea. Joel's prophecies were given after a locust swarm that had terrified the Israelites and left them with little to eat. In this setting, Joel helps us to see the emptiness that this world's 'locusts' produce in our spirits, and he reassures us that God can renew us when we seek him in truth.

Joel vividly describes the locust swarm, with great locusts and young locusts and other locusts (Joel 1). They have left a bleak landscape with nothing to eat (1:4). Joel uses this event to remind everyone of our dependence on God; and the locust swarm is also an image of the way that the world's distractions and its ways can eat away our spirits and leave us empty. So the book is also a promise of renewal, and in particular, it looks ahead to Jesus' coming.

After the locust swarm, God can still make the wilderness become green (Joel 2). Thus the prophet pleads with us to rend our hearts, not our garments; that is, to let God into our hearts and let him cleanse us, rather than making dramatic gestures (2:12-14). And he indeed will show us mercy instead of calamity, and he will show us compassion rather than anger.

As God promises renewal from the locust swarm, he also promises renewal to those who have lost their way or those who have drifted from God, or those who are simply confused or discouraged (2:21-27). When we walk in his light, God can sweep away the world's 'locusts' from our hearts, and when we trust in him, our Heavenly Father can send abundant showers of grace and understanding and truth and peace.

Then we come to Joel's memorable vision of God pouring out his Spirit on everyone who seeks him, men and women, young or old, and doing wonders in the heavens and on the earth (2:28-32, see also Acts 2:16-33). The images of upheaval remind us that everything in this world is temporary, and also promise that God will make everything new in Jesus. He also promises that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord in truth will be saved (see also Romans 10:11-13).

Joel concludes with the image of the valley of decision (Joel 3). For some, this may mean God's call to decide whether we believe in Jesus and follow him; for others, it could mean simply the daily decisions we must make. We see again images of the sun and moon and stars being shaken, for the world's appearances are a mere mist, yet God and his words and the purposes of his heart will stand forever (3:14-18)

God is indeed our refuge who will always be there when we call on him; he is our stronghold of mercy and understanding; and a fountain of living water flows from God to renew us inwardly, to nourish our spirits, and to cleanse and sanctify us through and through.

Jesus has brought us peace with God, and God pours out his love and his Spirit into our hearts (Romans 5:1-8). Jesus gives us hope in eternal things, and our hope in him does not put us to shame, for whatever this world thinks and whatever happens in this world, God has justified us with his unfailing love and has given us his Spirit to dwell within us. At just the right time, Jesus died for us, and God demonstrates his love for us in his cross.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does the locust swarm teach us about our need for God? What do we learn from Joel about God and his nature? What do the images of disruption in the skies symbolize? How are God's promises in Joel fulfilled to us through Jesus?

- *Mark Garner, April 2017*

**FROM THE BEGINNING:
A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**Notes For Week Nineteen: A Never-Failing Stream (The Book Of Amos);
Mount Zion & Mount Esau (The Book Of Obadiah)**

These two prophetic books are full of somber teachings, yet they also help us understand who God is and what matters to him. Amos laments over human ways, yet he also reassures us that God is a never-failing stream of righteousness and justice and mercy. In Obadiah, the long-standing rivalry between Jacob and Esau is used as a metaphor in our relationship with God.

A Never-Failing Stream (Overview Of Amos)

Amos prophesied in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, in a time of outward prosperity and a time when the Israelites prided themselves on their outward worship of God. Through Amos, God explains that these cannot replace knowing him. Human emotions and human plans change from one moment to the next, yet God is the same God, and the purposes of his heart will not change.

As the prophet laments the spiritual landscape, regarding each nation he uses the refrain that, 'for three sins, even for four' God is distressed; that is, as soon as he enumerates their sins, he sees yet another (Amos 1-3). The world of Amos's time is an all-too familiar scene: the violence of Aram (Syria), the oppression of the Philistines, the greed of Tyre, Edom's envy and anger the brutish cruelty of Ammon and Moab, Judah's idolatry and faithlessness.

Yet God concludes the list by singling out (northern) Israel, where Amos lives. Though his words are stern and warn of discipline, he is giving them yet another chance (3:1-8) to soften their calloused hearts and to worship him in truth instead of relying on outward appearances. Amos lived during the reign of Jeroboam II*, who from a worldly viewpoint was successful, for he enlarged the nation and reigned in a time of material prosperity, yet a time of spiritual poverty.

