



READ SCRIPTURE

VIDEO TRANSCRIPTS

SUMMARIES FOR EVERY BOOK OF THE BIBLE

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Read Scripture Video Transcripts: Summaries for Every Book of the Bible

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Videos, Posters, and More

The Read Scripture series is 70 videos spanning from Genesis to Revelation. They're all available to watch and download for free online. Each video ends with a visual summary of a book of the Bible. These have been turned into posters and are also available to download for free. You're also able to order large prints of any poster. If you're interested in reading through the Bible with a guided reading plan, download the Read Scripture app for your smartphone. It's available for free for iOS and Android. For all these resources and more, visit thebibleproject.com.

Introduction & Acknowledgments

In 2016, our team at The Bible Project released a series of animated videos that provide an outline and summary of every book of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. It was called the Read Scripture series. All of these videos are free to watch online and free to download. Since the release of these videos, millions of people have engaged with their Bible in a new and deeper way.

In 2017, we began to partner with The Grace and Mercy Foundation to encourage people to do something simple and revolutionary: get together and listen to the Bible being read out loud. The public reading of Scripture is an ancient practice that God's people have valued since the time of Moses. It's also something the Apostle Paul directed his protege Timothy to do in the context of the local church:

"Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching."

1 TIMOTHY 4:13

We are excited that there is a renewed passion in the Church for reading the Bible together out loud. We hope this book aids you to that end. Many people have found that watching a Read Scripture video before listening to a book of the Bible helps them comprehend and retain what they've heard in a new way.

The book before you is a word-for-word transcription of the Read Scripture videos for each book of the Bible. Use this book to follow along with the videos, take notes, or to come back to reflect.

We are grateful for the many people who have been a part of this project. Thank you to Francis Chan for the enthusiasm and early support of the project. Thank you to the entire Crazy Love team headed by Kevin Kim. Thank you to Bill Hwang and the entire Grace and Mercy Foundation for your partnership in this project. Thank you to all of our supporters who have given their prayers and finances so that all of the Bible Project videos and resources can be available for free.

We hope this book helps you foster the lifetime habit of meditating on the Scriptures.

With Love,

The Bible Project Team



Genesis Ch. 1-11

Introduction

The book of Genesis. It's the first book of the Bible, and its storyline divides into two main parts. There's chapters 1-11, which tell the story of God and the whole world, and then there's chapters 12-50, which zoom in and tell the story of God and just one man, Abraham, and then his family. And these two parts are connected by a hinge story at the beginning of chapter 12. And this design, it gives us a clue to how to understand the message of the book as a whole and how it introduces the story of the whole Bible.

Chapters 1-2

So the book begins with God taking the disorder and the darkness described in the second sentence of the Bible, and God brings out of it order and beauty and goodness. And he makes a world where life can flourish.

And God makes these creatures called humans, or "adam," in Hebrew. He makes them in his image, which has to do with their role and purpose in God's world. So the humans are made to be reflections of God's character out into the world. And they're appointed as God's representatives to rule his world on his behalf, which, in context, means to harness all of its potential, to care for it, and make it a place where even more life can flourish. God blesses the humans; it's a keyword in this book. And he gives them a garden; it's like a place from which they begin starting to build this new world.

Now the key is that the humans have a choice about how they're going to go about building this world, and that's represented by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Up until now, God has provided and defined what is good and what is not good, but now God is giving the humans the dignity and the freedom of a choice. Are they going to trust God's definition of good and evil, or are they going to seize autonomy and define good and evil for themselves? And the stakes are really high. To rebel against God is to embrace death because you're turning away from the giver of life himself. This is represented by the Tree of Life.

Chapter 3

And so in chapter 3, a mysterious figure, a snake, enters into the story. The snake's given no introduction other than it's a creature that God made. And it becomes clear that it's a creature in rebellion against God, and it wants to lead the humans into rebellion and their death. The snake tells a different story about the tree and the choice. It says that seizing the knowledge of good and evil are not going to bring death, that it's actually the way to life and becoming like God themselves. Now the irony of this is tragic because we know the humans, they're already like God. They were made to reflect God's image. But instead of trusting God, the humans seize autonomy. They take the knowledge of good and evil for themselves, and in an instant, the whole story spirals out of control.

The first casualty is human relationships. The man and the woman, they suddenly realize how vulnerable they are. Now they can't even trust each other, and so they make clothes and they hide their bodies from one another. The second casualty is that intimacy between God and the humans is lost, so they go, run, and hide from God. And then when God finds them, they start this game of blame-shifting about who rebelled first.

Now right here this story stops, and there's a series of short poems where God declares to the snake, and then to the humans, the tragic consequences of their actions. God first tells the snake that despite its apparent victory, it is destined for defeat—to eat dust. God promises that one day a seed, or a descendant, will come from

the woman, who's going to deliver a lethal strike to the snake's head, which sounds like great news. But this victory is going to come with a cost because the snake, too, will deliver a lethal strike to the descendant's heel as it's being crushed. It's a very mysterious promise of this wounded victor, but in the flow of the story so far, you see this is an act of God's grace. The humans, they've just rebelled, and what does God do? He promises to rescue them. But this doesn't erase the consequences of the humans' decision, so God informs them that now every aspect of their life together—at home and out in the field—it's going to be fraught with grief and pain because of the rebellion, all leading to their death. From here, the story then spirals downward. Chapters 3-11, they trace the widening ripple effect of the rebellion and of human relationships fracturing at every level.

Chapters 4-11

So there's the story about two brothers, Cain and Abel. Cain's so jealous of his brother that he wants to murder him. And God warns him not to give in to the temptation, but he does anyway. He murders him in the field, so Cain then goes on to build a city where violence and oppression reign. And this is all epitomized in the story of Lamech. He's the first man in the Bible to have more than one wife. He's accumulating them like property, and then he goes on to sing a short song about how he's more violent and vengeful than Cain ever was.

After this we get an odd story about the "sons of God," which could refer to evil, angelic beings, or it could refer to ancient kings who claimed that they descended from the gods. And like Lamech, they acquired as many wives as they wanted, and they produced the Nephilim, these great warriors of old. Whichever view is right, the point is that humans are building kingdoms that fill God's world with violence and even more corruption.

In response, we're told that God is broken with grief; humanity is ruining his good world, and they're ruining each other. And so out of a passion to protect the goodness of his world, he washes it clean of humanity's evil with a great flood. But he protects one blameless human, Noah, and his family. And he commissions him as a new

Adam. He repeats the divine blessing and commissions him to go out into the world. And so our hopes are really high, but then Noah fails too, and also in a garden. He goes and he plants a vineyard, and he gets drunk out of his mind. And then one of his sons, Ham, does something shameful to his father in the tent. And so here we have our new Adam, naked and ashamed, just like the first. And the downward spiral begins again.

It all leads to the foundation of the city of Babylon. The people of ancient Mesopotamia, they come together around this new technology they have—the brick. And they can make cities and towers bigger and faster than anybody’s ever done before. And they want to build a new kind of tower that will reach up to the gods, and they will make a great name for themselves. It’s an image of human rebellion and arrogance. It’s the garden rebellion now writ large. And so God humbles their pride and scatters them.

Conclusion

Now this is a diverse group of stories, but you can see they’re all exploring the same basic point: God keeps giving humans the chance to do the right thing with his world, and humans keep ruining it. These stories are making a claim that we live in a good world that we have turned bad—that we’ve all chosen to define good and evil for ourselves. And so we all contribute to this world of broken relationships leading to conflict, and violence, and ultimately death, but there’s hope. God promised that one day a descendant would come—the wounded victor who will defeat evil at its source. And so despite humanity’s evil, God is determined to bless and rescue his world. And so the big question, of course, is: What is God going to do? And the next story, the hinge, offers the answer, but for now, that’s what Genesis 1-11 is all about.

Genesis Ch. 12-50

Introduction

The book of Genesis. In the first video, we saw how chapters 1-11 set up the basic storyline of the Bible. God has created all things, and he makes humans in his image to rule the world on his behalf. The humans choose sin and rebellion, and so the world spins out of control into violence and death, all leading up to the rebellion and scattering of the people in Babylon. And so the big question is: What is God going to do to rescue and redeem his world?

Chapters 12-14

Well out of that scattering at Babylon, the author traces a genealogy of just one family that leads eventually to a man named Abram, later known as Abraham. And God's promise to Abraham at the beginning of chapter 12 opens up a whole new movement in the story.

God calls Abraham to leave his home and go to the land of Canaan, which God says will become his one day. And in that land, God promises to make Abraham into a great nation, to make his name great and to bless him. Now these promises are connected back to earlier parts of the book. So Babylon had arrogantly tried to make a great name for itself, and that didn't go over very well. But God, in his generosity, is going to bestow a great name on this no-name guy, Abraham. And God's blessing of Abraham echoes all the way back to that original blessing God gave humanity in the beginning.

So the question is why is God going to bless Abraham and his family? And the last line of God's promise makes this clear. "So that all the families of the earth will find God's blessing in you."

Now this is key for understanding the whole rest of the biblical story. God's plan is to rescue and bless his rebellious world through Abraham's family, and this is why the whole rest of the Old Testament story is just going to focus on this one family, eventually called the people of Israel. This is also why Israel will later be called a kingdom of priests at Mount Sinai. God wants to use them to show all of the other nations what he's like, and ultimately this is the promise that gets picked up by the later biblical prophets and poets who say that its fulfillment will come through Israel's Messianic King, whose reign will bring justice and peace to all of the nations. Now at this point of the story, none of that's clear. You just have to keep reading and watch the promise develop.

Chapters 15-26

And so the rest of the book focuses on Abraham and his family. First Abraham himself, then his son Isaac, and then his son Jacob, and then Jacob's twelve sons. And the stories about each generation, they're united by two main themes. So first, each generation of Abraham's family is marked by repeated failure. They just keep making really bad decisions that mess up their lives and that put God's promise in jeopardy. However, God remains faithful to them. He keeps rescuing them from themselves and reaffirming his commitment to bless them and bless the nations through them despite their failings.

So the Abraham stories: God had promised Abraham a huge family, but on two different occasions he's afraid for his life because other men are attracted to his wife. And so he denies that he's even married to her, which creates, of course, all of these problems. And not only that, Abraham and his wife Sarah, they can't have children, and so Sarah arranges for Abraham to sleep with one of their servant girls, which also creates all of these problems in the family.

But each time God bails Abraham out, and in chapters 15 and 17, God even formalizes his promise to Abraham with an official commitment

called a covenant. This is a classic scene. God invites Abraham to look up at the night stars and to count them. And he says that's how numerous your family's going to be. And despite all of the odds—having no kids and no way to have any at the moment—Abraham looks up in the sky and simply trusts God's promise. And God responds by entering into a covenant with Abraham, promising that he will become a father of many nations, that God's blessing may come to the whole world. God asked Abraham to mark his family with a sign of the covenant—circumcision of all the male boys in the family. This is a symbol to remind them that the fruitfulness of their family is a gift from God. And so Abraham has lots of kids eventually, and he dies at a good old age.

Chapters 27-36

Now the Jacob stories play out these themes even more dramatically. From birth, Jacob lives up to the meaning of his name, which is "deceiver." He cheats his brother, Esau, out of his inheritance and blessing, and he does it by deceiving his old, blind father no less, and then he just takes off. He goes on to take four wives even though he really only loves one, Rachel, and this creates all of these rivalries in the family.

The only thing that humbles Jacob is being deceived by his uncle Laban, who cheats him out of years of his life. The tables have finally turned. And so it's a humbled Jacob that returns to his homeland. In a very strange story, Jacob ends up wrestling with God as he demands that God bless him. Some things never really change, do they? However, God honors his determination, and he passes Abraham's blessing on to him, and he renames Jacob as Israel, which means "wrestles with God."

Chapters 37-50

Now it's this last part of the book—the story of Jacob's sons—where all the themes come to a head. Jacob loves his second-to-youngest son, Joseph, more than any of the others, and he gives him this special jacket. And the ten older sons come to hate Joseph, and so they kidnap him and they plan to kill him, but instead they decide to just sell him into slavery in Egypt where he ends up in prison. Talk

about family failure. But God is with Joseph, and he orchestrates Joseph's release from prison. And Pharaoh ends up elevating Joseph to second in command over all of Egypt. And so Joseph saves the nation of Egypt during a famine, and he also ends up saving his brothers and his family from starving to death. And so once again, we can see the folly and the sin of Abraham's family is met with God's faithfulness, who subverts even the evil of the brothers into an occasion to save lives. And this is actually what Joseph says right near the end of the book. He says to his brothers, "You all planned this for evil, but God planned it for good, to save many lives."

Now these words are strategically placed at the end of the book because they summarize not only the story of Joseph and his brothers, but the book as a whole. From Genesis 3 onward, humans keep acting selfishly and doing evil, but this God is not going to leave his world to its own devices. He remains faithful and determined to bless people despite their failures. You can see this especially in how that mysterious promise about the descendant of the woman gets developed throughout the book. So remember Genesis 3? God promised that this wounded victor would come and crush the snake and defeat evil at its source. And the author then connects this promise directly to the line of Abraham. This is a part of how God is going to bring his blessing to the nations.

Now from Abraham, this promise gets connected to Judah, the fourth son of Jacob. And this is how: In an extremely important poem in chapter 49, an aging Jacob, he's on his deathbed, he wants to bless his twelve sons. And when he comes to Judah, Jacob predicts that Judah will become the tribe of Israel's royal leaders and that one day a king will come, who will command the obedience of all the nations and fulfill God's promise to restore the garden blessing to all of the world. And then after this, Jacob dies and later Joseph dies too, and the growing family remains in Egypt.

Conclusion

And so the book of Genesis ends with all of these future hopes and promises left hanging and undeveloped, and it forces you to turn the page to see how it's all going to turn out, but for now, that's the book of Genesis.

Exodus Ch. 1-18

Introduction

The book of Exodus. It's the second book of the Bible, and it picks up the storyline from the previous book, Genesis, which ended with Abraham's grandson Jacob leading his large family of seventy people down to Egypt.

Now Jacob's eleventh son, Joseph, had been elevated to second in command over Egypt, and he had saved his whole family in a famine. And so Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, offered the family to come live there as a safe haven. And so eventually Jacob dies there in Egypt, and Joseph and all his brothers do too.

Chapters 1-3

About four hundred years pass, and the story of the exodus begins. Now that name refers to the event that takes place in the first half of the book—Israel's exodus from Egypt. But the book has a second half that takes place at the foot of Mount Sinai. In this video, we'll just focus on the first half, where centuries have passed and the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied and they filled the land.

Now this line is a deliberate echo back to the blessing that God gave all humanity back in the Garden of Eden, and it reminds us of the big biblical story so far. Humanity forfeited God's blessing through sin and rebellion, and so God chose Abraham's family as the vehicle through which he would restore his blessing to all the world. But the new Pharaoh does not view Israel as a blessing. He actually thinks

this growing Israelite immigrant group is a threat to his power. And so just as in Genesis, humanity rebels against God's blessing, so here Pharaoh attempts to destroy the source of God's blessing, the Israelites. He brutally enslaves them in forced labor, and then he orders that all the Israelite boys be drowned in the Nile River.

Now Pharaoh, he is the worst character in the Bible so far. His kingdom epitomizes humanity's rebellion against God. Pharaoh has so redefined good and evil according to his own interests that even the murder of innocent children has become good to him. And so Egypt has become worse than Babylon from the book of Genesis. So now Israel cries out for help against this new Babylon, and God responds. God first turns Pharaoh's evil upside-down, as an Israelite mother throws her boy into the Nile River but in a basket, and so he floats safely right down into Pharaoh's own family. He's named Moses, and he grows up to eventually become the man that God will use to defeat Pharaoh's evil. In the famous story of the burning bush, God appears to Moses and commissions him to go to Pharaoh and order him to release the Israelites. And God says that he knows Pharaoh will resist, and so he will bring his judgment on Egypt in the form of plagues. Then God also says that he will harden Pharaoh's heart, and so we're introduced into the next main part of the story—the confrontation between God and Pharaoh.

Chapters 4-11

Now what does this mean that God says he'll harden Pharaoh's heart? It's super important to read this section of the story really closely and in sequence. In Moses and Pharaoh's first encounter, we're told simply that Pharaoh's heart grew hard. There's no implication that God did anything. And so in response, God sends the first set of five plagues, each one confronting Pharaoh and one of his Egyptian gods. And each time Moses offers a chance for Pharaoh to humble himself and to let the Israelites go, but after each plague, we're told that Pharaoh either hardened his heart or that his heart grew hard. He's doing this of his own will, and so eventually it's with the second set of five plagues that we begin to hear how God hardened Pharaoh's heart.

So the point of the story seems to be this: Even though God knew that Pharaoh would resist his will, God still offered him all these chances to do the right thing, but eventually Pharaoh's evil reaches a point of no return. I mean, even his own advisers think that he has lost his mind. And it's at that point that God takes over and bends Pharaoh's evil towards his own redemptive purposes. God lures Pharaoh into his own destruction as he saves his people, which is what happens next.

Chapters 12-18

With the final plague, it's the night of Passover. And God turns the tables on Pharaoh. Just as he killed the sons of the Israelites, so God will kill the first born in Egypt with a final plague. But unlike Pharaoh, God provides a means of escape through the blood of the lamb. And here the story stops and introduces us in detail to the annual Israelite ritual of Passover. On the night before Israel left Egypt, they sacrificed a young, spotless lamb and painted its blood on the door frame of their house. And when the divine plague came over Egypt, the houses covered with the blood of the lamb were passed over and the son spared. And so every year since, the Israelites have reenacted that night to remember and to celebrate God's justice and his mercy. But Pharaoh, because of his pride and rebellion, he loses his own son, and he's compelled to finally let the Israelites go free. And so the Israelite slaves make their exodus from Egypt, but no sooner did they leave that Pharaoh changes his mind, and he gathers his army and chases after the Israelites for a final showdown. As the Israelites pass through the waters of the sea safely, Pharaoh charges towards his own destruction.

Conclusion

The exodus story concludes with the first song of praise in the Bible. It's called the Song of the Sea, and the final line declares that the Lord reigns as king. And then the song retells in poetry what the story of God's Kingdom is all about. It's about how God is on a mission to confront evil in his world and to redeem those who are enslaved to evil. God is going to bring his people into the promised land, where his divine presence will live among them.

This story is what it looks like when God becomes King over his people. So after the Israelites sing their song, the story takes a sharp turn. The Israelites, they're trekking through the wilderness on their way to Mount Sinai, and they're hungry, they're thirsty, and they start criticizing Moses and God for even rescuing them. They say they long for the good old days in Egypt. I mean, it's crazy. So God graciously provides food and water for Israel in the wilderness. But these stories, they cast a dark shadow, and we begin to wonder, "Could it be that Israel's heart is just as hard as Pharaoh's?" We shall see, but for now that's the first half of the book of Exodus.

Exodus Ch. 19-40

Introduction

The book of Exodus. In the first video we explored chapters 1-18, which tell the foundational story of how God rescued the enslaved Israelites by confronting and defeating Pharaoh while offering the way of escape through the blood of the Passover lamb.

God then delivered his people by bringing them through the waters of the sea and then into the wilderness, where, surprisingly, they grumbled and complained. Now the second half of the book of Exodus opens as Moses leads Israel to the foot of Mount Sinai, where God invites the nation of Israel to enter into a covenant relationship. And here we reach another key moment in the biblical storyline because this is picking up in developing God's promise to Abraham.

Chapters 19-24

So remember from the book of Genesis, God promised that through Abraham's family, somehow he would restore his blessing to all of the nations, and here we find out more. God says that if Israel obeys the terms of the covenant, they will be so shaped by God's laws and teaching and justice that they will become a kingdom of priests, which means that they will become God's representatives and show all of the other nations what God is truly like.

Now the people of Israel eagerly accept the offer, and so God's presence appears right on the top of Mount Sinai in the form of clouds and lightning and thunder. And Moses goes up as their

representative, and God opens with the basic terms of the covenant, the famous Ten Commandments. These are like the basic terms of the agreement—how the Israelites and God are going to relate to each other. And then after this comes another collection of commands, which fill out the first ten in more detail. There are laws about Israel's worship, about social justice, how they are to live together, all shaping Israel into a nation of justice and generosity that's different from the other nations.

So Moses writes down all of these laws and he brings them down to the people, who again eagerly agreed to enter into this covenant with God. And once they do so, God takes the relationship forward another step. He tells Moses that he wants his holy and divine and good presence to come and dwell right in the midst of Israel, which develops another aspect of God's covenant promises. So remember after humanity's rebellion in the garden? It was access to God's presence that was lost, but now it's through the family of Abraham that God's presence is becoming once again accessible through this covenant relationship, first with Israel and then somehow one day to all nations.

Chapters 25-31

So what follows are seven chapters of detailed architectural blueprints about this sacred tent called the tabernacle. There's the outer courtyard with an altar, and then in the center there's a tent that has an outer room and then an inner room. And then inside the inner room, which is called the most holy space, is a golden box called the Ark of the Covenant. And there's angelic creatures over the top of it. It's the hot spot of God's presence.

Now there's lots of detail in these chapters, and it's important to know that every piece has some kind of symbolic value. All of the flowers, the angels, the gold and jewels, it all echoes back to the Garden of Eden, the place where God and humans lived together in intimacy. And so the tabernacle is like a portable Eden, so to speak. It's the place where God and Israel can live together in peace, at least in theory, because right here something goes really, really wrong. Israel breaks the covenant.

Chapters 32-34

As Moses is up on the mountain receiving the blueprint for the tabernacle, down below at the camp, the Israelites, they're losing patience. And so they asked Moses' brother Aaron to make for them a golden calf idol, so they can worship it as the God who saved them out of slavery in Egypt. Now God's presence, it's right there on top of the mountain; they can see it. But here they are below breaking the first two commands of the covenant they just agreed to—no other gods and no idols.

Now what follows is really important. God knows what's happening down below, and so he first invites Moses into his own anger and pain. And he tells Moses what he wants to do—just to wipe Israel out, but Moses intercedes by appealing to God's character. He says, first of all, destroying Israel would be going back on your covenant promises to Abraham. And then Moses appeals to God's reputation among the nations. What would they think if they see you destroying your own people? And so God accepts Moses' intercession, and he relents. And while he does bring his judgment on those who instigated the idolatry, he forgives the nation as a whole and promises to renew his covenant. And it's right here at this point in the story that God for the first time describes his own character to Moses. He says, "The Lord is merciful and gracious. He's slow to anger, abounding in covenant faithfulness. He forgives sin, but he will not leave the wicked unpunished." So we have this tension. God is full of mercy, but also he must deal with evil if he claims to be good. And above all, God is faithful to his promises even though it means he knows he's committing himself to a people who are utterly faithless.

Chapters 35-40

And so after renewing the covenant with Israel, God commissions Moses to go ahead and build the tabernacle. And once again we get five long chapters describing in detail the construction of the tabernacle. And it all comes together in the final chapter where the tabernacle is finished. God's glorious divine presence comes and hovers over the tent and our hopes are high. And so Moses, he goes right up to enter into the tent, and he can't. He actually can't go in, and that's how the book ends.

It's really surprising, but not really if you think about it. You can see now how much Israel's sin has damaged the relationship with God in more ways than we realized. So the book opened, remember, with Pharaoh's evil threatening Israel and threatening God's covenant promise. But now as the book ends, Israel has become its own worst enemy. It's their sin that is threatening the future of the covenant.

Conclusion

And so the question as the book closes is: How is God going to reconcile this conflict between his holiness and his goodness in his presence with the sinful corruption of his own covenant people? The solution to that problem is what the next book is about, but for now, that's the book of Exodus.

Leviticus

Introduction

The book of Leviticus. It's the third book of the Bible, and it's set right after the exodus of the Israelites from their slavery, when God brought them to the foot of Mount Sinai and invited Israel into a covenant relationship. Now they had quickly rebelled and broke that covenant, and God had wanted for his glorious presence to come and live right in the midst of Israel in the form of this tabernacle, but Israel's sin has damaged the relationship. So at the end of the previous book, Exodus, Moses, as Israel's representative, could not even enter God's presence in the tent. The book of Leviticus opens by reminding us of this fundamental problem. It says, "The Lord called to Moses from the tent." So the question is: How can Israel, in their sin and selfishness, be reconciled to this holy God? That's what this book is all about—how God is graciously providing a way for sinful, corrupt people to live in his holy presence.

Now let's pause for a second and explore this really important idea that God is holy. It's fundamental to understanding this book. The word "holy" means simply to be set apart or unique. And in the Bible, God is set apart from all other things because of his unique role as the creator of all, as the author of life itself. And so if God is holy, then the space around God is also holy. It's full of his goodness, and his life, and purity and justice. So if Israel, who is unjust and sinful, wants to live in God's holy presence, they too need to become holy. Their sin has to be dealt with, thus, the book of Leviticus.

Now the book has a really amazing symmetrical design. It explores the three main ways that God helps Israel to live in his presence. The outer sections are descriptions of the rituals Israel was to practice in God's holy presence. The next intersections focus on the role of Israel's priests as mediators between God and Israel. And inside of that are two matching sections that focus on Israel's purity. And then right here, at the center of the book, there is a key ritual, the Day of Atonement, that brings the whole book together. The book concludes with a short section, where Moses calls on Israel to be faithful to this covenant.

Chapters 1-11

Let's dive into the book. The first section explores the five main types of ritual sacrifices that Israel was to perform. Two of these were ways that an Israelite could say thank you to God by offering back to God the symbolic tokens of what God has first given them. Three other sacrifices were different ways of saying sorry to God. So here, an Israelite would offer up the lifeblood of an animal while confessing that their sin has created more evil and death in God's good world. But instead of destroying this person, God, of course, wants to forgive them. And so this animal symbolically dies in their place and atones, which means it covers for their sin. And so through these rituals, the Israelites were constantly being reminded of God's grace, but also of his justice and of the seriousness of their evil and its consequences.

The second set of rituals lays out the seven annual feasts of Israel. And each of these retold a different part of the story about how God redeemed them from slavery in Egypt and brought them through the wilderness on their way to the promised land. And by celebrating these feasts regularly, Israel would remember who they were and who God was to them.

Now the sections about Israel's priests: You have Aaron and his sons first ordained to enter into God's presence on behalf of Israel, and then in this matching section, we find the qualifications for being a priest. The priests were called to the highest level of moral integrity and ritual holiness because they represented the people before God,

but then also represented God to the people. Now we find out why the priests' holiness matters so much back here in this first section. Right after the family of Aaron was ordained, two of his sons waltz right into God's presence and flagrantly violate the rules, and so they are consumed by God's holiness on the spot. It's a haunting reminder of the paradox of living in God's holy presence because it's pure goodness, but it becomes dangerous to those who rebel and insult God's holiness. And so it is important that Israel's priests become holy, and also that all of the people of Israel become holy, which is what the next intersections are all about.

Chapters 11-23

Chapters 11-15 are about the ritual purity required of all the Israelites, and chapters 18-20 are about the moral purity of the people. Here's what is underneath all of this purity and impurity language. Because God is holy and he's set apart, the Israelites need to be in a state of holiness themselves when they enter into his presence. This was called being clean or pure. God's presence was off limits to anybody who was not in a holy state, and this was called being unclean or impure. Now an Israelite could become impure in just a few ways: by contact with reproductive body fluids, by having a skin disease, by touching mold or fungus, or by touching a dead body. Now for the Israelites, all of these were associated with mortality, with the loss of life, which gets us to the core symbol of all these ideas. You become impure when you are contaminated by touching death, so to speak. And death is the opposite of God's holiness because God's essence is life. Now this is really key. Simply being impure was not sinful or wrong; touching these kinds of things was a normal part of everyday life, and impurity was a temporary state. It just lasted a week or two, and then it's over. What was wrong or sinful was to waltz into God's presence, carrying these symbols of death and impurity on my body. Don't do that.

Now the last way of becoming impure was by eating certain animals, and the kosher food laws are found right here in this section. Now there have been lots of theories about why certain animals were considered impure and off limits—to promote hygiene or to avoid cultural taboos—the text just isn't explicit. But the basic point of all

of these chapters is really clear. Altogether these work as an elaborate set of cultural symbols that reminds Israel that God's holiness was to affect all areas of their lives. The corresponding section is about Israel's moral purity. The Israelites were called to live differently than the Canaanites. They were to care for the poor instead of overlooking them. They were to have a high level of sexual integrity, and they were to promote justice throughout their entire land.

Chapters 23-27

Now here at the center of the book, we find a long description of one of Israel's annual feasts, the Day of Atonement. Odds are that not every Israelite's sin and rebellion would be covered through the individual sacrifices, and so once a year, the high priest would take two goats. One of these would become a purification offering and atone for the sins of the people, and the other was called the scapegoat. The priest would confess the sins of Israel and symbolically place them on this goat, and then it would be cast out into the wilderness. Again, this is a very powerful image of God's desire to remove sin and its consequences from his people, so that God can live with them in peace.

The book concludes with Moses calling Israel to be faithful to all of the terms of the covenant. And he describes the blessings of peace and abundance that will result if Israel obeys all of these laws. He also warns them that if they're unfaithful and dishonor God's holiness, it will result in disaster and ultimately exile from the land promised to Abraham.

Conclusion

Now if you want to see how Leviticus fits into the big storyline, it's helpful to look at the first sentence of the next book of the Bible, Numbers. It begins, "The Lord spoke to Moses in the tent," so we can see that Moses is now able to enter God's presence on behalf of Israel. The book of Leviticus—it worked! So despite Israel's failure, God has provided a way for their sin to be covered, so that God can live with sinful people in peace, and that's what the book of Leviticus is all about.

Numbers

Introduction

The book of Numbers. This fourth book of the Bible carries forward the story of Israel after their exodus from slavery in Egypt. God had brought them to Mount Sinai, and he entered into a covenant with them there. And despite Israel's rebellion, God had graciously provided a way for Israel to live near his holy presence in the tabernacle. So the book of Numbers begins as Israel wraps up their one-year stay at Mount Sinai, and they head out into the wilderness on their way to the land that God promised to Abraham.

Chapters 1-10

Now the book's storyline is designed according to the stages of their journey. So the first section begins at Mount Sinai, but then they set out and travel to the wilderness of Paran. And then from there, they travel to the plains of Moab, which is right across from the promised land.

Now the first part opens with a census where the people are numbered. That's where the book gets its name. And then there are laws about how the tribes of Israel were to be arranged in their camp. So the tabernacle was to be at the center, and then around that, the priests and the Levites, and then around them, the twelve tribes neatly arranged with Judah at their head. Now this was all an elaborate symbol about how God's holy presence was at the center of their existence as a people. This is all followed by a whole series of

laws that develop the purity laws from the book of Leviticus. If God's presence was going to be in their midst, every effort should be made to make the camp pure—a place that welcomes God's holiness. In chapter 10, the cloud of God's presence lifts from the tabernacle and guides Israel away from Sinai out into the wilderness, and immediately things go terribly wrong.

Chapters 11-20

So in chapter 11, the people start complaining about their hunger and thirst and how they want to go back to Egypt. And then in chapter 12, Moses' own brother and sister began opposing and bad-mouthing him in front of all of the people. This trip is not off to a good start.

The next section begins as the Israelites arrived in the desert of Paran—about halfway to the promised land. And God tells Moses to send out the twelve spies, one for each tribe, so they can scout out the promised land. So when the spies all return, ten of them say that there is no chance Israel can survive there because the Canaanites will destroy them. But there are two spies, Caleb and Joshua, who say that God can save them, but the ten whip up the people into a fearful rage, and they start planning a mutiny! They're going to appoint a new leader and head back to Egypt. So God is understandably angry, and Moses intercedes on the people's behalf. He calls God to be faithful to his promises to Abraham, and so God does, but not at the expense of his justice. He gives these Israelites what they want—to not enter the land. And God sentences this generation to wander in the wilderness for forty years until they die. Only their children will get to enter the promised land.

Now you'd think this severe consequence would wake them up, but it gets even worse. So in the next story there's a whole group of Levites that began a rebellion, and they challenged Moses and Aaron's leadership, saying that they have gone way too far. So God deals severely with these Levites, and he renews his commitment to Moses and Aaron as Israel's leaders. Now as they leave the region of Paran and hit the road, it goes downhill yet again. The Israelites start complaining again about their thirst, and they ask why Moses even brought them out of Egypt in the first place. So God tells Moses to

speak to a rock to bring out water for all of the people, but Moses doesn't really do this. He oversteps his bounds. He hits the rock twice and then says, "You rebels! Do we have to bring water out of this rock!?" So Moses dishonors God by putting himself in God's place as the one who brings out the water. And so Moses brings down on himself the same fate as the wilderness generation. He too will die in the desert and never get to enter the promised land.

Chapters 21-36

After this, the Israelites rebel yet again, and God brings a very strange judgment on them—venomous snakes to come and bite the people. And so Moses again intercedes on behalf of the people, and God tells Moses to do this: to make a bronze snake and to lift it up on a pole, so that whoever looks at this snake would be healed of the poisonous snake bite. It's a very strange symbol, but it speaks to the challenge that God has by being faithful to his covenant. He's right to bring justice on the Israelite evil and sin, but even God's justice gets transformed into a source of life for those who will look to God for healing.

From here, the people head into the plains of Moab. And the first main part of this section focuses on the strange figure of Balaam. So the king of Moab is freaked out at this huge group of people traveling through his territory, so he hires a pagan sorcerer, Balaam, to pronounce curses on Israel. And three different times Balaam finds that he cannot curse them. He can utter only blessing upon Israel. Remember God's promise to Abraham from Genesis 12. So not only can Balaam not curse Israel, but God actually gives him a vision about a future Israelite king who will one day bring God's justice to all of the nations. This vision recalls Jacob's promise to Judah in Genesis chapter 49.

Now it's worth stopping to reflect on the flow of the book so far. The rebellion stories in the wilderness, they just heap up on one another getting worse and worse. And while God does bring partial acts of judgment on Israel, he's also kept showing mercy, providing food and water along the way. And so the Balaam story, it shows God's grace in bright colors because here is Israel: they're down on the

camp, grumbling and rebelling, but up in the hills, unbeknownst to them, God is protecting and even blessing them. And it's this contrast between Israel's rebellion and God's faithfulness in the wilderness, that's what made these stories so important for later generations of Israel. So the wilderness stories are retold time and again by later biblical prophets and poets and even by the apostles in the New Testament. And these stories always serve as a warning, that while God will remain faithful to his covenant promises, he will also allow his people to walk away in rebellion and face the consequences.

Conclusion

After this, the rest of the book focuses on the children of the wilderness generation, and they begin preparing to inherit the promised land. They take another census of the new generation, then they go on and win a number of battles with the people groups around them, and then a few tribes even begin to settle in the promised land. So the book ends with the new generation poised to enter into the land, and Moses is about to deliver his final words of wisdom and warning, but for now, that's what the book of Numbers is all about.

Deuteronomy

Introduction

The book of Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Bible and the final book of the Torah. After the exodus from Egypt, Israel was at Mount Sinai for one year entering into a covenant with their God. And then they had the disastrous road trip through the wilderness, and the exodus generation disqualified themselves from entering into the land promised to Abraham. And so Deuteronomy begins with Moses standing in front of this new generation explaining the Torah, and it's from here that the design and purpose of the book unfolds.

Deuteronomy is a series of speeches from Moses where he's calling the next generation of Israel to be faithful to the covenant with their God. At the center of the book is a collection of laws, which are the terms of the covenant between God and Israel. Some of the laws are new, but many are repeated from the laws given earlier at Mount Sinai. And that's actually where this book gets its name, from the Greek word "deuteronomion," which means "a second law." Now surrounding these laws are two outer sections of Moses' speech. Each of these is broken up into two parts themselves. Let's just dive in and we'll see how this whole thing works.

Chapters 1-6

So Moses first of all summarizes the story so far, and he highlights how rebellious the previous generation was in contrast with God's constant grace and provision in the wilderness. And God did bring his

justice on them, yes, but he did not abandon his covenant promises. After this comes a series of very passionate sermons where Moses calls on this new generation to be more faithful than their parents were to the covenant. He reminds them of the Ten Commandments, and then the centerpiece of the section is the famous line called the Shema. Moses says, “Listen, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone, and you shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your might.” This became a very important daily prayer in Judaism, and it brings all of the themes of the book together.

So the word “listen,” or “shema” in Hebrew, it means much more than just to hear. Its meaning includes responding to what you hear, or in English we would say “obey.” And the word “love” in Hebrew also means much more than just an emotion or feeling. It’s about a decision of wholehearted devotion to God that involves your will and your emotions, your mind and your heart. Now for Israel, their obedience and devotion to God served a much larger purpose. Obedience to the laws is going to make Israel a unique people among the nations, just like God said at Mount Sinai. They’ll become a kingdom of priests, and Moses now says how. Israel has the chance by following the laws to show the whole world the wisdom and the justice of God.

The other key idea in the Shema is that Israel was called to obey and be devoted to the Lord alone, or literally in Hebrew it says, “the Lord is one.” Now in context, the point is that the Lord is the one God Israel is to worship and obey. Israel’s about to go into the land of Canaan, where people worship idol gods that represent all different aspects of creation: the sun, the weather, sex, and war. And in Moses’ view, worshipping these God degrades humans and destroys communities, but worshipping the God of Israel, who’s the creator and the redeemer, that will lead to life and blessing. And so we come to the large collection of laws at the center of the book, and they’re roughly arranged by topic, so the opening section is about Israel’s worship of their God. They were to have one central temple where one God would be worshiped, and also God was to be worshiped in Israel’s care for its poor. So for example, all Israelites were to set

aside one tenth of their annual income to be given to the temple, but another tenth was to be set aside every three years and given to the poor. And these are the kinds of laws that put Israel on the cutting edge of justice in comparison to their ancient neighbors, and it was all bound up with their worship of God.

Chapters 7-30

The next section outlines the character qualities of Israel's leaders, so the elders, the priests, the kings, these were all placed under the authority of the covenant laws, which God said that he would enforce by sending prophets to keep the leaders accountable. So in contrast to Israel's neighbors where kings were thought of as divine and a law unto themselves, Israel's leaders were subordinate to the law and the prophets. Following this is a large section of laws about Israel's civil life, so rules about marriage, and family, and business, and also about social justice, about their legal system and how it was to protect widows and orphans and immigrants. And then these are concluded by more laws about worship.

Now here's some tips for reading all of these laws. Remember, first of all, these are the terms of the Sinai covenant given specifically to ancient Israel living in a culture that's very different from yours. And so, two, it's not going to be helpful to compare these laws with modern laws from a very different culture. Rather, these were given to set Israel apart, and so we need to compare these laws with those of Israel's neighbors, like in Assyria or Babylon. And when you do that, all of a sudden laws that seemed harsh or bizarre become much more clear. You see that God is pushing Israel to a higher level of justice than was ever known before. And so finally, try to discern what core principles of wisdom or justice underlie any particular law, and you'll discover some really profound things.

So here's an extra credit assignment: Go see how Paul the Apostle does this very thing in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 9, verse 9. And he quotes a law from Deuteronomy, chapter 25, verse 4. It's really interesting. So back to Moses. After he goes through all of the laws, he issues a final challenge that Israel should listen to and love their God. He first issues a warning and the ultimatum. If Israel

listens to and obeys their God, everything's going to go great—lots of divine blessing—but if they don't listen and rebel, famine, plague, devastation, and ultimately exile from the land.

Chapters 30-34

And then Moses forces a decision. He says, "Today I set before you all life or death, blessing or curse, goodness or evil, so choose life by loving the Lord your God and listening to him." But then Moses says this, he says, "I know that after I die you're going to rebel and turn away from God and end up in exile," which is kind of a downer, but then again, he's been with these people for decades, and it becomes clear that his hopes are not very high. But all is not lost, Moses says. One day when Israel is sitting in exile, at any point, Moses says, they can turn back to their God who will, in his words, "circumcise your heart, so that you may love him with all your heart and soul and live."

Now this is a vivid metaphor that's saying something is fundamentally wrong with Israel's heart. It's stubborn and hard, and it's the same thing wrong with the heart of all of humanity. This is going all the way back to the rebellion in the garden. Humans seized autonomy from God; they wanted to define good and evil for themselves, and they've ruined God's good world as a result. But one day Moses says God is going to do something to transform the hearts of his people, so that they can truly listen to and love God from the heart and be led back to true life. And this is the promise that gets picked up by the later biblical prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel—the hope for a new heart. So Moses ends his speech with a poem of warning and then a blessing, and then he walks up onto a mountain and he dies. And so the Torah draws to a close. All of the major plot tensions of the biblical story are in place but left totally unresolved.

Conclusion

So when is the descendant of the woman going to come and defeat evil? Or how is God going to rescue the whole world and bless all nations through this family? And how can God's holiness be reconciled with people who are continually rebellious? And how is God going to transform the hearts of his people? You just have to keep reading to find out, but for now, that's what the book of Deuteronomy is all about.

Joshua

Introduction

The book of Joshua. Let's back up and remember the story so far. So God chose Abraham, and then his family became the people of Israel, who are then enslaved down in Egypt. And so through Moses, God rescued Israel out of Egypt. He made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai, and he brought them through the wilderness. So Israel then camped outside the promised land, and Moses called them to obey God's commands, so that they could show all the other nations what God is like.

The book of Joshua picks up right after Moses has died and Israel is ready to enter the land, so the story of Joshua is designed with four main movements. Joshua first leads Israel into the promised land, and then once they are there, they meet all this hostility from the Canaanites, and so they engage them in battle. Then after their victories, Joshua divides up the promised land as the inheritance for the twelve tribes, and then the book concludes with these final speeches that Joshua gives to the people. So let's dive in and we'll see how all of it flows together.

Chapters 1-4

The first section begins with Moses' death, and Joshua is appointed as Israel's new leader. And the author intentionally presents Joshua as a new Moses. So like Moses, Joshua calls the people to obey the Torah, which means the covenant commands that they were given

at Mount Sinai. And then Joshua sends spies into the land just as Moses did back in Numbers chapters 13 and 14, except it goes way better this time. In fact, some Canaanites turn and follow the God of Israel. Joshua then leads all Israel across the Jordan River and into the land. Just like the sea parted for Moses in the exodus, so here the river Jordan parts, and the priests carry the Ark of the Covenant across, leading all Israel with them.

Chapters 5-8

Now in chapter 5, the story transitions, so the people look back to their roots as God's covenant people. And so the new generation is circumcised, and they celebrate their first Passover in the land. But then they turn and prepare to go forward and Joshua has this crazy encounter with a mysterious warrior, who, it turns out, is the angelic commander of God's army. And Joshua asks, "Are you for us? Or are you for our enemies?" The warrior responds, "Neither," which shows that the real question here is whether Joshua is on God's side. It makes clear that this whole story is not about Israel versus the Canaanites, rather this is God's battle, and Israel is going to play the role of spectators or sometimes supporters in God's plan, which leads to the next section.

We find stories about all these conflicts that Israel had with different Canaanite groups, and the first part retells the story of two battles in detail, and that is followed by a series of short stories that condense years of battles into a few brief summaries. So the first two battles are against Jericho and then Ai, and they offer these contrasting portraits of God's faithfulness versus Israel's failure. At Jericho, Israel is to take a completely passive approach, so they let God's presence in the Ark lead them around the city to music for six days. And just like Rahab turned to the God of Israel, maybe the people of Jericho would do the same, but they don't. And so on the seventh day, the priests blow the trumpets and the walls come falling down leading Israel to victory. The point of the story is that God is the one who will deliver his people; Israel simply needs to trust and wait.

Now the next story of the battle at Ai makes the opposite point. So there is this Israelite named Achan, and he steals from Jericho some

of the devoted goods that were to belong to God alone, and then he lies about it. It's a pretty lame move after all that God has done for Israel. And so Israel goes into battle with the city of Ai, and they're totally defeated. And it's only after humble repentance and severely dealing with Achan's sin that Israel gains victory. And so together these two stories, they're placed right up front to make an important point. If Israel is going to inherit the land, they have to be obedient and trust in God's commands. They don't get special treatment.

Chapters 9-22

Now the second part of the section begins with the Gibeonites, a Canaanite people group. And they do just as Rahab did as they turn to follow the God of Israel, and they make peace with Israel. This is in contrast to all of these other Canaanite kings who start to form alliances and coalitions, and they want to destroy Israel. So Israel engages them in battle, and they win by a landslide. And so this whole section concludes with this summary list of all of these victories won by Moses and then by Joshua. Now let's stop for a second because odds are that these stories and the violence in them, they're going to bother you. And if you are a follower of Jesus, you're bound to wonder, like, didn't Jesus say to love your enemies? Why is God declaring war here?

So first, why the Canaanites? The main reasons are actually given earlier in the biblical story. It's that the culture of the Canaanites had become extremely morally corrupt, especially when it comes to sex. Go check out Leviticus chapter 18. And they also widely practiced child sacrifice. Go see Deuteronomy chapter 12. And so God didn't want these practices to influence Israel. The Canaanites had to go.

Which raises the second question. Did God actually command the destruction of all the Canaanites, like a genocide? So at first glance, you know, you look at the phrases used in these stories. They "totally destroyed them," they "left no survivor or anything that breathed," but when you look a second time more closely, you'll see that these phrases are clearly hyperbole and not literal. So go back to the original command about the Canaanites in Deuteronomy chapter 7. Israel is first told to drive out the Canaanites, but then to totally

destroy them, and then that's followed by commands to not intermarry with them or enter into business deals with them. So you can't marry someone that you've destroyed. I think you get the point.

The same idea applies to the stories in Joshua. Look closely. So for example, we're told in Joshua chapter 10 that Israel left no survivors in the cities of Hebron or Debir. But then later in chapter 15, we see these towns, and they're still populated by Canaanites. And so what we're seeing is that Joshua fits in with other ancient battle accounts by using nonliteral hyperbolic language as part of the narrative style. And so the word "genocide" doesn't actually fit what we see here, especially in light of the stories about the Canaanites who did turn to the God of Israel, like Rahab or the Gibeonites. God was open to those who would turn to him.

The last thing to think about is that these stories mark a unique moment in Israel's history. These battles were limited to the handful of people groups living in the land of Canaan. With all other nations, Israel was commanded by God to pursue peace; go read Deuteronomy chapter 20. And so the purpose of these battle stories was never to tell you, the reader, to go commit violence in God's name. Rather, they show God bringing his justice on human evil at a unique moment in history and how he delivered Israel from being annihilated by the Canaanites.

Now let's go back to the book's design. After years of battles, we see an aging Joshua, and he starts dividing up the land for the twelve tribes of Israel. And most of this section is like lists of boundary lines, and let's be honest, it's kind of boring. It's like reading a map that has no pictures. But for the Israelites, these lists were super important. This was the fulfillment of God's ancient promises to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the promised land. And so now it was all coming to pass right down to the detail, which leads to the final section.

Chapters 23-24

Joshua gives two speeches to the people. They're very similar to the final speeches of Moses in Deuteronomy. Joshua reminds them of God's generosity, how he brought them into the land and rescued

them from the Canaanites. And so he calls them to turn away from the Canaanite gods and be faithful to the covenant they made. If they do, it will lead to life and blessing in the land, but if they're unfaithful, Israel will call down on itself the same divine judgment that the Canaanites experienced. They'll be kicked off the land into exile, and so Joshua leaves Israel with a choice. What is Israel going to do? That's the big question that looms as the story ends, and that's the book of Joshua.

Judges

Introduction

The book of Judges. So remember, after Joshua led the tribes of Israel into the promised land, he called them to be faithful to their covenant with God by obeying the commands of the Torah. And if they do this, they will show all the other nations what God is like. So Judges begins with the death of Joshua and basically tells the story of Israel's total failure.

The book's name comes from the type of leaders Israel had in this period. Before they had any kings, the tribes were all governed by these judges. Now don't think of a courtroom; these were regional, political, military leaders more like a tribal chieftain. And you need to be warned. The book of Judges is very disturbing and violent. It tells the tragic tale of Israel's moral corruption, of its bad leadership, and basically how they become no different than the Canaanites. But this sad story is also meant to generate hope for the future, and you can see this in how the book is designed.

There's a large introduction that sets the stage for Israel's failure as they don't drive out the remaining Canaanites. Then the large main section of the book has stories about the growing corruption of Israel's judges. And the progression here shows how Israel's leaders go from pretty good, to okay, to bad, to worse. The concluding section is really disturbing and shows the corruption of the people of Israel as a whole. So let's dive in, and we can explore each part a bit more.

Chapters 1-5

The opening section begins with the tribes of Israel in their territories in the promised land. And while Joshua defeated some key Canaanite towns, there was still a lot of land to be taken and lots of Canaanites living in those areas. And so chapter 1 gives a long list of Canaanite groups and towns that Israel just failed to drive out from the land. Now remember, the whole point of driving out the Canaanites was to avoid their moral corruption and their way of worshipping the gods through child sacrifice. God had called Israel to be a holy people, and that does not happen.

Chapter 2 describes how Israel just moved in alongside the Canaanites and adopted all their cultural and religious practices. And it's right here that the story stops. For nearly a whole chapter, the narrator gives us an overview of everything that's about to happen in the body of the book. This part of Israel's history, the narrator says, was a series of cycles moving in a downward spiral. So Israel became like the Canaanites, and so they would sin against God. So God would allow them to be conquered and oppressed by the Canaanites, and eventually the Israelites would see the error of their ways and repent. So God would raise up a deliverer, a judge, from among Israel, who would defeat the enemy and bring about an era of peace, but eventually Israel would sin again and it will all start over. This cycle provides the literary design and flow for the next main section of the book. It gets repeated for each of the six main judges whose stories are told here.

Chapters 6-16

Now the stories of the first three judges, Othniel, Ehud, and Deborah—they're epic adventures. They're also extremely bloody stories. Either the judge themselves, or people who helped the judge, they defeat their enemies and deliver the people of Israel. The stories about the next three judges are longer, and they focus in on the character flaws of the judges, which get increasingly worse. So Gideon, he begins pretty well. He's a coward of a man, but he eventually comes to trust that God can save Israel through him, and so he defeats a huge army of Midianites with only three hundred men

carrying torches and clay pots. But Gideon has a nasty temper, and he murders a bunch of fellow Israelites for not helping him in his battle, and then it all goes downhill from there. He makes an idol from the gold that he won in his battles. And then after he dies, all Israel worships the idol as a god, and the cycle begins again.

The next main judge is Jephthah, who's something of a mafia thug living up in the hills, and when things get really bad for Israel, the elders come to him begging for his help. And Jephthah was a very effective leader. He won lots of battles against the Ammonites, but he was so unfamiliar with the God of Israel he treats him like a Canaanite god. He vows to sacrifice his daughter if he wins the battle. This tragic story, it shows just how far Israel has fallen. They no longer know the character of their own God, which leads to murder and to false worship.

The last judge, Samson, is by far the worst. His life began full of promise, but he has no regard for the God of Israel. He was promiscuous, violent, and arrogant. He did win brutally strategic victories over the Philistines, but only at the expense of his own integrity, and his life ends in a violent rush of mass murder.

Now a quick note here. You'll notice a repeated theme in the main section of the book that at key moments, God's Spirit will empower each of these judges to accomplish these great acts of deliverance. Now the fact that God uses these really screwed up people doesn't mean he endorses all or even any of their decisions. God is committed first and foremost to saving his people, but all he has to work with is these corrupt leaders, and so work with them he does. This whole section is designed to show just how bad things have gotten. You can't even tell the Israelites and the Canaanites apart anymore, and that's just the leaders.

Chapters 17-21

The final section shows Israel, as a whole, hitting bottom. There are two tragic stories here, and they are not for the faint of heart. They're structured by this key line that gets repeated four times at the close of the book. "In those days, Israel had no king, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes." The first story is about an

Israelite named Micah, who builds a private temple to an idol, and that gets plundered by a private army sent from the tribe of Dan. So they come and they steal everything, and then they go and burn down the peaceful city of Laish and murder all of its inhabitants. It's a horrifying story. When Israel forgets its God, might makes right.

The final story of the book is even worse. It's a shocking tale of sexual abuse and violence, which all leads to Israel's first civil war. It's very disturbing, and that's the point. These stories are meant to serve as a warning. Israel's descent into self-destruction is the result of turning away from the God who loves them and saved them out of slavery in Egypt, and now Israel needs to be delivered again from themselves. The only glimmer of hope in this story is found in this repeated line in the last part of the book. It actually forms the last sentence of the story. "Israel has no king." And so the stage is set for the following books to tell the origins of King David's family (the book of Ruth) and also the origins of kingship itself in Israel (the book of 1 Samuel).

Conclusion

But the story of Judges has value as a tragedy. It's a sobering explanation of the human condition, and ultimately it points out the need for God's grace to send a king who will rescue his people. And that's the book of Judges.

Ruth

Introduction

The book of Ruth. It's a brilliant work of theological art, and it invites us to reflect on the question of how God is involved in the day-to-day joys and hardships of our lives. There are three main characters in the book: Naomi, the widow; Ruth, the Moabite; and Boaz, the Israelite farmer. And their story is told in four chapters that are beautifully designed. Let's just dive in and see how this all unfolds.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 opens with this line, "In the days when the judges ruled." And it reminds us of the very dark and difficult days from the book of Judges. Here we meet an Israelite family in Bethlehem, struggling to survive through a famine. And so in search of food, they move on to the land of Moab, Israel's ancient enemy. And there the father of the family dies, and the sons marry two Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. And then the sons, they die too, and so they leave only Naomi and these new daughters-in-law.

And so Naomi, she has no reason to stay anymore, and so she tells her new daughters-in-law that she is moving back home. And Naomi, she knows the life of an unmarried foreign widow in Israel is going to be very hard, and so she compels the women to stay behind. Orpah agrees, but Ruth does not. She shows remarkable loyalty to Naomi, and she says, "Wherever you go, I'm going to go. Your people will become my people, and your God will become my God." And so the

two of them return to Israel together, and the chapter concludes with Naomi changing her name to Mara, which means “bitter” in Hebrew, and she laments her tragic fate.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 begins with Naomi and Ruth discussing where they’re going to find food, and it just so happens to be the beginning of the barley harvest. And so Ruth goes out to look for food, and it just so happens that she ends up picking grain in the field of the man named Boaz, who just so happens to be Naomi’s relative. We’re told that Boaz is a man of noble character, and he notices Ruth. And so after finding out more about her story, he shows remarkable generosity to her. He makes these special provisions, so that the immigrant, Ruth, can gather grain in his field. And in doing so, Boaz is actually obeying an explicit command of the Torah—to show generosity to the immigrant and the poor.

Boaz is so impressed by Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi. He prays for her that God will reward her for her boldness. So Ruth comes home that day, and Naomi finds out that she met Boaz and she is thrilled. She says, “Boaz is their family redeemer.” Now this family redeemer thing, this was a cultural practice in Israel where if a man in the family died and he left behind a wife, or children, or land, it was the family redeemer’s responsibility to marry that widow, to take up the land, and protect that family. So Naomi, she begins to hope that perhaps there might still be a future for her family.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 begins with Naomi and Ruth making a plan to get Boaz to notice their situation. So Ruth is going to stop wearing clothes of a grieving widow, and she’s going to show signs that she’s available to be married. And so Ruth goes to meet Boaz on the farm that night, and as she approaches, Boaz wakes up and he’s totally startled. And Ruth makes her intention very clear; she asks if Boaz will redeem Naomi’s family and marry her. Boaz is once again amazed by Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi and her family, and he calls Ruth “a woman of noble character.” It’s the same term used to describe the woman of Proverbs 31. So Boaz tells Ruth to wait until the next day, and he

will redeem both Ruth and Naomi legally before the town elders. And so the chapter ends with Ruth returning to Naomi, and they marvel together at all of these recent events.

Chapter 4

In chapter 4, it all comes together. It turns out at the last minute, there's a family member who is closer to Naomi than he is, and he's actually eligible before him to redeem the family. But at the last second, this family member finds out that he is going to have to marry Ruth, the Moabite, and so he declines. But Boaz, remember, he knows Ruth's true character, and so he acquires the family property of Naomi, and he marries Ruth. And so just at the beginning, how Ruth was loyal to Naomi's family, so now Boaz is loyal to Naomi's family as well.

The story concludes with a reversal of all of the tragedies from chapter 1. So the death of the husband and sons is reversed as Ruth is married again and gives birth to a new son, granting joy to Naomi. And this symmetry between the opening and the closing, it's even more remarkable. So remember the opening tragedy was followed by a great act of loyalty on the part of Ruth, and that is now matched by Boaz's act of loyalty that leads to the family's final restoration. And this symmetry, it highlights the design of the internal chapters as well. So each of the chapters begins with Naomi and Ruth making a plan for the future, and that's followed by a providential meeting between Ruth and Boaz, and each chapter concludes with Naomi and Ruth rejoicing at what's taken place. This story is beautifully designed, and that design actually connects with the really interesting feature of the story. And that's how little God is mentioned.

The characters talk about God a few times, but the narrator actually never once mentions God doing anything directly in the story, and that's its brilliance. Because God's providence is at work behind every scene of this story, weaving together the circumstances and choices of all these characters. So Naomi, her tragedy leads her to think that God is punishing her, but actually the whole story is about God's mission to restore her and her family. And he's doing so through Ruth, through her boldness and loyalty, which brings healing to

Naomi's life. But not without Boaz, who's a no-nonsense farmer, who's full of generosity and loyalty. And so God uses his integrity combined with Ruth's boldness to save Naomi and her family.

Conclusion

And so this story brilliantly explores the interplay of God's purposes and will with human decision and will. God weaves together the faithful obedience of his people to bring about his redemptive purposes in the world, and that leads to the real end of the story. The book of Ruth concludes with the genealogy, showing how Boaz and Ruth's son, Obed, was the grandfather of King David, from whom came the lineage of the Messiah. And so all of a sudden, these seemingly mundane ordinary events in this story are woven into God's grand story of redemption for the whole world. And so the book of Ruth invites us to consider how God might be at work in the very ordinary, mundane details of our lives as well, and that's what the book of Ruth is all about.

1 Samuel

Introduction

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel. They're two separate books in our modern Bibles, but that division is due simply to scroll length; it was originally written as one coherent story. We're just going to cover the book of 1 Samuel in this video.

So after Israel was rescued from slavery in Egypt, they made a covenant with God at Mount Sinai and eventually came into the promised land. And there, Israel was supposed to be faithful to God and obey the covenant commands. Before the book of Samuel, Judges showed how Israel failed at that task big time. It was a period of moral chaos, and it showed Israel's need for wise, faithful leaders. The book of Samuel provides an answer to that need.

The book of Samuel's story focuses on three main characters: the prophet Samuel, where the book gets its name, and then King Saul, and after that King David. And all three of them transitioned Israel from a group of tribes ruled by judges into a unified kingdom ruled by King David in Jerusalem. And the book of Samuel has a fascinating design that weaves the story of these three characters together in four main parts. Samuel, he's the key leader and prophet in the first section of the book, but then he also plays a key role in the next section, which is Saul's story. And it's told in two movements: Saul's rise to power and then his failures, and the second part is about his downfall and his tragic death. And then the drama of Saul's demise is matched by David's exciting rise to power, and then David's story

is told in two movements. First, he rides the wave of his success followed by his own tragic failure and the slow self-destruction of his family and then his kingdom. The book concludes with an epilogue that reflects back over the whole story. So let's dive in and see how this all unfolds.

Chapters 1-8

Part one picks up from the chaos of the book of Judges, and we are introduced to a touching story about a woman named Hannah. And she's grieved because she has never been able to have children, and, by God's grace, she finally has a son named Samuel. And in joy, she sings this amazing poem in chapter 2. And the poem is all about how God opposes the proud and exalts the humble, about how despite tragedies and human evil, God is working out his purposes in history, and also it's about how God will one day raise up an anointed king for his people. Now Hannah's poem has been placed here at the beginning of the book to introduce these key themes that we are going to see throughout the whole story, like the next one.

Samuel grows up and becomes a great prophet and leader for the people of Israel at the same time that the Philistines rise to power as Israel's arch nemesis. And in this crucial battle, the Israelites get arrogant, and instead of praying and asking God for help, they trot out the Ark of the Covenant as this kind of magic trophy that will automatically grant them victory in battle. And so because of their arrogant presumption, God allows Israel to lose the battle, and the ark is stolen.

So the Philistines, they take the ark, and they place it in the temple of their god Dagon. And then the God of Israel defeats the Philistines and the god Dagon without an army by sending plagues on the people. And then the Philistines don't want the ark anymore, obviously, and they send it back to Israel. And the point of this little story seems to be this: God is not Israel's trophy, and he opposes pride among the Philistines but also among his own people, and so Israel needs to remain humble and obedient if they want to experience God's covenant blessing, which opens up into the next large section.

The Israelites come to Samuel, and they say, "Hey, we want a king

like all the other nations have. Go find one for us.” And so Samuel, he’s kind of ticked off, and he goes to consult with God, and God says, “Yes, their motives are all wrong, but if a king is what they want, give them one.”

Chapters 9-15

And so we’re introduced to the figure of Saul. Now Saul is a tragic figure because he begins full of promise. He’s tall, he’s good looking, he’s a perfect candidate for a king, but he has deep character flaws. He’s dishonest, he lacks integrity, and he seems incapable of acknowledging his own mistakes, and so these flaws become his downfall. He wins some battles at the beginning, but his flaws run so deep he eventually disqualifies himself by blatantly disobeying God’s commands.

And so the aging Samuel confronts Saul and Israel. He had warned the people that they would only benefit from a king who’s humble and faithful to God, otherwise the kings of Israel will bring ruin. So he informs Saul that God is going to raise up a new king to replace him.

Chapters 16-31

And so Saul’s downfall begins as God, at the same time, is working behind the scenes to raise up that new king. It’s an insignificant shepherd boy named David. He’s the least likely candidate to be king, but the famous story of David and Goliath shows that God’s choice of David is not based on his family status but simply on his radical and humble trust in the God of Israel.

And so this story embodies all of the themes of Hannah’s poem. Proud Saul and Goliath are brought low, while humble David is exalted. From here, we watch Saul slowly descend into madness while David rises to power.

So David starts working for Saul as a general, and he’s winning all of the battles, and he’s also winning all of the fame. And so Saul gets jealous, and he starts chasing David around, hunting him and trying to kill him. David’s done nothing wrong, and so David simply runs and waits in the wilderness. And here we see David’s true character.

He has multiple opportunities to kill Saul, but he doesn't. He simply trusts that despite Saul's evil, God will raise up a king for his people. What's interesting too is that many of the poems of David that you find in the book of Psalms are linked to this very period of his life, and they all express that same attitude of trust. And so this section of the book ends with Saul coming to a grisly death after losing a battle with the Philistines.

Conclusion

1 Samuel tells some of the most intricate, well-told stories you find anywhere in the Bible, and the characters, Saul and David, they're portrayed very realistically. And the author's putting them forward as character studies, so that you can find yourself in them. So in Saul's story, we see a warning. It's crucial that we reflect on our own character flaws and how they harm us and other people. And with God's help, we need to humble ourselves and deal with our dark side, so that Saul's story doesn't become ours. David, on the other hand, is presented as an example of patience and trust in God's timing in our lives. And so he's running in the wilderness being chased by Saul. David had every reason to think that God had abandoned him, but that's not what he thinks. And so David's story encourages us to trust that despite human evil, God is working out his purposes to oppose the proud and to exalt the humble, and that's what 1 Samuel is all about.

2 Samuel

Introduction

The book of 2 Samuel. Check out the video on 1 Samuel where we were introduced to the book's three main characters: Samuel, Saul, and David, and then also to the book's literary design, which first introduced Samuel and then traced the rise and fall of King Saul in contrast to the rise of King David.

2 Samuel tells the story of David as Israel's king and in two movements. There's a season of success and of blessing, followed by a huge moral failure and then its sad consequences. And then the book ends with this well-crafted conclusion that reflects back on the good and the bad in David's life, generating hope for a future King to come from his line.

Chapters 1-10

So 2 Samuel picks up after Saul's death, and David surprises everyone by composing this long poem where he laments the death of the very man who tried to murder him. And so once again, the author, he's presenting David's humility and compassion; he's a man who grieves the death even of his own enemies.

After this, David experiences a season of success and God's blessing. All of the Israelite tribes, they come to David, then they ask him to unify all the tribes as their king. And so the first thing David does as king is to go to the city of Jerusalem. He conquers it, and he establishes it as Israel's capital city, which he renames as Zion. And from

there, David goes on and he wins many battles and expands Israel's territory. Now after making Jerusalem the political capital of Israel, he wants to make it their religious capital as well, and so he has the Ark of the Covenant moved into the city. And then in 2 Samuel 7, he tells God now that Israel has a permanent home, he thinks that God's presence should also get a permanent house. So he asks if he can build a temple for the God of Israel. But God says to David, "Thank you for that thought, but actually I am going to build you a house, a dynasty."

Now 2 Samuel 7, this is a key chapter for understanding the storyline of the whole Bible because God, here, makes a promise to David: that from his royal line will come a future King, who is going to build God's temple here on earth and set up an eternal Kingdom. And it's this Messianic promise to David that gets picked up and developed more in the book of Psalms and also in the books of the prophets, and it's this King that gets connected to God's promise to Abraham. The future Messianic Kingdom will be how God brings his blessing to all of the nations, and it is right here in the midst of all this divine blessing that things go horribly wrong. David makes a fatal mistake, not fatal for him, but for a man named Uriah, one of David's prized soldiers.

Chapters 11-20

So from his rooftop, David sees Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, bathing. David finds her, he sleeps with her, gets her pregnant, and then he tries to cover the whole thing up by having Uriah assassinated and then marrying her! It's just horrible. So when David's confronted by the prophet Nathan about all of this, he immediately owns up to what he's done. He's broken; he repents. He asks God to forgive him, and God does forgive him, but God doesn't erase the consequences of David's decisions. And so as a result of this horrible choice, David's family, his kingdom, it all falls apart and makes this section a tragic story, much like Saul's downfall.

So David's sons end up repeating his own mistakes, but in even more tragic ways. So Amnon sexually abuses his sister Tamar, and then their brother Absalom finds out about all of this and has Amnon

assassinated. And then Absalom goes, and he hatches a secret plan to oust his father, David, from power, and he launches this full-scale rebellion. And so for a second time, David is forced to flee from his own home and go hide in the wilderness, except this time he is not an innocent man. The rebellion ends when David's son is murdered, and it breaks David's heart. And so once again, he laments over the very man who tried to kill him. David's last days find him back on his throne, but as a broken man; he's wounded by the sad consequences of his sin.

Chapters 21-24

The book concludes with a well-crafted epilogue, with stories that are out of chronological order, but they have this really cool symmetrical literary design. So the outer pair of stories come from earlier in David's reign, and they compare the failures of Saul and then of David and how each of them hurt other people through their bad decisions. The next inner pair of stories are about David and his band of mighty men, who went about fighting the Philistines. And what's interesting is that both sections have a story of David's weakness in battle, so in contrast to the victorious David of chapters 1-9, here we see a vulnerable David who's dependent on others for help.

The center of the epilogue has two poems that act like memoirs, and David reflects back on his life, and he remembers times when God graciously rescued him from danger. And he sees these as moments where God was faithful to his covenant promise to him and to his family. Both poems conclude by looking back onto the hope of God's promise of a future King who will build that eternal Kingdom. Now these poems, and then God's promise, also connect back to Hannah's poem that opened the book. And so these key passages from the beginning, now the middle, and the end of the book bring the book's themes all together. Despite Saul and David's evil, God remained at work moving forward his redemptive purposes. And God opposed David and Saul's arrogance, but he exalted David when he humbled himself.

Conclusion

And so the future hope of this book reaches far beyond David himself. It looks to the future, to the Messianic King, who will one day bring God's Kingdom and blessing to all of the nations, and that's what the book of Samuel is all about.

1-2 Kings

Introduction

The books of 1 and 2 Kings. Although they're two separate books in our Bibles, they were originally written as one book, telling a unified story that continues on from the book of Samuel that came before it. So David has unified the tribes of Israel into a kingdom, and God promised that from his line would come a Messianic King, who would establish God's Kingdom over the nations and fulfill the promises made to Abraham. So the book of Kings tells the story of the long line of kings that came after David, and none of them lived up to that promise. In fact, they run the nation of Israel right into the ground.

The book is designed to have five main movements. The story begins and ends focused on Jerusalem, first with Solomon's reign in the construction of the temple, and then in this last section ending with Jerusalem's destruction and Israel's exile to Babylon. And the story leading up to this tragedy is what makes up the center three sections, which explain how Israel split into two rival kingdoms, how God tried to prevent the corruption of Israel by sending the prophets, and how exile became the unavoidable consequence of Israel's sins.

Chapters 1-11

The book opens with two chapters about the kingdom passing from the aging David to his son Solomon. And David's final words

to Solomon, they're very similar to those of Moses and Joshua and Samuel to the people. It's a call to remain faithful to the commands of the covenant and to give allegiance to the God of Israel alone. But David's words ring somewhat hollow here because David and Solomon then go on to conspire how they're going to consolidate this new kingdom through a whole series of political assassinations, so it's not off to a great start.

Solomon's brightest moment comes when he asks God for wisdom to lead Israel, and he even completes David's dream to make a temple for the God of Israel. Here the story actually stops and describes the design of this temple in detail. Just like the tabernacle design in the Torah, there's all these gold and jewels and depictions of angels and fruit trees; it is all symbolism echoing back to the Garden of Eden. It's the place where heaven and earth meet, where God's presence dwells with his people. But no sooner does Solomon finish the temple, that he makes some really horrible choices, and the kingdom falls apart. He starts marrying the daughters of other kings—hundreds of them—for political alliances, and then he adopts their gods and introduces the worship of those gods into Israel. Solomon then accumulates huge amounts of wealth, he built a huge army, he even institutes slave labor for all of his building projects. Now if you go back to the Torah and look at God's guidelines for Israel's kings in Deuteronomy 17, Solomon is breaking every one. So by the time that he dies, Solomon resembles Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, more than he does his father David.

Chapters 12-17

The next section of the book opens with Solomon's son Rehoboam acting just like his father. It's a very sad story of greed and lust for power. He tries to increase taxes for slave labor, and under the leadership of Jeroboam, the northern tribes reject this. They rebel and secede and form their own rival kingdom. And so now in the story, you have the southern kingdom, Judah, centered in Jerusalem, with kings from the line of David, and now this new northern kingdom called Israel, whose capital will be Samaria eventually.

Jeroboam also goes on to build two new temples to compete with

Solomon's temple in the south. He puts a golden calf in each one to represent the God of Israel. The connection to Exodus 32 and the golden calf—it's all quite explicit.

From this point on, the story goes back and forth from north to south, tracing the fate of both kingdoms. Each one had about twenty successive kings, and as the author introduces each king, he evaluates their reign by a few criteria: Did they worship the God of Israel alone, or did they promote the worship of other gods? Did they deal with idolatry among the people? And did they remain faithful to the covenant like David, or do they become corrupt and unjust?

And according to these criteria, the author finds no good kings in northern Israel, zero for twenty! And then in southern Judah, only eight out of twenty get a positive rating, which connects to another huge purpose in this book, and that's to introduce the role of the prophets—key figures in Israel's history.

So in the Bible, prophets were not fortune tellers; rather, they spoke on behalf of the God of Israel, and they played the role of covenant watchdogs, which means they called out idolatry and injustice among the kings and the people. They were constantly reminding Israel of their calling to be a light to the nations, that they should obey the commands of the Torah. And so the prophets challenged Israel to repent and follow their God. In these center sections for each king, God then raises up prophets to hold them accountable. The most prominent prophets over the northern ones are Elijah and his disciple Elisha, right here in the center of the book.

Elijah was a wild man of a prophet living out in the desert, and his arch nemesis was the northern King Ahab and his Canaanite wife Jezebel. Together these two had instituted the worship of the Canaanites' god Baal over Israel. And so in a famous story, Elijah challenged four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal to a contest to see which God was real. So they both built altars and prayed to their gods, but only the God of Israel answers with fire. After this, Ahab uses his royal power to murder an Israelite farmer and then steal his family's vineyard. And then Elijah again confronts Ahab's injustice, and he announces the downfall of his house.

Elijah eventually passes the mantle of his prophetic leadership to a young disciple named Elisha, who asks for two times the authority of Elijah. But what is fascinating here is how the author has recounted seven miraculous feats for Elijah, and then he offers stories of fourteen acts of power from Elisha. Both prophets were clearly remarkable men, and they played the same role confronting Israel's kings for idolatry and injustice, and ultimately they were unsuccessful in turning Israel back from apostasy.

Chapters 17-25

In the next section, the northern kingdom is rocked by a bloody revolution started by a king named Jehu, who destroys Ahab's family. And although Jehu was at first commissioned by God, his violence just gets out of control, and it creates the spiral of political assassinations and rebellions from which Israel never recovered. Coup follows coup after Jehu, and each king follows other gods, allows horrible injustice; it all leads up to 2 Kings chapter 17.

The big bad empire of Assyria swoops down and takes out the northern kingdom altogether, and the capital city of Samaria is conquered, and the Israelites were exiled and scattered throughout the ancient world. Now chapter 17 is key. The author stops the story and offers this prophetic reflection on what's just happened. He blames the downfall of the northern kingdom on the idolatry and covenant unfaithfulness of Israel and its kings. And so God has allowed them to face the consequences of their decisions.

The final movement of the book tells the story of the lone southern kingdom. In here, we meet some very heroic kings like Hezekiah, who trusts God when the armies of Assyria come knocking on Jerusalem's door. Or Josiah, who discovers this lost scroll of the Torah in the temple, so he starts reading it. He's convicted, and he institutes religious reforms to remove idolatry and Canaanite influences from the land, but Judah is just too far gone. The king right in between these two, Manasseh, he's the worst by far. So he not only introduces the worship of idols statues into the Jerusalem temple, he also institutes child sacrifice. And so God sends prophets to say the time is up; Israel has reached the point of no return.

The final chapters tell the story of the Babylonian Empire coming to invade Jerusalem, destroy the temple, and carry the people and the royal line of David off into exile. And so the story ends leaving us wondering, “Is God done with Israel? Is he done with the line of David?”

Conclusion

Well the final paragraph zooms about forty years forward into the exile, and it tells a very odd story. It’s about Jehoiachin, a descendant from David who would have been king if he was back in Jerusalem. And the king of Babylon releases him from prison and invites him to eat at the royal table for the rest of his life, and the book ends. So it’s not much, but it’s a story that gives a glimmer of hope that God has not abandoned the line of David. So the question now is: How is God going to fulfill his promises to Abraham, to David? How’s he going to bless the nations and bring the Messianic Kingdom? And to answer those questions, you have to read on into the wisdom and the prophetic books, but for now, that’s the book of Kings.

Isaiah Ch. 1-39

Introduction

The book of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah lived in Jerusalem in the latter half of Israel's kingdom period, and he spoke on God's behalf to the leaders of Jerusalem and Judah. He spoke first of all a message of God's judgment. He warned Israel's corrupt leaders that their rebellion against their covenant with God would come at a cost, that God was going to use the great empires of Assyria, and after them, Babylon, to judge Jerusalem if they persisted in idolatry and oppression of the poor.

But that announcement was combined with a message of hope. Isaiah believed deeply that God would one day fulfill all of his covenant promises, that he would send a King from David's line to establish God's Kingdom (remember 2 Samuel 7), that he would lead Israel in obedience to all of the laws of the covenant made at Mount Sinai (remember Exodus chapter 19). And all of this was so that God's blessing and salvation would flow outward to all of the nations like God promised to Abraham in Genesis chapter 12. And it's this hope that compelled Isaiah to speak out against the corruption and idolatry of Israel in his day.

Now the book has a pretty complex literary design, but there's one simple way to see how it all fits together. Chapters 1-39 contain three large sections that develop Isaiah's warning of judgment on Israel. And it all culminates in an event pointed to at the end of chapter 39, the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of the people to Babylon. But in

chapters 1-39, there's also a message of hope that after the exile, God's covenant promises would all be fulfilled. And chapters 40-66 pick up that promise of hope and develop it further. In this video we're just going to focus on chapters 1-39.

Chapters 1-12

The first main section focuses on Isaiah's vision of judgment and hope for Jerusalem, and it begins as Isaiah accuses the city's leaders of covenant rebellion, idolatry, injustice. And God says he's going to judge the city by sending the nations to conquer Israel. Isaiah says that this will be like a purifying fire that burns away all that's worthless in Israel in order to create a new Jerusalem that's populated by a remnant that has repented and turned back to God. And Isaiah says that that's when God's Kingdom will come and all nations will come to the temple in Jerusalem and learn of God's justice, bringing about an age of universal peace and harmony. Now it's this basic storyline of the old Jerusalem purifying judgment into the new Jerusalem—this is going to get repeated over and over throughout the book, getting filled in with increasing detail.

So at the center of this section is Isaiah's grand vision of God sitting on his throne in the temple, and he's surrounded by these heavenly creatures that are shouting that God is "holy, holy, holy." And Isaiah suddenly realizes just how corrupt he and his people Israel are, and he's certain that he's going to be destroyed by God's holiness, but he's not. God's holiness, in the form of this burning coal, comes and burns him, but not to destroy; rather, it purifies him from his sin. And as Isaiah ponders this strange experience, God commissions him with a very difficult task. He is to keep announcing this coming judgment, but because Israel has reached a point of no return, his warnings are going to have a paradoxical effect of hardening the people, but Isaiah is to trust God's plan. Israel is going to be chopped down like a tree and left like a stump in a field, and that stump will itself be scorched and burned. But after all of that burning, God says that this smoldering stump is a holy seed that will survive into the future. It's a small sign of hope, but who or what is that holy seed? The rest of this section offers an answer.

Isaiah confronts Ahaz, a descendant of David and a king of Jerusalem, and he announces his downfall. God says that it's the great empire of Assyria who will first chop Israel down and devastate the land, but there's hope. Because of God's promise to David, he's going to send, after this destruction, a new King named Immanuel, which means "God with us." And Immanuel's Kingdom is going to set God's people free from violent oppressive empires. And Isaiah describes this coming King as a small shoot of new growth that will emerge from the old stump of David's family. It's this King that's the holy seed from chapter 6, and the King is going to be empowered by God's Spirit to rule over a new Jerusalem and bring justice for the poor. And all nations will look to this Messianic King for guidance. His Kingdom will transform all creation bringing peace.

Now you finish chapters 1-12 with a pretty good understanding of Isaiah's message of judgment and hope, but when will this all happen? Isaiah saw another empire arising after Assyria, and that's Babylon, who would also attack Jerusalem and actually succeed in destroying it. And that brings us into the next sections of the book.

Chapters 13-27

So first we have a large collection of poems that explore God's judgment and hope for the nations. We learn first of all of the fall of Babylon and Israel's neighbors. Isaiah could see that Assyria's world power would one day be replaced by the empire of Babylon, a nation even more destructive and arrogant. Babylon's kings claimed that they were higher than all other gods, and so God vows to bring Babylon down—and not only Babylon. Isaiah goes on to list Israel's neighbors, accusing them all of the same kind of pride and injustice, and he predicts their ultimate ruin.

But remember, for Isaiah, God's judgment is never the final word for Israel or the nations. And that leads into the next section with the series of poems that tell a tale of two cities. There's the lofty city that has exalted itself above God and become corrupt and unjust. This city is an archetype of rebellious humanity and is described with language that's all borrowed from Isaiah's earlier descriptions of Jerusalem and Assyria and Babylon all put together. This city is

destined for ruin and one day is going to be replaced by the new Jerusalem, where God reigns as King over a redeemed humanity from all nations, and there's no more death or suffering. These chapters are the climax to this section, and it shows how Isaiah's message pointed far beyond his own day. It was a message for all who are waiting for God to bring his justice on violent oppressive kingdoms and bring his Kingdom of justice and peace and healing love.

Chapters 28-39

The following section returns the focus to the rise and fall of Jerusalem. And first we find a whole bunch of poems where Isaiah accuses Jerusalem's leaders for turning to Egypt for military protection against Assyria. He knows this will backfire, and Isaiah says that only trust in their God and repentance can save Israel now, which gets illustrated by the following story about the rise of Hezekiah, king of Jerusalem.

Just as Isaiah predicted, the Assyrian armies come and try to attack the city. And so Hezekiah humbles himself before God, and he prays for divine deliverance, and the city is miraculously saved overnight. But Hezekiah's rise is immediately followed by his fall. So he hosts a delegation from Babylon, and he tries to impress them by showing everything in Jerusalem's treasury and temple and palaces. It's clearly an effort to make another political alliance for protection. Isaiah hears about this, and he confronts Hezekiah for his foolishness. He predicts that this ally will one day betray him and return as an enemy to conquer Jerusalem. And we know from 2 Kings, chapters 24 and 25 that Isaiah was right. Over a hundred years later, Babylon would turn on Jerusalem, come and destroy the city, its temple, and carry the Israelites away to exile in Babylon.

Conclusion

And so all of Isaiah's warnings of divine judgment in chapters 1-39 lead up to this moment. He's shown to be a true prophet because it all came to pass like he said. But remember the purpose of God's judgment was to purify Jerusalem and bring the holy seed and Messianic Kingdom over all nations. And it's that hope that gets explored in the next part of the book, but for now, that's what Isaiah chapters 1-39 are all about.

Isaiah Ch. 40-66

Introduction

The book of the prophet Isaiah. In the first video, we explored chapters 1-39, which was Isaiah's message of judgment and hope for Jerusalem. He accused Israel's leaders of rebellion against God and said that through Assyria, and then Babylon, Israel's kingdom would come crashing down in an act of God's judgment. And so chapter 39 concluded with Isaiah predicting Jerusalem's fall to Babylon and the exile. And one hundred years after Isaiah, it all sadly came to pass. But Isaiah's greater hope was for a new, purified Jerusalem where God's Kingdom would be restored through the future Messianic King and all nations would come together in peace. And so chapters 40 and following explore this great hope.

Chapters 40-48

The first main section, chapters 40-48, open with an announcement of hope and comfort for Israel. The people are told that the Babylonian exile is over and that Israel's sin has been dealt with and a new era is beginning, so they should all return home to Jerusalem where God himself will bring his Kingdom and all nations will see his glory.

Now let's stop for a moment because this opening announcement raises a big question, that is, who is saying all of this? Whose voice are we hearing in these words of hope? The perspective of the prophet in these chapters is that of somebody who's living after the

exile. In other words, in the time period described by Ezra and Nehemiah, but Isaiah died one hundred fifty years before any of that. So what are we supposed to make of this?

Well there are many who think that it's still Isaiah in his own day speaking, but that he's been prophetically transported, so to speak, two hundred years into the future and that he's speaking to future generations as if the exile is past. However, the book of Isaiah itself gives us some clues that something else is probably going on. In chapters 8 and 29 and 30, we're told that after Isaiah was rejected by Israel's leaders that he wrote and sealed up in a scroll all of his messages of judgment and hope, and that he passed it on to his disciples as a witness for days to come. Eventually Isaiah died waiting for God to vindicate his words.

Now remember, chapters 1-39 were designed to show us that Isaiah's predictions of judgment were fulfilled in the exile. He's a true prophet. And so after exile is over, Isaiah's disciples who have treasured his words for so long open up the scroll and begin applying his words of hope to their own day. So on this view, the book of Isaiah consists of that first collection of Isaiah's words as well as the writings of his prophetic disciples that God uses to extend Isaiah's message of hope to future generations. Whichever view you end up taking, everybody agrees that these chapters are announcing that the future hope has come, that God is fulfilling Isaiah's prophetic promises.

And so the prophet hopes that Israel will respond by becoming God's servant. That is, after experiencing God's justice and mercy through history, that they will now begin to share with the nations who God truly is. But that's not what's happening. Israel, instead of bearing witness to the nations, is actually complaining and even accusing God. They say, "The Lord doesn't pay attention to our trouble. In fact, he's ignoring our cause." The Babylonian exile, understandably, caused Israel to lose faith in their God. I mean, maybe he's not that powerful; maybe the gods of Babylon are way greater than our God. And so the rest of these chapters, 41 to 47, are set up like a trial scene.

God is responding to these doubts and accusations with the following arguments: He says first that the exile to Babylon was not divine neglect; rather, it was divinely orchestrated as a judgment for Israel's sin. And second, it was for Israel's sake that God raised up Persia to conquer Babylon, so they could come back home fulfilling Isaiah's words. So the right conclusion that Israel should draw is that their God is the King of history, not the idols of the nations. In the fall of Babylon and the rise of the Persian King Cyrus, Israel should see God's hand at work and so become his servant, telling the nations who he is. But by the end of the trial in chapter 48, we find that Israel is still as rebellious and hard-hearted as their ancestors. And so God disqualifies them as his servants. But God's still on a mission to bless the nation, and so the prophet says God's going to do a new thing to solve this problem, which moves into the next section, 49–55.

Chapters 49-55

We're introduced to a figure who's called "God's Servant," who's going to fulfill God's mission and do what Israel has failed to do. God gives this servant the title "Israel" and sends this person on a mission to, first of all, restore the people of Israel back to their God, but second, to become God's light to the nations. And we're told that this servant is empowered by God's Spirit to announce good news and to bring God's Kingdom over all of the nations. It sounds just like the Messianic King from chapters 9 and 11.

But then we learn the surprising way of how the servant will bring God's Kingdom. He's going to be rejected and beaten and ultimately killed by his own people. In reality, as he's being accused and sentenced to death, he's dying on behalf of the sin of his own people. The prophet says the servant's death is a sacrifice of atonement for the people's evil and rebellion. And then after his death, all of a sudden, the servant is just alive again, and we hear that by his death, he provided a way to make people righteous, that is, to put them in a right relationship with God.

And so the section concludes by describing two ways people can respond to the servant. Some will respond with humility and turn from their sins and accept what God's servant did on their behalf.

These people are called the servants and also the seed. Remember the holy seed from chapter 6. These are the ones who will experience the blessing of the Messianic Kingdom. But there are others who are called simply “the wicked,” and they reject both the servant and his servants, which brings us to the final section of the book, 56-66, where the servants inherit God’s Kingdom. These chapters are beautifully designed as a symmetry that brings together all of the themes of the book.

Chapters 56-66

At the very center are three beautiful poems that describe how the Spirit-empowered Servant is announcing the good news of God’s Kingdom to the poor, and he reaffirms all of the promises of hope from earlier in the book. The new Jerusalem, inhabited by God’s servants, will be the place from which God’s justice and mercy and blessings flow out to all the nations of the world. And surrounding these poems are two long prayers of repentance where the servants confess Israel’s sin and they grieve over all of the evil they see in the world around them. And so they ask God to forgive them and that his Kingdom would come here on earth as it is in heaven.

Now on each side of these prayers are collections of more poems that contrast the destiny of the servants with that of the wicked who persecute them. God says he’s going to bring his justice on all who pollute his good world with their evil and selfishness and idolatry, and that he’s going to remove them from his city forever. But the servants, those who are humble before God and who repent and own their evil, they are forgiven and they will inherit the new Jerusalem, which, we discover, is an image for an entirely renewed creation, where death and suffering are gone forever. And this brings us to the very outer frame of this part of the book. In this renewed world of God’s Kingdom, people from all nations are invited to come and join the servants of God’s covenant family, so that everyone can know their creator and redeemer.

Conclusion

And so the book of Isaiah ends with a very grand vision of the fulfillment of all of God's covenant promises. Through the suffering servant King, God creates a covenant family of all nations who are awaiting the hope of God's justice and bringing a renewed creation where God's Kingdom finally comes here on earth as it is in heaven. And that's the very powerful hope of the book of Isaiah.

Hosea

Introduction

The book of the prophet Hosea. Hosea lived in the northern kingdom of Israel, which he sometimes calls Ephraim, or Jacob, about two hundred years after they had broken off from the southern Judah. Remember the story from 1 Kings. Hosea was called to speak on God's behalf during the reign of one of Israel's worst kings, Jeroboam II. The nation was descending into chaos, and in the year 722, the big, bad Assyrian empire swooped in and decimated Israel. Again, see the story in 2 Kings. And Hosea had seen all of this coming.

The book is a collection of some twenty-five years of his preaching and writing. It is almost all poetry, and this whole collection has been designed to have three main sections. Let's just dive in, and you will see how it works.

Chapters 1-3

The opening part tells the story of Hosea's broken marriage to a woman named Gomer, who commits adultery. Now it's not totally clear whether Gomer slept around with other men before or only after they got married, but they did have three children together, and things fell apart. The important point is that God tells Hosea that, despite Gomer's unfaithfulness, he is to go find her, to pay off her debts to her lovers, and to commit his love and faithfulness to her once again. And then God says that all of this— the broken and repaired marriage, the children—it's all a prophetic symbol telling the story of God's relationship to Israel.

So God has been like a faithful husband to Israel. He rescued them out of slavery, he brought them to Mount Sinai where he entered into a covenant with them. He asked them to be faithful to him alone, but then he brought Israel into the promised land, and they took all the abundance that he gave them, and they dedicated it to the worship of the Canaanite god Baal. And so God has a legitimate reason. He could end the covenant and divorce Israel, and he thinks about doing so, but instead, he says that he's going to pursue Israel again and renew his covenant with them. And he says why. It's purely because of his own love, compassion, and faithfulness.

Hosea then spells out what all this means. He says the consequences for Israel's rebellion will be imminent defeat by other nations and exile, but there's hope for future restoration. One day, Israel will once again repent and come back to worship their God, and Hosea says he will place over them a new Messianic King from the line of David, who will bring God's blessing. And so this opening section introduces all the main ideas of the book. Israel has rebelled, and God's going to bring severe consequences, but God's own covenant love and mercy are more powerful than Israel's sin. And so in the remaining sections of the book, Hosea's poetry explores these themes in more depth.

Chapters 4-10

So there are two collections of his accusations and warnings for Israel, and then each of these is concluded by a very hopeful poem about God's mercy and hope for the future. So chapters 4-10, Hosea explores the causes and effects of Israel's unfaithfulness. He says numerous times that Israel lacks all knowledge or understanding of God. The Hebrew word "to know," which is "yadá," it's more than just intellectual activity; it described personal relational knowledge. It's the difference between just knowing about someone and then actually knowing that someone, and God wants Israel to know him like that in a relationship. He wants them to experience his love for them and become the kind of knowledge that transforms their hearts and lives, so that they love him in return. And so this is why Hosea is constantly exposing the hypocrisy of Israel's worship. He constantly shows how they're breaking the Ten Commandments, how they're

allowing grave injustice in their communities, and then they go to their sacred temples and they offer sacrifices to God, like everything is just fine! But it's not fine, and not only because of their hypocrisy, but because they are worshipping all of these other gods too! He mentions many times their altars to Baal in the cities of Bethel and Gilgal. And not only have they given their allegiance to other gods, Hosea repeatedly accuses Israel for trusting in their political alliances with Egypt and Assyria. So instead of trusting God to protect them, they want to become like these nations and rely solely on military power, and God says it's all going to come crashing down on their head. Because in not too long, Assyria will turn on them and come to ravage their lands.