* He reigned during the first half of the 8th century BC, and he died sometime between 755 and 745 BC. Soon afterwards, Assyria would destroy his kingdom (in 722 BC).

For the Israelites have no real relationship with God, so the prophet calls them to "seek the Lord, and live" (Amos 4-6). They worshiped God with apparent outward fervor, yet instead of drawing them closer, it hardened their hearts and gave them a sense of false security (4:4-5). So when God tells them to "prepare to meet your God" (4:12-13), he is calling them to contemplate who he really is, and what really matters to him.

God tells them not to seek him in Bethel or Gilgal or in any other special place, instead to seek God for his own sake, for he is not far whenever we turn to him (5:4-8, see also Acts 17:27). God made the stars in the sky and gives us life and breath, so he cannot be put into a convenient box. He is a holy God whose ways and thoughts are far higher than ours, so we cannot come to know him with pat answers or human theologies.

God reproaches the Judeans for their assemblies, and he tells them that instead of trying to prove that they are righteous, simply to let God's righteousness flow (5:20-24). It is easy to rely on

human energy and plans and appearances, yet this is not what God asks for. Instead, he asks us to worship him in truth and in the Spirit, so his own righteousness and his mercy and his truth will flow like a never-failing stream.

God has warned Israel and Judah and the other nations that they will be shaken, yet he also promises that he will restore anyone who seeks him in truth (Amos 7-9). As we see him conversing with the prophet (7:1-9), God twice relents from sending disasters upon Israel, yet at last he says that he has set a plumb line, that is, that their foundation is faulty and he now cannot spare them from discipline.

Yet when God shakes Israel and the nations, he is merely shaking off the dust, the chaff; so he uses the image of a sieve that prevents the pebbles from reaching the ground (9:9, compare with John 15:1-4). God does not punish for punishment's sake, he acts to refine us, to purify us, and to remind us of our need for his mercy and his understanding.

So Amos concludes with the comforting image of God rebuilding the ruins (9:11-15). In our relationship with God, he must often restore our fallen shelter and repair our broken walls; and only God can bring us spiritual fruit instead of famine. God always wants to give us what our spirits really need, and when we seek him in truth, he will give us life.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What do we learn about God's nature in Amos? What does it tell us about what matters to God? What does Amos mean by 'seeking God'? Does it help us to understand what God means by 'worshiping him in truth and in the Spirit'?

Mount Zion & Mount Esau (Overview Of Obadiah)

Obadiah's prophecies are addressed to the nation of Edom, Esau's descendants who lived in the mountains south of the Dead Sea. Yet the prophet uses the long-standing rivalry between Israel and Edom as a metaphor for the choices we must make as we seek and understand God. Like Amos, the book is full of stern images, yet it also promises that God will bring deliverance near.

Obadiah opens with a vivid image of Edom's prideful hearts (Obadiah 1:1-4). They are so certain of their strongholds and their cleverness, that they openly ask whether anyone can bring them down to the ground (1:3-4). They are merely a symbol of human self-confidence, an attitude that impresses the world, yet an attitude that pushes God away from us. Hardened hearts can also begin a vicious cycle, as Obadiah will explain.

Edom's pride has also led them to trust in false friends, and to indulge their disdain for the Israelites (Obadiah 1:5-14). Several times in history, Obadiah had turned on Judah when they were already in trouble, most notably in 586 BC when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians*. We see human nature at its worst in Obadiah's description (1:7-12). Their envy turned to violence, their desire for rivalry turned to treachery, their competitiveness became slaughter.

* The date of the book is uncertain, though Obadiah's description of Edom's behavior fits especially closely with the events of 586 BC, so this is the most likely era.

Yet in God's desire for us to seek him, he promises that there will be deliverance for those who turn to him (Obadiah 1:15-21). The day of the Lord is near, when everyone from the nations may seek him, so he may refine us and will give us the inheritance of being with God (1:15-17). Not only will the deliverer come to Mount Zion, Jesus also gives those in Esau's mountains the chance to be part of his spiritual kingdom too (1:21).

For we have come to Mount Zion, where God calls us to draw near and receive the grace we need, so he may give our souls true life (Hebrews 12:14-29). He cautions us about Esau's godlessness, his casual way of handling his relationship with God; so he reminds us to walk in reverence and to walk by faith rather than by appearances.

God does not bring us to a fearful mountain, rather we have come to the city of the living God, where many thousands of angels joyfully praise him. God has given us a kingdom that cannot be shaken, so he reminds us to fix our eyes on Jesus and set our hearts on things above.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What do we learn from Obadiah about God's nature? What can we learn about our relationship with God?