Chapters 12-14

In this other section of warning, Hosea gives an ancient Israelite history lesson to show how this family's been unfaithful from the beginning. So he alludes to the patriarch Jacob's lying and treachery—remember Genesis 27 and 28. He alludes to Israel's rebellion in the wilderness—remember the book of Numbers. He alludes to their appointment of the corrupt King Saul who led the people into sin and disaster—remember the stories in 1 Samuel. This is all Hosea's way of saying some things in this family never change. So what hope does Hosea have? Well we know from chapter 3 that God's going to do something to save and restore his people, and that is what these two concluding chapters explore.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 is beautiful. The poem depicts God as a loving Father who raised his son Israel and then shared everything with him, but the son grew up and rebelled and turned on the father, taking advantage of his generosity. And so in this poem, God is emotionally torn apart. One moment he's angry, and, naturally, he says he is going to bring severe consequences, but the next moment he is heartbroken. And then he says that he's moved by his mercy and compassion, and he's going to forgive the son that he loves. He says, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? My heart churns inside of me. All my compassion

is aroused.” And so while God did allow Israel to be conquered by Assyria, face the consequences, that’s not God’s final word; there’s still hope.

Chapter 14

And that’s what the last chapter is about. Hosea calls Israel to repent and turn back to their God, but he knows that it won’t last because it never has before. And God says that one day, he will heal their waywardness and love them freely. God goes on to describe this new healed Israel as a lush tree that will grow deep roots and broad branches and offer shade and fruit to all of the nations. It’s an image of God’s promise to Abraham—how Israel was to become a blessing to the nations. And God’s saying if that’s ever going to happen, it’s going to require an act of God’s grace and healing power to repair the deep brokenness and sinful selfishness of the human heart, so that God’s people can receive his love, and love him in return. This is what God promises to do.

Now after this poem concludes, we find the very last words of the book. They’re like an appended note. They’re likely from the author who collected Hosea’s poetry and now wants to speak to you, the reader, for a second. And he says, “Who is wise and discerning to understand all of this?” In other words, Hosea’s poems. “The ways of the Lord are right. The righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them.”

Conclusion

So the author wants you to know that Hosea’s ancient poetry to northern Israel is not locked in the past. It reveals deep truths about God’s character and purposes and human nature. And while God should, and does, bring his justice on human evil, his ultimate purpose, his heart, is to heal and to save his people, and that’s what the book of Hosea is all about.

Joel

Introduction

The book of the prophet Joel. It's a short collection of prophetic poems that are both powerful and puzzling. Joel is unique among the prophets for a few reasons. First of all, there's no explicit indication of when this book was written. It's most likely the period of Ezra-Nehemiah after the return from the exile because he mentions Jerusalem and the temple, but there does not seem to be any kings. Also unique is that Joel is clearly familiar with many other scriptural books; he alludes to or quotes from the prophets Isaiah, Amos, Zephaniah, Nahum, Obadiah, Ezekiel, Malachi, even the book of Exodus. And this is connected with the last unique feature, and that's that Joel never accuses Israel of any specific sin.

So like many of the other prophets, he announces that God's judgment is coming to confront Israel's sin, but he never says why. And that is most likely because Joel assumes that, like him, you have been reading the books of the prophets, and so you already know all about Israel's rebellion. Now altogether these three features help us understand this fascinating little book: that Joel is a biblical author who was, himself, immersed in earlier biblical writings, and his reflection on them helped him make sense of the tragedies of his day, but also they gave him hope for the future. Let's dive in, and we will see how this book works.

Chapters 1-2

In chapters 1 and 2, Joel focuses on the Day of the Lord. This is a key theme in the prophets, and it describes events in the past when God appeared in a powerful way to save his people or confront evil. Think about the plagues in the book of Exodus. But the prophets saw in these past events pointers to a future time when God would again confront evil among his people, but also among the nations, and bring salvation to the whole world. And so here, in chapters 1 and 2, Joel has brought two parallel poems together that focus on this theme. So chapter 1 is about a past Day of the Lord. He begins by announcing a recent disaster that a locust swarm has devastated Israel, and his description of the swarm recalls the Day of the Lord against Egypt. Remember the eighth plague from Exodus chapter 10. Except this time, the locusts are being sent against Israel! And so Joel calls on the elders and the priests to lead the people in repentance and prayer, and then Joel actually himself repents along with all of the priests.

Chapter 2 comes alongside, and it has the same poetic design and flow of thought. So Joel announces another Day of the Lord. Except this time, it's future, not past. It's an imminent disaster coming on Jerusalem, and he begins describing what seems like another wave of locusts, but he uses military and cosmic imagery. So the locusts become God's army, like cavalry and soldiers that are marching and destroying everything in their path. And the sun has darkened, and the earth quakes, and Joel says, "The Day of the Lord is dreadful; who can endure it?" And so once more, Joel calls on the people to pray and repent. And he says how: "to rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to your God." In other words, Joel knows that repentance can be just a show that you put on to get out of trouble, and he says God's not interested in that. He wants genuine change, for his people to stop their selfishness and evil. And then Joel says why Israel should repent. Because "God is gracious and compassionate, he is slow to anger, and he is full of love." He's quoting here from the book of Exodus, about how God forgave Israel after they made the golden calf, and from that story, Joel learned that God's

mercy and love is more powerful than his wrath and judgment. And so he leads the priests in acts of repentance and prayer, asking God to spare his people.

Then right after these two poems, the scene shifts, and we have a short narrative about God's response to the repentance of Joel and the people. "So God was filled with passion for his land and he had pity on his people" Then God says he is going to reverse the devastating effects of this Day of the Lord and turn it from judgment into salvation. So first, he's going to defeat the threatening invaders, which were presumably the locusts, and he's going to turn them all away to their own ruin. Then he's going to restore the devastated land and bring it back to life, making it abundant once more. And finally, God says he's going to bring his divine presence among his people. It will become real and accessible to everyone.

Now up to this point, the poems tell a powerful story about Joel leading Israel to see how their sin led to disaster and divine judgment, and that with the God of mercy, there is always hope. But Joel sees in all of these past events an image of the future Day of the Lord. And so in the final section of the book, Joel writes three more poems that match God's three-part response, and he weaves together images from other prophetic books and expands it all into a vision of hope for all creation.

Chapters 2-3

So first, the hope of God's presence among his people gets expanded into a promise about how one day in the future, God's own Spirit, his personal life presence, will fill not just the temple, but all of his people. And here Joel is drawing upon the promises of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, that God's Spirit would come to transform and empower his people, so that they can truly love and follow him. Joel then picks up God's promise that he'll confront the threatening invader, and Joel sees in these ravaging locusts a similarity to the arrogant, violent nations of his own day that ravaged and oppressed people. And so he draws upon the promises of Isaiah and Zephaniah and Ezekiel about the future Day of the Lord, when God will confront evil among all the nations and turn their violence

back on themselves, bringing justice to right all wrongs. And finally, Joel picks up the images of the land's restoration, and he sees here a hope for the renewal of all creation. So he draws on the promises of Isaiah and Ezekiel and Zechariah, that God's final day of justice will be followed by a restoration of the entire world, a new Eden, where God's presence in Jerusalem will flow out like a river and bring about cosmic renewal. And so Joel's poem ends with God's forgiveness and mercy opening up a whole new creation.

Conclusion

And so this little book of Joel, it explores profound ideas about how human sin and failure wreak such devastating destruction in our world, about how God longs to show mercy to those who will just own up to their sin and confess it, and about how all of that leads us to hope that God will one day defeat evil in our world, but also inside of us, and bring his healing presence to make all things new. And that's what the book of Joel is all about.

Amos

Introduction

The book of the prophet Amos. Amos was a shepherd and a fig tree farmer who lived right near the border between northern Israel and southern Judah. Now the north had seized its independence about one hundred and fifty years earlier. Remember 1 Kings chapter 12. And it was currently being ruled by Jeroboam II, a successful military leader. He won lots of battles and new territory for Israel, and he generated lots of wealth, but in the eyes of the prophets, he was one of the worst kings ever. His wealth had led to apathy, and he allowed idol worship for the gods of Canaan, which in turn led to injustice and the neglect of the poor. And it got to the point where Amos couldn't take it anymore. He sensed God calling him to go trek up north to Bethel, an important city that had a large temple, and start announcing God's word to the people. And this book is a collection of his sermons and poems and visions uttered over the years. They were compiled later to give God's people a sense of his divine message to the northern kingdom, and it's a message we still need to hear today.

The book is a fairly clear design. Chapters 1 and 2 are a series of messages to the nations and Israel. Then chapters 3-6 are a collection of poems that express Amos' message to the people of Israel and its leaders. Chapters 7-9 contain a series of visions that Amos experienced that depict God's coming judgment on Israel. Let's just dive in.

Chapters 1-2

So the book opens with a series of short poems that accuse all of Israel's neighbors of violence and injustice. And this is kind of odd because the book's opening line says that Amos was going to speak against Israel. But watch how this works. As Amos is naming all of these neighboring nations, you can go look at a map and see that he's creating a circle. And when he's done, Israel lies right in the center, like a target in the crosshairs. And on Israel, Amos unleashes a poetic accusation that's three times longer and more intense than any of these others. He accuses Israel's wealthy of ignoring the poor and allowing grave injustice in their land, specifically by allowing the poor to be sold into debt slavery and then going on to deny any of these people legal representation. And this, Amos asks, "Is this the family that was once denied justice and enslaved in Egypt? The family that God rescued from oppression and slavery? The party's over!" Amos says, "God is done putting up with you!"

Chapters 3-6

So the opening of the next section explains why. God says, "I chose you, Israel, from among all of the families of the Earth!" This is an allusion to Genesis 12, how God had called the family of Abraham to become God's blessing to all of the nations. And so then God says, "So this is why I will punish you for all of your sin." Israel had a great calling, which came with great responsibility, and so their sin and rebellion brings great consequences. Now this section brings together a lot of Amos' poems. And you'll see a few key themes repeated over and over. So first, he's constantly exposing the religious hypocrisy of Israel's wealthy and their leaders. And he describes how they faithfully attend the religious gatherings, giving offerings and sacrifices all the while neglecting the poor and ignoring injustice. And Amos says it's all a sham, that God actually hates their worship because it's totally disconnected from how they treat people. God says a real relationship with him will transform a person's relationships. And so Amos' call to true worship is to let justice flow like a river and righteousness like a never failing stream. Now these two words, they're super important for Amos and actually all of the prophets. So "righteousness," or in Hebrew, "tsedaqah," refers

to a standard of right, equitable relationships between people, no matter their social differences. "Injustice," in Hebrew, "mishpat," refers to concrete actions that you take to correct injustice and create righteousness. And so both of these are to permeate the life of God's covenant people like a rushing stream fills a dry riverbed.

The next theme is Amos' repeated accusations of Israel's idolatry. So remember when the northern kingdom broke away from southern Judah, their king built two new temples to rival Solomon's in Jerusalem, and he placed a golden calf in each. Remember 1 Kings chapter 12. Since then, Israel had only accumulated more idols, worshipping the gods of sex and weather and war. And in the prophet's view, the worship of these gods always led to injustice because these gods don't require the same degree of justice and righteousness as the God of Israel. Not to mention that these gods were immoral themselves. Not the God of Israel; he's different. So he can say in one place, "Seek me, that you may live." And then right after that say to Israel, "Seek good, not evil, that you may live." So true worship of the creator God of Israel, it's synonymous with doing good, with generosity, and with justice. And so the final theme in these chapters is that because Israel and its king have rejected Amos and the other prophets, God will send the Day of the Lord. This is a great and terrible act of justice on Israel. And specifically, Amos predicts that a powerful nation will come and conquer and decimate their cities and take the people away into exile. And we know his prediction came true. Some forty years later the Assyrian Empire swooped in and did exactly as Amos had said.

Chapters 7-9

The book closes with a series of visions that Amos experienced, and they're symbolic depictions of the coming Day of the Lord. So he sees Israel devastated by a locust swarm and then by a scorching fire, and then they're being swallowed up like overripe fruit. And in the final vision, Amos sees God violently striking the pillars of Israel's great idol temple at Bethel, and the whole building comes crumbling down. It's an image of God's justice on the leaders and the gods of Israel. Their end has finally come. But then all of a sudden, in the final paragraph, we see a glimmer of hope. It picks up this image of

Israel as a destroyed building. And God says that out of the ruins he will one day restore the house of David. In other words, he's going to bring the future Messianic King from David's line, and he will rebuild the family of God's people, which, surprisingly, we're told is going to include people from all of the nations. All of the devastation caused by Israel's sin and God's judgment will that day be reversed.

Conclusion

Now this final paragraph is super important. It's the only sign of hope on the other side of judgment, and it helps us see how this book is exploring the relationship between God's justice and his mercy. If God is good, he has to confront and judge evil among Israel and the nations, but his long-term purposes are to restore his world and build a new covenant family. And so through Amos' words, we still today hear his call to learn from Israel's hypocrisy and disaster and to embrace a true worship of this God, which should always lead to justice and righteousness and loving our neighbor. And that's what the book of Amos is all about.

Obadiah

Introduction

The book of the prophet Obadiah. This is the shortest book in the whole Old Testament; it's a mere twenty-one verses. And at first glance, it does not look very promising. It's a series of divine judgment poems against the ancient people of Edom, which was a nation that neighbored Israel on the other side of the Dead Sea. However, there is way, way more going on here. So first, here's the back story.

The people of Edom were unique because they had a shared ancestry with the Israelites. They both belonged to the family of Abraham, who with Sarah, had their son Isaac, who with his wife Rebekah, had two sons Jacob and Esau. Now the book of Genesis told us the story of these two brothers, and to say the very least, they had a tense relationship. They each later received the names Israel and Edom, which eventually became the name of the families that descended from them, and these families replayed the same difficult relationship of their ancestors. Israel and Edom had enormous tensions throughout the centuries, but they still shared that family bond. And it's that bond that was betrayed and shattered in the tragic events of Jerusalem's fall to Babylon. So when Israel was invaded and conquered by Babylon, the people of Edom took advantage by plundering other Israelite cities and then capturing, and even killing, Israelite refugees. Now in other prophetic books, God held Israel's neighbors accountable for this kind of violence, and so here Obadiah does the same for Edom.

Verses 1-14

The short book has two halves. The first part is a series of accusations against the leaders of Edom, specifically for their pride and self-exaltation. Literally, as they lived up high in the desert rocks, but also metaphorically. They truly believed they were superior to the Israelites, and it's that pride that led the Edomites to not just stand idly by when Babylon came to destroy Jerusalem, but actually to participate in the destruction. And so God says, through Obadiah, that Edom will be brought down from their height and destroyed. As they have done to Israel, so it will be done to them.

Verse 15

Now right when you think you're going to hear more about how Edom will meet its doom, the topic suddenly shifts in verse 15. We hear this, "The Day of the Lord is near against all nations." Now why do we all of the sudden shift from Edom now to all nations? This verse is a hinge piece, and it links the first half of the book to the second half, where Obadiah announces the Day of the Lord, but not only for Edom. He widens his focus to include all nations, and Obadiah says that all prideful nations that act like Edom will face God's justice in the same way. They'll fall from their prideful heights and come to ruin.

Verses 16-21

Now the combination of these two sections, one about Edom, the other about all nations, shows us why Obadiah was so interested in this tiny southern neighbor of Israel. Obadiah sees Edom's pride and fall as an example, an image, of how God will one day confront the pride of all nations and bring about their fall too. It's hardly coincidental that in Hebrew, the word "edom" is spelled with the exact same letters as the word humanity, or in Hebrew, "adam." In Obadiah, Edom's rise and fall is a parable of how God's justice will one day oppose pride and violence among all nations in the Day of the Lord. But as in all the prophets, God's judgment is never his final word. Specifically, remember the conclusion of the two books that came right before Obadiah, Joel and Amos. Joel had painted a picture of what will happen after the Day of the Lord against all

nations. He said that God would perform a new act of salvation in Jerusalem and that all who humble themselves and call upon him would be delivered. And in the conclusion of Amos, he said that after the Day of the Lord has judged Israel's evil, God would raise up the house of David and build a new Kingdom for Israel that would include Edom and all the nations called by my name.

Conclusion

And so the book of Obadiah has been placed right after Joel and then Amos to expand on these very promises about the hope of God's Kingdom over all of the nations. And so the book concludes with a very hopeful future. God says he's going to restore his Kingdom over the new Jerusalem, that he'll repopulate it with a faithful remnant. And then from there, God's Kingdom will expand to include all the territories and nations around Israel. And so this little book contributes to the larger portrait of God's justice and faithfulness that we're seeing in the prophets. The ancient pride and betrayal of the people of Edom become an example of the greater human condition, all of the ways that we betray and hurt each other and God's good world. But there's hope, Obadiah says. Edom's downfall points to the day when God will deal with the evil in our world but also bring his healing Kingdom of peace over all the nations. And that's what the book of Obadiah is all about.

Jonah

Introduction

The book of Jonah, a subversive story about a rebellious prophet who hates God for loving his enemies. Jonah's unique among the prophets of the Old Testament because they're typically collections of God's words spoken through the prophet, but this book doesn't actually focus on the words of the prophet; rather, it's a story about a prophet, a really mean and nasty prophet. Jonah appears only one other time in the Old Testament—it's during the reign of Jeroboam II, one of Israel's worst kings. And Jonah prophesied in his favor, promising that he would win a battle and regain all this territory on Israel's northern borders. Now it's important to know that the prophet Amos also confronted Jeroboam, and through him, God specifically reversed Jonah's prophesy, promising that Jeroboam would lose all those same territories because he was so horrible. So before the story of Jonah even begins, we are suspicious of Jonah's character.

The book of Jonah has a beautiful design with all this literary pairing and symmetry. So you have chapters 1 and 3 telling the story of Jonah's encounter with non-Israelites, first with some sailors and then with Jonah's hated enemies the Ninevites. And each part offers a comic contrast between Jonah's selfishness and the pagans' humility and repentance. Chapters 2 and 4 contain prayers of Jonah. One is a prayer of repentance—kind of. And the other is a prayer in which Jonah chews out God for being too nice.

Now this careful design of the book is matched by a really unique style of narration. The story's full of all of these stereotyped characters, who ironically do the exact opposite of what you think they would do. So you have the prophet, the man of God, who rebels and hates his own God. You have the sailors, who are supposed to be really immoral, but actually they have soft repentant hearts and turn to God in humility. You have the king of the most powerful, murderous empire on the planet, and he humbles himself before God because of Jonah's five-word sermon, and even the king's cows repent. This kind of story fits what today we would call satire. These are stories about well-known figures who are placed in extreme circumstances, and they use humor and irony to critique their stupidity and character flaws. Let's just dive in, and we'll see how all the pieces work together.

Chapter 1

The story opens as God addresses Jonah and commissions him to go preach against the evil and injustice in Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian empire, Israel's bitter enemy. But instead of going east to Nineveh, Jonah goes in the opposite direction, finding a ship going as far west as you can go to Tarshish. Now the big question here is: why? Why does Jonah run? Is he afraid? Does he just not like Nineveh? And we're not told yet. So the man of God tries to run from God, and he boards a ship full of pagan sailors. He goes down into the ship, and then he falls asleep. So God sends a huge storm to wake up his prophet. While ironically, the sailors above board are wide awake to everything that's happening. They can discern that there's a divine power at work here, so they throw the dice and they discover that Jonah, he is the culprit. So they ask Jonah to explain himself, and Jonah spouts off a whole bunch of religious mumbo jumbo. He says, "Yeah, I'm a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God who made the sea and the dry land." What a joke, right? God made the sea and the dry land alright, and Jonah's dumb enough to run from this God by getting on a boat? And when the sailors ask Jonah what they should do, he says, "Kill me by throwing me overboard," which kind of seems noble at first until you realize that this could actually be his most selfish move yet. I mean, what better way to

avoid going to Nineveh? So he puts his blood on these innocent sailors' hands by trying to force them to kill him. They're reluctant, of course, and they repent to God even as they toss him over. The storm subsides, and they end up fearing the God of Israel, and unlike Jonah, they actually worship God.

Chapter 2

But God foils Jonah's plans to escape Nineveh. As Jonah's sinking, God provides this strange watery tomb for him, the stomach of a large fish. Now of course, under normal circumstances, this would be certain death, but in this story, everything's upside-down. And so Jonah's submarine death becomes his passage back to life. Cramped in the stomach of this beast, Jonah utters a prayer where he never technically says that he's sorry, but he does thank God for not abandoning him, and he promises that he will obey God from this point on no matter what. And God's response is quite comic. The whale vomits Jonah back onto dry land.

Chapter 3

So once again, God commissions Jonah to go and preach in Nineveh, and Jonah complies. We're told that Nineveh was a gigantic city; it would take days to walk through. So Jonah gets one day in, and here is his message: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." It's five words in Hebrew. Now his sermon is very short, and it's also odd. I mean, look at what's missing. There's no mention of what the Ninevites have done wrong or of what they should do to respond. There's no mention of who might overturn them, and most noticeable, there's no mention of God. What's going on here? Has Jonah intentionally given the bare minimum of information? It's like he's trying to sabotage his own message or ensure the Ninevite's destruction. There's just no effort on Jonah's part here.

Whatever his motives are, the plan doesn't work. Because no sooner does he utter this five-word sermon, that the king of Nineveh, the entire city, including all its cows, repent in sorrow and ashes. So for the second time, these evil pagans show themselves to be more responsive than God's own prophet. So God forgives the Ninevites, and he doesn't bring destruction on the city. Now here's the brilliant

part of the story. The last word of Jonah's short sermon, "overturned," means just that—"turned over." And it can refer to a city being overthrown or destroyed, like Sodom and Gomorrah, but it can also be used of something being transformed, like turned over and changed into its opposite. And so, comically, Jonah's words actually came true, but not in the way that he intended. Nineveh does get turned over as Jonah's enemies repent and find God's mercy.

Chapter 4

The final chapter brings all the pieces together. Jonah, he's fuming mad, and he utters his second prayer. He first tells God why he ran away back in chapter 1. It was not because he was afraid; rather, it was because he knew that God was so merciful. And this is great; Jonah actually quotes God's own description of himself from the book of Exodus, and he throws it back in God's face as an insult. He says he knew that God is compassionate and that he would find some way to forgive these horrible Ninevites. You can just hear the disgust in Jonah's voice. Jonah then cuts off the conversation, and he prays that God would kill him on the spot. He'd rather die than live with a God who forgives his enemies. Fortunate for Jonah, God doesn't comply and simply asks if Jonah's anger is even justified. Jonah ignores the question, and he goes outside the city to camp on a nearby hill waiting to see what might happen. You know, the Ninevites might repent of their repentance and get roasted after all.

What happens next is very odd. God provides this viney plant to shade Jonah from the sun, and that makes him quite happy. But then God sends a tiny worm to eat up the plant, and so Jonah loses his shade. And there in the heat of the sun, Jonah asks again that God kill him. So God again asks Jonah if his anger is justified, and Jonah barks back, "Absolutely! Just let me die!" And those are Jonah's last words in the story. God's final words are what concludes the book. He says that this whole vine incident was an attempt to get through to Jonah. Right, Jonah got all concerned and emotional over this vine, which he only enjoyed for a day. And God asked Jonah, "You know, aren't humans a bit more valuable than vines? I mean, isn't it

okay if God might feel the same kind of emotion and concern for the city of Nineveh that's full of thousands of people who have lost their way and also their cows?"

Conclusion

And that's how the book ends, with God asking Jonah for permission to show mercy to his enemies. And what is Jonah's answer? The story doesn't say because that's not the point. The point is that the book is trying to mess with you, and God's questions here are actually addressed to you, the reader. Are you okay with the fact that God loves your enemy? And so this book holds a mirror up to the one who reads it. In Jonah, we see the worst parts of our own character magnified, which should generate humility and gratitude that God would love his enemies and put up with the Jonah in all of us. And so this strange story actually becomes a message of good news about the wideness of God's mercy that ought to challenge us to the core. And that's the book of Jonah.

Micah

Introduction

The book of the prophet Micah. Micah lived in a small town named Moresheth in the southern kingdom of Judah, about the same time as Isaiah. And both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel had split long ago, and both had been violating their covenant with the God of Israel. So Micah warned that God would bring the big bad empire of Assyria to take out the northern kingdom and come ravage Jerusalem. And he also warned that after them, Babylon would bring an even greater destruction. Like all the prophets, Micah spoke on God's behalf to accuse Israel, whereas he puts in chapter 3, "I am filled with strength, with the spirit of God, with justice and power to declare how Israel has rebelled." And so most of this book explores Micah's accusations and his warning of God's judgment on Israel. But Micah also had a message of hope that countered these warnings about the restoration God would bring on the other side of his judgment. And if you dive into the book with us, you'll see how this works.

Chapters 1-2

So the first two sections of the book develop Micah's accusations and warnings against Israel and its leaders. So part one opens with a poetic description of God appearing over Israel, just like what he did at Mount Sinai. There's fire and smoke and earthquake, but he hasn't come to make a covenant this time; he's come to bring his judgment

on Israel for over five hundred years of rebellion. Micah goes on to name all of these towns and cities in Israel that are the culprits of all of this rebellion. God's coming for them, but why, exactly? So Micah picks a fight with Israel's leaders. He says that they have become wealthy through theft and greed. He alludes to the story of Ahab stealing a family vineyard from Naboth in 1 Kings chapter 21. But also it's because Israel's prophets are corrupt; they're quite happy to offer promises of God's protection to anyone who can afford to pay them. "No," Micah says, "God has withdrawn his protection from Israel."

Chapters 3-4

In the second section of accusations, Micah describes even more how Israel's leaders and prophets have together committed grave injustice. They run the land through bribery, they bend justice to favor the wealthy, and the poor are deprived of their land, their security, and their hope. And all of this is a violation of the laws of the Torah, which declared it illegal to sell land that belongs to families, even if they are poor. And so we find out that God's judgment is going to take the form of an oppressive nation that comes to take out the northern kingdom and Jerusalem and its temple, which will be reduced to ruins. These are very stiff warnings, and they're not the final word. Each of these warning sections is concluded with a striking promise of hope. So first is a poem about how God is like a shepherd who's going to rescue and regather his flock, which is the remnant of his people. And he's going to bring them all back to good pasture and become their king once more. The second warning section is concluded by picking up this image of the ruined Jerusalem temple, and Micah says this won't be permanent. One day God is going to exalt this temple. He's going to fill it with his presence and fill the city with the remnant of his people. And so God's purpose is to make Israel the meeting place of heaven and earth, so that all nations will stream to Jerusalem where God becomes the king of all the nations, bringing peace to the earth.

Chapters 4-5

Now these two concluding poems of hope, they are very powerful. And the next section of the book actually develops them further in a beautifully designed series of poems that are entirely about the future hope of Israel and the nations. So we learn that after the Assyrian attack, Israel will be conquered and exiled to Babylon. But from there, God will restore his people and bring them back to their land. And then we learn, in the new Jerusalem, a new Messianic King from the line of David will come. He'll be born in Bethlehem and then rule in Jerusalem over the restored people of God. Finally, in this Messianic Kingdom of God, the faithful remnant of God's people will become that blessing among the nations, but at the same time, God will bring his final justice and remove evil from his world.

Chapters 6-7

The final section of the book returns to this pattern of warning followed by hope that we saw in the first parts of the book. So Micah exposes again the unjust economic practices of Israel's leaders and how it's destroying the land and its people. And here Micah offers his famous words that summarize what it means for Israel to follow their God. "He has told you, O human, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." This is exactly what Israel has not been doing, and so they will come to ruin. However, the book ends with another powerful note of hope.

Israel is personified as an individual who is sitting alone in shame and defeat. It's a clear image of Israel's destruction in exile. And this individual is watching for God's mercy, and he begs God to listen and forgive, but why? Why should God listen to and forgive this faithless and rebellious people? Well the poet offers two reasons. First, he says, because of God's character. "Who is a God like you, who forgives sin and pardons rebellion?" He knows that God's mercy is more powerful than his anger or his judgment. And the second reason is because of God's promises. He says, "You will stay true to Jacob and show covenant love to Abraham, as you swore so long ago."

Conclusion

Now these are the final words of the book. They're an allusion to God's covenant promises to Abraham and his family all the way back in the book of Genesis—that all nations would find God's blessing through Abraham's family. But to become a blessing to the nations, Israel must first be faithful to their God. So this explains this back and forth between judgment and hope in the book of Micah. If God is going to bless the nations through Israel, then he must confront and judge the evil among his people, but his judgment is what leads to hope. Because God's covenant love and promise are more powerful than human evil, and his ultimate purpose is not to destroy; it's to save and redeem. Or as the concluding lines of the book put it, "God delights in covenant love, so he will again show compassion. He will trample our evil; he will toss our sins into the depths of the sea." And that's what the book of Micah is all about.

Nahum

Introduction

The book of the prophet Nahum. This short prophetic book is a collection of poems announcing the downfall of one of Israel's worse oppressors—the ancient empire of Assyria and its capital city, Nineveh. The Assyrians arose as one of the world's first great empires, and their expansion into Israel resulted in the total destruction and exile of the northern kingdom and its tribes. The Assyrian armies were violent and destructive on a scale that the world had never seen before. And so Israel and its neighbors were awaiting the downfall of Assyria, which eventually came in the year 612 BC. The Babylonians rose up and began a rebellion that overtook Nineveh and brought down the Assyrian empire. And so chapter 2 depicts the fall of Nineveh in vivid poetry, and chapter 3 then explores the downfall of the empire as a whole. But this book isn't just an angry tirade against Israel's enemies. The introductory chapters show us there is way, way more going on here.

Chapter 1

The book opens with an incomplete alphabet poem that began by describing a powerful appearance of God's glory. It's very similar to how the previous book, Micah, began and how the next book, Habakkuk, is going to conclude. And it's God—the all-powerful creator—coming to confront the nations and bring his justice on their evil. And the poem opens by quoting from the famous line of

God's self-description after the golden calf incident in the book of Exodus chapter 34. "The Lord is slow to anger, he's great in power, he won't leave evil unpunished." And so the rest of the poem goes back and forth contrasting the fate of the arrogant, violent nations with the fate of God's faithful remnant. When God brings down all the arrogant empires, he will provide refuge for those who humble themselves before him.

Now here's what's really interesting, is that you thought this book was only about Assyria, but Nahum actually nowhere mentions Nineveh or Assyria in chapter 1. And when he describes the downfall of the bad guys, he uses Isaiah's language about the fall of Babylon, which happened months later in history. And not only that, Nahum also describes the downfall of the bad guys as good news for the remnant of God's people. It's a direct allusion to Isaiah's good news about the downfall of Babylon. And so all these little details in chapter 1, they come together to make a key point. For Nahum, the fall of Nineveh is being presented as an example, as an image, of how God is at work in history, in every age, how he won't allow the arrogant or violent empires of our world to endure forever. And so, the message of Nahum is actually very similar to that of Daniel. Assyria stands in a long line of violent empires throughout history. And Nineveh's fate is a memorial to God's commitment to bring down the violent and the arrogant in every age. With this prospective from the opening chapter, the book then returns to its focus on Assyria.

Chapters 2-3

And so chapter 2 describes the battle of Nineveh and the overthrow of the city in progressive stages. So first we see the front line of Babylonian soldiers, and then we read about the charge of the chariots, and then the chaos on the city walls as the city is breached, then the slaughter of Nineveh's people, then the plundering of the city. Chapter 3 goes on to describe the results of the city's downfall for the empire as a whole. So Nahum begins by announcing a woe upon the city whose kings built with the blood of the innocent. It's an image of how injustice was built into the very system that made Assyria so successful. But their violence has sown the seeds of their own destruction, and so Assyria will fall before Babylon. The

book concludes with the taunt against the fallen king of Assyria. He's stricken with a fatal wound, and from among all the nations that he once oppressed, no one comes to help him. Rather, they sing and celebrate his destruction. And that's how the book ends.

Conclusion

Now this is a gloomy book, but it's important to see how Nahum's message addresses the tragic and perpetual cycles of human violence and oppression in every age. Human history is filled with tribes and nations elevating themselves and using violence to take what they want, resulting in the death of the innocent. And the book of Nahum uses Assyria and Babylon as examples to tell us that God is grieved, and that he cares about the death of the innocent, and that his goodness and his justice compel him to orchestrate the downfall of oppressive nations. And God's judgment on evil is good news, unless of course you happen to be Assyria. Which brings us all the way back to the conclusion of that opening poem in chapter 1, which tells us that, "The Lord is good and a refuge in the day of distress. He cares for those who take refuge in him." And so the little book of Nahum invites every reader to humble themselves before God's justice and to trust that in his time, he will bring down the oppressors of every time and place. And that's what the book of Nahum is all about.

Habakkuk

Introduction

The book of the prophet Habakkuk. He lived during the final decades of Israel's southern kingdom, and it was a time of injustice and idolatry. He saw the rising threat of Babylon on the horizon, and that was not good news for anybody. But unlike the other prophets, Habakkuk does not accuse Israel. He doesn't even speak on God's behalf to the people. Rather, all of his words are addressed personally to God, and the book tells about Habakkuk's personal struggle, his journey of trying to believe that God is good when there is so much evil and tragedy in the world. And so Habakkuk's words are actually poems of lament, and they're very similar to the laments that you find in the book of Psalms. The poet lodges a complaint and then draws God's attention to suffering or injustice in the world, demanding that God do something. And knowing about this lament form, it's actually the key to understanding the design and message of this short book.

Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1 and 2 are framed as a back-and-forth argument between Habakkuk and God, and the prophet lodges two complaints, to which God offers two responses. His first complaint is that life in Israel has become horrible. The Torah is neglected, resulting in violence and injustice, and it's all being tolerated by Israel's corrupt leaders. And Habakkuk, he's crying out asking God to do something, but nothing seems to change. But then all of a sudden, God responds. He says

that he's very aware of the corruption of his own people Israel and that he's summoning the armies of Babylon to bring down his justice on Israel. And very similar to the message of Micah or Isaiah, God says he will use this terrifying empire to devour Israel because of their injustice and evil.

But Habakkuk has a problem with this answer, and so he offers his second complaint. He says, "Babylon is even worse than Israel! They're more corrupt, they're more violent, they have deified their own military power, they treat humans like animals, gathering them up like fish in a net." He says, "They devour nations and people groups in order to build their own empire." And so Habakkuk says, "How can you, a holy good God, use such corrupt nations as your instruments in history?" He demands an explanation. In fact, he depicts himself as a watchman on the city walls, waiting for God's response, which eventually comes. God tells Habakkuk to get out some tablets and chisel and write down what he sees and hears. It's a vision about an appointed time in the future, that even though it may seem slow in coming, it will eventually come. In fact, God says that the righteous person will live by their faith in this hope and vision. So what is this divine promise that Habakkuk is supposed to write down? It's that God will bring Babylon down. God says that the violence and oppression of the nations create this never ending cycle of revenge and that God will use this cycle to bring about the rise and fall of nations. The fact that God might, for a time, use a corrupt nation like Babylon does not mean that he endorses everything that they do. He holds all nations accountable to his justice, and so Babylon will fall along with any other nation that acts like them.

God's promise is then elaborated by a series of five woes that describe the kinds of oppression and injustice that is perpetrated by nations like Babylon. The first two target unjust economic practices, like how wealthy people would charge ridiculous interest just to keep poor people in debt, and so they build their wealth through crooked means. The third woe is a critique of slave labor, treating humans like animals and threatening them with violence if they don't produce. The fourth woe targets the abuse of alcohol by irresponsible leaders. While people are suffering under their bad leadership,

they're partying and wasting their money on sex and booze. And the last woe exposes the idolatry, the engine that drives such nations. They have made money and power and national security into their gods, offering these allegiance at all costs, and so people become slaves to their own national empire.

Now the practices described here are not unique to Babylon, but that's part of the point. Given the human condition, most nations eventually become Babylon, and so this is how God's answer to Habakkuk in this book becomes God's answer to all later generations, to anyone who lives in a world ruled by other Babylons. But it leaves the question hanging. Is God going to let this cycle, the rise and fall of Babylon-like empires, go on forever? And that question is what chapter 3 is about.

Chapter 3

We're told that this is a prayer of Habakkuk, and it begins by Habakkuk pleading with God to act now in the present, like he has in the past, in bringing down corrupt nations. And what follows is a very ancient poem. It first describes a powerful, terrifying appearance of God. It's very similar to the opening poems of Micah and Nahum and similar to the appearance of God at Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus. There's cloud and fire and earthquake; when the creator shows up to confront human evil, everybody will be paying attention. Habakkuk then goes on to describe this future defeat of evil as a future exodus. So just like God came as a warrior and he split the sea in his battle against Pharaoh, Habakkuk says that God will once more bring his judgment down on the head of the evil house. So Pharaoh, like Babylon, has become here an archetype of violent human nations. But at the same time, we're told that when God confronts evil, he will save his people and his anointed one. It's a reference to the King from the line of David.

And so in this poem, the exodus story of the past has become an image of the future exodus God will perform. He will once again defeat evil and bring down the Pharaohs and the Babylons of this world. He'll bring justice to all people and rescue the oppressed and the innocent. And it's this hope that enables Habakkuk to conclude

the book with hopeful praise. Even if the world is falling apart with food shortage, or drought, or war, or whatever, he will choose trust and joy in the covenant promises of God.

Conclusion

And so Habakkuk, by the end of this book, becomes a shining example of how the righteous live by faith. Habakkuk recognizes just how dark and chaotic the world and our lives can become, and he invites us into a journey of faith, of trusting that God loves this world more than we do and that he will one day deal with its evil. And that's what the book of Habakkuk is all about.

Zephaniah

Introduction

The book of the prophet Zephaniah. Zephaniah lived during the final decades of the southern kingdom of Judah. It was when King Josiah had attempted to bring about real change in the land by removing idols and restoring the temple to the worship of Israel's God alone, but Israel was just too far gone. Worshipping other gods was too entrenched in the life of the people, and it ended up that Josiah's pride led him to a tragic death on the battlefield, as he set Jerusalem on a collision course with Babylon. And Zephaniah? He had seen all of this coming. For years, he had been warning the leaders of Jerusalem, and this little book is a collection of his poetry summarizing his message. It's designed to have three main parts. The first focuses on the Day of the Lord's judgment coming on Judah and Jerusalem. The second part is about the Day of the Lord's judgment on the nations and Jerusalem again. And then the third section explores the hope that remains for the nations and for Jerusalem on the other side of God's judgment.

Chapters 1-2

The first section opens with this shocking reversal of Genesis 1. So God's good, ordered world is going to descend back into disorder and darkness and chaos, becoming uninhabitable once again. And as you keep reading, you realize Zephaniah is developing all of these powerful poetic images to describe how Jerusalem's world

is going to end. All of the city's institutions for worshipping the gods of the Canaanites will be destroyed. All the leaders who perpetrated injustice, all the economic centers where crooked lending and borrowing took place, all of it will be gone along with the city's walls. Zephaniah develops these almost apocalyptic images to show the significance of what's going to happen. It all refers to a great army that is coming to take out Jerusalem. Now it's interesting that Zephaniah never mentions whose army God is going to use to bring this judgment. Now we know from the other prophets, Micah and Habakkuk, that it's Babylon, but Zephaniah never mentions that, and it's because he wants to highlight God's role in orchestrating the rise and fall of the city. And actually, that's what gives Zephaniah hope, not that Jerusalem as a whole can avoid its fate, but in the closing poem of section 1, he calls on anyone in Jerusalem who would seek the Lord. And he says, "these will make up the faithful remnant," the people who could be spared if they repent.

Chapters 2-3

In the second section, Zephaniah widens his focus to include the nations around Judah, so the Philistines, the Moabites, the Ammonites, even the Assyrians. He accuses all of them of corruption and violence and arrogance, and he predicts that all of them will fall before Babylon too. And what's shocking is that the final people group targeted in this section are the Israelites in Jerusalem. It's like the leaders and prophets and priests of Israel are so corrupt and violent, so estranged from their God, that he doesn't even recognize them as his people anymore. And so this section ends with God's final decision. He says he's going to gather up all the nations, including Jerusalem, and pour out his burning indignation. God's justice becomes this consuming fire that devours evil from the land, which is really intense. And so the following line that bring us into the final part of the book comes as a total surprise. We discover that this burning fire of divine judgment is not aimed at destroying people; rather, its purpose is to purify the nations, including Jerusalem.

Chapter 3

So this section begins as God says that he's going to heal and transform the rebellious nations into one unified family. And that after being purified, they're going to turn from their evil and call upon the name of the Lord. These images point to the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, all the way back in Genesis 12, that God would find a way to bless the nations and Jerusalem as well. The conclusion of the book focuses on the restoration of the city at the center of the nations. God's presence is there in the restored city, along with that faithful remnant that's been humbled and transformed by God's mercy, and they're called to sing and rejoice. And then, in this striking image, we are told that God is a poet who wants to sing too! "Your God will live among you, and he will celebrate you with songs of joy," Zephaniah says. The closing poem of the book ends with these very powerful images about God gathering up into his family the outcast and the poor and the broken, where he exalts them into a place of honor, and that's how the book ends.

Conclusion

This little book of Zephaniah, it contains some of the most intense images of God's justice and love that you find anywhere in the prophets. His justice is about his passion to protect and to rescue his world from the horror of human evil and violence. God won't tolerate the horrible things that humans do to each other and to his world, but he brings this justice in order to restore, in order to create a world where people can flourish in safety and peace because of his love. And so Zephaniah forces us to hold together these two aspects of God's character, his justice and his love; and he wants us to discover that together they contain the future hope of our world. And that's what the book of Zephaniah is all about.

Job

Introduction

The book of Job. It's a profound and very unique book in the Bible for lots of reasons. The story is set in a very obscure land that's far away from Israel, Uz. The main character, Job, he's not even an Israelite. And the author, who's anonymous, doesn't even set the story in any clear period of ancient history. This all seems intentional though. It's like the author doesn't want us to be distracted by historical questions but rather to focus simply on the story of Job and on the questions raised by his experience of suffering.

The book of Job has a very clear literary design. It opens and closes with a short narrative prologue and then epilogue. And then the central body of the book is dense Hebrew poetry, representing conversations between Job and four dialogue partners called "the friends." These conversations are then concluded by a series of poetic speeches given by God to Job. Let's dive in to see how it works together.

Chapters 1-2

The prologue introduces us to Job, and we're told that he's this blameless, upright man who honors God; he's a super good guy. And then all of a sudden we're transported into the heavenly realms, and God is holding court with his staff team. It's a very common

image in the Old Testament describing how God runs the world. And among the heavenly beings is a figure called “the satan,” which in Hebrew means “the accuser” or “the prosecutor.”

It’s like we’re watching a court scene. God presents Job as a truly righteous man, and then the accuser challenges God’s policy of rewarding righteous people like Job. He says the only reason Job obeys you is because you bless him with prosperity. Let Job suffer; then we’ll see how righteous he actually is. And then God agrees to let the accuser inflict suffering on Job.

Now it’s at this point in the story that most of us go, “What? Why did God do that?” And then we assume that this book is going to answer that question—why God allows good people to suffer. But as you read on, the book doesn’t answer that question. Nothing in the book ever answers that question.

The prologue is setting up the real questions this book is trying to get at, questions about God’s justice and whether God operates the universe according to the strict principle of justice. And the response to those questions comes as you read through to the end of the book, not at the beginning. The ultimate reason for Job suffering is simply never revealed, so the prologue concludes with a suffering and bewildered Job, who’s rebuked by his wife. And he’s approached by three friends who are going to try and provide wisdom and counsel. Their names are Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They are all non-Israelites like Job, and they represent the best of ancient Near Eastern thinking about God and suffering in the human condition.

Chapters 3-28

And this moves into the main part of the book. First Job speaks— this is how this section of the book works. First Job is going to speak, and then will follow a response from a friend. Then Job will respond to that friend, and then another friend will respond to Job’s response and so on, back and forth for three cycles.

And this whole debate has focused on three questions: Is God truly just in character? And does God run the universe on the strict principle of justice? And if so, then how is Job’s suffering to be explained?

As we're going to see, Job and the friends, they're working from a huge assumption about what God's justice ought to look like in the world, namely that every single thing that happens in the universe should operate according to the strict principle of justice. So if you're a wise, good person and you honor God, good things will happen to you; God will reward you. But if you're evil and stupid and do sinful things, bad things will happen to you; God will punish you.

Now Job's constant argument throughout his speeches is this: First of all, that he's innocent, and so the implication of that is that his suffering is not a divine punishment. Now we know from the prologue both of these things are true. Remember, God himself said Job is righteous and blameless, and so Job concludes his argument by accusing God. God either doesn't run the world according to justice, or even worse, God himself is simply unjust.

The friends, on the other hand, they beg to differ. Their argument is that God is just. The implication being that God always runs the world according to justice in this way, and so they conclude by accusing not God, but Job. Job must have done something really, really bad for God to punish him like this. They even start making up possible sins that Job must have committed. Job protests all of this. In fact, he gets so fed up with the friends that he eventually just gives up on them. He takes up his case directly with God.