- *Mark Garner, April 2017*

**FROM THE BEGINNING:
A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**Notes For Week Twenty: A Gracious & Compassionate God (The Book Of Jonah);
Who Is A God Like You? (The Book Of Micah)**

The story of Jonah and his trip to Nineveh is well-known, yet it also shows us some deeper aspects of our relationship with God. Micah prophesied during the era of Isaiah, and he discusses several similar themes. Micah's writings are usually concise and often pointed; and he continually shows us the contrast between human nature and God's holiness.

A Gracious & Compassionate God (Overview Of Jonah)

The book of Jonah holds some basic lessons about following God, yet it also holds some deeper truths about God's nature and the ways he guides us. On the surface, it is easy to see God's strength, yet if we look more closely, the book teaches us about God's understanding, his eagerness to show us mercy, and his patience with each of us as he teaches us about himself.

After Jonah* rejects God's call to go to Nineveh, the first part of the book tells us about the sailors who unexpectedly find themselves in the boat with Jonah (Jonah 1). When a strong storm comes, Jonah realizes at once what God is doing, yet he postpones the inevitable as long as possible, while the frightened soldiers try to figure out what to do (1:4-5).

* Like Amos, Jonah lived in the reign of Jeroboam II. Jonah appears briefly in the account of Jeroboam II's reign in 2 Kings 14:23-25.

Eventually, the sailors find out about Jonah, and Jonah finally accepts responsibility for the storm, even advising them to throw him overboard. The sailors do their best to keep the ship afloat without resorting to this drastic step, yet things get even worse. As they throw Jonah overboard, they plead with God to have mercy on them (1:14-16).

When the sea suddenly calms, the sailors are even more overawed, and they praise and worship the living God. Despite their ordeal, God has turned it into a blessing, for now each of them has the chance to come to know the Lord, the living God.

As Jonah is swallowed by a large fish, the next part of the book is his prayer from inside the fish (Jonah 2). God hears his cry (2:1-2), as he will do for us too, wherever we may be and whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, and no how badly we may have strayed or sinned, when we realize our need for God. Jonah's prayer concludes with his realization of the need to let go of any idols that may hinder us from knowing God and his mercy and his love for us (2:8-9).

This time, Jonah does go to Nineveh, and he sees God give mercy to those who believe (Jonah 3). Nineveh and the Assyrians had already made a reputation for their cruelty and violence. Yet their king humbles himself, and calls the residents of Nineveh to call on God and ask him for forgiveness (3:5-10). His prayer shows how God words have affected this calloused ruler, when he says, "Who knows" and expresses his hope that God may show them compassion.

Despite all the awful things the Ninevites had done, when they turn away from their violence and idolatry, God does not destroy the city. God desires mercy, and Jonah himself still doesn't

understand this, as we see in the next chapter. The sailors and the Ninevites have been given the chance to seek God and know him, and God will give that same chance to Jonah.

The book closes with a conversation between Jonah and God (Jonah 4). Despite his outward success, Jonah's heart is full of anger and bitterness (4:1-3). He even rehashes his reasons for not going to Nineveh in the first place, and speaks coldly with God. Jonah can see God's desire to be gracious and compassionate, yet his mind is clouded and his heart is hardened. Even so, God will teach him patiently.

So God sends a plant to give Jonah shade from the heat, yet he soon takes it away, which leaves Jonah even angrier. God hardly did this to punish Jonah, for he was trying to help Jonah understand God's heart (4:10-11). In these closing verses, we see God's care for every creature, and his desire to give each of us chance after chance to let him give us the grace we need.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What do we learn about God from the ways that he teaches the sailors, the Ninevites, and Jonah? What can we learn from each of these about our own relationship with God?

Who Is A God Like You? (Overview Of Micah)

Micah contains vivid images of human faithlessness, side-by-side with images of God's majesty and his understanding. Along the way, we also see a contrast between human plans and God's thoughts, the ways that human minds look at appearances while God looks at the heart. The book is a call for us to contemplate what Micah says to God, Who is a God like you*.

* The name Micah is a variant of Micaiah or Michael. Each of these names means, "who is like God?"

Micah often compares human plans with God's ways (Micah 1-3). The book opens with the image of God coming from his dwelling and walking on the earth, with the mountains melting like wax before him (1:3-4). Indeed, as God sometimes 'visits' us, the world's appearances melt away as we contemplate who our God really is, and we can only bow down and worship him reverently. Likewise, Micah calls his listeners to turn from their idols.