Chapters 29-31

Now something to be aware of is that Job, he's on an emotional roller coaster in these poems. He used to think that God is just, but now he can't reconcile that with his suffering. And so in some outbursts, Job, he'll accuse God of being a bully. Once he even declares that God has orchestrated all the injustice in the world. But the moment he utters that thought, he's terrified of it because he wants to hope and believe that God is truly just. Job is all over the place in this section. And so he makes one last statement of his innocence, and then he demands that God show up personally to explain himself.

Chapters 32-37

Now it's at this point that a surprise friend shows up, Elihu the Buzite. Now he's not an Israelite, but he does have a Hebrew name. And Elihu, he has the same assumption as Job and the friends. He argues that God is just and that that implies that God always operates the universe according to justice, but then Elihu draws a more sophisticated conclusion about why good people suffer. It may not be punishment for sin in the past. God might inflict suffering as a warning to help people avoid sin in the future. Or God might use pain and suffering to build character or to teach people valuable lessons. Elihu doesn't claim to know why Job is suffering, but one thing he is certain of: Job is wrong to accuse God of being unjust. Job doesn't even respond to Elihu, and the dialogues come to a close. It's like the wisdom of the ancients has been spent and the mystery remains.

Chapters 38-41

And then all of a sudden God shows up in a whirlwind, and he responds to Job personally. He first responds to Job's accusation that he's unjust and incompetent at running the universe. So God takes Job on a virtual tour of the universe, and he starts asking him all these questions about the order and origins of the cosmos. Was Job ever around when God architected the earth or organized the constellations? Has Job ever commanded the sunrise or controlled the weather? God has his eyes on all of these cosmic details that Job has never even conceived of. Then God starts going into detail describing the grazing habits of mountain goats and how deer give birth, or the feeding patterns of lions and wild donkeys.

What's the point of all this? Remember the assumption of Job and his friends about what it looks like for God to run the world according to justice. Underneath that assumption is a deeper one that Job and his friends have a wide enough perspective on life to make such a claim about how God ought to run the world. And God's response with this virtual tour, it deconstructs all of these assumptions. It first of all shows that the universe is a vast, complex place and that God has his eyes on all of it—every detail. Job, on the other hand, has

only the small horizon of his life experience to draw from. His view of the world is very limited, and so what looks like divine injustice from Job's point of view needs to be seen in an infinitely larger context. Job is simply not in a position to make such a huge accusation about God.

After the virtual tour, God asks Job if he would like to micromanage the world for a day according to the strict principle of justice that Job and his friends assume, punishing every evil deed of every person at every moment with precise retribution. The fact is that carrying out justice in a world like ours, it's extremely complex. It's never black and white like Job and the friends seem to think.

Which leads to God's last point. He starts describing these two fantastic creatures, Behemoth and Leviathan, which some people think are poetic depictions of the hippo and crocodile. More likely they refer to well-known creatures from ancient Near Eastern mythology that are used elsewhere in the Bible as symbols of the disorder and danger that exists in God's good world. These creatures, they're not evil; God's actually quite proud of them, but they're not safe either. The point is that God's world is amazing and very good, but it's not perfect or always safe. God's world has order and beauty, but it's also wild and sometimes dangerous, just like these two fantastic creatures.

And so we come back to the big question of Job's suffering. Why is there suffering in God's world? Whether it's from earthquakes or wild animals or from other humans, God doesn't explain why. What he says is that we live in an extremely complex, amazing world that at this stage at least is not designed to prevent suffering. And that's God's response. Job challenged God's justice. God responds that Job doesn't have sufficient knowledge about our universe to make such a claim. Job demanded a full explanation from God, and what God asked Job for is trust in his wisdom and character. And so Job responds with humility and repentance. He apologizes for accusing God, and he acknowledges that he's overstepped his bounds.

Chapter 42

Then all of a sudden the book concludes with a short epilogue. First God says that the friends were wrong, that their ideas about God's justice were just too simple—not true to the complexity of the world or God's wisdom. And then God says that Job has spoken rightly about him. Now this is surprising because it can't apply to everything Job said. I mean, we know Job drew hasty and wrong conclusions, but God still approves of Job's wrestling, how Job came honestly before God with all of his emotion and pain and simply wanted to talk to God himself. And God says that's the right way to process through all of this, through the struggle of prayer. The book concludes with Job having his health, his family, his wealth, all restored, not as a reward for good behavior but simply as a generous gift from God. And that's the end of the book.

Conclusion

So the book of Job, it doesn't unlock the puzzle of why bad things happen to good people; rather, it does invite us to trust God's wisdom when we do encounter suffering rather than try and figure out the reason for it. When we search for reasons, we tend to either simplify God, like the friends, or like Job, accuse God but based on limited evidence. And so the book is inviting us to honestly bring our pain and our grief to God and to trust that God actually cares and that he knows what he's doing. And that's what the book of Job is all about.

Psalms

Introduction

The book of Psalms. It's a collection of one hundred fifty ancient Hebrew poems, songs, and prayers that come from all different periods in Israel's history. Many of these poems are connected with King David—seventy-three actually. And he was known as a poet and a harp player. But there are many different authors behind these poems. There's the poems of Asaph, or from the sons of Korah, and some from other worship leaders in the temple. Even Solomon and Moses have their own poems, and nearly one third of these are anonymous.

Now many of these poems came to be used by the choirs that sang in Israel's temple. But the book of Psalms is actually not a hymn book. At some point in the period after Israel's exile to Babylon, these ancient poems were gathered together and intentionally arranged into the book of Psalms before us. And it has a very unique design and message that you're not going to notice unless you read it from beginning to end.

Now to see how the book of Psalms is designed, it's actually most helpful to start at the end. The book concludes with five poems of praise to the God of Israel, and each one begins and ends with the word "hallelujah," which is Hebrew for a command to tell a group of people to praise "Yah," which is short for the divine name Yahweh. Now that's a really nice five-part arrangement, and it looks like someone's giving us a conclusion here to the book.

So it invites the question: Does the book have any other signs of intentional design? If you pay attention to the headings of the poems, you'll notice that at five places, your Bible translators have the headings, "book one," "book two," "book three," "four," and "five" at various points and that these divide the book into five large sections.

Now the reason for this is that the final poem in each of those sections has a very similar ending that looks like an editorial addition. It reads something like, "May the Lord, the God of Israel, be blessed forever and ever, amen and amen." So the book has a conclusion. It has an internal organization into five main parts, and so the natural place to go from here is now the beginning to look for an introduction.

Chapters 1-2

And what do we find? Psalm 1 and 2, which stand outside of book one because most of the poems in book one are linked to David, except Psalms 1 and 2, which are anonymous. Psalm 1 celebrates how blessed the person is who meditates on the Torah, prayerfully reading it day and night and then obeying it.

Now the word "Torah," it simply means "teaching," and more specifically it came to refer to the five books of Moses that begin the Old Testament. And here actually the word seems to be used with both meanings in mind, which explains why it has five main parts. The book of Psalms is being offered as a new Torah that will teach God's people the lifelong practice of prayer as they strive to obey God's commands given in the first Torah.

Psalm 2 is a poetic reflection on God's promise to King David, from 2 Samuel chapter 7, that one day a Messianic King would come and establish God's Kingdom over the world and defeat evil and rebellion among the nations. Now Psalm 2 concludes by saying that all those who take refuge in the Messianic King will be blessed, precisely the word used to open Psalm 1.

And so together these two poems tell us that the book of Psalms is designed to be the prayer book of God's people as they strive to be faithful to the commands of the Torah as they hope and wait for the

future Messianic Kingdom. Now with these two themes introduced, we can start to see how the smaller books have been designed as well around these two ideas.

Chapters 3-41

So for example, book one has, right at the center, a collection of poems, Psalms 15-24, that opens and closes with a call to covenant faithfulness. And then in Psalms 16-18, we find a depiction of David as a model of this kind of faithfulness. And he calls out to God to deliver him, and God elevates him as king. Now in the corresponding set of poems, Psalms 20-23, the David of the past has become an image of the Messianic King of the future, who will also call out to God, he will be delivered, and then given a Kingdom over the nations. And then right at the center of this collection is a poem, Psalm 19, dedicated to praising God for the Torah. So here we go: the two themes from Psalm 1 and 2 are bound together tightly here.

Chapters 42-72

Book two opens with two poems that are united in their hope for a future return to the temple in Zion, and this is the image closely associated with the hope of the Messianic Kingdom. Then book two closes with a poem that depicts the future reign of the Messianic King over all of the nations. This poem's really amazing because it echoes all these other passages from the prophets about the Messianic Kingdom, and it concludes by saying that this King's reign will bring about the fulfillment of God's ancient promise to Abraham to bring God's blessing to all of the nations.

Chapters 73-89

Book three also concludes with a poem reflecting on God's promise to David, but this time in light of Israel's exile. So the poet remembers how God said he would never abandon the line of David, but now he's looking at Israel's rebellion in its result and destruction and exile and the downfall of the line of David. And so the poet ends by asking God to never forget his promise to David.

Chapters 90-106

Book four is designed to respond to this crisis of exile, so the opening poem returns us back to Israel's roots with a prayer of Moses. And he does what he did on Mount Sinai after the golden calf incident, which is to call upon God to show mercy. The center of book four is dominated by a group of poems that announced that the Lord, the God of Israel, reigns as the true King of the world and that all creation, trees, mountains, rivers, are all summoned to celebrate that future day when God will bring his justice and Kingdom over all the world.

Chapters 107-145

Book five opens with a series of poems that affirms that God hears the cries of his people and will one day send the future King to defeat evil and bring God's Kingdom. This book also contains two larger collections, one called the "hallel," the other called "the songs of ascent." Each one of these collections concludes with a poem about the future Messianic Kingdom. And these two collections together, they sustain the hope for a future exodus-like act of God to redeem his people. And then right between them is Psalm 119. It's the longest poem in the book. It's an alphabet poem; each line begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and it explores the wonder and the gift of the Torah as God's Word to his people. So here we go. The themes from Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 and Torah and Messiah combined all together here in book five, which brings us all the way back to that five-poem conclusion.

Chapters 146-150

In the center poem, Psalm 148, all creation is summoned to praise the God of Israel because he has "raised up a horn for his people." Now the horn here is a metaphor of a bull's horn raised in victory. And this image echoes back to the same image used in Hannah's song, 1 Samuel chapter 2, but also to the earlier Psalm 132. The horn is a symbol for the future Messianic King and his victory over evil. It's a fitting conclusion to this amazing book.

Now here's one more thing that you are likely going to miss if you

don't read this book in order. There's lots of different kinds of poems in the book of Psalms, but they all basically fall into two big categories—either poems of lament or poems of praise. Poems of lament expressed pain, confusion, and anger about how horrible the world is and how horrible things are happening to the poet, and so these poems draw attention to what's wrong in the world and they ask God to do something about it. There's a lot of these in the book, which tells us something important: that lament is an appropriate response to the evil that we see in our world. But what you'll notice is that lament poems predominate earlier in the book, in books one through three. Pay attention because you'll see praise poems occasionally too. Praise poems are poems of joy and celebration, and they draw attention to what's good in the world. They retell stories of what God has done in our lives and thank God for it.

In books four and five, you'll notice that praise poems come to outnumber lament poems, and it all culminates in that five-part hallelujah conclusion. So this shift from lament to praise, this is profound, and it tells us something about the nature of prayer. As we hoped for the Messianic Kingdom, as the book teaches us to do, this will create tension for us as we look out on the tragic state of our world and of our lives.

Conclusion

And so the Psalms teach us not to ignore the pain of our lives, but at the same time, biblical faith is forward-looking, looking to the promise of God's future Messianic Kingdom. And so Torah and Messiah, lament and praise, faith and hope—that's what the book of Psalms is all about.

Proverbs

Introduction

The book of Proverbs. The word “proverb” typically refers to a short, clever saying that offers some kind of wisdom, and this book has a lot of those, but they’re almost all in the center section of the book, chapters 10-29. But there is way more going on in the book of Proverbs, especially at the beginning, chapters 1-9, and the conclusion chapters 30 and 31.

The book’s been designed with an introduction, chapter 1 verses 1-9, and it first of all links this book to King Solomon. Now remember the story in 1 Kings chapter 3. Solomon had asked God for wisdom to lead Israel well, and so Solomon became known as the wisest man in the ancient world, and we’re told in 1 Kings chapter 4 that he wrote thousands of proverbs and poems and collected knowledge about plants and animals. So Solomon was like the fountainhead of Israel’s wisdom literature. So while not all the material in this book is written by him personally, he is where Israel’s wisdom tradition began.

Chapters 1-9

The introduction says that by reading this book, you too can gain wisdom. Now wisdom for most of us means knowledge, but the Hebrew word “khokhmah” means much more than just mental activity; it refers to action also, so think skill or applied knowledge. This is why back in the book of Exodus chapter 31 it was artists and craftsmen in Israel who were said to have khokhmah. So the purpose

of this book is to help you develop a set of practical skills for living well in God's world, and this gets linked with another key idea in the introduction, the fear of the Lord. The fear here is not about terror; it's about a healthy sense of reverence and awe for God and about my place in the universe. It's a moral mindset that recognizes I am not God and I don't get to make up my own definitions of good and evil and right and wrong; rather, I need to humble myself before God and embrace God's definition of right and wrong even when that's inconvenient for me.

Now this introduction leads us into the first main section of the book, chapters 1-9, which also doesn't contain short one-liner proverbs. Rather, what we find here are ten speeches from a father to a son about how the son should listen to wisdom and cultivate the fear of the Lord and live accordingly, which means a life of virtue and integrity and generosity, all of which leads to success and peace. The father warns his son also about folly and evil and stupid decisions that will breed selfishness and pride, all leading to ruin and shame. And so the son should make the pursuit of wisdom and the fear of the Lord his highest goals in life. And this way of thinking, it forms the moral logic of this entire book.

Now these speeches from the father also clue us into what biblical wisdom literature is and how it's different from other parts of the Bible. These books explore how to live well in God's world, but wisdom is not the same as law, like what Moses gave Israel at Mount Sinai. And it's not the same as prophecy, divine speech to God's people. Rather, wisdom literature has the accumulated insight of God's people through the generations about how to live in a way that honors God and others. And so through the book of Proverbs now, these human words about wisdom have been put together as God's word and wisdom to his people. Which connects with the other thing you find in chapters 1-9.

There are four poems from Lady Wisdom. Here wisdom has been poetically personified as a woman, who calls out to humanity to pay attention and to seek her. Wisdom says that she is woven into the fabric of the universe, and so wherever you see people making wise decisions, they're relying on her. So you see someone being

generous, or having sexual integrity, or upholding justice—they are drawing on wisdom. These Lady Wisdom poems, they're a creative poetic way of exploring this idea that we live in God's moral universe and that goodness and justice are objective realities that we ignore to our own peril. And so fearing the Lord, living wisely, it's living along the grain of the universe. Now together, these two sets of speeches, from the father and Lady Wisdom, they make a powerful claim about this book: that you're not simply reading good advice, that you're reading God's own invitation to learn wisdom from previous generations.

Chapters 10-29

And so in the next section of the book, chapters 10-29, we find hundreds of ancient proverbs, and they apply wisdom and fear of the Lord to every life topic you could imagine: family, work, neighborhood, friendship, sex, marriage, money, anger, forgiveness, alcohol, debt, everything, and these are all filtered through the value system of Proverbs 1-9. Now these proverbs, they're all pretty short. They're easy to memorize, and actually this section of the book is meant to become a reference work that you return to time and time again throughout the years, which raises some important issues in learning how to read these proverbs.

First of all, proverbs are by nature about probabilities. So you fear the Lord and you make wise, good choices, things will likely go well for you. And if you don't fear the Lord, you're foolish, your life will likely not go so well. Now that is all often true, but not always, which leads to the next point, that proverbs are not promises. They are not formulas for success. So some proverbs for example, "the fear of the Lord prolongs your life, but the years of the wicked are cut short," or "train up a child in the way they should go, and when they're old they won't turn from it." So yes, fearing God and being a moral person will most likely lead to a better, longer life, and raising your kids in a stable, loving home does set them up well, but there are no guarantees. Lots of things can and often do go wrong in our world. And so lastly, proverbs, by nature, focuses on the general rule but not the exceptions, which are many. And the wisdom books actually are not ignorant of that. The exceptions are what the other wisdom books,

Job and Ecclesiastes, are all about. And together these acknowledge that life is too complex for simple formulas, which is why we need all of the wisdom books together to get the bigger picture. This all leads to the final section of the book, two large collections of poems.

Chapter 30

First, poems from a man named Agur, who begins by acknowledging his own ignorance and folly and his great need for God's wisdom. And then Agur discovers that divine wisdom has been given to him in the Scriptures, which teach him how to live well. And so Agur is put before us as like a model reader of the book of Proverbs, somebody who is always open to hearing God's wisdom through the Scriptures.

Chapter 31

The final poems are connected to a man named Lemuel. He's a non-Israelite king, and he passes on the wisdom that was given to him by his mom. It's guidance for being a wise and just leader, and then the final poem is an acrostic, or an alphabet poem, where each line begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet. And the entire poem is about the woman of noble character. It depicts a woman who lives accordingly to the wisdom of proverbs and stands like a model of someone who takes God's wisdom and then translates it into practical decisions in everyday life, at work, or at home, in her family, and in her community.

Conclusion

So the book opens with words from a father to a son about listening to Lady Wisdom, and so now the book closes by offering the words of a mother to her son about a woman who lives wisely. The book of Proverbs is for every person in every season of life. It's a guide for living wisely and well in God's good world, and that's what the book of Proverbs is all about.

Ecclesiastes

Introduction

The book of Ecclesiastes. It's part of the Bible's wisdom literature, and it opens with this line, "The words of Qohelet, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." Now, in Hebrew, the word "qohelet" means someone who has gathered people together, and in this case, it's to learn, so it's often translated in English as "teacher." And the teacher is said to be a son or descendant of King David, and so there are different views about who this figure might have been. Many think that it refers to King Solomon, others to maybe one of the later kings of David's line, and still others think that it's actually a later Israelite teacher who has adopted a Solomon-like persona as a teaching aid. Whichever of these views is correct, the key thing is to recognize that the teacher is a character in the book and is different than the author of the book, who remains anonymous. So we do hear the teacher's voice for most of the book, but it's actually a different voice—the author—who introduces us to the teacher in the first sentence and then at the end concludes the book by summarizing and evaluating everything the teacher just said. So the author is someone who wants us to hear all that the teacher has to say and then help us process it and form our own conclusion.

Chapters 1-12

So what does the teacher have to say? Well the author summarizes the teacher's basic message at the beginning and right at the end,

and it's, "Hevel, hevel, everything is utterly hevel." Now most English Bibles translate this word "hevel" as "meaningless," but that doesn't quite capture the heart of that idea. In Hebrew, hevel literally means "vapor" or "smoke," and the teacher uses this word thirty-eight times in the book as a metaphor to describe how life is, first of all, temporary or fleeting, like a wisp of smoke, but secondly, also how life is an enigma or a paradox. Like smoke, it appears solid, but when you try and grab onto it, there's nothing there. So there's so much beauty or goodness in the world, but just when you are enjoying it, tragedy strikes, and it all seems to blow away. Or we all have a strong sense of justice, but all of the time, bad things happen to good people. So life is constantly unpredictable—it's unstable—or in the teacher's words, like chasing after the wind—hevel.

Now that is kind of a downer, so why is he saying all of this? The author's basic goal is to target all of the ways that we try to build meaning and purpose in our lives apart from God, and he lets the teacher deconstruct these. So the author thinks that we spend most of our time investing energy and emotion in things that ultimately have no lasting meaning or significance, and he lets the teacher give us a hard lesson in reality. You can see this most clearly in the opening and closing poems, which focus first of all on time and then on death. So the teacher says, "You can spend your whole life working and achieving because you think that makes your life meaningful. You should really stop and consider the march of time." For all of the human effort that takes place in the world, nothing really ever changes.

So sure, we develop technology and we build nations that rise and fall, but go climb a mountain and see if it cares. It was there long before any of us, and it will be here long after us. I mean, no one is even going to remember you or anything you did a hundred years from now, but that mountain? It will still be there. And the ocean will still be breaking on the beach, and the sun will still rise and set, and so time will eventually erase you and me and everything that we care about. And if that's not disheartening enough, the teacher also can't stop talking about death all the way through the book, but especially in this poem near the end. He says, "Death is the great

equalizer, and it renders meaningless most of our daily activities. It devours the wise and the fool, the rich and the poor. No matter who you are, what you've done, good or bad, we are all going to die, and it's inescapable."

So with these two ideas in hand, the teacher goes on to consider all the activities and false hopes that we invest our lives in to find meaning and significance, like wealth, or career, or social status, or pleasure. So you think working hard is going to make life worth it? Think about the stress and the toll that that takes on you, all the anxiety and the sleepless nights. And by the time you actually earn some wealth, you're going to be too old to enjoy it anyway. And then by the time you have to pass it on to someone, they may not even be someone who cares about anything that you did. Or maybe you think pleasure is going to make life worth it for you? Go for it! You know, live for your vacations, live for the weekend party, Monday always comes. Hevel, hevel, everything is utterly hevel.

So what does the teacher advocate then? That we become pure hedonists or relativists? Well, no. That would be hevel too. The teacher acknowledges the ideas from Proverbs, that living by wisdom and the fear of the Lord, that these have real advantages. On the whole, life will probably go better for you. See but the problem is that even living by wisdom and the fear of the Lord, they're hevel too because they don't guarantee a good life. Good people die tragically, and horrible people live long and prosper; there are just too many exceptions. And so even wisdom is hevel—again, not meaningless, but an enigma. Wisdom doesn't work the way you think it should all of the time.

So what's the way forward in the midst of all this hevel? And here, paradoxically, the teacher discovers the key to the true enjoyment of life under the sun: it's accepting hevel. It's acknowledging that everything in your life is totally out of your control. About six different times at some of the bleakest moments in his monologue, the teacher talks about the gift of God, which is the enjoyment of simple, good things in life, like friendship or family, a good meal or a sunny day. You can't control these things; you're certainly not guaranteed them, but that's their beauty. When I come to adopt a

posture of total trust in God, it frees me to simply enjoy my life as I actually experience it, not as I think it ought to be because even my expectations of what life ought to be are ultimately hevel, hevel. Everything under the sun is utterly hevel, and so the teacher's words come to a close.

Chapters 12-14

Right here at the end, the author speaks up again, and he brings it all to a conclusion. He says, "The teacher's words are very important for us to hear." He likens them to a shepherd's staff with a goad, a pointy end, which might hurt when it pokes you, but he says the teacher is trying to poke you to get you to move in the right direction towards greater wisdom. The author then warns us that you can actually take the teacher's words too far, and you could spend your whole life buried in books trying to answer life's existential puzzles. "Don't try," he says, "you'll never get there." And so instead the author offers his own conclusion, and it's this: "Fear God and keep his commandments. This is the whole duty of humans, for God will bring every deed into judgment, every hidden thing, whether good or evil."

Conclusion

And so the author thinks it's good to let the teacher challenge your false hopes and remind you that time and death make most of life completely out of your control, but what gives life true meaning is the hope of God's judgment, the hope that one day God will clear away all of the hevel and bring true justice to our world. And it's that hope that should fuel a life of honesty and integrity before God despite the fact that I remain puzzled by most of life's mysteries. And that's the wisdom of the book of Ecclesiastes.

Song of Songs

Introduction

The Song of Songs. It's a well-known, but not so well-understood, book of the Bible. It's eight chapters of love poetry, and while there is an introduction and a conclusion, the book doesn't have any kind of rigid literary design, and that's because it is a collection of poems. They're not meant to be dissected or taken apart; they're meant to be read as a flowing whole and simply enjoyed.

The first line of the book tells us that it's "the song of songs," which is a Hebrew idiom like, "the holy of holies" or "the king of kings." It's a Hebrew way of saying, "the greatest thing!" So this is the greatest song of all songs. Then we're told in the first line that this "song of songs" is of Solomon, which could mean that he's the author. His name does begin the book after all. But as you read the poems, you discover that the main voice is that of a woman called "the beloved." And while there is also a male voice, it does not seem to be Solomon. Solomon is mentioned a couple times in the poems, but he's never a speaker, and you do have to admit, Solomon is a very odd candidate as the author of this book given the fact that he had seven hundred wives.

For the lovers in the Song of Songs, they are the only ones in the world for each other. So the "of Solomon" likely means "in the wisdom tradition of Solomon." He was known for his wisdom, his poetry, his love of learning about every part of life. And Solomon

became the father of wisdom literature in Israel, and so his legacy is here carried on through a collection of love poems that explore the human experience of love and sexual desire.

Chapter 1

The opening poem introduces us to the basic theme of this book. We hear the voice of the young woman who delights in her man, a shepherd. Now she's not married to him yet, but it becomes clear that they are engaged and they cannot wait to be together. From the introduction, the poems flow back and forth from the woman's voice to the man's, shifting from scene to scene without any kind of clear, linear sequence or storyline. The poems move in these symphonic cycles, and key images and ideas get repeated and developed. So one of the basic themes uniting the poems is the intense desire that this couple has for each other, expressed through their constant seeking and finding.

Chapters 2-8

So after the opening poem, they're separated but on the hunt for one another. So the woman calls out, or she'll wake up from a dream and go looking for her lover, and more than once they'll find each other, they'll embrace, and then right when things start to get a bit racy, the scene will suddenly end, and the new one will start. They're separated, looking for each other, and on it goes.

Another repeated theme is the joy of the couple's physical attraction for one another. So multiple times they'll pause and describe each other with these elaborate metaphors, and here it's very helpful to know that these images and metaphors in Hebrew poetry are not primarily visual. If you try and paint a picture of these people based on the metaphors, you will end up with something that looks very, very strange. What you're supposed to do is reflect on the meaning of these images as they relate to the man and the woman. So you'll read through the poetic cycles, and the tension will keep building, and their desire and joy and attraction, and this spiraling repetition is a poetic way of heightening and focusing on the mystery and power of sexual love. It all comes together in the conclusion, which pauses to summarize what these poems are all about.

*Love is as strong as death, its passions are as severe as the grave,
 Its flashes are of fire, a divine flame.
 Many waters cannot extinguish love, rivers cannot sweep it away.
 If one were to give all the wealth of one's house for love,
 he would be utterly scorned.*

The poem highlights the power and the intensity of love, how it's both beautiful but also dangerous. Like fire, love can destroy people if it's abused or be life-giving if it's protected. Ultimately, love expresses the insatiable human longing to know and be fully known and desired by another. Love is one of the most transcendent and mysterious experiences in human life, and as a part of the Bible's wisdom tradition, this book says it's a gift from God.

After this, there is an odd poem about Solomon trying to do what the previous poem just said was impossible: to buy love. The woman rejects Solomon's offer, and then the book concludes with the man and the woman—they're separate once more, on the hunt for each other. He calls to hear her voice, she begs him to run away with her, and that's how the book ends. Just totally open-ended. But that's a lot like love, which never truly concludes because there's always more to discover and pursue in your beloved. And so true love has no end, and neither does this book.

Conclusion

Now through history, the big question raised by the Song of Songs is, "what on earth is love poetry doing in the Bible?" There have been three main interpretations of this book throughout history. In Jewish tradition, it's been read as an allegory, each character a symbol. So the woman is Israel, the man is God, and their love is the symbol of the covenant between God and Israel made at Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah. This view flowed into the Christian tradition, but the characters were swapped. So it's about Christ's love for his people, the Church. And this interpretation was inspired by Paul's words in Ephesians 5, that a Christian husband's love for his wife is a symbol of Christ's love for the Church.

What's interesting is that in the last hundred years, archaeological discoveries among Israel's ancient neighbors and Egypt and Babylon

has turned up all kinds of ancient love poetry that's very similar in language and imagery to the Song of Songs. We see that love poetry was a meaningful part of Israel's cultural environment, which has led most scholars today to view the Song of Songs as what it presents itself to be: an arrangement of Israelite love poetry reflecting on the divine gift of love.

But that doesn't mean that it's only ancient love poetry. There is a key feature of these poems that sticks out when you read them as a part of the Old Testament, and that's the overwhelming use of garden imagery. There are powerful echoes of the Garden of Eden and the idyllic scene between the married couple in the early chapters of Genesis. So the image of the man and the woman naked and vulnerable but completely unified and safe with one another, this resonates in the background of the Song of Songs. It's as if in these poems, we are witnessing the love of a couple whose relationship is untainted by selfishness and sin.

And so ultimately, the Song holds out hope that even though our own relationships are so often distorted by selfishness, love is a transcendent gift. And it's meant to point us to something greater, to the gift of God's love that will one day permeate and transform his beloved world. And that's what the Song of Songs is all about.

Jeremiah

Introduction

The book of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was an Israelite priest who lived and worked in Jerusalem during the final decades of the kingdom of southern Judah. He was called as a prophet to warn Israel about the severe consequences of breaking their covenant with God through their idolatry and injustice, and he even predicted that the empire of Babylon would come as God's servant to bring this judgment on Israel by destroying Jerusalem, taking the people into exile. And sadly, his words became reality. Jeremiah lived through the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and witnessed the exile personally.

Now this book came into existence in a really interesting way. Chapter 36 tells us that after twenty years of Jeremiah's preaching in Jerusalem, God called him to collect all of his sermons and poems and essays and commit them to writing, which Jeremiah did by employing a scribe named Baruch, who wrote down and compiled all of this material into a scroll. Now Baruch also gathered lots of stories about Jeremiah, and he linked all the pieces together, and so this is why the book reads like an anthology—a collection of collections. It's all been arranged to present this prophet as a messenger of God's justice and grace.

Chapters 1-24

So the book begins by God calling Jeremiah to be a prophet, and he's given a dual vocation. He will be a prophet to Israel but also to the nations. And his words will both uproot and tear down but also plant and build up. In other words, he's going to accuse Israel and warn them of God's coming judgment, but he also has a message of hope for the future.

Now this opening perfectly summarizes the first large section, chapters 1-24. It's a collection of Jeremiah's writings from before the exile, and the core idea here is that Israel has broken the covenant with God and violated all the terms of the agreement they made that are written in the Torah, and in a number of ways. They've adopted the worship of all kinds of Canaanite gods, building idol shrines all over the land, and Jeremiah develops the metaphor of idolatry as adultery and uses the language of prostitution, promiscuity, unfaithfulness to describe how Israel has given their allegiance to other gods. Jeremiah also repeatedly accuses Israel's leaders. The priests, the kings, the other prophets have all become corrupt. They've abandoned the Torah and the covenant, which has led to a tragic result: rampant social injustice. The most vulnerable people in Israelite communities—the widows, the orphans, the immigrants—were all being taken advantage of in clear violation of the laws of the Torah, and Israel's leaders didn't even seem to care.

So a classic place where all of these ideas come together is in chapter 7; it's called Jeremiah's temple sermon. The Israelites are coming to worship their God in the temple as if everything is just fine, but outside the temple, they are worshipping other gods, and some were even adopting the horrifying Canaanite practice of child sacrifice. And so Jeremiah makes his very unpopular announcement. The God of Israel is coming in judgment. He's going to destroy his own temple and punish Israel by sending an enemy from the north. This is an army that God would allow to conquer Jerusalem. And as you read on, you discover he's talking about the great empire of Babylon.

Chapter 25

As so this all leads up to a transition in chapter 25. Israel hasn't turned back to their God. And so in the first year of Babylon's new king, Nebuchadnezzar, God tells Jeremiah to announce that the Babylonian armies are headed for Israel and all of its neighbors to conquer them and take them into exile for seventy years. He compares Babylon to a cup of wine filled to the brim with God's just anger at all of Israel's injustice and idolatry, and God will make Israel and the nations drink from this cup. Now this chapter is key to the book's design because everything that follows is going to focus on Babylon's coming attack. First on Israel in chapters 26-45, and then on the other nations in chapters 46-51.

Chapters 26-45

The section about Israel first contains stories about how Jeremiah begged Israel to turn back, how he warned them right up to the last minute, but the leaders of Israel kept rejecting him. The section concludes with a large collection of stories about how Jerusalem was under siege and eventually destroyed by Babylon and about how Jeremiah was persecuted all through that time and eventually kidnapped and taken against his will to Egypt by a group of Israelite rebels.

Now right here in the middle in between all these dark stories of disaster and judgment is a collection of Jeremiah's messages of hope for Israel's future. So he picks up on Moses' prediction that after Israel had broken the covenant and gone into exile (see Deuteronomy 30), God would not abandon his people; rather, he would renew his covenant with them and transform their hearts. Jeremiah develops this promise, and he says that God is going to one day inscribe the laws of the Torah, not on tablets, but rather on the hearts of his own people. He's going to heal their rebellion, so that they can truly one day love and follow him fully. And so one day, Israel will return back to the land, and the Messiah from the line of David is going to come. And that's when all nations will come to recognize Israel's God as the true God. So these chapters are showing

that despite Israel's apostasy, God is not going to let Israel's sin get the final word. Rather, his own faithfulness will bring about the fulfillment of his promises no matter what.

Chapters 46-51

After this, we find a large collection of poems about how God is going to use Babylon to judge the nations around Israel—so Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Edom, Ammon, Damascus, Hazor. But then surprisingly the longest poems are saved for last, and they're about God's coming judgment on Babylon itself. So although God used this nation to execute his justice, God doesn't endorse their violence and idolatry. And so Babylon too will come under the standard of God's justice. And so Jeremiah denounces this nation's pride and injustice as well. Now Babylon is larger than life in these poems, and it reminds us of the image of Babylon all the way back from Genesis Chapter 11. Babylon has become the archetypal rebellious nation in their glorification of wealth and war. God's going to give this nation over to its own destruction.

Chapter 52

The book concludes with a story taken from the end of the book of 2 Kings. It tells about Babylon's final attack on Jerusalem, how they destroyed the city walls, and burned the temple, and took the people into exile. The story shows how Jeremiah's warnings of judgment from chapters 1-24 were fulfilled. But then the chapter ends with a short story about the captive Israelite king, Jehoiachin; he's heir to the line of David. And the king of Babylon releases him from prison and shows him favor and invites him to eat at the royal table for the rest of his life. And that's how the book ends.

Conclusion

So it's a little glimmer of hope, and this recalls Jeremiah's promises of hope from chapters 30-33. God hasn't abandoned his people or the promise of a future coming King from David's line. And so while this book contains a huge amount of warning and judgment, the final words conclude with a note of hope for the future, and that's what the book of Jeremiah is all about.

Lamentations

Introduction

The book of Lamentations. It's a unique book in the Old Testament that contains five poems from an anonymous author who survived and is now reflecting back on the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem and the destruction and the exile that followed. Remember the whole story from the book of 2 Kings.

The fall of Jerusalem into exile was the most horrendous catastrophe in Israel's history up to this point. So remember God had promised Abraham the land. He'd given David victory to make Jerusalem Israel's capital. And from David came the royal line of kings. You had God's presence there in the temple. That's where the priests maintained the rituals of Israel's worship. And after five hundred years of all of this history, in the summer of 587 B.C., the city fell to Babylon. It was all decimated and gone. And so the book of Lamentations is a memorial to the pain and confusion of the Israelites that followed this destruction.

Now the lament poems found here are not unique in the Bible. There's lots of them in the book of Psalms, and these biblical poems of lament, they do a number of things. They're a form of protest. They're a way of drawing everybody's attention, including God's attention, to the horrible things that happen in this world that should not be tolerated. They're a way of processing emotion, so in these poems, God's people vent their anger and dismay at the ruin caused by peoples' sin and selfishness. And these poems are a place to voice

confusion. Suffering makes us ask questions about God's character and promises, and none of this is looked down on in the Bible—just the opposite. These poems of lament give a sacred dignity to human suffering, and so these human words of grief that are addressed to God have now become part of God's word to his people.

The design of these five poems is very intentional; it's part of the book's message. So chapters 1-4 are called acrostics, which means alphabet poems. Each poetic verse begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which is made up of twenty-two letters. Now this very ordered and linear structure, it's in stark contrast to the disorder of the pain and confused grief that's explored in these poems. So it's like Israel's suffering is explored A to Z and is trying to express something that is inexpressible. Chapters 1 and 2 each have one verse per letter giving them a very similar design, but the themes are very different.

Chapter 1

So chapter 1 focuses on the grief and shame of a figure called Lady Zion. The poet personifies the city of Jerusalem as a widow, also called the daughter of Zion, and she sits alone. She's bereaved of her loved ones, devastated, no one comes to comfort her. It's a very powerful metaphor. And then Lady Zion speaks. She calls on the Lord to notice her fate. And through this image, the poet, he's showing that the city's destruction brought a level of psychological trauma on the Israelites that can only be expressed as the experience of a funeral and the death of a loved one.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 focuses on the fall of Jerusalem and how it was a consequence of Israel's sin and was brought about by God's wrath, which is a keyword in this poem. Now it's important to remember that in the Bible, God's wrath is not spontaneous volatile anger. The biblical poets and prophets, they used this work to talk about God's justice. So Israel had entered a covenant agreement with God, and for centuries they'd been violating it by worshipping other gods, perpetrating injustice, oppressing the poor. And so yes, God is slow to anger, but he eventually does get angry at human evil, and he will

bring his just anger in the form of punishment. In the case of Jerusalem, this involved allowing Babylon to come and conquer the city. And so this poem is acknowledging that God's wrath is justified, but this doesn't keep the poet from lamenting and asking God to show compassion once again.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 breaks this design pattern by having three verses per letter, so it's the longest poem in the book. And the voice is that of a lonely man speaking out of his suffering and grief as a representative of the whole people. And what's interesting is that this chapter is full of language that's drawn from other parts of the Old Testament, from the laments of Job, and from other important lament psalms, and even from the suffering servant poems in Isaiah. And the poet sees his hardship as a form of God's justice like chapter 2 said, but paradoxically, this is what gives the poet hope. And it leads him to offer the only hopeful words in the whole book. "Because of the Lord's covenant faithfulness, we do not perish. His mercies never fail; they're new every morning. How great is Your faithfulness, O God. So I say to myself the Lord is my inheritance, therefore I will put my hope in him." So the poet reasons if God is consistent enough to bring his justice on human evil, then he'll also be consistent with his covenant promise to not allow evil to get the final word. And so for this poet, God's judgment is the seedbed of hope for the future.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 goes back to the same alphabet structure as chapters 1 and 2, and it's a vivid and disturbing depiction of the two-year siege in Jerusalem. And it contrasts how things used to be in Jerusalem of the past and how terrible they became in the siege. So children used to laugh and play in the streets, but now they beg for food. The wealthy used to eat lavish meals, but now they eat whatever they can find in the dirt. And the royal leaders used to be full of splendor, but now they're famished and dirty and unrecognizable. And the anointed king from the line of David has been captured and

dragged away. So the poem's power comes from the shock of these contrasts, and it's exploring the depth of the suffering that Israel brought on itself.

Chapter 5

Now the final poem is unique because it breaks the design pattern. It's the same length as the alphabet poems, but the alphabet order is gone. It's like the poet can't hold it together anymore, and his grief has exploded back into chaos. The poem is a communal prayer for God's mercy. Israel begs God not to ignore their suffering or abandon them, and the poem offers a long list of all of the different kinds of people who are devastated by the fall of the city. They ask God not to forget these people, and they lament on behalf of others giving voice to their pain. Suffering in silence is just not a virtue in this book. God's people are not asked to deny their emotions but voice their protest to vent their feelings and pour it all out before God.

The book ends with something of a paradox. The poet acknowledges that God is the eternal King of the world, but also that Israel's circumstances make them feel like God is nowhere to be found. And so the final words of the book leave this tension totally unresolved. It asks, "unless you've totally rejected us?" And the book ends.

Conclusion

The poet doesn't offer a nice neat conclusion, much like our own experiences of pain and suffering. The story of the Bible doesn't end here, but this very important book shows us how lament and prayer and grief are a crucial part of the journey of faith of God's people in a broken world. And that's what the book of Lamentations is all about.

Ezekiel Ch. 1-33

Introduction

The book of the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a priest who had been living in Jerusalem during the first Babylonian attack on the city. And they spared the city, but they took a first wave of Israelite prisoners and hauled them off into exile, and Ezekiel was among them.

So the book begins five years after all that, and Ezekiel is sitting on the bank of an irrigation canal, near his Israelite refugee camp, and it's his thirtieth birthday no less, the year that he would've been installed as a priest in Jerusalem. And then all of a sudden, Ezekiel has this vision. He sees a storm cloud approaching, and then inside the cloud are four strange creatures that have wings outstretched and touching each other. And these creatures each had four faces. And then he saw four wheels, one by each creature, and then he saw that the wings of the creatures were supporting this dazzling platform. And then on that platform is a throne, and then sitting on that throne is this human-like creature glowing and shrouded in fire. And then all of a sudden, Ezekiel realizes what he's seeing! He calls it, "The appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord." It's God riding his royal throne chariot.

Now the word "glory," in Hebrew, it's "kavod." It means heavy or significant. The biblical authors use this word to describe the physical appearance and manifestation of God's significance when he shows up in person. These images in the vision, they are very similar to what happened when God appeared on Mount Sinai in the book of

Exodus. And it's also very similar to the depictions of God's presence over the Ark of the Covenant, and that's actually the most shocking thing about Ezekiel's vision. What is God's glory doing in Babylon? It is supposed to be above the Ark of the Covenant in the temple in Jerusalem.

Chapters 1-11

And so the first section of the book opens to explore that question as Ezekiel begins to accuse Israel of rebellion. So God first speaks to Ezekiel from the throne chariot, and he commissions him as a prophet. Ezekiel is to accuse Israel of breaking their covenant agreement with God in a couple of ways. Israel has given their allegiance to other gods and has been worshipping idols, and this has all led to rampant social injustice and violence. And so as a result, God appoints Ezekiel to warn the people. The first Babylonian attack that took Ezekiel into exile is going to be matched by another, and Jerusalem, its temple all face imminent destruction.

So Ezekiel uses words and more to get his message across. He also performs sign acts. These were a form of street theater. Ezekiel would go out in public and start behaving in these really bizarre ways that were like parables of his prophetic message. So he was supposed to build a tiny model of Jerusalem and then stage an attack on it, or he was to shave off all of his hair and then chop it up with a sword. Or, the most extreme, he was to play the role of the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement. And he would lay on his side for over a year, eating food cooked over poop, as a sign of the nasty food that people will have to eat during the siege of Jerusalem. And perhaps the most disheartening thing of all is the bad news God gave Ezekiel: that no one was going to listen to him. Israel would reject him because of their rebellious and hard heart, and this recalls Moses' description of the people after the wilderness rebellions, when he predicted that exile would one day happen. And Ezekiel had the unfortunate privilege of seeing it all come to pass.

And so a dismayed Ezekiel, he begins to perform his task, and after about a year, he has another vision. This one is about the temple. He goes on this virtual tour of the temple, and he sees what is happening

there in his absence, and it is not good. In the outer courtyard, in front of the temple, he sees this large idol statue, and then he sees the elders of Israel worshipping other gods, both outside and inside the temple. And then he sees the women of Israel, they're worshipping a Babylonian god named Tammuz. And the vision ends with God's glorious throne chariot moving up and away from the temple. It's leaving, going east, headed towards Babylon.

And so in chapter 11, we come to see why and how God's glory appeared to Ezekiel there in Babylon. Israel's idolatry and their covenant violations, it's become so blatant and offensive that God has left his temple. They've driven him away, and he consigns it to destruction. But God has not abandoned his people; rather, he goes into exile with them. And so at the end of this vision in chapter 11, God promises that he will return a remnant of Israel back to the land, and he'll transform them by removing their heart of stone and giving them a new soft heart of flesh, so that they can love and truly follow their God after all. This is a small glimmer of hope, and it's quickly submerged under the reality of the imminent destruction. But chapter 11 is the key transition, and it helps us understand how the rest of the book has been designed.

So the next three sections are all announcements of God's judgment, first on Israel, then on the nations around Israel, and then on Jerusalem itself. But then after that, the hopeful conclusion of chapter 11 gets developed in the final three sections of the book: first hope for Israel, then for the nations, and then for all creation.

Chapters 12-24

Chapters 12-24 focus on God's judgment coming to Israel, and this is a diverse collection of poems and essays. And here Ezekiel shows his fondness for parable and allegory. So he depicts Israel as a burnt, useless stick, or as a rebellious wife, or as a dangerous, raging lion that gets captured, or as two promiscuous sisters. These are all depictions of Israel's senseless rebellion and idolatry that result in their ruin. In this section, Ezekiel also acts like a lawyer. He begins arguing the case that, first of all, Jerusalem's destruction is truly deserved after centuries of covenant violation, and that even

if the most righteous people in the world—like Noah or Daniel or Job—were alive and praying for God to spare Israel, God would not accept their prayers; it's far too late. And so God's goodness actually demands that he bring justice on this generation of Israel. The exile has become inevitable. They've reached the point of no return.

Chapters 25-32

Following this, Ezekiel focuses first on the nations immediately around Israel and then on the two most powerful states in the region, Egypt and then Tyre. Israel has allied with these nations and adopted their gods and their idols, and so God accuses the kings of Tyre and Egypt for arrogantly viewing themselves as gods who get to define right and wrong on their own terms. And God holds these kings accountable for their pride, and he announces that he will use Babylon to bring them down. They will face God's justice along with everybody else.