Micah paints a vivid picture of human nature, plotting and reveling in human power (2:1). Yet even as the prophet recounts the many ills that come from human striving and restlessness, he also shows us God's heart (2:12-13). As God watches his sheep chasing meaningless things, he still wants to gather us like a shepherd. We also see a prophetic depiction of Jesus, the One who opened the way to God, our King who walked among us.

Micah now echoes Isaiah's image of the mountain of the Lord, and God's call to us to go up to God's temple; that is, to seek God (Micah 4-5), so that we may come to know God and that we may learn to walk in his paths (4:1-2). Again we see images of Jesus' ministry, for he has made it possible for anyone from any nation to come directly to him to know God personally. Even in Micah's time, the prophet was also reassuring his listeners of God's desire to teach them his paths.

We see more images of Jesus in Micah 5, with the promise of our ruler coming from Bethlehem, and also the picture of him standing and shepherding his flock (5:2-4). He brings us the peace and security of knowing that he has accepted us, and he has made the majesty of God known throughout the earth by showing us God's unfailing love on the cross.

Micah now closes with a look at human sin, with all its deceit and boasting and loudness, and then a look at God's forgiveness, and the ways he shows us grace each moment (Micah 6-7). He has taken each of us on a journey to be remembered (6:3-5), and he does not lay unbearable burdens; rather it is God who sustains us and shows us mercy and understanding each step.

As Micah explains what God asks of us, there are similarities to what we've seen in Hosea and elsewhere (6:8). God simply asks us to acknowledge that he alone is our God, walk in humility and reverence, and to love the mercy he pours out on those who walk in the light of Jesus.

We see one more glimpse of God's longing for each of us to be close with him (7:1), and as the prophet must forewarn his listeners of the discipline and refining that God will bring, he reminds us that our hope has always been in God himself (7:7). Moreover, he reassures us of God's intentions (7:14-15, 7:18-20). Truly as Micah says, who is a God like the Lord, our living God, who hurls all our sins into the depths of the sea, because of his mercy and his desire to be with us.

The song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, tells us about the tender mercy of our God (Luke 1:68-79). He has now come to his people, for Jesus has redeemed those who believe in him and follow him. He is the rising sun who comes from heaven to give us hope and reassurance and the grace that will always sustain us, and that he may guide us into the path of peace, to teach us to walk in step with the Spirit.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does Micah tell us about the ministry of Jesus? How might these prophecies have helped his original listeners? What do we learn about God's nature in Micah? What do we learn about our relationship with God?

- *Mark Garner, April 2017*

**FROM THE BEGINNING:
A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**Notes For Week Twenty-One: The Hills Melt Away Before Him (The Book Of Nahum);
The Lord Is In His Holy Temple (The Book Of Habakkuk)**

The book of Nahum shows us God's holiness and his compassion. Even as God forewarns the Assyrians, he also promises that he will be a refuge for those who trust in him. Then, the book of Habakkuk is a conversation between God and the prophet, which shows us God's understanding and his patience as he teaches Habakkuk some difficult truths.

The Hills Melt Away Before Him (Overview Of Nahum)

The book of Nahum is a prophecy against Assyria, yet it is also a message for our own times. Today's 'Assyrians' rely on force and loudness to get their way, and they seek earthly things. This world is full of bad news, yet Jesus has come to bring good news to those who believe in him. When God comes near, "the hills melt away" so we can see him more clearly.

The images of the earth trembling before God was a warning to the Assyrians, and it is also a reminder to us of God's holiness (Nahum 1:1-14). The Lord is like a holy fire, he cannot have fellowship with sin, yet he is also a refuge for those who walk with him (1:5-8). This apparent paradox is a look at God's heart whenever he watches those he cares for going astray. He desires to purify and refine us, so that he can give us relief from the world's ways and its distractions.

God broke Assyria's yoke*, and only he can break the Assyrians' yoke on us (1:12-13). They may seem fearsome, and they have many allies, and indeed they can harm us in this world. Yet when we turn to Jesus in our troubles, he can take the 'shackles' off of our spirits, to free us from chasing the world's possessions and its distinctions and its ambitions.

* Nineveh, Assyria's capital, fell to the Babylonians in 612 BC, and the Assyrian Empire collapsed soon afterwards.