Chapter 33

Following these really intense sections is a short story in chapter 33. Ezekiel is met by a refugee who has just arrived from Jerusalem, and he gives them the report that Babylon has attacked the city of Jerusalem, that the city has fallen and the temple is destroyed. Ezekiel's grim warnings have become a reality, but remember the end of chapter 11.

Conclusion

That's not the end of the story. And so in the next video, we'll explore Ezekiel's profound vision of hope, but for now, that's the first half of the book of Ezekiel.

Ezekiel Ch. 34-48

Introduction

The book of the prophet Ezekiel. In the first video, we were introduced to Ezekiel the priest. And he's sitting among the exiles in Babylon, and he's confronted by the awesome glory of God's temple presence, but it's appearing to him in Babylon. And then Ezekiel discovers why. It's because of Israel's idolatry and injustice that has compelled God to abandon his own temple. And while there is still hope for the future, the book went on to develop Ezekiel's message of divine judgment, first for Israel, and then for the nations around Israel. And then a key moment happened in chapter 33. Ezekiel receives a report that the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem is over because the city has fallen. The temple is destroyed. Ezekiel's grim words of warning came true.

The exile was the most horrendous catastrophe that ever happened to Israel, and it raised the big question of whether God was done with Israel for good. But remember at the end of chapter 11, God promised that there was still a future beyond exile for Israel. And so, the rest of the book is designed to explore Ezekiel's vision of hope, first for Israel, then for the nations, and then for all of creation.

Chapters 34-37

The hope for Israel begins with God promising to raise up a new David, a future Messianic King who's going to be the kind of leader that Israel needed but never got. And this new Israel, who's going to

come under the Messianic King's rule, is going to be a transformed people. God's going to deal with the heart of their problem of rebellion by giving them new hearts. It's just like Moses promised at the end of the book of Deuteronomy. God says he's going to remove their hard hearts and send his Spirit into his people to give them new soft hearts that can love and obey their God.

And this idea gets developed in the next strange vision. Ezekiel sees a huge valley filled up with dry human bones and skeletons, and God tells him that it's an image—a metaphor—for Israel's spiritual state. So their rebellion against God, it resulted in exile and the literal death of many people, but it was also a metaphorical death of their covenant relationship. And God tells Ezekiel that his Spirit is coming to bring his people back to life, and so this wind comes and it causes all of the bones to stand up, and it fills them with breath and life. And then skin grows over the bones, and then all of a sudden, Ezekiel sees all of these new humans standing in front of him. Now this vision, it's recalling the story about the creation of humans in Genesis chapter 2, where God made humans out of dirt and divine breath. And so Israel and all humanity have rebelled, resulting in death, and so the only hope is that God would perform a new act of creation and remake humans in such a way that they can truly live in a relationship of love with God and with each other.

And so after God is going to deal with the evil that's in the hearts of his own people, some questions still remain unresolved like: What about the evil that is still rampant out there among the nations? And what about the future of God's dwelling place in the temple? And this is what the final two sections of the book are about.

Chapters 38-39

So first come chapters 38 and 39, and they promise God's final defeat of evil among the nations, which gets personified by a ruler who's named Gog, from the land of Magog. Now this name is derived from a genealogy of ancient kingdoms and lands from Genesis chapter 10, and it referred to powerful nations from the distant past. And so Ezekiel picks up this ancient biblical name as an image of any and all violent kingdoms. And so we find that Gog gets allied with

seven nations that come from all four directions of the compass; it's clearly an image that represents all of the nations. This also helps us understand why Ezekiel describes Gog with images that he used earlier in the book to describe the king of Tyre, and the king of Egypt, Pharaoh. For Ezekiel, Gog is an amalgam of all of the worst, most violent people in the Bible. Gog is the archetype of human rebellion against God.

The basic story in these chapters is that Gog resists God's plan to restore his people. And so just like Pharaoh in the exodus story, Gog comes to destroy the people, but God unleashes his justice on Gog. And it's in a flurry of scenes that do not actually make very good literal sense if you read them in sequence. Because first, Gog and his armies are consumed by an earthquake, but then they are consumed by fire two different times, and then after that, God comes and strikes Gog and his army down in the fields where they lay unburied for months. It's clear that these scenes are full of symbol and imagery. Ezekiel has pulled out his entire poetic tool set here to describe how God is determined to finally defeat human evil that has ruined his world, and it's so that he can pave the way for a new creation. And so once evil is finally dealt with among the nations, the last section of the book describes how God's presence is going to one day return to his people and his temple to bring cosmic restoration.

Chapters 40-48

So Ezekiel first gets this long, elaborate vision of a new temple in a new city. He's given this heavenly tour guide, who shows him around the new temple complex, and it's much larger and more majestic than even Solomon's temple. There's a new altar, new priests, a whole new system of worship. And then after this elaborate tour, God's glorious throne chariot that he saw back in his first vision comes back, and it enters the new temple. Now the meaning of these temple visions has been the source of debate for a long, long time.

So some Christian and Jewish readers believe that this vision will be fulfilled literally one day, and that these chapters offer the actual blueprints of the new temple that will be built when the Messiah

returns and brings God's Kingdom. But many other Jewish and Christian readers think that this vision—like all of Ezekiel's other visions—is full of symbols. And they depict the reality of God's presence returning to his people in the Messianic Kingdom, but not necessarily in the form of an actual building. Whichever view you take, it's important that Ezekiel never calls the city Jerusalem, and chapters 47 and 48 show why.

Ezekiel sees this tiny stream pouring out of the temple threshold and steps, and then it quickly becomes this raging river, and then it flows out of the temple and the city into the desert, into one of the most desolate places on planet Earth, the Dead Sea valley. And then that river, it leaves behind a trail of trees and life, and then the Dead Sea gets transformed into a living sea that's teeming with plants and animals. All of this imagery comes from the Garden of Eden in Genesis chapters 1 and 2, and we see just how cosmic Ezekiel's vision really is. God's plan has always been to restore all humanity and all creation back to his life-giving presence.

Conclusion

And so the book ends with the name of this garden city, "the Lord is there." And so Ezekiel's visions come to a close, full of hope for a new future, new humans living in a new world that's animated by God's life-giving Spirit. It's a world permeated with God's love and justice, and that's what the book of Ezekiel is all about.

Ezra-Nehemiah

Introduction

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah. In most modern Bibles, these books are separate, but that division happened long after it was written. It was originally a unified work written by a single author. The story is set after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and its temple and took many of the people into exile. And this book picks up about fifty years later and tells the return of some Israelites to Jerusalem and then what happened when they rebuilt the city and their lives there.

Specifically, the book focuses on three key leaders who led the rebuilding efforts. You have Zerubbabel, then Ezra, and then Nehemiah, and the book's design focuses on the efforts of each leader. Zerubbabel leads a large group of people back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Then about sixty years later, Ezra arrives in Jerusalem to teach the Torah and rebuild the community, and then he's followed by Nehemiah, who leads the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. And these three stories are designed to be parallel. Each begins with the king of Persia prompted by God to send the leader to Jerusalem, and he offers resources and support. And then each leader encounters opposition in their efforts, which they then overcome, but in a way that leads to a strange anticlimax in each of the three parts. Let's back up and see how it fits together.

Ezra 1-6

So the story begins with a decree from Cyrus, the king of Persia, and he's moved by God to allow the exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. And the author says this fulfills a promise made by the prophet Jeremiah, that the exiles would one day return to Jerusalem. Now this fulfillment should trigger our hopes in the many other prophetic promises that exile was not the end of the story. We have hope for a future Messianic King from the line of David. We have hope for a rebuilt temple, where God's presence will dwell with his people, hope for God's Kingdom to come over all the nations and bring his blessing, just like he promised Abraham.

And so it's with all these hopes in mind that we read on into the story of Zerubbabel. His name means "planted in Babylon." He represents the generation born in Babylonian captivity, and he leads a wave of Israelites returning to Jerusalem. After they settle there, they rebuild the altar for offering sacrifices and later the temple itself. The foundation laying ceremony and then the temple's final dedication, these are key moments. The past stories of the tabernacle and temple's dedication should be in our minds. This is when the fiery cloud of God's presence is supposed to descend. He's dwelling with his people, and it doesn't happen. And so while some people are happy about this new temple, the elders who had seen the previous temple of Solomon, they cry out in grief. It is nothing like their glorious past or their hopes for the future. And it's right here that we get the first story of opposition, and it's very odd.

So the grandchildren of the Israelites who were not taken into exile, they had been living in Jerusalem all along. They come to offer help with the temple rebuilding, and Zerubbabel refuses. He says, "You have no part in our temple." And this of course generates a conflict, which Zerubbabel overcomes. But it's very strange because the prophets had envisioned that the tribes of Israel would all come together, along with all of the nations, to participate in the worship of the God of Israel when the Kingdom finally comes. So this is an anticlimactic moment to say the least.

Ezra 7-10

In the next section, we zoom forward about sixty years, and we're introduced to Ezra. He's a leader among the exiled Israelites in Babylon, and he's a Torah scholar and a teacher. And so he gets appointed by Artaxerxes, king of Persia, to lead another wave of people back to Jerusalem. And Ezra wants to bring about spiritual and social renewal among the people. Our hopes are high, and again we come to another anticlimactic moment in the story.

Ezra learns that many of the exiled Israelites that had come back, they had married non-exiles who had been living around Jerusalem. Some of them were non-Israelites, almost certainly some of them were. Ezra then appeals to the commands of the Torah that Israel was supposed to be holy and separate from the ancient Canaanites. And he then says that the people living around Jerusalem are like the Canaanites; they're going to corrupt the exiles. So Ezra offers a prayer of repentance, and it's very heartfelt. But then he rallies all the leaders and enacts this divorce decree that says all these marriages should be annulled, the women and children sent away. And then the decree is only partially carried out when given a list of some of the men who divorce their wives. The story is very strange for a number of reasons.

First of all, God never commanded Ezra to do any of this. It was the leaders of Jerusalem who led Ezra to make the decree. Second, the contemporary prophet Malachi, he did say that the exile should care about purity, but he also said that God was opposed to divorce. And so the mixed results of the decree, this all fits into this pattern of a strange concluding anticlimax, which leads us to the next section about Nehemiah.

Nehemiah 1-7

He's an Israelite official serving in the Persian government, and when he hears about the ruined state of Jerusalem's walls, he prays and then gets permission from the Persian king Artaxerxes to go and rebuild the walls. The king even gives him an armed escort and all these resources. So after arriving in Jerusalem, he begins the

building project, and he too faces opposition from the people who had already been living around Jerusalem. Once again we face a tension in the story.

The contemporary prophet Zechariah said that the New Jerusalem of God's Kingdom would be a city without walls, that God's presence would surround it, that people from all nations would come and join the covenant people. But Nehemiah seems to operate with the opposite vision. He informs the people surrounding Jerusalem that they have no part in Jerusalem, and this of course provokes them to hostility. And so while Nehemiah carries out his vision for the city with integrity and courage, they have to build the city with armed guards to protect them. We keep wondering, "Could this whole conflict have been handled differently?"

Nehemiah 8-12

And this all leads to the conclusion of the book in two movements, first positive, and then negative. Ezra and Nehemiah combine forces to bring about a spiritual renewal among the people. They gather all the exiles together for a festival, they read and teach the Torah to all the people for seven days, and then they celebrate the ancient Feast of Tabernacles to remember God's faithfulness from the exodus and the wilderness journeys. Then they offer a confession of their sins. They vow themselves to renew the covenant, follow all the commands of the Torah, and they finish with the great celebration over the temple, the walls of Jerusalem. And we're thinking this could be the turning point, but it's not. The book ends on a huge downer.

Nehemiah 13

Nehemiah tours around the city, and he finds that the people have not been fulfilling their covenant vows. So Zerubbabel's work is undone as he finds the temple being neglected and staffed by all these unqualified people. He then discovers that Ezra's work is being compromised. He finds everyone violating the Torah. People are working on the Sabbath, and even his own work on the walls is involved because people are setting up markets around the walls of Jerusalem and working on the Sabbath. So Nehemiah, he goes on a rampage. He is beating people up, he is pulling out their hair, and

he's yelling, "Obey the commands of the Torah!" In his final words are a prayer that God would remember him, that at least he tried, and the book ends. I mean, it's very strange, but we have been prepared for it, right?

Conclusion

These anticlimactic moments have been woven into the book's design intentionally, and so it raises the question: What on earth does this book contribute to the storyline of the Bible? Well remember, the book started by raising our hopes in the prophetic promises about the Messiah, the temple, the Kingdom of God, and then none of it happens!

So even though Israel is now back in the land, their spiritual state seems unchanged from before the exile. And while Ezra, Nehemiah, they do their best, but their political and social reforms among the people don't address the core issues of their heart. So what the book is pointing out is the same need highlighted by the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. What God's people need is a holistic transformation of their hearts if they're ever going to love and obey their God.

And so the book ends on a downer, yes, but it forces you to keep reading on into the wisdom and prophetic books to find out what is God going to do to fulfill his great covenant promises? But for now, that's the book of Ezra-Nehemiah.

Esther

Introduction

The book of Esther. It's one of the more exciting and curious books in the Bible. The story is set over one hundred years after the Babylonian exile of the Israelites from their land. And while some Jews did return to Jerusalem, remember Ezra and Nehemiah, many did not.

And so the book of Esther is about a Jewish community living in Susa, the capital city of the ancient Persian Empire. The main characters in the story are two Jews, Mordecai and then his niece Esther. And then there's the king of Persia who's something of a drunken pushover in this story. And then there's the Persian official Haman, the cunning villain.

Now this is a curious book in the Bible mainly for the fact that God is never even mentioned, not once, which might strike you as kind of odd. I mean, isn't the Bible about God? But this is a brilliant technique by the author, who's anonymous by the way. It's an invitation to read this story looking for God's activity, and there are signs of it everywhere. The story is full of very odd "coincidences" and ironic reversals, and it all forces you to see God's purpose at work, but behind the scenes. Let's just dive into the story.

Chapters 1-2

The book opens with the king of Persia throwing two elaborate banquet feasts that last a total of one hundred and eighty-seven

days. And it's all for the grandiose purpose of displaying his greatness and splendor. On the last day of the banquet feast, he's really drunk, and he demands that his wife Queen Vashti appear at the party to show off her beauty. She refuses, and so in a drunken rage, the king deposes Vashti and makes the silly decree that all Persian men should now be the masters of their own homes. Then he holds a beauty pageant because he wants to find a new queen. This is like a really bad soap opera. But it's right here that we're introduced to Esther and Mordecai.

Esther's hides her Jewish identity and enters the beauty pageant and wins! And the king is so obsessed with Esther that he elevates her to become the new queen of Persia. After this, and even more serendipitous, is the fact that Mordecai just happens to overhear two royal guards plotting to murder the king. And so he informs Esther, who in turn informs the king, and Mordecai gets credit for saving the king's life. Now right here, from the beginning, God's not mentioned anywhere, but this all seems providentially ordered. What is it that God's up to? You have to keep reading.

Chapter 3

We're next introduced to Haman, who's not actually a Persian; he's called an Agagite. He's a descendant of the ancient Canaanites. Remember 1 Samuel chapter 15. The king elevates Haman to the highest position in the kingdom, and he demands that everybody kneel before Haman. Well when Mordecai sees Haman, he refuses to kneel, which of course fills Haman with rage. And when he finds out that Mordecai's Jewish, Haman successfully persuades the king to enact this crazy decree to destroy all of the Jewish people. And to decide the date of the Jews' annihilation, Haman rolls the dice. A die is called "pur" in Hebrew; tuck that away for later. Eleven months later on the thirteenth of Adar, all the Jews will die. Haman and the king then have a drinking banquet to celebrate their really horrible decision.

Chapter 4

So the focus now turns to Mordecai and Esther, who are the only hope for the Jewish people. They make a plan that Esther's going

to reveal her Jewish identity to the king and ask him to reverse the decree. But approaching the king without a royal request is, according to Persian law, an act worthy of death. So in a key statement, Mordecai, he's confident that even if Esther remains silent, that deliverance for the Jews will arrive from another place. And then Mordecai wonders aloud. He says, "Who knows, maybe you've become queen for this very moment." Esther responds with bravery, and she purposes to go to the king with her amazing words, "If I perish, I perish." Then in what unfolds, we watch the ironic reversal of all of Haman's evil plan.

Chapter 5

So Esther hosts the king and Haman at a first banquet, and she says that she wants to make a special request of both of them at an exclusive banquet the following day. So Haman leaves the banquet totally drunk, and he sees Mordecai in the street. He fumes with anger, and he orders that a tall stake be built so that Mordecai can be impaled upon it in the morning. It seems like things can't get any worse for the Jews and for Mordecai, but all of a sudden the story pivots.

It just so happens that night, the king, he can't sleep, and he has the royal chronicles read to him for good bedtime reading. And he just happens to hear about how Mordecai had saved the king's life. He had totally forgotten! So in the morning, Haman enters to request Mordecai's execution, and the king in that moment orders Haman to honor Mordecai publicly for saving his life. So now Haman has to lead Mordecai around the city on a royal horse telling everyone to praise him.

Chapter 6

Now this moment in the story is a pivot for the whole book. It begins Haman's downfall and Mordecai's rise to power. Watch how this works. The day after is Esther's second banquet, so the king and Haman arrive, and Esther informs the king that first of all, she's Jewish, and second that Haman has enacted a decree to murder her and murder Mordecai who saved his life and to murder all of the Jews.

Chapter 7

Now the king's had a lot to drink, so when he hears this news, he goes into yet one more drunken rage, and he orders that Haman be impaled on the very stake he made for Mordecai. It's ironic and a grizzly way for Haman to go. Haman's execution however doesn't solve the problem of the decree to kill all of the Jews, so the focus now turns to Esther and Mordecai as they make a plan to reverse the decree.

Chapter 8

They discover that the king can't revoke a decree that he's already made, so instead the king commissions Mordecai to issue a counter decree. On the appointed day that all of the Jews were supposed to be killed, the thirteenth of Adar, now the Jews are ordered to defend themselves and to destroy any who plotted to kill them. Then Mordecai, Esther, and Jews everywhere hold banquets and feasts to celebrate this new decree, and Mordecai is elevated to a seat beside the king. Eventually the decree day comes and the Jews triumph over their enemies. First they destroy Haman's family and then any other Persian officials who had joined in Haman's plot. And then on a second day, they get permission to destroy any who plotted against them throughout the entire kingdom. This results in joy and celebration as the Jews are rescued from annihilation.

Chapters 9-10

The story then tells about how Esther and Mordecai established by decree this annual two-day feast of Purim to commemorate their deliverance from destruction. And the name of the feast comes from Haman's dice—remember “pur”im. The book concludes with a short epilogue as Mordecai is elevated to second in command in the kingdom, and we are told now of his royal greatness and splendor as the Jews thrive in exile.

Conclusion

Now step back. Notice how this whole story's been designed. The story was full of moments of ironic reversal, but we can now see the

whole story is structured as ironic reversal right down to the details. So the king's splendor and feasts and decrees are mirrored by Mordecai's splendor and feasts and decrees at the end.

Esther and Mordecai, they first save the king, but now in the end they save all of the Jews. Then you have Haman's elevation and edicts and banquet that gets reversed by Mordecai's elevation and edict and banquet. And then in the center you have Esther and Mordecai's planning scenes and then Ester's two banquets that act as a frame around the greatest moment of reversal in the whole story—Haman's humiliation and Mordecai's exaltation. Beautiful.

Another fascinating feature of this book is the moral ambiguity of the characters. There's a lot of drinking and anger and sex and murder, of which Mordecai and Esther are a part, not to mention their violation of many commands in the Torah, like marrying Gentiles or eating impure foods. And so the story's not putting Mordecai and Esther forward as moral examples, as if it endorses all of their behavior, but they are put forward as models of trust and hope when things get really bad.

And so the book of Esther comes back to that question with which we began: why God is not mentioned. The message of this book seems to be that when God seems absent, when his people are in exile, when they're unfaithful to the Torah, does this mean that God is done with Israel? Has God abandoned his promises? And the book of Esther says no.

It invites us to see that God can and does work in the real mess and moral ambiguity of human history, and he uses the faithfulness of even morally compromised people to accomplish his purposes. And so the book of Esther asks us to be willing to trust God's providence even when we can't see it working and to hope that no matter how bad things get, God is committed to redeeming his world. And that's what the book of Esther is all about.

Daniel

Introduction

The book of Daniel. The story's set right after Babylon's first attack on Jerusalem, and they had plundered the city and its temple and taken a wave of Israelites into exile. Among them were four men from the royal family of David, Daniel, who is later named Belteshazzar, and his three friends, whom you probably know by their Babylonian names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. This book tells of their struggles to maintain hope in the land of their conquerors.

The book's design seems pretty simple at first. Chapters 1-6 contain stories about Daniel and his friends in Babylon, while chapters 7-12 contain the visions of Daniel about the future. But this two-part shape is made even more interesting by another design feature, and that's the book's language. It begins in Hebrew, the language of the Israelites, but chapters 2-7 are written in Aramaic, a cousin language to Hebrew spoken widely among the ancient empires. But then in chapters 8-12, it goes back to Hebrew. This design shows how chapters 2-7 are a coherent section, but it also highlights the importance of chapters 2 and 7 for understanding the later chapters of the book. Let's just dive in.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 introduces the basic tension of the first half of the book. Daniel and his friends, they're really wise and capable, and they're recruited to serve in the royal palace of Babylon. But they're

pressured to give up their Jewish identity by living and eating like Babylonians and violating the Jewish food laws found in the Torah. So they refuse, and they choose faithfulness to the Torah, and it puts them in danger. But God delivers them, and they end up being elevated by the king of Babylon.

Chapters 2-7

After this begins the Aramaic section, which you'll see has this really cool symmetrical design. So first the king of Babylon has a dream that, it turns out, only Daniel is able to interpret. It's about a huge statue made of four types of metal, and it symbolizes a sequence of kingdoms, and the head is Babylon. But then a huge rock comes flying in, and it shatters the statue, and it becomes this huge mountain. Now this dream is the first of many symbolic visions in the book, and this one introduces the basic storyline of them all. Daniel says that the statue represents a train of human kingdoms following from Babylon, and they will all fill God's world with violence. But one day, God's Kingdom will come and will confront and humble the arrogant kingdoms of this world and fill the world with the healing justice of God's reign and rule.

After this, chapter 3 tells the famous story of Daniel's three friends who refuse to bow down and worship a huge idol statue, which like the statue in chapter 2, represents the king and his imperial power. And so the friends are persecuted; they're thrown into a fiery furnace, but God delivers them from death, and they're exalted by the king who now acknowledges their God as the true one.

After this come a pair of stories about two Babylonian kings, the father, Nebuchadnezzar and then his son, Belshazzar. They're both filled with pride because of their imperial power, and so like in chapter 2, God warns them both through dreams and then visions, which, also like chapter 2, only Daniel can interpret. He says that both kings are to humble themselves before God, and both kings arrogantly resist. So Nebuchadnezzar is stricken with madness. He becomes like a beast in the field. But then he humbles himself before

God, and his humanity returns to him. He's restored as king. This is in contrast with his son Belshazzar, who doesn't humble himself before God, and he's assassinated that very night.

Now these two stories draw this imagery from Genesis chapters 1 and 2 and Psalm 8, where humans are depicted as the royal image of God. He's given them authority to rule over the beasts of the field and the birds of the air on behalf of God, who is the world's true King. But when human kingdoms forget that, when they rebel and make themselves and their power into a god, they become less than human, like violent beasts who will face God's justice.

Which brings us to chapter 6, the pair of chapter 3. And this time, it's Daniel who is being persecuted because he refuses to pray and worship the king as a god. And so like the friends, he's sentenced to death and thrown into a lion's den. But God delivers him from the beasts, and like the friends, the king exalts Daniel and praises his God, which brings us to chapter 7.

It's the pair of chapter 2 and the center of the book, where all its themes come together. It's another dream, but it's Daniel's this time, and ironically, he can't understand the dream until an angelic messenger explains it to him. He sees a series of four beasts, one like a lion, then like a bear, then one like a winged leopard, each of these symbolizing an arrogant kingdom. And last of all is a super-beast, identified as a really evil empire, and it has lots of horns, a common symbol for kings in the Old Testament. And there's one specific horn, who is an image of an arrogant king, who exalts himself above God and persecutes God's people. Now they are symbolized by a figure called the Son of Man, who's an image for both God's covenant people but also for their King from the line of David. But then all of a sudden, God, who's called the Ancient of Days, comes and he sets up his throne. He destroys the super-beast, and he exalts the Son of Man on the clouds, where he comes up to sit at God's right hand and share in God's rule over the nations.

We can look back now and see how all of these stories in the first half fit together. The three stories of faithfulness despite persecution, these are meant to offer hope to God's suffering people among

the nations. But they suffer because human kingdoms have rebelled against God and have become beasts. And so these visions encourage patience, that God's people are to wait for him to bring his Kingdom and rule over our world and vindicate his suffering people. But it raises the question about when God is going to do that, and that's what these final three visions set out to explore.

Chapters 8-12

In chapter 8, Daniel has another vision about the final two beasts of chapter 7, but this time they're symbolized by a ram, who we're told is the empire of the Medes and the Persians, and then by a goat, who's an image of ancient Greece. And out of the goat come a whole bunch of horns, one of which symbolizes the evil king from chapter 7. And we're told more about him, that he will attack Jerusalem and exalt himself above God and defile the temple with idols. However in the end, he will be destroyed by God, who will exalt his people and his Kingdom.

Now by chapter 9, Daniel is very puzzled, especially as to when all of this is going to take place. And so he consults the scroll of the prophet Jeremiah, where God said that Israel's exile would only last seventy years. So for Daniel, the seventy years is almost up, and so he asks God to fulfill his promise soon. But an angel comes and informs him that Israel's sin and rebellion has continued, and so their time of exile and oppression will continue on seven times longer than Jeremiah envisioned. Daniel is deeply disturbed by this, and he has one final vision. We're shown the same sequence of kingdoms. It's Persia, then Greece and Alexander the Great, followed by lesser kings all leading up to this final king of the north, who will invade Jerusalem, set up idols in the temple, and exalt himself above God. But then all of a sudden, this king comes to ruin.

Now there's been endless debate about what all of these visions refer to. Many see a clear connection to the exploits of the Syrian king Antiochus in the 160s BC. He killed many faithful Jews in Jerusalem and set up idols in the temple. Others think it points forward to the Roman empire's role in the execution of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70. And still others think it will

be fulfilled in future events that have yet to happen when Jesus will return. Now the problem is that the symbols and the numbers, they don't quite match any of these views perfectly, but it opens up the possibility that in a sense, they are all right.

Conclusion

The book of Daniel has been designed to offer hope to all future generations of God's people. It did so in the days of Antiochus' empire, and it has ever since. This is why Jesus could use imagery from Daniel to describe and confront the oppressive leaders he confronted in Jerusalem. This is why John the visionary, who wrote the Revelation, could adapt Daniel's visions and apply them to Rome of his day and also all future oppressive empires.

And so the point of Daniel is that all generations of readers can find here a pattern and a promise. It's a pattern that human beings and their kingdoms become violent beasts when they glorify their own power, when they redefine right and wrong and don't acknowledge God as the true King. But Daniel also holds out a promise that one day God will confront the beast. He will rescue his world and his people by bringing his Kingdom over all nations.

And so for every generation, this book speaks a message of hope that should motivate faithfulness, and that's what the book of Daniel is all about.

Haggai

Introduction

The book of the prophet Haggai. It's one of the smaller prophetic books, but crucially important in the overall story of the Hebrew Bible. So for centuries, the Hebrew prophets had been accusing Israel of breaking their covenant with God through idolatry and injustice, and they warned that God would send the great empire of Babylon to take out Jerusalem, destroy the temple, and haul off the people into exile. And it all happened in the year 587 BC, but that wasn't the end of the story. The prophets also believed that there was still hope and that God would one day bring back a transformed remnant of his people Israel to live in a new Jerusalem, where God's presence would live in their midst.

Now when we turn to Haggai, the year is 520 BC, nearly seventy years after the exile, and the Babylonian empire has recently collapsed, and the world is now ruled by the Persians. Now they allowed the return of any exiled Israelites who wanted to go back to Jerusalem, which still lay in ruins. And so under the leadership of a high priest named Joshua, and Zerubbabel, an heir from the line of David, and a group of exiles, they all returned and began to rebuild the city and their lives. Remember the story from the book of Ezra chapters 1-6. So our hopes are high, and the future seems very bright, but it's not actually, at least from Haggai's point of view. The book consists of four sections that summarize Haggai's message given to the people of Jerusalem over the course of four months.

Chapter 1

He opens by accusing the people of misplaced priorities, and so, yes, they have come back to Jerusalem, but they're spending all of their time and resources rebuilding their own fancy houses while the temple still lay in ruins from its destruction from seventy years ago! So Haggai asks, "Are your own houses really more important than your allegiance to God?" "This neglect," Haggai says, "is tantamount to the covenant rebellion of our ancestors," which is why the land is still unproductive, why they've been struck with famine and drought. And here, Haggai's quoting from the list of covenant curses in the book of Deuteronomy. And so Haggai's challenging words are followed by a story of the people's response. Remember also the story in Ezra chapter 5. We are told that Zerubbabel, Joshua, the remnant of the people were provoked by Haggai's message, and they were motivated. They started rebuilding the temple.

Chapter 2

So in the next section, Haggai follows up one month later, and he addresses some problems of shattered expectations among the people. So the temple that they're rebuilding is really pretty unimpressive. It's nothing compared to the glory of the temple Solomon built here some five hundred years earlier, and so morale was really low for finishing the project. And so Haggai reminds the people of the great prophetic promises of the future Kingdom of God and about this temple. He draws from the earlier prophets, especially Isaiah and Micah, about the new Jerusalem, and that it would be the place from which God would redeem the whole world and where all nations would come and participate in God's Kingdom, resulting in an era of peace. And so the temple, it plays a key role in God's plans for the future, and Haggai calls on the people to work in hope despite the disappointing circumstances.

In the third section, Haggai follows up two months later with a call to covenant faithfulness, and he engages some priests in a conversation about ritual purity. Remember all the key ideas from the book of Leviticus. "So," he says, "if someone goes and touches a dead body and becomes ritually impure or marked by death, and then they go

and touch some food, is that food impure too?" And the priests, knowing the book of Leviticus, say, "Yes, it's impure." And then Haggai turns this into a parable. He says, "This is how it is with the people of Israel and what they're putting their hands to in rebuilding the temple. If the current generation doesn't humble themselves, if they don't turn from injustice and apathy, then," Haggai says, "whatever they build with their hands, including this new temple, will be impure too." Haggai's challenge is that it's only by true repentance and covenant faithfulness that their building efforts will result in God bringing his Kingdom and blessing. And so in a sense, Israel's future lay in their hands. God's waiting for his people to be faithful. And so the choice that Haggai is laying before the exile generation, it's very similar to the challenge Moses gave the wilderness generation before entering the land. Their obedience will lead to blessing and success, while faithlessness will lead to ruin.

The book concludes with Haggai's summary of the future hope of God's Kingdom. He's going to make the new Jerusalem the center of his glorious international Kingdom, and from there he will confront and defeat evil among the nations. He reminds the people of the defeat of Pharaoh's army in the exodus story. God will fulfill here his promise to David and establish the King from his line, and in Haggai's day, that was represented by Zerubbabel.

Conclusion

And so the book ends with the choice of a bright future just hanging there. So the question is: Will Haggai's generation be faithful to God? Will they experience the fulfillment of all these promises? And Zerubbabel, will he be faithful? Will he turn out to be the Messianic King? And you have to just keep reading into the final two books of the prophets, Zechariah and Malachi, to find out. But you can see how this little book contains a great challenge to every generation of God's people, that our choices really matter, and that the faithfulness and obedience of God's people is part of how God has chosen to work out his purposes in the world. And so this surprising truth should motivate humility and action in God's people as they look forward to God's coming Kingdom, and that is the message of the book of Haggai.

Zechariah

Introduction

The book of the prophet Zechariah. The book is set after the return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem, and we're told in the book of Ezra that Zechariah and Haggai together challenged and motivated the people to rebuild the temple and look for the fulfillment of God's promises. Now long ago, Jeremiah the prophet had said that Israel's exile would last for seventy years, and that afterwards, God would restore his presence to a new temple and bring his Kingdom and the rule of the Messiah over all nations. The dates at the beginning of this book tell us that those seventy years are almost up, but life back in the land was hard, and it seemed like none of these promises were going to come true. Why? And the book of Zechariah offers an explanation. It has a fairly clear design. There's an introduction, which sets the tone for a large collection of Zechariah's dream visions, and that's concluded by chapters 7 and 8, and then this is followed by two more large collections of poetry and prophecy. Let's just dive in and see how the book works.

Chapters 1-6

It begins with Zechariah's challenge to his generation to turn back to God and not be like their ancestors, who rebelled and refused to listen to the earlier prophets, which landed them in exile. And so now the returned exiles respond positively to Zechariah. They repent and humble themselves before God, or so it seems. The next

large section is a collection of eight nighttime visions that Zechariah experienced, and just to prepare you, these are full of very bizarre, strange images, a lot like your dreams. The idea that God communicates to people through symbolic dreams, it's very old; it goes back to the book of Genesis—the dreams of Jacob, or Joseph, or Pharaoh. These gave meaning to current events at the time, but they also gave a window into the future. And so Zechariah has his own dreams now, and they've been arranged in this really cool symmetrical design. The first and the last visions are about four horsemen each. They're like rangers patrolling the world on God's behalf, and it is a representation of God's attentive watch over the nations. Their report is that the world is at peace, and in Zechariah's day, this refers to how God raised up Persia to conquer Babylon and bring peace. And so the question now arises. The seventy years of Israel's exile are almost up. Is now the time for the Messianic Kingdom in Jerusalem? And God responds by saying that he's determined to fulfill those promises, but he leaves the question of timing unanswered.

The second and seventh visions are paired because they're both reflections on Israel's past sin that led up to the exile. So the second vision is about these horns that symbolize the nations that attacked and then scattered Israel, Assyria, and Babylon. But then these horns, or empires, are themselves scattered by a group of blacksmiths, an image for Persia. The seventh dream is about a woman in a basket, and we're told that she is a symbol of the centuries of Israel's covenant rebellion, and then this woman is carried off to Babylon by other women, who carry the basket flying with stork wings. This is so strange. The third and sixth visions are paired, as they're both about the rebuilding of a new Jerusalem. So a man is measuring the city. It's an image of God's promise that Jerusalem will be rebuilt and become a beacon to the nations, who will join God's people in worship. And then the sixth dream is about a scroll that flies around the new Jerusalem, punishing thieves and liars, the idea being that the new Jerusalem is a place that is purified from sin by the Scriptures.

The fourth and fifth visions are at the center of this collection, and they're about the two key leaders among the returned exiles, so

Joshua the high priest and then Zerubbabel, the royal descendant of David. So Joshua had been symbolically wearing Israel's sin in the form of these dirty clothes, but then those are taken off, and he's given new clothes and a new turban, a symbol of God's grace and forgiveness. And then an angel tells Joshua that if he remains faithful to God, he will lead his people, and Joshua will become a symbol of the future Messianic King. The other vision is about two olive trees that supply oil to this elaborate golden lamp, which itself is a symbol of God's watchful eye over his people. And these two trees symbolize the two anointed leaders, Joshua and then Zerubbabel, who's leading the temple rebuilding efforts. And God says that success will not come to this new temple if it's the result only of political maneuvering; rather, these two leaders must be dependent upon the work of God's Spirit.

The visions come to a close with a bonus vision from the prophet, and it picks up the themes of the central fourth and fifth visions. It's Joshua the high priest again, and he's given a crown and presented as a symbol of the future Messiah, who will also be a priest over God's Kingdom. And then Zechariah closes it all out saying that all of these visions will be fulfilled only if the current generation is faithful to God and obeys the terms of the covenant. And so altogether, these three visions emphasize how the coming of the Messianic Kingdom is conditional upon this generation being faithful to God, which leads to the conclusion of the dreams.

Chapters 7-8

It's another challenge from Zechariah, and a group of Israelites come and they've been mourning over the former temple's destruction for nearly seventy years. And they ask him, "Is it time to stop grieving? I mean, is God's Kingdom going to come very soon?" Zechariah again reminds them of how their ancestors rejected God's call through the prophets, which led to the exile, and so he challenges them too. He says, "This generation will see the Messianic Kingdom only if they pursue justice and peace and remain faithful to the covenant." So in other words, Zechariah reverses their question. He asks, "Are you going to become the kind of people who are ready to receive and

participate in God's coming Kingdom?" And that question is left just hanging there. The people don't answer, and the book just moves on.

Chapters 9-11

And so we come to the final sections that are very different from chapters 1-8. Each section is a kaleidoscopic collage of poems and images about the future Messianic Kingdom. So the first one, chapters 9-11, describe the coming of the humble Messianic King, who's riding a donkey into the new Jerusalem to establish God's Kingdom over the nations. But then all of a sudden, this King, he's symbolized as a shepherd of the flock of Israel. And then he's rejected, first by his own people, but then also by their leaders, who are also symbolized as shepherds. And so God hands Israel over to these corrupt shepherds, and it raises the question: will Israel's rejection of their King last forever? In the final section, chapters 12-14 say no!

Chapters 12-14

It's another mosaic of poems and images about the future Messianic Kingdom, and they depict the new Jerusalem as a place where God's justice will finally confront and defeat evil among the nations. It's very similar to the same themes in the prophets Joel or Ezekiel. But then God also will confront the rebellion within the hearts of his own people. He's going to pour out his Spirit on them, he says, so that they can repent and grieve over the fact that they have rebelled and rejected their Messianic shepherd. The final chapter concludes with the new Jerusalem, that's the gathering point for all of the nations. And then this city becomes a new Garden of Eden, and there's a river of living water flowing out of the temple, bringing healing to all of creation, and that's how the book ends.

Conclusion

And so Zechariah just leaves you to ponder the connection between chapters 1-8 and 9-14. And the point seems to be that this future Messianic Kingdom of the book's second half will only come when God's people are faithful to the covenant, the point of the first half. Reading the book of Zechariah is a wild ride. These visions and poems are full of startling imagery, and they do not follow a linear flow of thought. And that's part of the point. It's like history and our lives; it doesn't always fit into neat orderly patterns. But the prophets offer us glimpses of God's hand at work, guiding history towards his own purposes. And so ultimately, Zechariah invites us to look above the chaos and hope for the coming of God's Kingdom, which should motivate faithfulness in the present. And that's what the book of Zechariah is all about.

Malachi

Introduction

The book of the prophet Malachi. He lived about one hundred years after the Israelites had returned from their Babylonian exile, and his message was directed to the people who had been living in Jerusalem for some time now. The temple had been rebuilt a while ago, and things were not going well. Just remember the stories from Ezra and Nehemiah. Now when the Israelites first returned from exile, their hopes were high that they would return and rebuild their lives and the temple, all of the great promises of the prophets would come true, the Messiah would come and set up God's Kingdom over a unified Israel and over the nations and bring justice and peace for all, but that's not what happened. The Israelites who repopulated the city proved to be just as unfaithful to God as their ancestors, resulting in poverty and injustice. And so in Malachi, we find out just how corrupt this new generation has become.

The book is designed as a series of disputes, and most sections begin with God saying something, making a claim or an accusation, and then Israel will disagree or question God's statement, and then God will respond and offer the last word. This happens six times.

Chapters 1-2

In the first three disputes, God exposes Israel's corruption, and in the final three disputes, he confronts their corruption. And the overall impression you get from these arguments and disputes is that the

exile fundamentally didn't change anything in the people. Israel's hearts are as hard as ever. The first dispute starts when God says that he still loves his covenant people despite their failures, and Israel rudely objects, saying, "How have you shown us any love?" And so God reminds them of how he graciously chose the family of Jacob, their ancestor, to become the carrier of God's covenant promises instead of Esau, his brother, and the family that came from him, who eventually came to ruin. Remember the stories from Genesis and the book of Obadiah. So right from this first dispute, Israel is exposed as suspicious, doubting God's love and faithfulness.

The second dispute exposes a problem with Israel's second temple. God accuses the people of despising and defiling the temple, and the people fire back, "How have we despised you?" And so God responds by focusing on the people, how they're bringing shamefully lame offerings of these sick, blemished animals that show that they don't value or honor their God. But it's not just the people, it's the priests too who run the temple. They not only tolerate, but participate, in these corrupt forms of worship. From top to bottom, God's people have proven faithless.

In the third dispute, God accuses the Israelite men of treachery against him and their wives, which, of course, they deny. And God exposes the toxic combination of idolatry and divorce taking place. You have Israelite men marrying non-Israelite women and then adopting the worship of their wives' ancestral gods into their homes. Remember the story from Nehemiah chapter 13. And so Malachi connects this to a wave of men divorcing their wives for no good reason, and the people are all fine with this, and Malachi says no! It's a betrayal of your covenant with God. And so Malachi transitions into the second set of disputes that confront Israel's rebellion.

Chapter 3

So the fourth dispute begins with the Israelites accusing God of neglect, saying, "Where is the God of justice?" They see injustice and corruption abounding, and God seems to do nothing. So God responds by saying that he'll send a messenger, who'll prepare the people for God's personal return in the Day of the Lord. He will

come like fire to purify his people and to remove idolatry and sexual immorality and injustice, so that only the faithful remnant is left to become his people.

In the fifth dispute, God calls the people to turn back to him, to which the people say, "How can we turn back?" And so God confronts their selfishness. He shows how they have stopped offering a tithe of their income to the temple. Now that word, tithe, just means one tenth. It's the amount of their income and produce that the Israelites were to annually donate to support the temple and its priests. The practice is laid out in different parts of the Torah. Now we know from Malachi and from the book of Nehemiah that the people were neglecting this responsibility, and so the temple was falling into disrepair. And so God confronts them. He says he wants to bless them with abundance, but only if they're going to be faithful.

In the final dispute, the people accuse God and say that it's pointless to serve him. They observe wicked, prideful people succeeding in life, and God does nothing. And God's response for the first time in the book is not a speech, but rather a short story about the faithful remnant in Israel, people who fear the Lord, and they love to get together and talk about how to honor God and serve him. And so God orders that a scroll of remembrance be written for these people, so that they can read the scroll and remember God's character and promises. Malachi, he is reflecting here on the divine gift of the Scriptures, how they point us to the past to remember what God has done in order to inspire faithfulness and hope for the future, which leads to the conclusion of the book.

It picks up and develops the imagery of the fourth dispute about the coming Day of the Lord, but it develops it further. God says that he's appointed a day of purifying judgment that will consume the wicked from among his people. But what the conclusion adds is the future of the faithful remnant because for them, the Day of the Lord is not a threat; it's a cause for joy. It will be like the rays of the rising sun that bring healing and life and hope for the future.

Chapter 4

And so Malachi's disputes come to a close, but there's still a bit more to this book. The final three verses, they are not part of the disputes, and actually they function like a concluding appendix, bringing closure, not just to Malachi, but to the whole collection of the Torah and the prophets. So first the reader is called to remember the law, or the Torah, of my servant Moses. This recalls the story and the laws of the covenant that you find in the first five books of the Bible. But then we hear this summary of the books of the prophets: "I will send the prophet Elijah before the Day of the Lord, who will restore the hearts of God's people." So this conclusion, it summarizes the Torah and the prophets as a unified story that points to the future. Israel was redeemed by God, and then they betrayed him through their rebellion and hard hearts, breaking the laws of the Torah. But the Scriptures anticipate a future day when God's going to send a new prophet, a Moses, a new Elijah, who will restore God's people and heal their hard hearts. Remember all of the promises from Deuteronomy and Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Conclusion

And so this concluding appendix presents the Scriptures as a divine gift to read and to ponder and to pray over. They tell the truth about the human condition, about our selfishness and our sin, but they also announced God's promise that one day he would send a messenger and then show up personally to confront evil, to restore his people, and bring his healing justice. And it's that future hope that Malachi and the Torah and all of the prophets are about.

1-2 Chronicles

Introduction

The books of 1 and 2 Chronicles. While they're two separate books in our Bibles, that division is not original. Due to scroll lengths, the book was divided in two, but it was written as one book with one coherent storyline. Now in our English Bibles, Chronicles comes after the books of Samuel and Kings, and most of Chronicles is actually repeat content from those books. And so most modern readers, when they come to Chronicles, they think, "Wait a minute, I just read all of this," and so they skip it. And that's a shame because this book is really important and unique in the Bible.

In the traditional Jewish ordering of the Bible, Chronicles is actually the last book because it summarizes all of the Jewish Scriptures. The first word in the book is Adam, the first character at the beginning of the story, and then the last paragraph announces the return of Israel from exile.

Now we don't know who wrote this book, but we can tell from details within it, it was produced by somebody who lived a couple hundred years after the Israelites returned from the Babylonian exile. Now for this author, Jerusalem and the temple were rebuilt some time ago, and as we learned from Ezra and Nehemiah, things were not going well. The great prophetic hope was that the city and the temple would be rebuilt, that God would come to live among his people, the Messianic King would come, and all the nations would come live under his peaceful rule, and none of that has happened.

And so the author of Chronicles has reshaped these stories of David and Solomon and the kings of the past in order to provide a message of hope for the future. And we'll see that he has designed this book to emphasize two clear themes, first the hope of the coming Messianic King, and second the hope for a new temple. Let's just dive in, and you'll see these themes all over the book.

1 Chronicles 1-9

1 Chronicles begins with nine chapters of genealogies, long lists of names. And you'll read these and think that this is kind of boring, and that may be true for you, but actually they're very, very important. The author is summarizing here the whole storyline of the Old Testament by naming all of the key characters in the stories, and as he does so, he shapes the genealogies to emphasize two key lineages. First is the line of the promised Messianic King, so lots of space is dedicated to tracing the line of Judah that led all the way to King David, to whom the Messianic promise was given. And then from David, the author traces that line up into his own day. The other family line that receives lots of attention here is that of the priesthood, the descendants of Aaron, who of course served in the temple. And so right from the start, you can see the two main themes: the author's hope of the Messiah coming to build a new temple, and it's rooted in these ancient genealogies.

1 Chronicles 10-29

Now after that, the author moves into the stories about David, and most of these are going to be familiar to you from the book of Samuel, but again, there are some really important differences. So first of all, the author leaves out all of the negative stories about David where he's portrayed as weak or immoral. So Saul chasing David around the desert and persecuting him, the story of David's adultery with Bathsheba and then murdering her husband, all of that is gone, and what's left are the stories that portray David as a good guy. And not only that, there's also new, additional material that you won't find in the book of Samuel that shows David in a very positive light. So there's a large block of chapters where David makes preparations for the temple. He arranges resources and builders and

Levites and choirs. And not only that, the author also portrays David as a Moses-like figure. God gives David plans for building the temple just as he gave plans to Moses for building the tabernacle. So why all this new material about David? The author's not trying to hide David's flaws. He knows that anybody can go read about them in the book of Samuel; rather, he's trying to portray David as the ideal king in order to make him an image or a type of the future Messiah from the line of David. It's very similar to how Jeremiah or Ezekiel spoke of the coming Messiah as a new David. This is most clear in how the author retells the story of God's covenant promise to David in 1 Chronicles 17. When you compare the story with its parallel in 2 Samuel 7, you will see that the author of Chronicles is highlighting that neither David, nor Solomon, nor any of the kings from his line were the Messianic King, and that when the Messiah does come, he will be a King like David. And so for this author, these stories about David from the past are what sustain his hope for the future.

2 Chronicles

After David dies, we move into 2 Chronicles, which focuses on the kings that lived in Jerusalem. And again there's lots of overlap with 1 and 2 Kings, but there are many key differences. So the author has left out all of the stories about the kings of northern Israel, so he can just focus on the line of David. And there's lots of new material about these kings from David's line. He highlights the kings that were obedient to God, and he adds new stories about how their obedience led to success and God's blessing. But he also adds new stories about kings who were unfaithful to God. They didn't follow the Torah, they led Israel to worship idols, and these kings faced horrible consequences, all leading up to Israel's exile—a mess of their own making. And so this whole section becomes a series of character studies where the author wants later generations of Israelites to learn from their family history, and so become faithful to their God and the Torah.

Now the book's conclusion is really unique too. At the very end of the book, the king of the Persians, his name's Cyrus, and he tells the Israelites that they can go back home, return from exile, and rebuild the city and the temple. And he says in the last line of the book,

"Whoever there is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him and let him go up..." And that's how the book ends, with an incomplete sentence!

Conclusion

Now of course the author knows about the first return from exile and the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah, but clearly in his view, the prophetic hopes of Israel were not fulfilled in those events. And so this incomplete ending shows that the author's hope is set on yet another return from exile when the Messiah will finally come to rebuild the temple and restore God's people.

And so the book of Chronicles—it's the final book of the Jewish Scriptures—it ends by pointing forward. It calls God's people to look back in order to look ahead because the past has become the source of hope for the future. So Chronicles concludes the Old Testament as a story in search of an ending, and that's what this book is all about.

Matthew Ch. 1-13

Introduction

The Gospel according to Matthew. It's one of the earliest official accounts about Jesus of Nazareth—his life, his death, and his resurrection. The book itself is anonymous, but the earliest reliable tradition links it to Matthew the tax collector, who was one of the twelve apostles that Jesus appointed, and he actually appears within the book itself.

For about thirty to forty years, the apostles orally taught and passed on their eyewitness accounts about Jesus, along with his teachings they had all memorized. And Matthew has then collected and arranged all these into this amazing tapestry and designed the book to highlight certain themes about Jesus. In this video, we're just going to cover the first half of the book.

Specifically, Matthew wants to show how Jesus is the continuation and fulfillment of the whole biblical story about God and Israel, that Jesus is the Messiah from the line of David, that he is a new authoritative teacher like Moses. And not only that, Jesus is God with us, or in Hebrew, Emmanuel.

And Matthew's designed this book with an introduction and conclusion, and these act like a frame around five clear sections right here in the center, each of which concludes with a long block of Jesus' teaching. Now this design is very intentional, and it's amazing. Just watch how this works.

Chapters 1-3

Chapters 1-3, they set the stage by attaching Jesus' story right onto the storyline of the Old Testament Scriptures. So Matthew opens with the genealogy about Jesus that highlights how he is from the Messianic line of the son of David and he's a son of Abraham. That means he's going to bring God's blessing to all of the nations. After that, we get the famous story about Jesus' birth and how all of the events fulfilled the Old Testament prophetic promises that the nations would come and honor the Messiah, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. But even more than that, Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit, his name Emmanuel, all these work together to show that Jesus is no mere human; he is God with us, God become human. So you can see two of Matthew's key themes right here in the introduction. He's from the line of David; he's Emmanuel.

But Matthew also wants to show how Jesus is a new Moses. So like Moses, Jesus came up out of Egypt, he passed through the waters of baptism, and he entered into the wilderness for forty days. And then Jesus goes up onto a mountain to deliver his new teaching. So through all of this, Matthew is claiming that Jesus is the promised "greater than Moses" figure who's going to deliver Israel from slavery. He's going to give them new divine teaching. He's going to save them from their sins and bring about a new covenant relationship between God and his people.

This Moses and Jesus parallel also explains why Matthew has structured the center of the book the way that he did. These five main parts highlight Jesus as a teacher, and he's created a parallel. Jesus as a teacher parallels the five books of Moses. Jesus is the new authoritative covenant teacher who's going to fulfill the storyline of the Torah.

Chapters 4-7

Now in the first section, chapters 4-7, Jesus steps onto the scene announcing the arrival of God's Kingdom. And this is really key. The Kingdom is in essence about God's rescue operation for his whole world, and it's taking place through King Jesus. Jesus has come to confront evil, especially spiritual evil and its whole legacy of demon

oppression and disease and death. Jesus has come to restore God's rule and reign over the whole world by creating a new family of people who will follow him, obey his teachings, and live under his rule.

So after Jesus begins healing people and forming a movement, a community, he takes his followers out to a mountain, or a hillside, and he delivers his first big block of teaching, traditionally called the Sermon on the Mount. And here Jesus explores what it looks like to follow him and live in God's Kingdom. And it's an upside-down Kingdom where there are no privileged members. So the poor, the nobodies, the wealthy, the religious—everybody is invited and is called to turn, to repent, and to follow Jesus and join his family. Jesus says that he's not here to set aside the commands of the Torah or the Old Testament; rather, he's here to fulfill all of that through his life, through his teachings. He's here to transform the hearts of his people, so that they can truly love God and love their neighbor, including their enemy.

Chapters 8-10

After concluding his great teaching on the Kingdom, the next section shows Jesus bringing the Kingdom into reality in the day-to-day lives of people. So Matthew's arranged here nine stories about Jesus bringing the power of God's Kingdom into the lives of hurting, broken people. There's three groups of three stories, and they're all about people who are sick or have broken bodies or they're in danger, and Jesus heals or saves them by these acts of grace and power. And then right in between these triads, we find two parallel stories about Jesus' call that people should follow him. Matthew's making a point here. One can only experience the power of Jesus' grace by following him and becoming his disciple.

Now after Matthew has shown the power of the Kingdom through Jesus, Jesus then extends his reach by sending out the twelve disciples, who are going to go do what he's been doing. And this leads to the second large block of teaching, chapter 10. And here Jesus teaches his disciples how to announce the Kingdom and what to expect once they do. Many among Israel are accepting Jesus and

his offer of the Kingdom, but Israel's leaders, they aren't. They stand to lose a lot if they repent and become disciples of Jesus, and so Jesus knows they're going to reject him and persecute his followers, which is exactly what happens.

Chapters 11-13

In the next section, chapters 11-13, Matthew has collected a group of stories about how people are responding to Jesus and his message, and it's a mixed bag. So some stories are positive—people love Jesus and they think he's the Messiah. Others are more neutral, like John the Baptist or even the members of Jesus' own family. And they make it clear that Jesus is not what they expected. And then you have Israel's leaders. They're entirely negative. You have the Pharisees and the Bible scholars—they all reject Jesus together. They think he's a false teacher, he's leading the people astray. They think he's blasphemous in these exalted claims he's making about himself.

But Jesus isn't surprised or thrown by all these diverse responses. In fact, he focuses on it in the third block of teaching, chapter 13. Here Matthew has collected together a bunch of Jesus' parables about the Kingdom, like about a farmer throwing seed on four types of soil, or about a mustard seed, or a pearl, or buried treasure. These parables are like a commentary on the stories that you've just read in chapters 11 and 12. Some people are accepting Jesus with enthusiasm; others are rejecting him. But God's Kingdom is of ultimate value, and it will not stop spreading despite all of these obstacles.

Conclusion

So that's the first half of the Gospel according to Matthew. Now here's a few more things to look for as you read through these chapters. Matthew is presenting Jesus, remember, as the continuation and fulfillment of the Old Testament storyline. So look for how he weaves in quotations from the Old Testament Scriptures, and what you'll find is that they're placed at strategic points in the story, explaining more about Jesus and his identity. So stop, take time to go look up these references and read them in their Old Testament context, and most often you'll discover really cool, interesting connections.

Lastly, pay attention to the types of people who accept Jesus and follow him, and you'll see that it's most often people who are unimportant; they're nobodies or their irreligious. And these are the people who are transformed by their trust or faith in Jesus and follow him, and it's the religious and the prideful who are offended by him. So how is this tension between Jesus and Israel's leaders going to play itself out? That's what the second half of Matthew is all about.

Matthew Ch. 14-28

Introduction

The Gospel according to Matthew. In the first video we saw how Matthew introduced Jesus as the Messiah from the line of David and as a new authoritative teacher like Moses, and also as Emmanuel, which in Hebrew means "God with us." After Jesus announced and taught about the arrival of God's Kingdom, and after he brought the Kingdom into day-to-day life among the people of Israel, we saw that Jesus was accepted by many but rejected by others, especially Israel's religious leaders, the Pharisees. And so the big question is: How is this conflict between Jesus and Israel's leaders going to play itself out?

Chapters 14-20

The next large section, chapters 14-20, explore all of the different expectations people have about the Messiah. So Jesus keeps healing sick people, and twice he even miraculously provides food for these huge crowds in the desert. One is made up of Jewish people, and the other is a non-Jewish crowd. And this sign, it's very similar to what Moses did for Israel in the wilderness.

And so all of these people are excited about Jesus, they think he's the great prophet and the Messiah, but not the religious leaders. Their view of the Messiah is built on passages like Psalm 2 or Daniel chapter 2, about a victorious Messiah who's going to deliver Israel and defeat the pagan oppressors. And from their point of view,

Jesus, he's a false teacher, he's making blasphemous claims about himself. And so there are stories here about them increasing their opposition, hatching a plan to kill him.

And so in response, Jesus, he withdraws, and he begins teaching his closest disciples what it means for him to be Israel's Messiah because it is not what anybody expects. So Jesus asked his disciples—chapter 16—he says, “Who do you all say that I am?” And Peter comes up with the right answer, it seems. He says, “Well you're the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” But then it becomes clear that Peter's thinking about a king who's going to reign victoriously through military power. And Jesus challenges Peter, saying that, “Yes, I am going to become King, but through a different way.” And so Jesus starts to teach on themes from the prophet Isaiah, who said that the Messianic King would suffer and die for the sins of his own people. And so Jesus, he was positioning himself as a Messianic King who reigns by becoming a servant and who would lay down his life for Israel and the nations.

Well Peter and the disciples, they mostly just don't get it. And so Jesus enters into the fourth block of teaching followed by a series of teachings after that. And these are all about the upside-down nature of Jesus' Messianic Kingdom, which turns upside-down all of our value systems. So in the community of the servant King, you gain honor by serving others, and instead of getting revenge, you forgive and do good to your enemies. And in Jesus' Kingdom, you gain true wealth by giving your wealth away to the poor. To follow the servant Messiah, you must become a servant yourself.

Chapters 21-25

In the next section, we watch the two kingdoms clash, Jesus' Kingdom and that of Israel's leader. Jesus comes to Jerusalem for Passover riding in on a donkey, and the crowds are hailing him as the Messiah. And Jesus immediately marches into the courtyard of the temple and he creates this huge disruption that brings the daily sacrifices to a halt. His actions speak louder than words here. As Israel's King, Jesus was asserting his royal authority over the temple, the place where God and Israel met together. And in Jesus' view, the

temple was compromised by the hypocrisy of Israel's leaders, and so here he's challenging their authority, and naturally they're deeply offended. And so they try to trap Jesus and shame him in public debate, and they fail. So they end up just determining to have him killed.

In response, Jesus delivers his final block of teaching. He first offers this passionate critique of the Pharisees and their hypocrisy. And then he weeps over Jerusalem and its rejection of God and his Kingdom. Then Jesus withdraws with the disciples, and he starts telling them what's going to happen. He's going to be executed by these leaders, but in doing so, they're going to create their own demise. Because instead of accepting Jesus' way of the peaceful Kingdom, they're going to take the road of revolt against Rome, and so Jerusalem and its temple are going to be destroyed.

But Jesus says that is not the end of the story. He's going to be vindicated after his death by his resurrection, and one day he'll return and set up his Kingdom over all nations. And so in the meanwhile, the disciples need to stay alert and stay committed to just announcing Jesus and his Kingdom and spreading the good news.

Chapters 26–28

And so with all of that ringing in the disciples' ears, the story comes to its climax. That night, Jesus takes the disciples aside and he celebrates the Passover meal with them. Passover retells the story of Israel's rescue from slavery through the death of the Passover lamb. And then Jesus takes the bread and the wine from this meal as new symbols, showing that his coming death would be a sacrifice that would redeem his people from slavery to sin and evil.

After the meal, Jesus is arrested. He's put on trial before the Sanhedrin, the council of Jewish leaders, and they reject his claim to be the Messiah. They charge him with blasphemy against God. Then Jesus is brought before the Roman governor, Pilate. And he thinks Jesus is innocent, but he gives in to the pressure from the Jewish leaders, and he sentences Jesus to death by crucifixion. So Jesus is led away by Roman soldiers and crucified.

Now you'll notice right here in this section that, just like Matthew

did in the opening chapters, he increases the number of references to the Old Testament. He's trying to show that Jesus' death was not a tragedy or failure; rather, it was the surprising fulfillment of all of the old, prophetic promises. Jesus came as the servant Messiah spoken of by Isaiah. He was rejected by his own people, but instead of judging them, he is judged on their behalf, bearing the consequences of their sin.

So the crucifixion scene, it comes to a close, and Jesus' body is placed in a tomb. But the book ends with a surprising twist in the last chapter. The disciples, they discover on Sunday morning that Jesus' tomb is empty. And then all of a sudden, people start seeing Jesus alive from the dead. And the book concludes with the risen Jesus giving a final teaching called the Great Commission.

Conclusion

Jesus says that he is now the true King of the world, and so he sends his disciples out to all nations with the good news that Jesus is Lord and that anyone can join his Kingdom by being baptized and by following his teachings. And echoing all the way back to his name, Emmanuel, God with us, from chapter 1, Jesus' last words in the book to his disciples are, "I will be with you." It's a promise of Jesus' presence until the day he finally returns. And that's the Gospel according to Matthew.

Mark

Introduction

The Gospel according to Mark. It's one of the first accounts of the life of Jesus, and our earliest historical traditions link this book to a Christian scribe named Mark, or John Mark. He was a coworker with Paul and a close partner with Peter. And in fact, an ancient church historian named Papias, he recalls that Mark had collected all of the eyewitness accounts and memories of Peter and then shaped them into this account. But Mark didn't just randomly throw the pieces together. He's carefully designed the story of Jesus.

In the first line of the book, Mark makes this claim about Jesus: "It's the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God." Now what's interesting is that this is the only time Mark is going to tell you what he thinks. For the rest of the book, he's going to influence you by simply putting Jesus' actions and words in front of you and showing you how other people react to him. Now Mark's designed the story of Jesus as a drama with three acts. The first one is set in Galilee, the third one is set in Jerusalem, and the second act shows Jesus on the way from one place to the other, and each of the acts focuses on a repeated theme. So in act one, everybody is blown away by Jesus, and they're wondering: who is this Jesus? In act two, it's the disciples who are struggling to understand what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. And then in act three, we watch the surprising paradox of how Jesus becomes the Messianic King. Let's just dive in, and you'll see how it unfolds.

Chapters 1-8

After the opening line, Mark begins with a quotation from the ancient prophets Isaiah and Malachi, who said that God would send a messenger to Israel to prepare them for when God would show up himself to rescue his people and become their King. And Mark introduces John the Baptist as that messenger, and then right when you expect God to show up personally, Mark introduces Jesus. And as he comes onto the scene, the heavens open, God's Spirit descends on Jesus, and God says, "You are my beloved Son."

After this, Mark places in front of us a summary of Jesus' core message. He went about Galilee announcing the good news that God's Kingdom has come near. Jesus is carrying forward the story from the Old Testament Scriptures about God's rescue operation for his world. Through Jesus, God is restoring his reign over the world by confronting and defeating evil and its hold on people's lives, and then by inviting them to live under his reign by following Jesus.

From here, Mark's given us a big block of stories, showing us Jesus' power as he brings God's Kingdom. He goes about healing people whose bodies are sick or broken or under the oppression of dark spiritual powers. And Jesus even does something that, for Jewish people, only God has the right to do: He forgives people's sins. And Jesus' actions here produce lots of different responses. So some people follow him and become his disciples, other people don't know what to think, and still others reject him completely, especially Israel's leaders who accuse him of blaspheming God and being empowered by evil. But Jesus isn't surprised by these responses; in fact, he draws attention to it. In chapter 4, Mark has collected many of Jesus' parables about the hidden, mysterious nature of God's Kingdom. And Jesus says that his message is like seed falling on different types of soil—some are receptive, some are not. Or it's like a mustard seed that's very tiny; it seems insignificant, but then it grows huge and surprises everyone. Jesus' point is that he really is the Messiah bringing God's Kingdom, but it doesn't look like what anybody expected. And this growing confusion about Jesus among the crowds is connected to a key idea Mark emphasizes at the end

of act one: that even among Jesus' disciples, there's confusion. Even they are struggling to grasp who Jesus really is. And that brings us to act two.

Chapters 8-10

It begins with a crucial conversation. Jesus takes the disciples aside, and he asks, "Who do you all say that I am?" And Peter speaks up saying, "You're The Messiah," but it becomes clear that, for Peter, this means that Jesus is a victorious military king from the line of David, who will rescue Israel from the Romans. But for Jesus, to be the Messiah means that he is the suffering servant King of Isaiah 53, who will bring God's rule by giving up his life in Jerusalem. And the disciples, they don't get it. They think following King Jesus is going to mean fame and status and importance, and Jesus makes it clear that following him is actually like dying, like carrying your own cross. It means rejecting violence and pride and selfishness and giving one's life out for others in acts of service and love. He has the same conversation with them two more times, and it all culminates in Jesus' important statement that, "The Son of man did not come to be served, but to become a servant and give his life as a ransom for many."

The disciples still don't get it. They respond in confusion and fear. And so here in act two, Mark has placed another key story that echoes the book's introduction. Jesus takes three of his disciples up to a mountain, and he's suddenly transformed. He is radiating with light and glory, and a cloud envelops them. Now this is just like the glory of the God of Israel that showed up long ago on Mount Sinai. And then the two prophets who stood in God's presence on Mount Sinai, Moses and Elijah, they appear next to Jesus as God announces again, "This is my beloved Son."

Now by placing this story in the middle of all these conversations in act two, Mark is making an astounding claim: That Jesus, God's Son, is the physical embodiment of God's own glory. And in Jesus, the glorious God of Israel is going to become King by suffering and

dying for the sins of his own people. It is a puzzling claim that confuses and scares the disciples as they leave the mountain, which brings us to act three.

Chapters 11-16

Jesus makes a very public royal entry into Jerusalem for Passover. People are hailing him as the Messiah. Then he enters into the temple courtyard and he asserts his royal authority by running out the thieves and crooks and stopping the sacrificial system. Then this kicks off a whole week of Jesus debating and confronting the leaders of Israel, condemning their hypocrisy, and so they set in motion a plan to have him killed. And Jesus warns his disciples, predicting that Jerusalem and its temple will be destroyed within a generation and his disciples will be persecuted just like him, until he returns one day to bring God's Kingdom fully over the world.

And it all leads up to the final night. Jesus has his last Passover meal with the disciples, a symbolic meal that told the story of Israel's liberation from slavery through the death of the Passover lamb. And Jesus takes these symbols and he gives them new meaning. They point to the liberation from sin and death that will happen through the death of the suffering servant Messiah.

From here, the story rushes forward to Jesus' arrest, his trial before Israel's priests and the Roman governor Pilate, all resulting in Jesus' crucifixion. And it culminates in a key scene that matches the important scenes from acts one and two. Except this time, it is darkness that descends, not a cloud. And instead of the divine voice from heaven, it's Jesus' voice crying out before he dies. And then most surprising, is that it's a Roman soldier who sees Jesus die, who grasps and then announces who Jesus is. "This man was the Son of God!" He's the first person in the story to recognize the story's shocking claim about Jesus' identity, that it's the crucified Son of God who is the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, who died for his friends and for his enemies.

After this, Jesus' body is placed in a tomb. And on the first day of the new week, two women from his disciples come to the tomb, and they discover that the tomb is empty! The stone is rolled away. And

then an angelic man informs them that Jesus isn't here, that he's risen from the dead. And so he orders them to go and tell this good news to the others disciples, that Jesus is alive, that he'll meet them back up in Galilee. And the women, they are freaked out. Mark says that, "They fled from the tomb in terror, telling no one, for they were afraid." And that's how the book ends, with Jesus' disciples showing the same kind of fear and confusion that concluded acts two and one!

Conclusion

Now if you look in your Bible, you'll see that the Gospel of Mark has more to its ending, where Jesus appears, he speaks to his disciples. But there's also a note there telling you that ending is not part of the original book, that it's only found in later, less reliable manuscripts. Now it's possible that the original ending got lost, or that Mark actually never finished writing his account, but it's more likely that this abrupt ending is intentional to make a point. The entire story has focused on the shocking claim that puzzled Jesus' disciples from beginning to end, that it's the suffering, crucified, and risen Jesus who's the Messiah, the Son of God. That God's love and upside-down Kingdom were revealed as Jesus died for the sins of the world.

And so this story ends without closure, and it forces you, the reader, to grapple with this very strange and scandalous claim about Jesus. And are you going to run away like the disciples? Or are you going to recognize Jesus as your King and go and tell the good news? And only you can answer that question, and that's what the Gospel of Mark is all about.

John Ch. 1-12

Introduction

The Gospel according to John. It's one of the earliest accounts of Jesus' life, and we learn at the end of the book that it comes from one of Jesus' closest followers called, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Now he appears many times in the story itself, and there is some debate about whether it's John the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve, or a different John who lived in Jerusalem and was known in the later church as John the Elder. Whichever John it was, the book embodies his eyewitness testimony, and it has been brilliantly designed with the clear purpose that he states near the end. John says, "This story is written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and that by believing, you may have life in his name." John believes that the Jesus you read about in this book is alive and real and that he can change your life forever.

The book's design is really cool. Its first half opens with an introductory poem and a short story that's followed by then a big block of stories about Jesus performing miraculous signs that generate increasing controversy. And it all culminates in his greatest sign—the raising of Lazarus—which creates the greatest controversy as Israel's leaders decide to kill Jesus. And that launches into the book's second half. These chapters focus on Jesus' final night and last words to his disciples, which are followed by his arrest, trial, death, and resurrection. The book concludes with an epilogue. In this video, we're just going to focus on the first half.

Chapter 1

So the book opens with a two-part introduction. First, a poem that begins, “In the beginning was the word,” an obvious allusion to Genesis 1 when God created everything with his word. Now a person’s words, they’re distinct from that person, but they’re also the embodiment of that person’s mind and will. And so John says that God’s word was with God, that is, distinct. And yet the word was God, that is, divine. And as we ponder this claim, we hear later in the poem that this divine word became human in Jesus. Then John goes on to draw from the stories of Exodus, saying that Jesus was God’s tabernacle in our midst. The glorious divine presence that hovered over the Ark of the Covenant became a human in Jesus, which leads to his last claim: that the one true God of Israel consists of God the Father and the Son, who has become human to reveal the Father to us.

Now as we consider these mind-bending claims, we then start to hear a story about how John the Baptist first met Jesus and then led other people to meet him and become his disciples. And one by one, as people encounter Jesus, they say out loud who they think he is. And in this one chapter, Jesus is given seven titles. Now these titles prepare us for John’s love of sevens in designing the book, but altogether they also make a claim that this fully human Jesus from Nazareth is the Messianic King. He is the teacher of Israel and he’s the Son of God, who will die for the sins of the world. Now that’s a big claim to make about someone, and John will now go on to support it through the stories in chapters 2-12. They all have the same basic pattern. Jesus will perform a sign or make a claim about himself, and that will result in misunderstanding or controversy. And so in the end of each story, people are forced to make a choice about who they think Jesus is.

Chapters 2-4

The first section shows Jesus encountering four classic Jewish institutions, and in each case, Jesus shows that he is the reality to which that institution pointed. So Jesus is at a wedding party and the wine runs out, and Jesus then turns these huge jugs of water—like

one hundred and twenty gallons total—into the best wine ever. And the head waiter says to the groom, “You’ve saved the best wine for last,” which is, of course, true, but John also calls this miracle Jesus’ first sign. In other words, it’s a symbol that reveals something about Jesus. So just as Isaiah said that the Messianic Kingdom would be like this huge party with lots of good wine, so this first miraculous sign reveals the generosity of Jesus’ Kingdom. Next Jesus goes to the Jerusalem temple, the place where heaven and earth were supposed to come together and God would meet with his people. And Jesus asserts his authority over it, running out all the money exchangers, stopping the sacrificial offerings. And when the temple leaders threaten him, he says, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” Jesus is claiming that his coming sacrificial death is where heaven and earth will truly meet together. His body, that will be killed, is the reality to which the temple building points. Then Jesus has this all-night conversation with a rabbi named Nicodemus, who thinks that Jesus is just like him, another rabbi and teacher for Israel. But Jesus says that Israel needs much more than just another teacher with new information; Israel needs a new heart and a new life, or in his words, “No one can experience God’s Kingdom without being born again.” Jesus believes that humans are caught in a web of selfishness and sin that leads to death, but he also knows that God loves this world, and so he is here to offer people a new birth, a new chance at life.

From here, Jesus travels north, and he ends up at a sacred well in a conversation with a Samaritan, that is, a non-Jewish woman. And they start talking about water, which Jesus turns into a metaphor for himself. He says that he is here to bring living water that can become a source of eternal life. Now in John, this term refers to a new quality of life, one that’s infused with God’s eternal love, and it’s a life that can begin now and last on into the future.

Chapters 5-10

After this, John has designed another collection of stories that took place during four Jewish sacred days or feasts, and again, Jesus uses the images related to the feasts to make claims about himself. So Jesus first heals a paralyzed man on the Sabbath, which

starts a controversy with the Jewish leaders about working on the day of rest. And Jesus says that it's his Father who is working on the Sabbath, and so is he. And they catch his meaning, that he was calling God his Father, making himself equal with God, and so they want to kill him.

The next story takes place during Passover, the feast that retold the exodus story with the symbolic meal of the lamb and bread and wine. And Jesus miraculously provides food for a crowd of thousands, which results in people asking him for more bread. And then Jesus goes on to claim that he is the true bread, and if they eat him, they will discover eternal life. And this offends many people who stop following him.

After this is a block of stories set in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles, which retold the story of Israel's wilderness wanderings as God guided them with the pillar of cloud and fire and provided them water in the desert. And Jesus gets up in the temple courts and he shouts, "If anyone is thirsty, let them come to me and drink." And then later he says, "I am the light of the world." He's claiming to be the illuminating presence of God and the life-saving gift of God to his people. And some people believe and follow him, but others are offended, and still others try to kill him for these exalted claims.

The final feast story is during Hanukkah, which means "re-dedication." It's about how Judah Maccabee cleared the temple of idols and set it apart as holy once more. And Jesus goes into the temple area and says that he is the one whom God has set apart as the Holy One and that he is the true temple where God's presence dwells. And he also says that, "I and the Father are one." This makes the Jerusalem leaders so angry they set in motion a plan to kill Jesus, and so he retreats from the city.

Chapters 11-12

Now all these conflicts, they culminate in one last miraculous sign. Jesus hears that his dear friend Lazarus is sick, but his family lives near Jerusalem, which is now a death trap for Jesus. Now Jesus could stay away, and he would save his own life, but he loves Lazarus. So once he hears that Lazarus has died, he goes to raise

him from the dead, and he calls him to life out of his tomb, knowing that it will cost him his own life. And the news of this amazing sign, it spreads quickly of course, and just as Jesus knew would happen, the Jerusalem leaders hear about it and begin to conspire to murder him. And so he rides into Jerusalem as Israel's King who is rejected by its leaders.

Conclusion

So the first half of John draws to a close with this story about Jesus laying down his life as an act of love for his friend. And this, of course, is also a sign pointing forward to the cross, which we'll explore more in the next video, but for now, that's the first half of the Gospel of John.

John Ch. 13-21

Introduction

The Gospel according to John. In the first video, we saw that John wrote this book to make the claim that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the human embodiment of God's word and glorious presence, who has come to reveal who God truly is. Then we explored how John designed the first half of the book to demonstrate this claim. Jesus performed miraculous signs and made huge claims about himself, that he is the reality to which Israel's entire history points. And this all generates controversy, however, and the Jewish leaders confront Jesus for all these claims. And it culminated with Jesus laying down his life for his friend Lazarus. By going near Jerusalem to raise him from the dead, Jesus sealed his fate. And so once the plot to murder Jesus is set in motion, we come into the book's second half.

Chapters 13-17

The first part focuses entirely on Jesus' final night and last words to the disciples as he tries to prepare them for his coming death. Jesus performs this shocking act at dinner. He takes on the role of a common servant by kneeling down to wash their dirty feet, something that, in their culture, a superior rabbi would never do for his disciples. And Jesus says that it is a symbol of his entire life purpose: to reveal the true nature of God as a being of self-giving love. And it's also a symbol of what Jesus is about to do in becoming a servant

and giving up his life to die for the sins of the world. And so this act leads to his great command to his disciples: that they are to follow him by loving one another as he has loved them. Acts of loving generosity are to be the hallmark of Jesus' followers. This is what will show the world who Jesus is, and therefore, who God is.

Now from here, Jesus goes into a long flowing speech that's concluded with a prayer, and you'll find the whole thing is unified by a few repeated themes. Jesus keeps saying that he is going away, which makes the disciples sad, but Jesus says it's for the best because it means that he will send the Spirit, also known as "the advocate." As a human, Jesus can only be in one place at a time, but the Spirit can be Jesus' divine personal presence in any place at any time, and the Spirit will do a number of things, Jesus says.

So remember, for John, the unique deity of the one God consists of that loving unified relationship between the Father and the Son. Jesus says the Spirit is that loving personal presence that will come to live in his people and draw them into the love between the Father and the Son. And so Jesus says his disciples are the ones who abide or remain in that divine love the way that branches are connected to a vine. He's describing here how the personal love of God can permeate a person's life, healing, transforming, and making them new. And there's more. The Spirit will also empower Jesus' followers to carry on his mission in the world to first of all fulfill the great command to love others through radical acts of service. But also Jesus says the mission is to bear witness to the truth, to expose and name the selfish, sinful ways that we as humans treat each other, and to declare that in Jesus, God has saved the world through him because he loves it. He has opened up a new way to become human again.

And so finally Jesus predicts that there will be opposition. Just as the Jewish leaders rejected him, so his followers will be persecuted, but he tells them not to be afraid because he has already conquered or gained victory over the world. Now what does Jesus mean by victory here? He doesn't say, but it leads us into the final section of the book where John shows us what victory looks like, Jesus style.

Chapters 18-20

The Jewish leaders sent soldiers to Jesus and his disciples to arrest him, and when the soldiers ask which one Jesus is, he declares, "I AM," and they fall backward. Now this is brilliant on John's part. These words are the culmination of two sets of seven instances where Jesus has used that very phrase, and it all highlights one of John's core claims about Jesus. The words "I AM," or in Greek, "ego eimi," they're the Greek translation of the Hebrew personal covenant name of God that was revealed to Moses back in Exodus chapter 3. It was also repeated many times in Isaiah. And John has strategically placed seven moments in his story where Jesus says, "I AM," followed by some astounding claim: "I AM the bread of life," "I AM the light of the world," "the gate for the sheep," "the good shepherd," "the resurrection," "the way, the truth and the life," "the true vine." And John's also designed seven other stories that have key moments where Jesus says simply, "I AM," echoing this divine name.

And so here, this occurrence as Jesus is arrested, is the ironic climax of all of them because Jesus reveals his divine name and power and victory precisely at the moment that he gives up his life.

After this, Jesus is put on trial for his exalted claims to be the Son of God and the King of Israel, first before the high priests, and then before the Roman governor Pilate, who has to take seriously anyone who's charged with claiming to be the king of Israel. And Jesus tells Pilate that, "My Kingdom is not from this world," meaning that he is a king and that his Kingdom is for this world, but its radically different value system, its redefinition of power and greatness, none of this is derived from this world. Rather, they are defined by God's character that Jesus has revealed through his upside-down Kingdom, which is epitomized by the cross. It's the place where the world's true King conquers sin and evil by letting it conquer him, and Jesus gains victory over the world through an act of self-giving love.

After this, Jesus' body is placed in a tomb that is then sealed. And on the first day of the week, Mary, and then later the other disciples, discover that the tomb is strangely open and then empty! And then Mary, all of a sudden, she meets Jesus! He is alive from the dead!

Now the resurrection of Jesus connects back to another pattern of sevens in John's Gospel. So all the way back at the wedding party in Cana, when Jesus turned the water into wine, John told us that that was Jesus' first sign. And he also identified the second sign, the healing of the sick boy in chapter 4. But after this, John just lets you keep count, and if you have, you'll have noticed that the sixth sign was the raising of Lazarus from the tomb, which Jesus performed at the cost of his own life. And so that and all of the signs, they point forward to this seventh and greatest sign at the culmination of the story: Jesus' own resurrection from the dead. It vindicates Jesus' claim to be the Son of God, the author of all life whose love has conquered death itself.

After the empty tomb, Jesus then meets up with all the disciples, and he commissions them by sending the Spirit as he promised, so that his mission from the Father can now be carried on through them.

Chapter 21

After this, the book concludes with an epilogue that explores the ongoing mission of Jesus' disciples in the world. So a number of them are fishing, and they're not catching anything, and so Jesus appears to them on the shore. They don't recognize him though, and he tells them to cast their net on the other side of the boat. And when they obey him, they catch a huge amount of fish, and it's only then that they recognize him as Jesus. Now John's offering here a picture of discipleship to Jesus. His followers will be most effective in the world when their focus is not on their work as such, but on simply listening for Jesus' voice and obeying him when he speaks. That's when they will truly see him at work in their lives.

After this, Jesus talks with Peter and then commissions him as a unique leader in the Jesus movement, indicating that he too will give up his life one day. But in contrast to Peter, the last moments of the story focus on the author of this Gospel, the disciple whom Jesus loved. And unlike Peter, his job was not to lead the Jesus movement, but rather to spend his long life bearing witness to Jesus, so that others might believe in him.

Conclusion

And that's actually what he's done right here by authoring this amazing story about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. And that's what the Gospel of John is all about.

Luke Ch. 1-9

Introduction

The Gospel according to Luke. It's one of the earliest accounts of Jesus' life, and it's actually part one of a unified two-volume work: Luke-Acts. If you compare the opening lines of both of these books, it's clear that they come from the same author, and there are internal clues in the book of Acts, as well as an early tradition, that identifies the author as Luke, the traveling companion and coworker of Paul the Apostle, who we know was also a doctor.

Luke opens his work with a preface telling us how and why he wrote this book. He acknowledges that there's many other fine accounts of Jesus' life out there, but he wanted to go back to the eyewitness traditions of as many early disciples as he could in order to produce what he calls, "an orderly account about the things that have been fulfilled among us." Now that word "fulfilled" shows us why Luke wrote this account. For him, the story of Jesus isn't just ancient history; he wants to show how it is the fulfillment of the long covenant story of God in Israel, and bigger than that, of the story of God in the whole world.

The book's design is fairly clear. There is a long introduction that sets up the stories of John the Baptist and Jesus. Then in chapters 3-9, Luke presents a robust portrait of Jesus and his mission in his home region of Galilee. After that, the large mid-section of the book is Jesus' long journey to Jerusalem, which leads to the story's climax:

Jesus' final week in Jerusalem leading up to his death and resurrection, which then leads on into the book of Acts. In this video, we are just going to focus on the first half of Luke's Gospel.

Chapters 1-2

The extended introduction tells in parallel, the birth stories of John the Baptist and Jesus. So you have this elderly priestly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, and then this young unmarried woman, Mary, and Joseph. They both receive an unlikely divine promise that they are going to have a son. Both promises are fulfilled then as John and then Jesus are born, and both parents sing poems of celebration. Now these poetic songs, they're filled with echoes from the Old Testament Psalms and prophets, showing how these children will fulfill God's ancient promises. But these poems also preview each child's role in the story to follow. So John is the prophetic messenger promised in the Torah and the prophets, who's going to prepare Israel to meet their God. And Jesus, he's the Messianic King promised to David, who's going to bring God's reign over Israel and God's blessing to the nations, just like he promised Abraham.

After this, Mary brings Jesus to the Jerusalem temple for his dedication, and two elderly prophets, Anna and Simeon, they see Jesus and they recognize who he is. And Simeon sings his own song, a poem inspired by the prophet Isaiah. He says this child is God's salvation for Israel and he will become a light to the nations.

Chapter 3

So with all this anticipation, the story moves forward into the next main section where Luke presents Jesus and his mission. He sets the stage with John's renewal movement at the Jordan River, where he's calling a new repentant, recommitted Israel into existence through baptism. He's preparing for the arrival of God's Kingdom. And then Jesus appears as the leader of this new Israel, and he's marked out by the Spirit and the voice of God from heaven: he is the beloved Son of God.

After this, Luke follows with the genealogy, and it traces Jesus' origins back to David, then back to Abraham, and then all the way

back to Adam from the book of Genesis. Luke's claiming here that Jesus is the Messianic King of Israel who will bring God's blessing, but not only to Israel, the family of Abraham. He is here for all the sons of Adam, for all humanity.

Chapters 4-8

After this, Luke has strategically placed the story of Jesus going to his hometown Nazareth, where he launches his public mission. At a synagogue gathering, Jesus stands up and he reads from the scroll of Isaiah, saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor and freedom for the prisoners. New sight for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed." Now along with the other Gospels, Jesus is presented here, he's the Messianic King bringing the good news of God's Kingdom, but what Luke uniquely highlights are the social implications of Jesus' mission.

So he brings freedom; the Greek word is "aphesis," and it literally means release, and it refers to the ancient Jewish practice of the Year of Jubilee described in Leviticus 25. It's when all Israelite slaves were released, when people's debts were canceled, when land that was sold was returned back to families. It's all a symbolic reenactment of God's liberating justice and mercy. And then Jesus says that this good news of release is specifically for the poor. Now in the Old Testament, the poor, or in Hebrew, "ani," it's a much broader category than just people who don't have very much money. It refers also to people of low social status in their culture, like people with disabilities, or women and children, and the elderly. It also can include social outsiders, like people of other ethnic groups or people whose poor life choices have placed them outside acceptable religious circles. And Jesus says that God's Kingdom is especially good news for these people.

So after this, Luke immediately puts in front of us a large block of stories showing us what Jesus' good news for the poor looks like. It involves the healing of a bedridden sick woman, or a man who has a skin disease, or someone who is paralyzed. There are stories here also about Jesus welcoming into his community a tax collector, like Levi, who is not financially poor, but he is a social outsider.

There's a story about Jesus forgiving a prostitute. Luke's showing us how Jesus' Kingdom brought restoration and reversal of peoples' whole life circumstances. He's expanding the circle of people who get invited in to discover the healing power of God's Kingdom.

And as Jesus' mission attracts a large following, he does something even more provocative. He forms these people into a new Israel by appointing over them the twelve disciples as leaders, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. And then Jesus teaches his manifesto of an upside-down Kingdom, or as Luke calls it, the "sermon given on the plain." He says God's love for the outsider and the poor means that his Kingdom brings a reversal of all of our value systems. He is here to form a new alternative people of God who are going to respond to Jesus' invitation by practicing radical generosity, by serving the poor, people who are going to lead by serving and live by peacemaking and forgiveness, people who are deeply pious, but who reject religious hypocrisy.

Chapter 9

Now Jesus' radical Kingdom vision has claim to divine authority. It starts to generate resistance and controversy, especially from Israel's religious leaders. His outreach to questionable people, it's a threat to their religious traditions and their sense of social stability. And so they start accusing Jesus of blaspheming God, of being a drunk, and mixing with sinners. And so this section culminates in a new revelation of Jesus' mission to his disciples. He says that yes, he is the Messianic King, and that he is going to assert his reign over Israel by dying in Jerusalem, by becoming the suffering servant King of Isaiah 53, who dies for the sins of Israel.

And then this shocking idea, it gets explored in the next story as Jesus goes up a mountain with three of his disciples, and he's suddenly transformed in front of them. They're enveloped in this cloud of God's presence, who announces, "This is my chosen Son." And then Moses and Elijah are there, the two other prophets who encountered God's presence and voice on a mountain, and Luke tells us that they're talking together about Jesus' exodus that he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem. Now that Greek word, "exodus," it's a clear reference to the exodus story.

Conclusion

Luke is portraying Jesus here as a new Moses, who will lead his newly formed Israel into freedom and release from the tyranny of sin and evil and all of its forms: personal, spiritual, and social. And that's going to lead us into the second half of the book, but for now, that is the first half of the Gospel according to Luke.

Luke Ch. 10-24

Introduction

The Gospel according to Luke. In the first video, we explored Luke's portrayal of John the Baptist and Jesus as the fulfillment of the story of Israel and of God's promises told in the Old Testament Scriptures. We then watched Jesus launch his mission and bring the good news of God's Kingdom to the poor among Israel—people of low social status and also people who are outsiders. And Jesus taught that his Kingdom is upside-down. It's a reversal of all of our common social values. This section culminated with Luke showing us how Jesus was a new Moses about to bring a new exodus by his death in Jerusalem.

Chapters 10-19

And so we come to the large center section of the book, where Jesus leads his newly formed Israel on a journey to Jerusalem. This part of the book consists mainly of Jesus' teaching and parables given on the road to the various people he encounters, mainly his growing group of disciples. And in this way, Luke portrays following Jesus as a journey. It's something you do where you learn as you go along life's path.

So first Jesus invites his disciples into his mission as he sends a wave of them to go ahead of him, announcing God's Kingdom. So being a disciple, right from the start, it means participating in Jesus' Kingdom mission, making it your own. And as Jesus' disciples come back, he then starts to give various teachings about prayer, about

trusting in God's provision. It's actually in these chapters of Luke that Jesus talks more about money, possessions, and generosity than anywhere else in his teachings. If following him is truly like being on the road, it should produce this minimalist mentality, creating a freedom from possessions that allows for radical generosity.

Another key theme in these chapters is Jesus' continued mission to the poor. So as he travels, he keeps forming his new Israel, and he encounters all these people who are sick or blind. He meets Samaritans, who are ancient enemies of the Jewish people, and famously, Zacchaeus, a Jewish man, but who heads up tax collection for the Romans. All of these social outsiders meet Jesus, and they're transformed by the encounter. And so they join his Kingdom community, which Jesus describes as a great banquet party. He is here to seek and save the lost, and so he's celebrating when people discover the mercy of God, but not everybody at the party is happy.

Luke includes multiple stories of Jesus at banquets with Israel's leaders, and these all become heated debates, where Jesus confronts their pride and hypocrisy. And so these contrasting banquet parties, they're captured most memorably in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. So a father had two sons, and one foolishly ran away and squandered his inheritance. But he comes back eventually, repentant, and his father forgives him, and he throws this huge party to celebrate "my son who was lost, but now is found." But the older brother, who never left his father, he's angry, and he resents his father's generosity to this undeserving son. Now in this famous parable, Jesus is explaining his whole Kingdom mission to these leaders. His parties represent God's joyous welcome of every kind of person into his family. The only entry requirement is humility and repentance. And so it highlights the tragedy of Israel's leaders, who reject Jesus and his upside-down Kingdom community.