And there is one who brings good news (Nahum 1:15-2:13), our Prince Of Peace who brings a new covenant and proclaims the time of God's favor (1:15). Jesus can take the hardness and the Assyrians from our hearts, and the Lord will renew us inwardly and will restore the ruins in our hearts that the world's ways have caused (2:2).

Just as Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire are now mere ruins (Nahum 3), God also exposes the emptiness and futility of the world's ways and its thinking. As he endured Assyria's violence for many years before their futility was exposed, he will also do this in his own time and in his own way. Indeed, when we let him open our eyes, we can see that he has already made a spectacle of Nineveh's worldly ways (3:5-7).

Jesus has triumphed over every earthly force and every human philosophy and all of the world's plans by his cross (Colossians 2:13-15). Only he holds the truth, only he is the Way, and he alone gives us true life and eternal life and lasting meaning.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: How can we harmonize God's 'wrath' with his compassion? What do the images in Nahum 1 tell us about God? What does the book of Nahum teach us about our relationship with God?

The Lord Is In His Holy Temple (Overview Of Habakkuk)

Though it was written many centuries ago, the book of Habakkuk could almost have been written today. It tells us of the struggles of a faithful believer who lives in a time of materialism and violence, and it records his conversation with God. Even more troubled times lie ahead, so God counsels the prophet to live by faith. Habakkuk concludes with a memorable prayer.

Habakkuk looks at the sins and evil around him, and as many believers call out from time to time, he asks, How long, Lord? (Habakkuk 1). Even in times that are not quite so violent, there is always plenty of conflict and injustice (1:2-3). Any thoughtful believer can become troubled just by looking around, hoping that something would happen to make things better.

It is in this context, then, that God tells the prophet to "be utterly amazed" (1:5-6). God did intend to cleanse Judah, yet it would come by the Babylonian invasion. God understands how far the Judeans have wandered from him, and he also understands that this will be especially hard for caring believers like Habakkuk. So he is prepared to explain things fully, however long it may take to console the prophet's spirit.

And indeed, the prophet asks, Why? (1:13). How can God allow the callous and the loud have their way, how can he let people 'get away with' so many sins, and above all, how can God let Babylon, which was even worse than Judah, discipline his own people. These are questions that cannot be handled with pat answers; rather they call for us to reflect on what matters most to God, and think about other deeper questions.

Thus, as God continues his explanation, he will call the earth to be silent before him (Habakkuk 2); that is, after God answers us, to meditate and ponder his teachings instead of resorting to speculations or quick fixes. Mindful of the troubling times ahead, and even as God tells the prophet that his words will not prove false, he gently calls him to live by faith in the difficulties that are coming (2:2-4).

Verse 4 is quoted three times in the New Testament. Romans tells us of the good news of God's righteousness that is "by faith from first to last" (Romans 1:16-18), and that does not depend on what nation we come from nor on what language we speak. Galatians also reminds us that we cannot be justified by following laws nor rules, so in his grace God himself justifies those who believe in Jesus and follow him (Galatians 3:11). (The third reference is in Hebrews 10:37-38.)

For the Lord has indeed determined that human plans and talents and self-reliance are mere fuel for the fire (2:13-14); that is, that they cannot lead us closer with God, for they are false hopes. Yet God has made the earth full of the knowledge of his glory and his understanding and his mercy; so that anyone who seeks him in truth will find him; that anyone who will be still in his presence and contemplate him and his words, he will teach us what really matters to him.

Human nature trusts in things they can see and touch, yet these idols are simply a means of disguising the worship of self; so God calls us to be silent before him in his holy temple (2:18-20). The things that this world chases have no life in them, yet God is our life and our breath and our hope.

After Habakkuk meditates on what God has taught him, even as he realizes the gloom ahead, he decides that yet he will rejoice in the Lord (Habakkuk 3). Whatever happens in this world, he knows that God will be with him. Knowing that discipline will come, he prays that God, in his wrath, as he must refine us, will remember mercy (3:2-4). God never punishes for punishment's sake, and he also knows what we can bear.

As Habakkuk contemplates what may happen, though there may not be any grapes on the vines, though the sheep pens may be empty, he can rejoice in the Lord (3:17-19). The joy of the Lord, the reassurance that he is with us and understands us, does not depend on appearances or on emotions. We can be joyful even as we weep and mourn and fear, for the joy of the Lord is a deeper and lasting sense that is hard even to express in human words.

Habakkuk's image of God making us like a deer on the heights reminds us that God is our strength, and that he upholds us each step. As we too must go through the world's storms, God will protect what matter most to him; he can protect our spirits and keep us in his grace, and he can give us hope in better things above.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does God's conversation with the prophet tell us about our own relationship with God? How may we relate to Habakkuk's struggles and questions? How can God's answers help us today? What does it mean to rejoice even when everything in this world is going poorly? What do we learn about God's nature from this book?

- *Mark Garner, May 2017*

**FROM THE BEGINNING:
A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**Notes For Week Twenty-Two: The Lord Has Prepared A Sacrifice (Zephaniah);
A House With Greater Glory (Haggai)**

At about the same time that Habakkuk wrote about the Babylonian invasion, Zephaniah proclaimed a similar message. Yet like Habakkuk, he adds a message of hope, and he also describes what God will do afterward. Then, in Haggai, the Judeans have now returned and have begun returning. God teaches them some new lessons that also speak to us today.

The Lord Has Prepared A Sacrifice (Overview Of Zephaniah)

Zephaniah begins with stark images of destruction, and concludes with images of comfort and kindness. As God laments over the Judeans' pride and their materialism, he appeals to them to seek him and walk humbly. Throughout the book, we also see God's desire to purify and restore them, and his readiness to give them what they need.

The prophet tells us a number of times that the day of the Lord is near (Zephaniah 1). We see this often in the prophetic books, and this 'day' can take a number of forms. In Zephaniah, we see from the beginning that this will be a day of discipline for 'those who turn back from the Lord' or who do not seek him (see 1:6). Yet God also has a day in mind for those who do seek him in truth.

So Zephaniah calls everyone to be silent before the Lord (1:7). Although he is God over all, it is God himself who has prepared this sacrifice. Moreover, he calls everyone to come, and he himself consecrates those he has invited. For by one sacrifice Jesus has made us new, cleansed us, and sanctified us (Hebrews 10:14-17). We could not have done any of this by our own efforts, so Jesus has made a perfect sacrifice, to do these once for all who believe in him.

Yet the prophet again reminds his hearers that this day is near and is coming quickly (1:14-15). He also emphasizes that this 'day' will be gloomy for those who do not seek God. In its original time, this foresaw the coming of the Babylonians, when neither silver nor gold could save them from the coming wrath (see 1:18). Yet it is also a caution that we too cannot be saved by money nor our earthly talents nor actions, only by the sacrifice of Jesus.

So as the day approaches, the prophet repeats God's call to seek righteousness, and seek humility (Zephaniah 2). As we saw in Jeremiah, even as the end of Judah approaches, God gives everyone chance after chance to turn back to him. For whenever someone does, no matter how long they may have wandered off, God will give us shelter (2:1-3). Even during the Babylonian assault, God would protect the spirits of those who walked by faith.

As Zephaniah looks ahead to our Messiah Jesus, he promises a land where we can find pasture (2:6-7). The imagery of transforming the turbulent land of Philistia into a peaceful place helps us understand how God can give us a deeper sense of peace even though the world around us

may be in ruins and chaos. In Jesus, he has restored the 'fortunes' of Judah and every nation, by making it possible for everyone to know their living God.

The closing chapter returns to warnings for the Judeans and especially their leaders, yet it concludes with God rescuing the lame and gathers the exiles (Zephaniah 3). He promises to bring purification and harmony, to those who seek him from every nation, when they cease their boasts and walk in humility and reverence before God (3:9-12).

The stern imagery in Zephaniah is not to terrify nor to condemn, rather it is to remind us to trust in God rather than in ourselves; for God wants to rejoice over us with singing (3:16-17, 3:19). He alone can save us, he alone is our strength, and we need him every moment.

We are lame, and we cannot take a single step closer with God; yet God carries us every step. Those who seek him in truth are exiles, outcasts from the world's thinking; yet God has given us a home, our true home with him. The world may often make us feel ashamed or unimportant, yet God is not ashamed of those who simply walk in the light of Jesus.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What do we learn about God's nature from Zephaniah? How does the book use the phrase 'the day of the Lord'? What should it suggest to us? What can we learn from Zephaniah about our relationship with God?

A House With Greater Glory (Overview Of Haggai)

Haggai writes 15 years after the initial return to Judah*. Upon their initial return, the Judeans eagerly proceeded to restore the altar and began rebuilding the temple. Yet since then they have been overcome by the opposition and by the distractions of this world, so now most of them have gone their own way. Through Haggai, God reasons with them, and he explains his path for them.