Chapters 19-24

And this resistance to Jesus, it ramps up, and he finally arrives in Jerusalem for Passover. As he nears the city, he's weeping. His disciples are hailing him as the Messianic King, but Israel's leaders are denouncing him, and he knows that their rejection of his Kingdom

of peace is going to set Israel on a road of resistance and rebellion against the Roman Empire. It will bring the city's downfall. And it's that destruction of Jerusalem that Jesus symbolically enacts as he storms into the temple, he runs out the animal sellers, he brings the sacrificial system to a halt, and he says that "This place of worship has become a den of rebels, and will be destroyed."

Now this act, of course, generates a whole series of debates between Jesus and Israel's leaders, all leading up to Jesus' prediction that the Roman armies will one day surround the city. They will desolate it and the temple, all within a generation. With that, Jesus retreats with his disciples to celebrate the Passover meal. It is the annual symbolic meal about Israel's liberation from slavery through the death of the lamb. And so Jesus turns the meal's bread and wine into new symbols about this new exodus. His broken body, his shed blood will bring liberation for Jesus' renewed Israel.

After the meal, Jesus is arrested, and he's examined before the Jewish leaders and then put on trial as one claiming to be king. And Luke emphasizes Jesus' innocence. Pilate, the Roman governor, he claims that Jesus is innocent three times before giving in! Even Herod the ruler of Galilee finds nothing to accuse Jesus of, but the leaders finally compelled Pilate to have him crucified, and so he is. But even in his painful death, Jesus embodies the love and the mercy of God he taught so much about. He offers God's forgiveness to the soldiers as they crucify him! And then when one of the criminals executed alongside Jesus realizes who he actually is, he says, "Remember me when you come in your Kingdom." And Jesus' final words are an offer of hope to a humiliated criminal. "Today you will be with me in paradise."

And so with this last act of generosity and kindness, Jesus dies. His body is placed in a tomb, and on the first day of the week, some of Jesus' disciples come to the tomb only to find it empty! And there are two angelic figures there telling them that Jesus is alive, that he's risen from the dead, and so they leave with their minds blown. And it's right here that Luke tells one of his most beautiful stories.

Two of Jesus' disciples, they're leaving Jerusalem for a town called Emmaus, and they're heartbroken over Jesus' death. And then suddenly, Jesus is there just walking alongside them, but they don't recognize him.

He asks why they're so sad, and they go on to talk about all of their hopes, that Jesus would have been the one to redeem Israel, but now he is dead; it was all for nothing. But then later, as Jesus has a meal with these two, he breaks bread for them just as he did at the Passover meal, and it's in that moment that they recognize him. Then he disappears! Luke is telling the story to make a powerful point about following Jesus. When Jesus' disciples impose their agenda and their view of reality on Jesus, he remains invisible and unknown to them. It's only when we submit ourselves to the upside-down Kingdom of Jesus, that's epitomized in his broken body on the cross offered in self-giving love, it's only then that we see and know the real Jesus.

Conclusion

The book's concluding scene is yet another meal, as Jesus appears to his disciples and he explains to them from the Old Testament Scriptures how this was all a part of God's plan, that the Messiah would become Israel's King by suffering and dying for their sins and conquering their evil with his resurrection life. And so now as Simeon the prophet promised back in chapter 2, Jesus' Kingdom will move outward from Israel, so God's forgiveness can be announced to the nations and everyone invited to follow Jesus. But Jesus tells his disciples, wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Spirit to empower them for this new mission. And this, of course, keeps you reading right into Luke's second volume, the book of Acts. But for now, that's the Gospel according to Luke.

Acts Ch. 1-12

Introduction

The book of Acts. It's the second volume of the unified, two-part work that today we call "Luke-Acts." These were written by the same author, Luke, who was a traveling coworker with Paul. This is clear from the book's introduction, where Luke says, "I produced my first volume (that's the Gospel) about all the things that Jesus began to do and to teach." Now Luke's giving a clue here as to what this book of Acts will be about. Volume one was about what Jesus began to do and to teach. Volume two will then be about what Jesus continued to do and teach, which leads to a really interesting point about the book's traditional, but not original, name, "The Acts of the Apostles."

While different apostles do appear in most of these stories, the only single character who unifies the whole story from beginning to end, is Jesus himself, acting directly or through the Spirit. And so the book would more accurately be named, "The Acts of Jesus and the Spirit."

Chapter 1

The book's introduction recounts how the risen Jesus spent some forty days with the disciples, teaching them about the Kingdom of God. This connects back to the story of Luke's Gospel, where Jesus claimed he was restoring God's Kingdom over the world, beginning with Israel. So he called Israel to live under God's reign by following him, and he was enthroned as King when he gave up his life and

then conquered death with his love. And so the book of Acts begins with the risen King Jesus instructing his disciples about life in his Kingdom.

So he promises that the Spirit will soon come and immerse them in his personal presence, and this fulfills one of the key hopes from the Old Testament prophets, that in the Messianic Kingdom, God's presence, his Spirit, would come and take up residence among his people in a new temple and transform their hearts. And so Jesus says when this happens, the Spirit will empower his disciples to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

From here, Jesus is taken up from their sight in a cloud. It's an image drawn from the book of Daniel chapter 7. It shows how Jesus is now being enthroned as the Son of Man, who was vindicated after his suffering and now shares in God's rule over the world. And so he promises that he will return one day.

And so the main themes and design of the book of Acts flow right out of this opening chapter. This is a story about Jesus leading his people by the Spirit to go out into the world and invite all nations to live under his reign. And so the story will begin with that message spreading in Jerusalem and then into the neighboring regions of Judea and Samaria, full of non-Jewish people, and then from there out to all of the nations and to the ends of the earth. This video's just going to focus on the first half of the book.

Chapters 2-7

So the Jerusalem-focused section begins with Jesus' followers waiting until the feast of Pentecost, when all of these Jewish pilgrims from all over the ancient world were in the city. And the Holy Spirit comes on the disciples as a great wind, and something like flames appear over each person's head, and together they start announcing and telling stories of God's mighty deeds. And they're speaking in all of these languages that they didn't know before, but all of the people gathered there understand perfectly.

Now in order to see what Luke's emphasizing in this story, it's crucial to see the Old Testament roots of all of these images. So first, the

wind and fire is a direct allusion to the stories about God's glorious fiery presence filling the tabernacle and the temple, and it's also connected to the prophetic promises that God would come and live by his Spirit in the new temple of the Messianic Kingdom.

And so here in Acts, God's fiery presence comes to dwell, not in a building, but in his people. Luke is saying that the new temple promised by the prophets is Jesus' new covenant family, the people of Jesus, which connects to the second thing Luke's trying to say here.

So the prophets promised that when God came to dwell in his new temple, he would reunify all the tribes of Israel under the Messianic King, and that the good news of God's reign would go out and be announced to the nations. Luke describes in detail the international, multi-tribe makeup of all of the Israelites who were there at Pentecost and who responded to Peter's message. And so the apostles keep calling Israelites to acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah, and thousands upon thousands respond, forming new communities of generosity and worship and celebration.

But not everyone's celebrating. From here Luke shows how Jesus' new family quickly faced hostility from the Jerusalem leaders. With a really beautiful symmetrical design, Luke tells a tale of two temples. So God's new temple, the community of Jesus' followers, they're gathering every day in the temple courts and from house to house. Now in between those notices, are two stories of Peter and the other apostles healing people in the temple courts, only to get arrested by the temple leaders, followed each time by a speech of Peter claiming that Jesus is true King of Israel. And at the center of all this is a story of Jesus' followers donating property and possessions to a common fund to help the poor, which is really cool. But it seems kind of random for Luke to mention it here, until you realize that this was a practice described in the laws of the Torah and was supposed to be happening through the Jerusalem temple and its leaders.

So Luke's point here is clear. The new temple of Jesus' community is fulfilling the purpose that God always intended for the Jerusalem temple: to be a place where heaven and earth meet, where people encounter God's generosity and healing presence.

And this conflict between the two temples, it culminates in Acts chapter 6-7. It's the first wave of persecution. So Jesus' followers, they continue to multiply, requiring more leaders. And one of these, Stephen, he's a bold witness for Jesus in Jerusalem, and he ends up getting arrested. And he's accused of speaking against, and even threatening, the temple. And so Stephen here gives a long speech, showing how Israel's leaders have always rejected the messengers God sent them, including Jesus, and now his disciples. So the Jerusalem leaders are enraged. They murder Stephen, and they launch a wave of persecution against Jesus' followers that drives most of them from the city. But it has a paradoxical effect. Luke shows how this tragedy actually became the means by which Jesus' people are now sent out into Judea and Samaria.

Chapters 8-12

Now in this section, Luke has collected a diverse group of stories that all show how the mostly Jewish, Jerusalem-based community of Jesus became a multi-ethnic international movement.

So first is the mission of Philip into Samaria. It's the land of Israel's hated enemies, and many of them come to follow Jesus. Next we have the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, later known as Paul. He was the sworn enemy and persecutor of Jesus' followers until he personally met the risen Jesus, and he then became a passionate advocate on behalf of Jesus. Next is the story of Peter having a vision about how God doesn't consider non-Jewish people ritually impure or unworthy of joining Jesus' family. And so Peter, he's led by the Spirit into the house of a Roman soldier, full of non-Jewish people, and they all respond to the good news about Jesus. In fact, the Spirit shows up powerfully upon them, just as he did to the Jewish disciples back in chapter 2.

These themes all come together in the founding of the church in Antioch, the largest, most cosmopolitan city in that part of the Roman empire. And Luke, he tells us that Barnabas, a Jewish leader from the Jerusalem church, went along with Paul to help lead this church community.

Conclusion

And so it became the first large multi-ethnic church in history. It was where Jesus' followers were called "Christians" for the first time, and it's from here that the first international missionaries were sent out. And so we see Jesus' commission coming true, and this takes us into the rest of Luke's story, but for now, that's the first half of the book of Acts.

Acts Ch. 13-28

Introduction

The book of Acts. In the first video, we watched Luke open the book by showing us how the risen Jesus was exalted as the King of the world. He promised to send the Holy Spirit as his own personal presence to empower his followers to go out into the world and bear witness to the good news about his Kingdom until he would return one day. And so the movement began in Jerusalem, as the Spirit came and formed Jesus' followers into the new temple promised by the scriptural prophets. But this generated conflict with the leaders of Jerusalem, and so it led to the persecution of the Christians, but the Spirit transformed it into good. It actually became the means by which the originally Jewish Jesus communities were pushed outside Jerusalem to become a multi-ethnic international movement. And the flagship church of this diverse Jesus movement was in Antioch, the largest city in that part of the Roman Empire.

Chapters 13-20

So we left the story with Barnabas and Paul serving in the Antioch church, and the Spirit prompts the church to send them on a missionary journey, which opens up a whole new section of the book: the stories about Paul and his coworkers traveling to different cities around the Roman Empire, announcing the good news that Jesus is King.

The first mission is into the interior of what's called Asia Minor, found

in modern Turkey, and it ends with an important meeting of the apostles back in Jerusalem. The second mission is through Asia Minor, and then into ancient Greece, and then the third mission is through that same territory again, and it concludes with Paul's journey all the way back to Jerusalem. Now in recounting all these stories, Luke has highlighted a number of important themes by repeating them. So first is the continued mission to Israel. Whenever Paul enters a new city, he always goes first to the Jewish synagogue to share about the risen King Jesus and how he's forming a new multi-ethnic family of God. Now most often, lots of people come to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, but some oppose Paul. Sometimes, they even throw him out of town as a dangerous rebel, who opposes the Torah and Jewish tradition, and this tension culminates after the first journey, leading to an important council in Jerusalem.

So Paul discovers that there are some Jewish Christians in Antioch, and they're claiming that unless non-Jewish people become Jewish by practicing circumcision, the Sabbath, obeying the kosher food laws, that they can't become part of Jesus' family. But Paul and Barnabas, they radically disagree, and so they take the debate to a leadership council in Jerusalem. Now there, Peter, Paul, and James (the brother of Jesus), they all show from the Scriptures, and from their experience, that God's plan was always to include the nations within his covenant people. So they write a letter, requiring non-Jewish Christians to stop participating in pagan temple sacrifices, but they don't require them to adopt an ethnically Jewish identity or obey the laws of the Torah. Now this decision was groundbreaking for the history of the Jesus movement. Jesus, he's the Jewish Messiah, but he's also the risen King of all nations. And so once membership among his people is not based on ethnic identity or following the laws of the Torah, it's based simply on trusting Jesus and then following his teachings. And it's this multi-ethnic reality of the Jesus movement that leads us to the next theme Luke wants us to see in the missionary journeys, namely, the clash of cultures between the early Christians and the Greek and Roman world.

Luke records multiple clashes in Philippi, Athens, and Ephesus. Paul goes and announces Jesus as the revelation of the one true God

and as the King of the world, who shows up all other gods and idols as powerless and futile. And his message is consistently viewed as subversive to the Roman way of life, and he gets accused of being a dangerous social revolutionary. These stories show how the multi-ethnic, monotheistic Jesus communities did not fit into any cultural boxes known to the Roman people. The ancient world had just never seen anything like them, and the Christians aroused more than just suspicion.

Another theme Luke repeats is how Paul and the Christians are constantly being accused of rebellion, even treason, against Caesar, the Roman Emperor. People heard Paul correctly; he was announcing that there's another King, Jesus. And they also correctly saw that the Christian way of life was a challenge to many Roman cultural values. But every time Paul gets arrested and interrogated before Roman officials, they don't see any threat, and he's dismissed. These stories show us the paradox that the early Church presented to the world; it was a Jewish Messianic movement, but it was ethnically diverse, full of communities that treated men and women and rich and poor and slave and free all as equals, and they all gave their allegiance to King Jesus alone and no other god or king. And so their very existence, it turned upside-down the core values of Roman culture, but the Christians posed no military threat because Jesus taught them to be people of peace. And so the only crime Paul and the Christians can be accused of is not conforming to the status quo.

Chapters 21-28

The book's final section returns the focus to Paul's witness spreading from Jerusalem to Rome. His final missionary journey ends back in Jerusalem, where his controversial reputation precedes him. He gets attacked by Jewish people, who think that he has betrayed Israel, which attracts the attention of Roman soldiers, who think Paul's a terrorist from Egypt starting a rebellion! And so he gets arrested. From here, Paul is put on trial, first before the Jewish leaders of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, but then before a series of Roman leaders in Caesarea. There's Governor Felix, who puts Paul off for the next governor, Festus, who eventually brings Paul before King Agrippa. He ends up in prison for years, even though at each trial, the charges

never stick to him because all he's doing is announcing that his hope in the resurrection has been fulfilled in King Jesus. This is hardly a crime, but at this point, the Roman legal machine can't just turn him away, and so Paul ends up appealing to Rome's highest court.

Now you would think that all this prison time would be a setback for Paul because his heartbeat is to be on the road starting new Jesus communities. But the Spirit orchestrates everything for good in this book, and so the imprisonment gives Paul time to have his most important apostolic letters written, and these become the way that his missionary legacy is carried on, long after he dies.

Eventually Paul was transferred as a prisoner to Rome, and after a terrifying near-death voyage across the Mediterranean, Paul ends up in house arrest in Rome, awaiting his delayed trial. And so he's able to host in quite a nice house, regular meetings that reach Jews and Gentiles. And the book's final words are about how Paul is announcing the Kingdom of God and boldly teaching all about the Lord Jesus the Messiah, totally unhindered, all happening right under Caesar's nose in Rome.

Conclusion

The unified work of Luke-Acts, it does so much more than give us a history of Jesus and the early Church. He's showing how the Kingdom of God came on earth as in heaven, through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, through the coming of his Spirit to empower the Church to bear witness from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. And as Luke has told the story, he's given us scores of examples of what faithfulness to King Jesus looks like. It looks like sharing the good news of the risen King Jesus in word and in action. It means forming diverse Jesus communities where people of all kinds come together, where they're treated equally and give allegiance to King Jesus and live by his teachings. And all of this is done by trusting in the power and the guidance of the Spirit to lead the way forward, and that's what the book of Acts is all about.

Romans Ch. 1-4

Introduction

Paul's letter to the Romans. It's one of the longest and most significant things ever written by the man who was formerly known as Saul of Tarsus. He was a Jewish rabbi belonging to a group known as the Pharisees, and he was passionate and devout to the Torah of Moses and the traditions of Israel. And he saw Jesus and his followers as a threat. But then he had a radical encounter with the risen Jesus, who commissioned him as an apostle, like an official representative, to the world of non-Jewish people, called Gentiles, in the Bible.

And so he started going by his Roman name, Paul, and he traveled all around the ancient Roman empire, telling people about the risen King Jesus and forming his followers, then, into these new communities called churches. And Paul would occasionally write letters to these new Jesus communities to help them foster their faith or answer questions, and the book of Romans is one of these. It was actually written quite late in his career. Now we know from the book of Acts that the church in Rome had existed for some time, that it was made up of Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Jesus. But at one point, the Roman Emperor Claudius had expelled all of the Jewish people from Rome, and then about five years later, all of those Jews, including Jesus-following Jews, were allowed to return. And when they did, they found a church that had become very non-Jewish in custom and practice, and so this created lots of tension, so that by Paul's day, the Roman church was divided.

People disagreed about how to follow Jesus, they were debating about whether non-Jewish Christians should celebrate the Sabbath, or eat kosher, or be circumcised.

And so Paul wrote this letter to accomplish a few things. He wanted this divided church to become unified, and for a practical purpose. He was hoping that the Roman church could become a staging ground for his mission to go even further west, all the way to Spain. And so these circumstances are what motivated Paul to write out his fullest explanation of the Gospel, the good news that he was announcing about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Now the letter is designed to have four main movements, but it's unified as one, long flowing exploration of the Gospel. The Gospel, Paul says, first of all reveals God's righteousness, and then it also creates a new humanity, which fulfills God's promise to Israel. And so it's this Gospel that's going to unify the Church. In this video, we're just going to explore the ideas in chapters 1-4.

Chapters 1-2

So Paul opens by introducing himself as an apostle appointed by God to spread the Gospel about Jesus, how he's the Messiah of Israel, who was raised from the dead as the Son of God, King of the nations. And Jesus now calls all humanity to come under his loving rule, and Paul says this good news about King Jesus is first of all, God's power to save people who trust in him, and second, that it reveals God's righteousness. Now, righteousness is a rich Old Testament word for Paul. It describes God's character, that he always does justice, what is right and what is good, but also that he is faithful and just to fulfill his promises. And Paul's saying that the story of Jesus shows how God has done both of these things. How?

Well he goes first into a long, creative retelling of Genesis chapters 3-11. He shows how all the Gentile world, all the nations, have become trapped in the spiral of sin and selfishness. The human heart and mind are broken, Paul says. We've turned away from God to embrace idolatry, which means finding ultimate significance in created things and then giving ultimate allegiance to these things that are not God. This results in a distortion of our humanity and

destructive behavior, and so what's left is a humanity that stands guilty as charged before a just and righteous God, to which the people of Israel might say, "Well it's a good thing then that God chose our people out from among the nations. He saved us out of slavery in Egypt; he gave us the laws of the Torah, like the Sabbath and eating kosher and circumcision. And these all together show us how to live as God's holy people." But Paul says, not so fast.

He recalls the storyline of the Torah and of the rest of the Old Testament, which shows that Israel was just as sinful and idolatrous and morally broken as the rest of humanity. Israel is actually more guilty than the Gentiles, Paul says, because they have the Torah; they should know better. And so Paul concludes, all humanity, Gentiles, Israelites, are hopelessly trapped and guilty before God, but that is not the final word.

Chapter 3

The good news about Jesus is God's response. Instead of holding humanity guilty, Jesus came as Israel's Messiah to die on behalf of all people as a sacrifice for sins. As our representative, Jesus took into himself all of the just consequences of the pain, the sin, and the death that we have caused in the world. And he overcame it all by his resurrection from the dead; it's his new resurrection life that he makes available to others. Jesus became what we are, so that we might become what he is. And all of this, Paul says, is how God justifies those who trust or have in faith in Jesus.

Now justification is another rich, Old Testament term for Paul. And it's related to God's righteousness. It literally means to "declare righteous." Because of what Jesus did on our behalf, we are given a new status before God. Instead of finding us guilty, God declares that a person is in a right relationship with him and is forgiven. Justification results in a new family; the person who trusts in Jesus is given a place among God's covenant people. Justification also results in a new future, which begins a journey of life transformation by God's grace. And so all of these things about justification are God's gift to those who, through their faith, are in Christ.

Chapter 4

And so this leads Paul, in chapter 4, to explore the huge implications that all of this has for who can be a part of God's covenant family. He goes back to the story of Abraham in Genesis chapter 15. Before any of the laws of the Torah were given to Israel, Abraham was justified, or declared righteous, before God. How?

Well God promised that Abraham would become a father of a large, multi-ethnic family that would receive God's blessing. But he and his wife, Sarah, they were really old. They had never been able to have children. But nonetheless, Abraham had radical faith and trust in God's promise, and so God declared him to be righteous. And so Paul says now Abraham has become the father of God's new covenant family, and it's spreading all around the world. It's made up of Jews and Gentiles who have the same kind of faith and trust in the one who fulfilled God's promise to Abraham, Jesus the Messiah.

Conclusion

So let's pause and summarize Paul's main ideas here in chapters 1-4 because they're the foundation for understanding the rest of the letter. All humanity is hopelessly trapped in sin and needs to be rescued. That rescue, however, is not going to happen by people trying to obey the laws of the Torah; rather, God's righteous character has moved him to rescue the world through Jesus' death and resurrection, so that he could create that multi-ethnic family of Abraham based on faith as his own new covenant people. And so Paul's going to go on to show how this new family is a part of something much, much bigger that calls them to a whole new way of life together. But it's all going to be rooted in these core ideas explored in chapters 1-4 of Paul's letter to the Romans.

Romans Ch. 5-16

Introduction

Paul's letter to the Romans. Check out the first video where we explored who Paul was and why he wrote this letter and where we trace the core ideas of chapters 1-4: that all humanity is hopelessly trapped in sin and needs to be rescued. That this rescue is not going to happen by people trying to obey the laws of the Torah; rather, God's righteous character has moved him to rescue the world through Jesus' death and resurrection, so that he could create a faith-based, multi-ethnic family of Abraham as his people.

Now in the remaining three movements of the letter to the Romans, Paul is going to develop these ideas even more. So remember Paul's exploration of justification by faith, that when people trust Jesus' death and resurrection was for them, they're given a new status, they're right with God, they're placed in a new family, the covenant people of Abraham, and they're given a new future, the hope of a transformed life. Now Paul wants to show how this reality should reshape every part of our existence because being in this family means being a part of a new humanity that God is creating through Jesus and the Spirit.

Chapters 5-8

So Paul goes back to the first human character in the biblical story, Adam. His name means "humanity," and Adam, like all humanity after him, has chosen sin and selfishness. And so everyone faces God's

judgment because we've become slaves to sin's influence, resulting in death. But then Paul contrasts Adam with Jesus, who he says is the new Adam, a human who lived in faithful obedience to God, shown through his act of sacrificial love. And now Jesus offers his life as a gift to others, so that they can be justified before God.

And so Jesus stands as the head of a new humanity that is being transformed by this gift, which leads him to chapter 6. Paul reminds these Christians in Rome that choosing to follow Jesus means leaving their old Adam-like humanity and entering into the new Jesus-like humanity. And their baptism was a sacred symbol of that transition. Their old humanity died with Jesus, and their new humanity was raised with him from the dead. So when a person trusts in Jesus, their life becomes joined to Jesus' life; what's true of him is now true of them. It's when people accept their identity as Jesus-like humans, that they are liberated to become the wholehearted humans who can truly love God and their neighbor.

Now if creating this new humanity was always God's purpose, Paul asks in chapter 7, what then was the point of God giving Israel the law, or in Hebrew, the Torah? Now, side note: When Paul uses this word "law," he sometimes means the storyline and message of the first five books of the Bible. But other times, he's more specifically referring to the hundreds of commands given through Moses and that are found in the Torah. The second meaning is Paul's focus here. What was the purpose of all those commands?

Paul says the commands of the Torah were good. They showed God's will for how Israel was to live, but if you read the storyline of the Torah, Israel broke all those commands. The more laws Israel received, the more they replayed the sin of Adam and rebelled. So even when God gave his people specific moral rules to obey, that did not fix the problem of the sinful human heart. And so, paradoxically, these rules made Israel even more guilty. But Paul says that paradox is the point. God's goal was to make it crystal clear that it's evil that's hijacked the human heart and that the Torah, good as it is, could not do a thing about it.

But Paul says in chapter 8 the solution has arrived in Jesus and the

Spirit, and here's how. The commands of the Torah acted like a magnifying glass. It focused the problem of the human condition into one place, the people of Israel. But now Israel's representative, Jesus the Messiah, has paid for and dealt with all of that sin through his death and his resurrection. And now Jesus has released his Spirit into his new family to transform their hearts, so that they can truly fulfill the call of all of the Torah's commands: to love God and neighbor. And there's more. God's renewal of human beings is the first step of his larger mission to rescue and renew all of creation, making it a place where his love gets the final word.

Now you can see how chapters 1-8 are one long flow of thought here, but it raises some other questions. If all of this was God's purpose, what is the current status then of Paul's fellow Israelites who don't acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah? How does this story fulfill God's promises to them?

Chapters 9-11

Well Paul begins in chapter 9 with his own anguish over fellow Israelites who don't think Jesus is their Messiah. And it leads him to reflect on Israel in the past from the Old Testament story. And he reminds us that simply being an ethnic Israelite, a physical descendant of Abraham, never made one automatically a faithful member of the covenant family. Paul shows us how God has always selected a subset from Abraham's family to carry on the line of promise. And his point is that now that line of promise is carried on by those who follow Jesus. He reminds us that for a long time, people inside and outside Abraham's family have rejected God's will. He reminds us of the story of Israel and the golden calf and of Pharaoh's rebellion. He shows us how God was able to orchestrate events, so that people's rejection of him actually accomplished his redemptive purposes.

And so in chapter 10, Paul turns his focus to Israel in the present. The reason many Israelites reject Jesus is because they're basing their covenant relationship with God on their performance of the commands in the Torah. And so sadly they don't recognize what God has done through Jesus to create a new covenant family on the basis of faith. And so Paul asks in chapter 11: What is Israel's future? Has

God written off his people? “No!” He says. There are tons of Jewish people, including himself, who do recognize Jesus as their Messiah. But there are also a lot who don’t.

But God has been able to use their rejection for his own purposes. It’s caused the Gospel to spread even quicker and farther into the Gentile world, making the family of Abraham even larger and more multi-ethnic. Paul describes God’s covenant family as a big olive tree, and the rejectors of Jesus have been broken off, so to speak. And these Gentiles are like wild branches that have been grafted into the family tree; however, Paul says one day Jesus will be acknowledged by his own people. He doesn’t offer any details about how. Paul simply trusts God’s character and promise that he won’t give up on his covenant people, which transitions into the final section of the book, chapters 12-16.

Chapters 12-16

But remember the big picture. Because of their faith in Jesus, Jews and Gentiles are now together Abraham’s family, that new humanity that’s being transformed by God’s Spirit. And so this is how God is fulfilling his ancient promises. Therefore, the only reasonable response is for these Jews and non-Jewish Christians to be unified as the Church.

In Chapters 12-13, he shows that this unity will come from a commitment to love and forgive each other. Love will look like everybody using their diverse gifts and talents to serve one another in the Church, and it will also mean humility and forgiveness. When these different ethnic groups and cultures come together in Jesus, conflict is inevitable and can only be overcome through the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation. This is how they will show that greatest of Christian virtues—love, which fulfills the Torah’s greatest commands, to love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

In chapters 14 and 15, he focuses specifically on the issues that are creating ethnic divisions in the Roman church. These are disputes about the Jewish food laws and the Sabbath. And Paul says these practices don’t define who’s in or out of Jesus’ family. And if people

differ over these culturally important but nonessential issues, they need to learn how to respect each other's differences. And it's in this way that love will heal and unify the family.

Conclusion

Paul closes the letter by first commending Phoebe, who's a key leader in the church of Cenchrea. She had the honor of carrying, and perhaps even reading, this letter aloud to the Roman churches for the first time. Paul then concludes by greeting a whole bunch of people he hasn't seen for a long time, and that's the end. Whoa. You can see better how all the pieces of this letter fit together and show what a profound masterpiece it truly is. That's what the letter to the Romans is all about.

1 Corinthians

Introduction

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, written to a church community that Paul knew really well. Corinth was a major port city in the ancient world and had lots of temples to Greek and Roman gods. It was a big economic center, and so Paul strategically came here as a missionary. He spent a year and a half there getting to know people, talking to them about Jesus, and a whole bunch of people became followers of Jesus and formed a church community. You can read about all of this in Acts chapter 18.

So after a while, Paul moved on to start churches in other cities, and he started getting reports that things were not going well at all back at the church in Corinth. It was plagued by all kinds of problems, and that's why he wrote this letter.

It's broken up into five main parts along with the final greeting. And these five sections correspond to five main problems that Paul is addressing. And so the letter reads like a collection of short essays on different topics, but there are these core ideas that unite all of the pieces together.

So here's what he does in each section. He describes the problem, but then he always responds to that problem with some part of the story of the Gospel, which is the good news about Jesus. And he shows how they're actually not living out what they say they believe.

And so this letter is all about learning to think about every area of life through the lens of the Gospel. So let's dive in and see how he does it.

Chapters 1-4

In chapters 1-4, the problem is that there are these divisions in the church. There are some other teachers who had come through town since Paul left, a guy named Apollos and then Peter, and people had picked their favorite teacher and then became groupies around that leader and then started to talk bad and disrespect people who favored another leader or teacher.

And so Paul, his response to this is kind of sarcastic and sharp. He says, "You have to be kidding me! The church is not a popularity contest. The church is a community of people who are centered around Jesus. Its leaders and its teachers are simply servants of Jesus. So while you might prefer one leader more than another, it's not worth dividing over and certainly not speaking poorly about each other. The center of the church is Jesus and the good news about who he is and what he's done."

Chapters 5-7

In chapters 5-7, Paul addresses some problems related to sex. There were a number of people sleeping around in the church, one guy with his stepmother and a number of other people still worshipping at the local temples to Greek gods and sleeping with the prostitutes who worked there. Not only that, but there were people in the church who were saying that this was all just fine. They said, "Hey, we're free in Christ! God's grace is bottomless, right? It's fine." And Paul says it's not fine. And with the Gospel in hand, he shows just how wrong-headed this kind of thinking is. He says, "Remember first of all, Jesus died for your sins, including the ruin of broken relationships that's caused by sexual misconduct. And so if you're a Christian, sexual integrity is one of the main ways that we respond to Jesus' love and grace."

Paul also reminds them that just as Jesus was physically raised from the dead, so our bodies will be raised from the dead, which means

this: if your body is being redeemed by Jesus now and in the future, then what you do with your body matters. It matters a lot, and it's not yours to do whatever you want with. Paul's being super clear. Being a follower of Jesus involves no compromise when it comes to sexual integrity.

Chapters 8-10

In chapters 8-10, the issue is about food, but not just food preferences like, do you like or dislike a certain food. The issue the Corinthians were divided over is meat that came from animals sacrificed in the local temples to Greek and Roman gods. And there was a split between the Jewish and non-Jewish Christians about how to respond to this issue.

And once again Paul appeals to some core ideas from the Gospel. He says our allegiance first and foremost is to Jesus as Lord, not to any other gods. And so if you're in a situation where there's meat that's been dedicated to another god and there are people around who might watch you and conclude, "Oh, look! Christians worship Jesus and they can worship other gods too." Paul says if that's the scenario, don't eat the meat. Your loyalty is to Jesus, and you should love those people more than yourself and not mislead them.

But Paul quickly qualifies this and says, "Listen, as Christians, we believe God is the Creator of all things including that animal. And the temple idols, we believe, are just pieces of wood and stone. So if there's no one around who's going to misunderstand your actions and you're hungry, eat up! You're free as a new human in Christ to follow your conscience in these kind of debatable matters."

So what makes it okay in one situation to eat but not in the other? The core principle is love. Love will deny itself and look out for the well-being of other people. And love, God's love, is at the core of the Gospel. It's what Jesus did when he died for us, and so Paul says it's what Christians should do for other people.

Chapters 11-14

In chapters 11-14, Paul moves on and addresses problems in their weekly worship gathering. There were some people who were

having really powerful spiritual experiences in the gathering, and so they would start praying out loud in unknown languages. There were other people who might start sharing a teaching or a word from God, and then someone would get up and interrupt them because they wanted to share. And it all was really chaotic, and it was distracting people, especially visitors, from hearing the Gospel.

So in these chapters, Paul helps them think first of all about the purpose of this gathering to help them see what kind of behaviors are appropriate. He says the gathering is a place where God's Spirit should be working through everybody, and it should happen in a unified way.

So he develops this cool metaphor about the Church as a human body. It's one, but it has all these different parts, and each part serves a unique and important role. So he goes on to name a whole bunch of things that the Spirit does through all these different people, all for the building up of the Church. That's a key phrase in these chapters. And Paul concludes that the highest value in the gathering should be a concept central to the Gospel, God's love. Love is the keyword in these chapters too. Love will compel each person in the gathering to use their role to serve and seek the well-being of others.

So Paul applies all this to the Corinthians' problems. Some people think the purpose of the gathering is to have intense spiritual experiences or to get a chance to speak their mind. And Paul says, "Listen, I'm a big fan of powerful experiences of prayer, but if it distracts other people or freaks them out, I should stop it because I'm loving myself more than I am loving those people." The gathering around Jesus should be orderly, so everybody can learn and sing and worship and hear God speaking to them.

Chapters 15-16

The last problem Paul addresses is the issue of Jesus' resurrection and the future hope of Jesus' followers. There were some people in the church who were saying that the idea of resurrection is ridiculous and doesn't really matter to being a Christian. And Paul reacts to this big time. He begins by saying that the resurrection is an indispensable part of the Gospel. We believe in it because of the hundreds

of eye witnesses that saw Jesus alive in a physical body after being publicly executed by the Romans. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, Paul says that his death was meaningless. We are all still lost in our sin and selfishness; we should just stop being Christians.

Paul then shows in detail how the resurrection was Jesus' victory over death and evil, how it's a source of life and power for us now in the present and how it's a promise of future hope for the whole world. It's because of the resurrection that we have a reason to be unified around Jesus. It's the reason we have motivation for sexual integrity. It's the source of power for loving other people more than ourselves, and ultimately it's our hope for victory over death.

Conclusion

And so Paul concludes we do believe Jesus was raised from the dead, which means this: the Gospel is not just moral advice or a recipe for private spirituality. It's an announcement about Jesus that opens up a whole new reality. And that's what 1 Corinthians is all about—seeing every part of life through the lens of that Gospel.

2 Corinthians

Introduction

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Even though it's called "second," or "2 Corinthians," in our Bibles, there are multiple clues within this letter that it's not the second thing he ever wrote to the church of ancient Corinth.

Paul started this Jesus community in Corinth some time ago on one of his missionary journeys. You can read the story in the book of Acts, chapter 18. And after moving on, Paul got a report that things were not going well there. So he wrote the letter that we call 1 Corinthians to correct these problems, and it appears that many in the church rejected Paul's teaching in that letter and rebelled against his authority. And so we learn in this letter that Paul had followed up in person with what he calls the "painful visit," and after that, he sent a letter, which he says was written with "anguish and tears." And so after all these measures, most, but not all, of the Corinthians realized their arrogance, and they apologized to Paul. They wanted to reconcile. And so Paul wrote this letter to assure them of his love and commitment. The letter's been designed with three main sections, each addressing a distinct topic.

So Paul first finalizes his reconciliation with the Corinthians. Then in chapters 8 and 9, he addresses the topic of forgotten generosity, and in the final chapters, Paul challenges the remaining Corinthians who still reject him. Let's dive in and you'll see how it all works.

Chapters 1-7

So Paul opens up by thanking the God of all mercy and comfort, who brought peace and encouragement to him and the Corinthians during this time of division and dispute. He acknowledges that things have been tense since his painful visit, and he makes clear he's forgiven them; he wants an open and honest relationship. But why had they rejected Paul in the first place?

Well we discover later in this letter that the Corinthians had disregarded Paul as a leader. He was poor, he earned a meager living through manual labor, he was under constant persecution and suffering, he was often homeless, and to top it off, he wasn't a very impressive public speaker. And so once the Corinthians were exposed to other, more wealthy, impressive Christian leaders, they started to think less of Paul. They were actually ashamed of him.

So Paul responds first by showing that their elevation of these leaders simply because of their wealth and eloquence is a betrayal of Jesus. It shows a totally distorted value system. True Christian leadership, Paul says, is not about status or self-promotion. Paul depicts himself and the other apostles as captive slaves to King Jesus, who's leading them on a procession of triumph. Paul's job isn't to be impressive, but rather to point people to the one who is: Jesus.

He then alludes to a recent demand of the Corinthians that he provide some letters of recommendation to prove his authority and credentials, and this is ridiculous to Paul. Their church wouldn't even exist if he hadn't started it, and so he says they are his proof of his genuine leadership; they are his letter of recommendation. He cleverly quotes from the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, saying that God's spirit has written his letter of recommendation on their hearts as his new covenant people. The Corinthians shouldn't need any more proof than that.

Now the mention of the new covenant, it leads Paul into a long comparison between the old covenant between God and Israel that was mediated by Moses, and the new covenant between God and the Corinthians, mediated by Jesus and the Spirit.

The old covenant, made at Mount Sinai, it was truly glorious. It

made Moses himself shine with God's glory, but that glory eventually faded. Not to mention the fact that the laws of that covenant were ineffective at truly transforming Israel. But the new covenant, by comparison, is even more glorious because the resurrected Jesus is the very glory of God, and he lives on forever. And it's his Spirit that's now transforming people to become more faithful, just like Jesus himself.

Now this all sounds amazing. I mean, who doesn't want to share in God's own glory? But Paul goes on to show how the paradox of the cross turns upside-down the Corinthians' ideas of glory and success. After all, Jesus' glorious exaltation as King took place through his suffering, execution, and death. On the cross, Jesus revealed God's salvation. He died for the sins of the world to reconcile people to God, but the cross does even more. It reveals God's character. He's a being of utter self-giving, suffering love that seeks the well-being of others. The cross also reveals a new "cruciform" way of life.

And Paul's goal is that his life and ministry imitates the cross, so although his apostolic career has been marked by humility, suffering, by poverty, it was all to serve the Corinthians. And so when they disapprove of Paul's poverty and suffering, they disapprove of Jesus too. Paul's way of life and leadership is actually the proof that he authentically represents the crucified and risen Jesus. Paul really wants to reconcile with the Corinthians, but he won't let things lie until they've been transformed and embrace this upside-down paradox of the cross.

Chapters 8-9

After this passionate appeal, Paul moves on to address the topic of forgotten generosity. So the Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem, they had fallen into poverty due to a famine, and Paul was raising money among the new churches that he started, full of mostly non-Jews. They would all send a relief gift as a symbol of their unity in the Messiah Jesus. And so many of his churches, they were thrilled to give, but the Corinthians, in the midst of all this conflict with Paul, hadn't saved up for the gift.

And for Paul, this isn't just about money. It's another sign that the Corinthians have not been transformed by the Gospel about Jesus, which at its heart, is a story of generosity.

Paul says, "You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, that even though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich."

He's telling the story of the Gospel through financial metaphors. Jesus gave up his glorious honor, or "wealth," and he lowered himself to die like a poor slave, so that other people, who are impoverished through sin and death, could be exalted and become wealthy through the riches of God's grace. To be a Christian is to let this story sink deep into your mind and heart, letting it transform you into someone who's more generous, more willing to share your life and resources to help others.

Chapters 10-13

In the final section of the letter, Paul focuses on the main source of his conflict with the Corinthians: that group of impressive leaders that he sarcastically calls, "super apostles." So they came to Corinth promoting themselves and badmouthing Paul as a poor, unsuccessful leader.

And at the risk of sounding self-promoting, Paul says, "Do these guys really want to compare credentials?" He can totally take them on. Are they Jewish Bible experts? Well so is Paul; he was a Pharisee for goodness sake! He has the entire Bible memorized. Do they want to brag about their superior knowledge of Jesus? Paul has actually seen and hung out with the risen Jesus. He's actually had visions of Jesus' heavenly throne room! But more importantly, Paul's has given his entire life to the mission of Jesus. He's sacrificed comfort and stability, and he never asked the Corinthians for money. Unlike the super apostles, who charged a lot, Paul earned his own living.

But Paul says he refuses to brag about these accomplishments because these aren't the things that really matter as a Christian. Instead what he'll brag about is how flawed and how weak he is

because it's in those inadequacies that he discovers the love and mercy of Jesus. Or as Jesus once told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect through weakness."

Paul concludes the letter with a sober warning to the Corinthians. They need to check themselves. Their contempt for Paul, his way of life, their love for these super apostles, it all shows that they don't grasp who Jesus is on a fundamental level. They're not living like transformed followers of Jesus, and so he invites them, once again, to humble themselves before the love of Jesus.

Conclusion

2 Corinthians gives us a really unique window into the life of Paul and the paradox set before us by the cross of Jesus. The cross challenges our values, our ways of seeing the world. We value success, education, wealth, but God values humility and weakness because his love and power were made known through the suffering, death, and the resurrection of Jesus. The cross also unleashes the transforming power and presence of the Spirit to empower Jesus' followers to take up his "cruciform" way of life and make it their own. And that's what 2 Corinthians is all about.

Galatians

Introduction

Paul's letter to the Galatians. It was written to a number of churches in the region of Galatia, where Paul had traveled on one of his missionary journeys. You can read the stories in the book of Acts. He wrote this important letter from a place of deep passion and frustration. Here's the backstory: Christianity began as a Jewish Messianic movement in Jerusalem, but its message was for all humanity, and so it quickly spread beyond Israel. By Paul's time as a missionary, there were as many non-Jews as there were Jewish people in the Jesus movement, and this sparked a huge debate that we know about from the book of Acts, chapter 15.

Historically, the covenant people of God were focused in one ethnic group, Israel, and they were set apart by the practices commanded in the Torah, like circumcision of males, eating kosher, observing the Sabbath. And there were many Jewish Christians who believed that for all of these non-Jews to truly become a part of God's family, they needed to obey the laws of the Torah. And so some of these Jewish Christians ended up coming to the Galatian churches. They were undermining Paul and demanding circumcision of all these male non-Jewish Christians, and so many of them were. And when Paul found out, he was brokenhearted and angry, and this letter is the result.

He first challenges the Galatians with his summary of the Gospel message about the crucified Messiah. He then argues that this

Gospel is what creates the new multi-ethnic family of Jesus and Abraham, and then he shows how this Gospel is what truly transforms people by the presence and power of the Spirit.

Chapters 1-2

He opens by expressing his bewilderment that the Galatians have embraced a different Gospel. It's the one promoted by these Christians who badmouth Paul and demand circumcision. So Paul first defends the authenticity of his message and authority as an apostle. He was commissioned by the risen Jesus himself to go to the non-Jewish world. Remember the story from the book of Acts. Paul says it was only later that he went to Jerusalem to consult the other apostles like Peter or James, and when he told them he wasn't requiring non-Jewish Christians to be circumcised or eat kosher, they were in full support. But this tension ran deeper. Peter had come to Antioch to visit and see all of these non-Jewish Christians, and he was eating and mingling with them, but when some of this Jerusalem opposition group showed up in Antioch, Peter caved under their pressure. He stopped eating with these uncircumcised Christians, and he was avoiding them. And so Paul confronted and accused Peter of hypocrisy, of not staying true to the Gospel. For Paul, demanding these new Christians to become circumcised and Torah-observant, it's wrong-headed for all kinds of reasons. First of all, because it's a betrayal of the Gospel, or in his words, "People are not justified by the works of the Torah, but rather by the faith of Jesus the Messiah. And we have faith in the Messiah Jesus."

To be justified, literally "to be declared righteous," it's a rich Old Testament term for Paul. It's when God declares that someone is in a right relationship with him; they're forgiven, they're given a place in God's family, and they are being transformed by God's grace. And it's Paul's conviction that no one can be justified by observing the commands of the Torah, but only by the faith of Jesus. This is a dense phrase, and it could refer to Jesus' own faithfulness in living and dying on our behalf, or it could refer to our own trust and devotion to Jesus. Either way, the point is clear. People are justified only through trusting in what God did for them through Jesus, not by what they do for themselves.

At the heart of Paul's Gospel is this claim: That when people trust in the Messiah Jesus, what's true of him becomes true of them. His life, death, and resurrection become theirs, or in his words, "I've been crucified with the Messiah, and it's not I who come back to life, it's the Messiah living in me. And the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."

Chapters 3-4

And so the reason anyone can say that they are right with God or belong to Jesus' covenant family, it's not because they obey the laws of the Torah. It's only because of what Jesus did for them that they could never do for themselves. Now this profound understanding of what Jesus accomplished, it has huge implications for who can now be included in God's covenant family and for what it means to live as a member of that family.

So Paul first turns to the stories about Abraham in Genesis, how he was justified, or declared righteous before God, by simply having faith, by trusting in God's promise that one day all nations would find God's blessing through him and his offspring. God's purpose was always to have one large multi-ethnic family of people who relate to him on the basis of faith, not on the laws of the Torah. But that raises an important question: Why did God give the laws of the Torah to Israel then?