* Persian emperor Cyrus had allowed the Judeans to return in 536 BC. Soon afterwards, they had begun rebuilding the temple, but soon stopped in large part due to local opposition (see Ezra 3-4). In 521 BC, God sent Haggai and Zechariah to call them to resume the rebuilding (see also Ezra 5-6).

Haggai opens by advising the people to give careful thought to their ways (Haggai 1). Since the community had decided to neglect the temple, they turned their attention to personal interests. So the prophet explains that they are planting much, yet harvesting little (1:5-8). They drink, yet are never satisfied. Likewise, this is a reminder to us; pursuing earthly things or chasing outward results can never bring us lasting hope or enduring peace.

So as he asks them to resume the work on the temple, the Lord reassures them that, "I am with you" (1:13-15). When they listen, he 'stirs up their spirits', that is, when we walk by faith God can give us a sense of hope and a quiet joy that do not depend on human emotions. Likewise, God does not want us to rely on human energy or will power, rather to take reassurance that he is with us.

Yet even as the people continued working, the outward appearance of the temple disappointed them. So God says that once more he will shake the heavens and the earth (Haggai 2). And as

he asks, does it seem to you like nothing? (2:3-5), he speaks to us too. It is human nature to seek fleshly excitement or dramatic results, yet as God says, he is with us and his Spirit remains among us - blessings to comfort us, and to help us understand what matters most to God.

So even as God speaks of shaking the heavens and the earth, he also promises that in this place he will grant peace (2:6-9). Moreover, he has built a new house with greater glory than any physical temple, a temple for the Spirit, who lives among us. Everything in this world can be shaken, yet what cannot be shaken will remain (Hebrews 12:26-29) - God lives forever and his words are eternal truths, and the purposes of his heart will stand for all ages.

For God has given us treasures in heaven (Luke 12:27-34). Just as the wild flowers are here briefly and pass away, yet God makes them beautiful in their own time; so while we are in this perishable world, God gives us what we need and even more. And God has been pleased to give us a kingdom that will never fade. Jesus reminds us that where our treasure is, there our hearts will be, to call us to consider what we put our hope in, what matters most to us.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does the book of Haggai teach us about our relationship with God? What might it mean when it says that God will shake the heavens and the earth? What does Haggai tell us about God's nature?

- *Mark Garner, May 2017*

**FROM THE BEGINNING:
A READING SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**Notes For Week Twenty-Three: See, Our King Comes (The Book Of Zechariah);
The Messenger Of The Covenant (The Book Of Malachi)**

The two books that close out the Old Testament look ahead to the coming of Jesus. At the same time, each of them starts with problematic situations in Judah, and uses them to help the Judeans to see things from God's viewpoint. From there, Zechariah and Malachi use these things to tell them about the message of the Messiah.

See, Our King Comes (Overview Of Zechariah)

Zechariah, like Haggai, was one of the prophets that God sent to encourage the Judeans to resume work on the temple, after a fifteen-year delay. In Zechariah, the people are also pre-occupied with questions about observing fasts in connection with the fall of Jerusalem. The prophet ties all of these together into a message of God's forgiveness and understanding.

The first part of Zechariah has several visions of reassurance and encouragement (Zechariah 1-6). Many of them seem at first to be obscure, and some of them take a while to see what God is saying. Yet each of them reassured the Judeans that God would be with them. After the vision of the horses that bring reports to God (see 1:8-10), God promises that no matter what things in this world may look like, he will return, and his house will be rebuilt (1:16-17).

In Zechariah's time, the Judeans would rebuild a physical house for God, and today in Jesus he has sanctified us and made our hearts a 'house' for him so that he may dwell with us. Then, in their time they were fearful of the opposition around them (as we saw in the book of Ezra), so God promises them that they can rebuild without physical walls, for he himself will be a wall around the city, and he himself will be the glory within (2:1-5).

Today too, God protects our spirits from dangers too strong for us, even those we may not even realize; and he has given us the very great gift of his Spirit to live within us. Then, in the next vision when God gives clean clothes to the high priest (3:1-4), this again reassures the Judeans that he will cleanse them; and it also looks ahead to the complete cleansing Jesus brings us (3:8).

After a few more of these visions, Zechariah then turns to a discussion of worshiping in truth (Zechariah 7-8). They have been following a custom of observing fasts in the 4th, 5th, 7th, and 10th months in memory of various events when Jerusalem was conquered by Babylon*, yet God tells the prophet to advise them to turn away from these fasts, and instead to show mercy and compassion to one another (7:4-10, see also Isaiah 58:3-9a).

* For example, in the 4th month during the last year of Zedekiah's reign, the Babylonians broke through the city walls. The other months also referenced similar events that had taken place in those months.

The rest of Zechariah looks ahead, and it contains many prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, as Jesus our heavenly King comes to proclaim peace to those who believe in him

(Zechariah 9-14)*. He does not come on a powerful warhorse, rather he rides on a humble donkey (9:9-12), and he makes a covenant with his blood to free us from the pit of spiritual death.

* Of the prophetic books, only Isaiah is quoted more often than Zechariah in the New Testament.

Though some of the further prophecies may take some time to study, two of them use similar imagery that we often see in the New Testament. When Jesus came, a fountain was opened to cleanse us of the sins and stains that we couldn't remove (13:1-2), and to banish the idols from our hearts. And it was a unique day (14:6-9), when darkness came at noon and when living water began to flow to every corner of the world.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What do the visions in Zechariah tell us about God's nature and the ways he cares for us? Some of the visions seem at first to be complex or obscure - what might God hope we could learn from them? What do Zechariah's Messianic prophecies tell us about Jesus?

The Messenger Of The Covenant (Overview Of Malachi)

Malachi is written twenty years or so after Ezra and Nehemiah had come to Judah, taught the Judeans about God's words, and instituted a number of reforms. Yet within a generation, we see that new problems have arisen. So Malachi will use these to help us see the need we all have for God to cleanse us, and in turn this will lead to a look ahead to the Messiah Jesus.

As Malachi must address some of the people who have gone astray, he also tells us about the covenant of life and peace that God wants to make with each of us (Malachi 1-2). The book opens with God reassuring them, and us, that he has loved us and still loves us (1:2). God understands how easy it can be to become distracted or discouraged, and to drift away from him without realizing it; thus much of the book is God trying to reason with everyone.

Over time, the Judeans began to use diseased or unhealthy animals as sacrifices - a symptom that they are drifting, and a reminder to us as well when we too fall into similar patterns (1:8-9). God points out that they wouldn't do this for an important human, so he explains that he is far greater than any human ruler or celebrity, and he appeals them to give him pure offerings (1:11). Likewise, Romans reminds us to become living sacrifices to our God (see Romans 12:1-2).

Then God reminds us that his covenant of life and peace calls for reverence (2:4-5). Just as he cautions the Judeans to think about what this means, so also he calls us to stand and speak and act in awe of his name, instead of treating and worshiping God as something casual.

So as Malachi tells us about the coming of the messenger of the covenant*, he also tells us that those who revere God and who walk with him are the Lord's treasured possession (Malachi 3-4). Yet, as the prophet asks, who can stand when he appears? (3:1-4). Indeed, none of us can stand before God by our deeds nor our knowledge nor by our possessions, yet Jesus came to refine us and purify us, to make our hearts acceptable to God.

* Incidentally, the name Malachi also means 'my messenger.'

After he discusses some more of their spiritual struggles, God reassures them simply to return to him and walk with him in reverence and humility, and he will write about them in a scroll of remembrance (3:16-17). And indeed, God has done this for us, as the New Testament tells us of his book of life that contains the names of those who recognize the voice of Jesus and follow him.

The final chapter of the Old Testament cautions us not to wander off, while promising those who seek God in truth that he will be like a sun of righteousness, rising with healing and radiance and hope (4:1-2). The imagery of the contented calves also reminds us of the quiet joy of knowing that God is near, regardless of what may happen in this world. The book closes with the well-known prophecy of an 'Elijah' figure who will come.

Both then and now, human nature has its own expectations of what a Messiah should look like. So as Jesus responds to John the Baptist's messengers, Jesus tells us that we are blessed when we do not stumble on account of who he is (Matthew 11:2-6). He did not come to establish a powerful earthly kingdom, yet he opens our eyes and our ears so we can understand the far more glorious things God has done for us.

Jesus did not come to give us earthly wealth nor positions nor fame, yet he cleanses us of spiritual illnesses and gives us the eternal life of being with God. And he has proclaimed good news, the good news of truth and grace and understanding that we see in Jesus and the cross.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What does Malachi tells us about our relationship with God, and about what matters most to him? What does the book tell us about Jesus and the forgiveness and cleansing he brings? What could we learn about Jesus, using only the Old Testament?

- *Mark Garner, May 2017*