Here Paul offers a very brief and dense explanation that he will later fill out in his letter to the Romans. He observes that the laws of the Torah were given to Israel at Mount Sinai long after God's promise to Abraham. And if you read the Torah carefully, he says you'll see that God always intended the laws to be a temporary measure. He says the laws had both a negative and a positive role. Negatively, the laws acted like a magnifying glass on Israel's sin. They exposed how Israel shared in the sinful human condition, constantly rebelling against God's law. And so the law, which is good, ended up pronouncing Israel guilty, and all humanity with them, or in his words, "The laws imprisoned everyone under the power of sin."

But the laws also had a positive role. They acted like a strict school-teacher that kept Israel in line until the coming of the promised

offspring of Abraham, the Messiah. And once the Messiah came, he fulfilled the purpose of the laws on Israel's behalf. Jesus was the faithful Israelite who truly loved God and neighbor, and as Israel's King, he died to take the curse and consequence of Israel's failure into himself and bring redemption. And so now through Jesus, the offspring of Abraham, God's blessing can come to all people, regardless of their ethnicity, social status, or gender.

For Paul, requiring Torah observance from non-Jewish Christians, it makes no sense. It's acting as if Jesus didn't fulfill God's promise or deal with our sins. It neglects the new freedom gained for us through Jesus and the gift of the Spirit, and it limits God's promise and blessing to one ethnic family. But Paul's opponents might argue, "The laws of the Torah, they are a proven guide to living according to God's will. How will non-Jewish Christians learn this?"

Chapters 5-6

Paul responds in chapters 5-6 by describing how Jesus' transforming presence through the Spirit is the key. "The laws of the Torah are good. They are wise." Paul says. In fact, they can all be summarized, as Jesus did, in the command to love your neighbor as yourself. But the laws, good as they are, they did not give Israel the power to obey them. In contrast, the good news is that Jesus did fulfill the laws on our behalf, and now he lives in us through the Spirit, making his people into new humans who fulfill the law by loving others.

So Paul goes on to contrast this old and new humanity. The habits of the old humanity are obvious. These are behaviors that dehumanize people, they destroy relationships and whole communities. And while the laws of the Torah prohibited these behaviors, Jesus actually put them to death on the cross. So when a person trusts in Jesus and lives in dependence on the Spirit, his life becomes theirs and produces what Paul calls "the fruit of the Spirit." This is Jesus' way of life that he wants to reproduce in his family, so that they become people of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

But this fruit isn't automatic, Paul says. It requires cultivation just like real fruit, or in his words, "If we live by the Spirit, we have to keep in step with the Spirit."

This requires intentionality. We have to learn how to prune off our old habits and cultivate new ones. And as we do so, we find ourselves carried along by the Spirit, as Jesus reshapes our minds and hearts and makes us into people who love God and others. And in this way, Jesus' people fulfill what Paul calls "the Torah of the Messiah."

Conclusion

In the end, Paul concludes this requirement for Christians to become Torah-observant or be circumcised, it's an adventure in missing the point. What really matters is God's new creation, this new multi-ethnic family of the Messiah, people full of faith in Jesus who are learning to love God and others in the power of the Spirit. And that's what the letter to the Galatians is all about.

Ephesians

Introduction

Paul's letter to the Ephesians. The story of how Paul came to the city of Ephesus is really interesting. You can go read about in Acts chapter 19. Ephesus was a huge city. It was the epicenter of worship for most of the Greek and Roman gods, and for over two years, Paul had a really effective missionary presence there, and lots of people became followers of Jesus. Years later, after being imprisoned by the Romans, Paul wrote this letter. The movement of thought in the letter divides into two really clear halves. In the first half, Paul is exploring the story of the Gospel, how all history came to its climax in Jesus and in his creation of this multi-ethnic community of his followers. The second half of the letter is linked to the first by the word "therefore," and here Paul explores how the Gospel story should affect how we live every part of our life story personally, in our neighborhoods and communities, and in our families. So let's dive in, and we can see how Paul develops all of this.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 opens with a beautiful Jewish style poem, where Paul praises God the Father for the amazing things that he has done in Christ Jesus. From eternity past, the Father has purposed to choose and bless a covenant people. (And think here, the family of Abraham and Genesis chapter 12 verses 1-3.) And through Jesus, now anyone can be adopted into that family. Jesus' death covers our worst sins,

our worse failures, and in Jesus, we find God's grace. In fact, Paul says that grace has opened up a whole new way for us to understand every part of our lives. He says in chapter 1 verse 10, that God's purpose was to unify all things in heaven and on earth under Christ, which is a title that means Messiah. God's plan was always to have a huge family of restored human beings who are unified in Jesus the Messiah. This divine purpose became clear, Paul says, when we were first made into that family. And here, he's referring to ethnic Jews in the family of Abraham, but then Paul talks about how "you," and here he means non-Jews, you all heard about Jesus and the salvation through him, and you were also brought into this family by the work of the Holy Spirit. And so here, he's referring to the events told in the stories of Acts about how God's Spirit brought together Jew and non-Jew into one family in Jesus. It's just like God promised to Abraham long ago. Notice also how in this poem, Paul begins by talking about God the Father, but then about Jesus the Son, and then here at the end about the Spirit. All three work together as Paul tells the story of the Gospel. It's really cool.

After the poem, Paul responds with a prayer. He prays that these followers of Jesus would not just know about, but personally experience, the power of the Gospel, that they would be energized by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and placed him as the exalted head of the whole world.

Chapter 2

Now in chapter 2, Paul goes back and he elaborates on some key ideas from the poem in chapter 1, especially God's grace and this new multi-ethnic family of Jesus. He begins by retelling the story of how these non-Jewish Christians came to know Jesus. Before hearing about Jesus, they were physically alive, but they were spiritually dead. They were trapped in a purposeless life of selfishness and sin, and they were deceived by dark spiritual forces of evil. But amazingly, God, in his great love and mercy, he saved them. He forgave all of their sins, and he joined their lives to Jesus' resurrection life, and he's brought them back to life too.

And so now, having been created as new human beings through

Jesus, they have the joy of discovering all of the new callings and purposes and tasks that God has set before them. Not only have they been shown God's grace, they've also been invited into a new family. Before hearing about Jesus, these non-Jewish people, they were not just cut off from God, they were cut off from his covenant people, the family of Abraham. And for a really practical reason. The commands of the Sinai covenant, they formed like a boundary line around the family. They were like a barrier that kept most non-Jewish people away, but in Jesus, the laws of the Torah have been fulfilled and the barrier is removed. The two ethnic groups have become, as Paul puts it, "a new unified humanity that can live together in peace."

Chapter 3

So Paul goes on in chapter 3 to marvel at the unique role that he got to have in spreading this good news to non-Jewish people. And even though he's in prison, he's thanking God for the chance he's had to see this covenant family grow so huge. So Paul closes the first half of the letter with another prayer. This time he prays that Jesus' followers would be strengthened by God's Spirit to simply grasp and comprehend the love that Christ has for his people.

Chapters 4-6

The second half of the letter begins with Paul shifting gears, and he starts challenging the reader to respond to the Gospel story by how they live their own life story. So he starts in chapter 4 with just the everyday life of the Church. The Church is a big family with lots of different kinds of people, but he emphasizes that they are one, and one is a keyword in this chapter. They are one body that is unified by one Spirit. They have one Lord with one faith. They have one baptism. They believe in one God. It's a lot of unity; however, Paul says unity is not the same thing as uniformity. He goes on to explore how Jesus' new family consists of lots of very, very different kinds of people, but they're all empowered by the one Holy Spirit, each using their unique talents and passions to serve and to love each other and to build up the Church. And here he uses two really cool metaphors. One is building up the Church as a new temple, and the second is that they are all becoming a new humanity with Jesus as the head.

And this new humanity is a metaphor he's going to then run with for the next couple of chapters. Paul challenges every Christian to take off their old humanity, like a set of old clothes, and to put on their new humanity in which the image of God is being restored. And he then goes on into this long section where he compares this new and old humanity. So instead of lying, new humans speak truth. Instead of harboring anger, they peacefully resolve their conflicts. Instead of stealing, new humans are generous. Instead of gossiping, they encourage people with their words. Instead of getting revenge, new humans forgive. Instead of gratifying every sexual impulse, new humans cultivate self-control of their bodily desires. Instead of getting drunk, new humans come under the influence of God's Spirit, and he spells out what that influence looks like in four different ways.

The first two have to do with singing, singing together, but also singing alone. And this is really interesting, that the first thing that Paul thinks of about how the Spirit works in the lives of Jesus' people is singing and music. The third sign of the Spirit's influence is being thankful for everything, and the fourth is that the Spirit will compel Jesus' followers to put themselves underneath others and to elevate others as more important than themselves. And Paul actually expands on this fourth point by showing how it works in Christian marriage. So you have a wife who follows Jesus. She is called to respect and to allow her husband to become responsible for her. And the husband is called to love his wife and to use his responsibility to lay down his selfish agenda, and to prioritize his wife's well-being above his own. And Paul says it's this kind of marriage that is actually reenacting the Gospel story. The husband's actions mimic Jesus and his love and his self-sacrifice. The wife's actions mimic the Church, which allows Jesus to love her and to make her new. Paul then applies the same idea to children and parents, as well as slaves and masters.

Paul closes out the letter by reminding these Christians of the reality of spiritual evil. These are beings and forces that will try to undermine the unity of Jesus' people and to compromise their new humanity. And so Paul challenges them to stand firm and to put on

this metaphorical set of body armor, which he describes in detail. And Paul has drawn all of these pieces of body armor from the book of Isaiah, and how Isaiah depicted the Messianic King.

Conclusion

And so now, as the Messiah's followers, we need to make the Messiah's attributes our own, since we make up Jesus' body. Practically, I think Paul means for Christians to begin to form habits, proactively using prayer and the Scriptures and our relationships with each other to help us grow and mature as followers of Jesus.

And that's the letter to the Ephesians. Very powerful. It's where Paul summarizes the whole Gospel story and how it should reshape every part of our life story.

Philippians

Introduction

Paul's letter to the Philippians. The church in Philippi was the first Jesus community Paul started in Eastern Europe, and that story is told in Acts chapter 16. Philippi was a Roman colony in ancient Macedonia. It was full of retired soldiers, and it was known for its patriotic nationalism. And so there Paul faced resistance when he was announcing Jesus as the true King of the world. And after Paul moved on from there, those who became followers of Jesus continued to suffer resistance and even persecution, but they remained a vibrant community faithful to the way of Jesus.

Paul sent this letter from one of his many imprisonments and for a very practical reason. The Philippians had sent one of their members, Epaphroditus, to take a financial gift to Paul, to support him in prison, and Paul sent back this letter with Epaphroditus to say thank you and to do a whole lot more. The design of this letter doesn't develop one single idea from beginning to end like many of Paul's other letters. Rather, Paul has arranged a series of short reflective essays, or vignettes, and they all revolve around the center of gravity in this letter, which is a poem in chapter 2. It artistically retells the story of the Messiah's incarnation, his life, death, resurrection, and exaltation. And then in each of these vignettes, Paul will take up keywords or ideas from that poem, to show how living as a Christian means seeing your own story as a lived expression of Jesus' story.

Chapter 1

So Paul opens the letter with a prayer of gratefulness, and he thanks God for the Philippians' generosity, for their faithfulness, and he expresses his confidence that the life-transforming work that God has begun in them will continue into greater and more beautiful expressions of faithfulness and love. And Paul then focuses on their obvious concern at the moment, which is his status in prison. Being in a Roman prison was no picnic, but it paradoxically has turned out for good, to advance the good news about Jesus. So all of the Roman guards, the administrators, they all know that Paul is in prison for announcing Jesus as the risen Lord, and his imprisonment, it's inspired confidence in other Christians to talk of Jesus more openly. And Paul's optimistic that he will be released from prison, but it's possible that he could be executed. And as he reflects on it, that actually would not be so bad. "Because for me," Paul says, "life is the Messiah, and so dying would be a gain." For Paul, his life in the present and in the future, it's defined by the life and love of Jesus for him. And so if he's executed, that means he will be present with Jesus, which would be great for him. And if he's released, well that would mean he could keep working to start more Jesus communities, which would be better for other people, and so that's what he hopes for. And notice how his train of thought works here. Dying for Jesus is not the true sacrifice for Paul; rather, it's staying alive to serve others, and so that's Paul's way of participating in the story of Jesus, to suffer in order to love others more than himself.

Paul then turns to the Philippians, and he urges them to participate in Jesus' example by taking up the same mindset. He says, "Your life as citizens should be consistent with the good news about the Messiah." So these Christians in Philippi, they were living in a hotbed of Roman patriotism, but their way of life was to be shaped by another King, Jesus. And that might bring persecution, but they are not to be afraid because suffering for being associated with Jesus, it's a way of living out the story of Jesus himself, which leads Paul into the great poem of chapter 2.

Chapter 2

It's rich with echoes of Old Testament text, specifically the story of Adam and his rebellion in Genesis 1-3 and the poems about the suffering servant in the book of Isaiah. This poem is worth committing to memory. It's a beautifully condensed version of the Gospel story. So before becoming human, the Messiah preexisted in a state of glory and equality with God. And unlike Adam, who tried to seize equality with God, the Messiah chose not to exploit his equal status for his self-advantage. Rather, he emptied himself of status. He became a human, he became a servant to all, and even more than that, he allowed himself to be humiliated. He was obedient to the Father by going to his death on a Roman execution rack.

But through God's power and grace, the Messiah's shameful death has been reversed through the resurrection. And now God has highly exalted Jesus as the King of all, bestowing upon him the name that is above all names, so that all creation should recognize that Jesus the Messiah is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Now that last statement is astounding. Paul's quoting from Isaiah chapter 45. It's a passage where all creation comes to recognize the God of Israel as Lord. Paul's point here is very clear. In the crucified and risen Jesus, we discover that the one true God of Israel consists of God the Father and the Lord Jesus.

And so for Paul, this poem, it expresses his convictions about who Jesus is, and it does more. It offers the example of Jesus as a way of life that his followers are to imitate. And so that's why Paul immediately goes on to tell two stories, first about Timothy, then about Epaphroditus, because they are both examples of people living out Jesus' story. So Timothy is like Jesus because he is constantly concerned for the well-being of other people more than his own. And Epaphroditus, who the Philippians sent with their gift, he ended up risking his life to serve Paul in prison. He got so sick he almost died trying to help Paul, but God had mercy on him and Paul by sparing him the loss of a friend. Paul's point here is that these are the kinds of people who are living, breathing examples of the story of Jesus, and they are worthy of imitation.

Chapter 3

Paul then turns to his own story as an example. So those Christians who had been demanding circumcision of non-Jewish Christians (remember his letter to the Galatians), these people are still stirring up trouble for Paul, and they keep reminding him of his own past when he used to persecute Jesus' followers, when he tried to show his right standing before God by his zealous obedience to the laws of the Torah. But like Jesus, Paul has given up all of that status and privilege. He now regards all of it as filth, and the word he actually uses is much less polite. He's given it all up to become a servant like Jesus, to participate in his suffering and sacrificial love, and he does all of it in the hope that Jesus' love will carry him through death and out the other side into resurrection.

So Paul says that for followers of Jesus, their true citizenship is in heaven, which, for Paul, doesn't mean that we should all hope to get away from earth and go to heaven one day. Rather, heaven is the transcendent place where Jesus reigns as King, and he says, "we're eagerly awaiting our royal Savior to come from there and return here, to bring his Kingdom of healing justice and transforming love, to bring about a new creation."

Chapter 4

Paul then challenges the Philippians to keep living out the Jesus story. He first addresses two prominent women leaders in the church, who worked alongside Paul, and they're in some kind of conflict. And so Paul pleads with them to follow Jesus' example of humility, to reconcile and become unified. Paul then urges the Philippians not to give in to fear, despite their persecution, to vent all of their emotions and their needs to God, who will give them peace. And that peace, Paul says, it comes by focusing your thoughts on what is good and true and lovely. There's always something that you could complain about, but a follower of Jesus knows that all of life is a gift and can choose to see beauty and grace in any life circumstance, which leads Paul to his conclusion.

He again thanks the Philippians for their sacrificial gift, and he wants them to know that his imprisonments, that his times of poverty, that

these are not true hardships for him. They've actually become his greatest teachers, showing him that no matter his circumstances, he has learned the secret of contentment: It's simple dependence on the one who strengthens him. Paul has come to see his own suffering as a participation in the story of Jesus.

Conclusion

The letter to the Philippians gives us a unique window into Paul's own heart and mind. He saw his entire life as a reenactment of the story of Jesus, and you can sense in this letter his close connection to Jesus, his awareness that Jesus' love and presence is closer than his own skin. And that's what gave him hope and humility in his darkest hours. And so Paul shows us that knowing Jesus is always a deeply personal, transforming encounter, and that's the kind of Jesus that Paul invites others to follow. And that's what Paul's letter to the Philippians is all about.

Colossians

Introduction

Paul's letter to the Colossians. It was written during one of Paul the Apostle's many imprisonments for announcing Jesus as the risen Lord, and the letter is addressed to a group of people that Paul had never met, who made up a church community that he didn't start. This church at Colossae was started by a coworker of Paul's named Epaphras, who was actually from that city. And Epaphras had recently visited Paul in prison, and he updated him on how well the Colossians were doing overall, but he also mentioned some of the cultural pressures tempting them to turn away from Jesus. And so Paul wrote this letter to encourage the Colossians to address the issues that Epaphras had raised and then to challenge them to a greater devotion to Jesus.

The letter's design and flow of thoughts are pretty easy to follow. The opening movement focuses on Jesus as the exalted Messiah. Paul then goes on to show how his suffering in prison is for the exalted Jesus, and then he addresses the pressures tempting the Colossians to turn away from Jesus. After this, he explores the new way of life that Jesus' resurrection opened up for them.

Chapter 1

So the letter opens with two prayers. Paul first thanks God that he learned from Epaphras that the Colossians have been totally faithful to Jesus, showing love for God and their neighbors, all because of

the hope they have in the new creation that Jesus has in store. And so he moves on to pray that they would grow in their wisdom and understanding about Jesus, and then Paul has placed a poem here to help the Colossians and us do exactly that. It is the centerpiece of chapter 1, a poem all about the crucified and exalted Messiah. It has two parallel stanzas, and it's crammed with language and imagery from the books of Genesis and Exodus, from the Psalms and the Proverbs. The first stanza explores how Jesus is the true image of God. In him, the full character and purpose of God is embodied in a human. He's the "firstborn," an Old Testament phrase about Jesus' royal status over all creation. He shares in the very identity of the one true creator God, and by him all reality, all powers and authorities, spiritual and human, have been created. It's in Jesus the Messiah that we discover the very author and King of creation.

And so in the second stanza, we discover he is also the one bringing about a new creation; he is the head of a new body, which refers to Jesus' people who are the new humanity, of which his own resurrection existence is a prototype. In him, God's glorious temple presence dwells, and so it's through Jesus' death and resurrection that God has reconciled himself to humanity, to all spiritual powers, to all of creation. It's a remarkable poem, and Paul will keep referring back to it as he goes on in the letter.

So he first shows how the truth of this poem transforms his own experience of suffering in prison. He's being punished for announcing to the Greek and the Roman world that Jesus is the resurrected Lord and King of all, and so his suffering, he thinks, is not a sign of defeat. It's actually his way of participating in Jesus' own suffering, done as an act of love. And so his hardships are actually a cause for joy. He's imprisoned for the surprising news that Israel's resurrected Messiah is creating a new multi-ethnic family. And more, just as the divine glory dwelt in Jesus, so Jesus dwells in and among his international family, or as Paul says, "The Messiah is in you all, the hope of glory."

Chapter 2

Paul then addresses the cultural pressures that are tempting the Colossians to turn away from Jesus. They were confronted by a combination of mystical polytheism, along with a pressure to observe the laws of the Torah. So all these new Christians, they had grown up worshipping the various Greek and Roman gods, who govern different arenas of human life, and many simply included Jesus as one more deity that they could worship. There was also great pressure from the Jewish Christian community for these non-Jews to complete their commitment to the Messiah by following all of the laws found in the Torah. Specifically he mentions eating a kosher diet, observing sacred days, and circumcision. It's very similar to the problem he addressed in the letter to the Galatians. For Paul, to give into either of these temptations is compromise; it's a failure to grasp who Jesus really is and what he did on their behalf. The Colossians used to live in fear of spiritual powers and "elemental spirits," as Paul calls them, but Jesus triumphed over these through his death and resurrection. He freed the Colossians from any obligation to them in the same way Jesus fulfilled on our behalf all of the laws of the Torah, which never had the power to transform the selfish human heart anyway. And so what Jesus did in his life and death and resurrection, it lacks nothing; it doesn't need to be supplemented by following the laws. He is the reality to which all of the laws of the Torah were pointing anyway. Instead of the laws, followers of Jesus have the power of his resurrection to change them, which is what he goes on to explore.

Following Jesus means joining his new humanity because their lives have now been joined to the risen Jesus' life. And this is why Paul challenges the Colossians to set their minds on things above, where the Messiah is seated, or rules, at God's right hand. Now Paul does not mean here, "Think about how you one day leave earth and go to heaven." Rather, the heavens are the transcendent place from which Jesus rules now, over all of creation, and from there, he will one day return here to transform all things, or as Paul says, "When the Messiah, who is your life, is revealed, you too will be revealed with him in glory." So Paul challenges them to live in the present

as the kinds of new humans they will one day become. He uses the image of their old humanity characterized by distorted sexuality and destructive speech. For Christians, that humanity died with Jesus and has been replaced by his own new humanity, which is characterized by mercy and generosity, by forgiveness and love. And this humanity, it transcends the ethnic and social boundary lines of our world to create, in Paul's words, "a people where there is no one Greek or Jewish, circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free, but the Messiah is all and is in all people."

Chapters 3-4

Paul then gets really practical, and he shows the Colossians what this new humanity might look like in a first-century Roman household, which was a highly authoritarian institution where the male patriarch held the power of life and death over his wife and children and slaves. Not so in a Christian household. Here the risen Jesus is the true Lord, and so in the Lord, the wife allows her husband to become responsible for her, and the husband is subject to Jesus by loving his wife and placing her well-being above his own. In a home where Jesus is Lord, children are not objects, but are called to maturity and to respect, and parents are to raise their children with patience and understanding. Christians who are slaves are to honor their human masters precisely because they're not the real master; Jesus is. And Christians who have slaves are to understand that this slave is not their property, but rather a fellow member of Jesus' body to be honored and embraced in love.

And Paul's walking a very fine line here. He is reshaping the most basic Roman institution around Jesus, who rules by his self-giving love. And so while he does not abolish the household structure outright, the exalted Messiah demands that it be transformed almost beyond the point of recognition for any Roman living in Colossae. You can see this most clearly in the letter's conclusion. After a request for prayer, Paul applies these instructions about Christian slaves and masters, and we discover that Tychicus is the one carrying and reading this letter to the Colossians. And he's accompanied by a certain Onesimus, who was a former slave to a Colossian Christian named Philemon. And we discover from another letter addressed

to Philemon that Onesimus had escaped from his master. It was a crime worthy of imprisonment, but Paul asks the whole church to greet Onesimus as a faithful and beloved brother in the Lord. And then in the letter to Philemon, Paul says that he should receive Onesimus no longer as a slave, but as a brother. Talk about ending the letter with a punch!

Conclusion

So in the letter to the Colossians, Paul is inviting us to see that no part of human existence remains untouched by the loving and liberating rule of the risen Jesus. Our suffering, our temptation to compromise, our moral character, the power dynamics in our homes, all of it must be reexamined and transformed. We are invited to live in the present as if the new creation really arrived when Jesus rose from the dead, and that's what the letter to the Colossians is all about.

1 Thessalonians

Introduction

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. This is most likely the earliest letter that we have from Paul, and the backstory for it is found in the book of Acts. It's where Paul and his coworker Silas went to the ancient Greek city of Thessalonica. And after just one month of telling people the good news about Jesus, a large number of Jewish and Greek people gave their allegiance to Jesus, and they formed the first church community there. But trouble was brewing. Paul's announcement of the risen Jesus as the true Lord of the world, it led to suspicion.

So the Christians in Thessalonica were eventually accused of defying Caesar, the Roman Emperor, when they said that there is another King, Jesus. And this led to a persecution that got so intense Paul and Silas actually had to flee from the city. And this was painful for them because they loved the people there so much. And so this letter is Paul's attempt to reconnect with the Christians in Thessalonica after he got a report from Timothy that they were doing more than okay; they were flourishing despite this intense persecution. He designed the letter to have two main movements. First is a celebration of their faithfulness to Jesus, and then he challenges them to keep growing as followers of Jesus. And then these two movements are surrounded by three prayers. The letter opens with

a thanksgiving prayer, the two movements are linked together by a transitional prayer, and then the whole thing is concluded with a final prayer. It's a beautiful design.

Chapters 1-3

Paul opens by giving thanks and celebrating the Thessalonians' faith, their love for others, and their hope in Jesus despite persecution. He goes on to retell the story of their conversion, how they used to be idolatrous polytheists, and they were living in a culture where all of life was permeated by institutions and practices that honored the Greek and Roman gods. And Paul talks about how they turned away from those idols to serve the living and true God, and that they're now waiting for the coming of God's Son from heaven. So in a city like Thessalonica, transferring your allegiance to the creator God of Israel and to King Jesus, this came at a cost—isolation from your neighbors, hostility from your family. But for the Thessalonians, the overwhelming love of Jesus who died for them and the hope of his return, it made it all worth it.

Paul then retells the story of his mission in Thessalonica and of the dear friendships he formed with the people. He uses really intimate metaphors here. They treated him like their child, and he became like their mother, and like their father he says, "We were happy to share with you, not only the good news from God, but our very selves because we came to dearly love you." Paul reminds us here that the essence of Christian leadership is not about power and having influence; it's about healthy relationships and humble, loving service. He reminds them that he never asked for money. He simply came to love and serve them in the name of Jesus.

And so Paul moves on to reflect on their common persecution. Just like Jesus was rejected and killed by his own people, so now Paul is persecuted by his fellow Jews, and the Thessalonians are facing hostility from their Greek neighbors. And Paul draws a strange comfort from knowing that together their sufferings are a way of participating in the story of Jesus' own life and death.

Paul then shares about the anguish he experienced when he heard of the hardships the Thessalonians had after he and Silas fled. So he

sent Timothy to support them and see how they were doing. And to his joy, Timothy discovered that they were going strong. They were faithful to Jesus, they were full of love for God and their neighbors, and they longed to see Paul as much as he longed to see them. And so Paul concludes with a prayer for endurance. And what's cool is that he introduces here the topics he is going to address in the letter's second half. He prays that God will grow their capacity to love, that he'll strengthen their commitment to holiness as they fix their hope on the return of King Jesus.

Chapters 4-5

So he opens the letter's second movement by challenging them to a life that's consistent with the teachings of Jesus. So this means, first of all, a serious commitment to holiness and sexual purity. In contrast to the promiscuous, sexually destructive culture around them, they are to follow Jesus' teaching about experiencing the beauty and the power of sex within the haven of a committed marriage covenant relationship. God takes sexual misbehavior seriously, Paul says. It dishonors and destroys people and their dignity. Following Jesus also means a commitment to loving and serving others, so Paul instructs them that Christians should be known in the city as a reliable people who work really hard, not just to make money, but so that they can have resources to provide for themselves and to generously share with people who are in need.

After this, Paul addresses a number of questions the Thessalonians had raised about the future hope of Jesus' return. So some Christians in the church had recently died—most likely killed as martyrs—and their friends and family are wondering about their fate when Jesus returns. And so Paul makes it clear that despite their grief and loss, not even death can separate Christians from the love of Jesus. When he returns as King, he will call both the living and the dead to himself. And Paul uses a really cool image here. He uses language that would normally describe how a city subject to the Roman Caesar would send out a delegation to welcome or meet his arrival. Paul then applies this imagery to the arrival of King Jesus.

He too will be greeted by a delegation of his people, who will go to meet the Lord in the air as they welcome and escort him back to this world, where he'll establish his kingdom of justice and peace.

Paul then wants the Thessalonians to see how this hope should motivate faithfulness to Jesus, so he pokes fun at the famous Roman propaganda, that it's Caesar who brings peace and security. Of course Rome's peace came through violence, through enslaving their enemies, and military occupation. And Paul warns that Jesus will return as King one day and confront this kind of injustice. Followers of King Jesus should live in the present as if that future day is already here. Despite the nighttime of human evil around them, they should stay sober and awake as the light of God's Kingdom dawns here on earth as it is in heaven.

Paul closes all of these exhortations like he began, with a hopeful prayer that God would permeate their lives with his holiness, that he would set them apart to be completely devoted and blameless until the return of King Jesus.

Conclusion

1 Thessalonians reminds us that, from the very beginning, following Jesus as King has produced a truly counter-cultural, or holy, way of life, and this will sometimes generate suspicion and conflict among our neighbors. But the response of Jesus' followers to such hostility should always be love, meeting opposition with grace and generosity. And this way of life, it's motivated by hope in the coming Kingdom of Jesus that has already begun in his resurrection from the dead. And so holiness, love, and future hope, that's what 1 Thessalonians is all about.

2 Thessalonians

Introduction

Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. So not long after Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, he got a report about the Christians in Thessalonica, that the problems he had addressed in that letter not only had continued, but had gotten worse. The persecutions had intensified, and the Thessalonian Christians had become confused and scared about the return of Jesus. So Paul sent off this short letter, which is designed to have three sections that address the three problems in this church. Paul first offers hope in the midst of their continued persecution, and then he offers clarity about the coming Day of the Lord, and then finally, he brings a really specific challenge to the idle, people who were refusing to work normal jobs. And the end of each of these sections is clearly marked by a short closing prayer.

Chapter 1

Paul opens with a thanksgiving prayer for the Thessalonians' continued faithfulness and love, and specifically for their endurance. He has learned that their Greek and Roman, and perhaps even Jewish, neighbors have intensified their persecution of these Christians. They're a religious minority facing violent oppression, and Paul is worried that they might give up on Jesus if it gets worse. So Paul reminds them, like he did in the first letter, that they are suffering because of being associated with Jesus. It's a way of participating in

God's Kingdom. Jesus was inaugurated as King by his suffering on the cross, and so his followers will show their victory over the world by imitating Jesus' non-violence and patient endurance.

Paul also reminds them that this won't last forever. When Jesus returns, he will bring his justice to bear on those that have oppressed them and shed the blood of the innocent. Specifically, he says that their punishment is to be banished away from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his power. Paul does not speculate here on the fate of those who reject Jesus, except to say that throughout their lives, they wanted nothing to do with Jesus, and then in the end they get what they want—relational distance from their creator and their King. And for Paul, this is the ultimate tragedy. To choose separation from Jesus, who is the source of all life and love, is to embrace one's own undoing. He closes this thought by praying that God would use their suffering to bring about deep character change inside of them, so that their lives would bring honor to the name of Jesus.

Chapter 2

Paul then moves on to address a specific issue related to the return of Jesus and the Day of the Lord. So somebody in the Thessalonian church community had been spreading wrong information in Paul's name, saying that God's final act of justice on human evil, the Day of the Lord, it was upon them; it has come. And these people had likely been predicting dates about the end of all things, and they were frightening other Christians. And you can see why. Due to the intense persecution, they were vulnerable to somebody claiming that Jesus had already returned like a thief in the night. They'd been left behind; maybe he abandoned the Thessalonians to their suffering. This kind of talk really ticks Paul off. It's misrepresenting his teaching. The return of Jesus should never inspire fear, but rather hope and confidence. Paul reminds them of everything he taught them about Jesus' return back when he was in town, and he gives a short summary here. It's actually too short.

This paragraph has lots of puzzles and problems of interpretation, but what's clear is that he cites the well-known theme from the prophets Isaiah and Daniel, that the kingdoms of this world will

continue to produce rulers who rebel against God, like Nebuchadnezzar or the king of the north did in the past. These leaders had exalted themselves to divine authority, and for Paul, these ancient kings and prophecies, they give us images. They set out a pattern that he saw fulfilled in his own day in the Roman emperors Caligula and Nero, and he expected that it would be repeated again. That history would culminate with such a rebellious ruler empowered by evil itself, someone who will wreak havoc and violence in God's world, but not forever. When Jesus returns, he will confront the rebel and all who perpetrate evil, and he will deliver his people.

So Paul's point here is not to give later readers fuel for apocalyptic speculation; rather, he's comforting the Thessalonians. He is recalling the teachings of Jesus from Mark chapter 13, who said that the events leading up to his return would be very public and obvious. And so they don't need to be scared or worried that they have been left behind; rather, they need to stay faithful until Jesus returns to deliver them.

Chapter 3

And so in his closing prayer, he asks Jesus and the Father to comfort and strengthen the Thessalonians to stay faithful to the way of Jesus, which brings Paul to the final topic. It's a challenge for those who were idle, which doesn't just mean lazy. This refers to people who were irresponsible and who refused to work and provide for themselves, resulting in chaotic personal lives. So Paul had actually addressed this problem in his first letter, and it seems like it's gotten worse.

Now we don't know for certain why some people in this church were refusing to work. It's possible that this problem is connected to the previous one. Maybe some people thought Jesus would return very soon, and so they quit their jobs and dropped out of normal life, but it's more likely that Paul is addressing a problem related to a practice in Roman culture called patronage. So you'd have poor people living in cities, and they would become clients, kind of like personal assistants, to wealthy people, and they would live off of their occasional

generosity, but there were lots of strings attached. This sometimes involved the clients in their patrons' morally corrupt way of life, not to mention it was unpredictable income.

So this is what Paul seems to refer to when he says these people lead a disordered life; they're not working, and they're meddling in the business of others. So Paul reminds them of the example he gave when he was with them. He didn't ask for their money; he worked a manual labor job, so he could provide for himself, and so he could serve the Thessalonians free of charge. He says this is the ideal. A follower of Jesus should imitate Jesus' self-giving love by working hard, so they can provide for themselves, and so their lives can be a benefit to other people.

He concludes this with a final prayer that, in the midst of all the confusion and suffering, that God would grant them peace through the Lord Jesus, the Messiah.

Conclusion

This short letter to the Thessalonians, it helps us see that the early Christian belief in Jesus' return and the hope of final judgment, these ideas were not meant for generating speculation about apocalyptic time lines. Rather, these beliefs brought hope. They inspired faithfulness and devotion to Jesus, especially for persecuted Christians facing violent opposition. And so for later generations of Christians, whether they undergo persecution or not, this letter reminds us that what you hope for shapes what you live for, and that's what 2 Thessalonians is all about.

1 Timothy

Introduction

Paul's first letter to Timothy. Paul spent many years traveling about and starting new churches, and he developed a large team of coworkers in this mission. Timothy was one of these. Paul was once in the city of Lystra, and he met Timothy's faithful mother and grandmother, and he was impressed by Timothy's passion and devotion to Jesus. And so Paul mentored him for many years and eventually started sending him on missions to different churches. And so when Paul got word about a group of leaders who infiltrated the influential church in Ephesus (they were spreading incorrect views about Jesus and what it means to follow him), he sent Timothy to confront these leaders and restore order to this church. So after Timothy arrived there, Paul sent this letter to follow up and instruct him on how to fulfill this mission.

The letter has a really cool design. There's an opening and closing commission to Timothy to go confront these leaders and their bad theology, and then these surround two large central sections that are full of really practical instructions about the problems that Timothy faced in the Ephesian church. And then finally, all of these sections are linked together, or concluded, by a series of three poems that each exalt the risen Jesus as the King of the world. Let's dive in, and you'll see how it works.

Chapter 1

Paul opens by recalling how he sent Timothy to Ephesus to confront these leaders, who were spreading their strange teaching. And he describes how these guys are obsessed with speculating about the Torah (specifically the early stories and genealogies in the book of Genesis), and as we'll see, they had developed all kinds of weird teachings about food and marriage and sex that weren't consistent with the teachings of Jesus or the apostles. He even names some of these people (Alexander and Hymenaeus), and he describes how their teaching has divided the church. It's generated controversy, and Paul says this is actually the first clear sign that their teaching is distorted. When genuine Christian teaching is done, it's faithful to the way of Jesus, and it results in love and genuine faith. And he says the purpose of the Torah anyway isn't to fuel speculation; rather, its purpose is to expose the truth about the human condition, as it did for Paul. Correct teaching about the Torah will lead people to see the grace of God revealed in the Messiah, who came to save sinful, broken people. And so Paul closes here with a poem that honors King Jesus overall, and he calls Timothy to shut these men and their false teaching down.

He then addresses very specific problems in this church caused by the false teachers. First of all, he calls Timothy to hold regular church prayer gatherings, to pray for the governing leaders of Rome, and for peace. Because peace in the land, it creates an ideal setting for Jesus' followers to keep spreading their message about the God of peace who wants all people to be saved, the God who sent Jesus as the only mediator to give his life as a ransom for all. In contrast to the false teachers, Paul reminds Timothy that God wants to rescue the whole world, and prayer is going to keep this at the forefront of their minds.

Chapters 2-3

Paul then addresses problems related to men and women who are being influenced by these corrupt leaders in Ephesus. So he first shuts down a group of men, who were getting drawn into angry theological disputes started by the teachers. He says these guys should learn how to pray.

Then he confronts a group of wealthy women in the church, who were treating the Sabbath gathering like a fashion show. They were dressing so upscale that they would shame most of the other people who couldn't afford such a wardrobe. And not only that, but some of these women were also usurping leadership positions in the church, and they were teaching others the bad theology of the corrupt teachers. And so Paul shuts these women down. He says they should not teach or lead in the church, and then he goes on to explore the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent from Genesis chapter 3.

Now this is one of those sections in Paul's letters where, like Peter said, he's kind of hard to understand. There are many different views about what Paul meant here. Some think that Paul is prohibiting women from ever teaching or leading men in any church and that his comments about Adam and Eve are about how God has ordered that only men should be leaders in the church. There are others who think that Paul is prohibiting women from having leadership authority over men in a church, but that once educated, women should and can teach as leaders in a church under male leadership. And there are still others who think that Paul is only prohibiting these women in Ephesus and that his comments about Adam and Eve are a comparison of how these women have been deceived by the false teachers. Whichever view you take, Paul is clear that these Ephesian women need to come under Timothy's leadership and get a proper theological education. And the goal is to help them grow, so that they could one day become like the outstanding female ministers that Paul mentions in his other letters, like Phoebe, or Junia, or Priscilla.

Paul continues to address this leadership crisis, and he calls Timothy to appoint a small healthy team of husbands and fathers, who will act like elders or overseers for the church. These should be men of outstanding character and integrity, and they will work alongside a team of deacons—it's a Greek word that means servant—and these are men and women who actually lead and do the ministries of the church. And they are to have the same kind of character as the elders. And all together, these people should be known for healthy relationships in their families because that will demonstrate their

ability to lead in the church, which is God's family. And the way of life that they live all together, it's consistent with the story about Jesus, which is explored in the closing poem about his incarnation, his death, his resurrection, his exaltation as King, and then the spread of his new family throughout the whole world.

Chapters 4-6

Paul's second body of instructions for Timothy are, again, very specific to the problems caused by these bad leaders. So he first corrects their bad theology. They have been telling people to stop eating certain kinds of foods, most likely meat, and to stop getting married, which Paul thinks is ridiculous. So he goes to Genesis chapter 1, and he reminds Timothy that God's entire creation is very good, including food and marriage. It is all to be received with gratefulness by those who know and give thanks to the creator.

Paul then moves on to address problems about the church's care of widows. So this very important ministry was being taken advantage of by younger, wealthy widows, most likely the same trouble-making women from chapter 2. They would sign up for the church's support but then spend their days sleeping around, spreading gossip, and damaging the church's reputation in the city. Paul is having none of it. He says that only older widows that have no other family support qualify, and, for these, the church should show the love and generosity of Jesus.

Paul then addresses problems among some older men in the church, and Timothy is to respect their age, but not their misbehavior, which seems to be alcohol-related. They're damaging the church's reputation in Ephesus, and so Timothy is, in love, to confront them and have them step down if they are in leadership. And then Paul adds this interesting side note, that this doesn't mean that Timothy himself should never drink. Given his stomach problems, he should probably have a glass of wine each night with dinner.

Paul then addresses a problem among Christian slaves. Some of them were disrespecting their Christian masters. And so yes, the Gospel creates equality among Jesus' followers; however, Paul thinks that equality needs to be implemented in a strategic way

that doesn't compromise the mission and witness of the church. If Christians become associated with slave rebellions, they are compromised. The Christian transformation of the Roman household had to be implemented strategically, so that their neighbors could be persuaded and not repulsed by this new vision of God's family.

Finally, Paul closes the letter by calling Timothy again to confront the corrupt leaders. Paul here exposes their motives to make lots of money by accumulating followers and then charging them all high rates for their teaching. These teachers betray Jesus and his message of contentment and simple living. And so Paul instructs the wealthy Ephesian Christians to become rich in good works and generosity, to be people who submit all of their resources to King Jesus. And he is the one who inspires the final poem about how he is the true King above all other kings.

Conclusion

1 Timothy is a really important letter; it helps us gain a holistic vision of the nature and mission of the Church. So what a Jesus community believes will directly shape how that community lives and behaves in its city, and so its theology, its beliefs, have to be constantly critiqued and formed by the Scriptures and the good news about Jesus. And how the church is perceived in public is also very important to Paul. Christians should be known as people who are full of integrity, known for good works, known for serving the poor and the most vulnerable, all out of devotion to the risen King Jesus, and that's what 1 Timothy is all about.

2 Timothy

Introduction

Paul's second letter to Timothy. This is Paul's final and most personal letter. He wrote it from yet another time in prison, and it's addressed to Paul's dear coworker and protégé, the young Timothy. Now we don't know how much time exactly has passed since he wrote 1 Timothy, but we can see that Paul's situation has changed and for the worse. He's imprisoned in Rome, which could refer to his time under house arrest that was mentioned in Acts chapter 28, or it could be that he was released from that imprisonment, had another long season of ministry, and then was arrested again in Troas. Either way, Paul says he's in the middle of his court trial now, and it is not going well. He is pretty sure he's not going to survive this one. And so out of this very dark situation, Paul appeals to Timothy, who, it seems, is still on assignment in Ephesus. He asked Timothy to come be with him in prison, so Paul can pass on to him the church planting mission he started.

The letter's design is pretty simple. There are two large sections where Paul challenges Timothy. First, to accept his calling as a leader, and then, before he comes to Paul, to deal with the corrupt teachers that are still causing problems in Ephesus. After this, Paul concludes the letter.

Chapters 1-2

So Paul begins by thanking God for Timothy and his family, specifically for his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. They immersed the young Timothy in the story of the Old Testament Scriptures; they instilled in him a deep faith in the Messiah Jesus. And so because of that firm faith, Paul offers his first challenge to Timothy. He calls him to reject any temptation to be ashamed of the good news about Jesus or of Paul, who is suffering in prison for announcing that good news. Now the reason Paul needs to emphasize this is the negative stigma that he gained by his frequent times in prison. It made many of Paul's coworkers, in fact, doubt his calling as an apostle. He mentions two guys, Phygellus and Hermogenes. They deserted Paul because they were ashamed of being associated with Paul, who was an accused criminal now. So Paul asks Timothy to reject any fear of shame and to come see him. Now Paul knows that this is a costly request; it could put Timothy at risk, and so he reminds Timothy that Jesus' grace is a source of power, which is really important. You're going to need it because following Jesus is not easy. It requires everything that you have.

Paul likens following Jesus to enrolling as a soldier who's striving to please their commanding officer, or it's like an athlete who is training their body for competition, or it's like a hard-working, dedicated farmer. All three of these metaphors involve a person who's committed to something bigger than themselves, and who's willing to sacrifice and endure challenges to accomplish a greater goal. And of course the highest example of this is Jesus himself. Because of his commitment to the Father, he suffered crucifixion by the Romans. And similarly, Paul himself is now suffering in a Roman prison. Hardship and sacrifice are inherent to the Christian life, and this is why Jesus' resurrection is the foundation of Christian hope, or as Paul puts it in a short and very powerful poem:

"If we died with him, then we will live with him;

"If we endure, then we will reign with him;

"If we deny him, then he will deny us.

*"If we are unfaithful, he will remain faithful,
for he is unable to deny his own nature."*

God's love for our world has opened up a new hope through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and so for those who will take the risk of trusting and following Jesus, God promises vindication and life. For those who reject him, God will honor that decision and do the same, but people's faithlessness will never compel God to abandon his faithfulness. And so Paul calls Timothy to faithfulness, knowing that it may come with a cost.

Chapters 2-4

Paul moves into the second half of the letter, calling Timothy to confront the corrupt teachers in Ephesus before he comes to Rome. Their teaching is spreading in the Ephesian church like a cancer. They've targeted and corrupted a number of influential women in the church. These are likely the wealthy women that Paul had to deal with in his first letter to Timothy. He doesn't offer much detail about the teachers' bad theology. Timothy already knows about it, but he does give us one hint. He says they teach that the resurrection has already taken place.

Now, we don't know if the teachers are following a Greek philosophical rejection of the whole idea of bodily resurrection and they think it's only really about spiritual experience. Or it could be that they've simply distorted Paul's teaching about the resurrection life that begins now through the power of the Spirit. Either way, the problem is that they've abandoned the robust future hope of resurrection and of new creation, and they've embraced instead, a private hyper-spiritualized Christianity that is disconnected from day-to-day life.

And so Paul calls Timothy to raise up faithful leaders who are going to teach the real good news of Jesus. They should avoid senseless arguments that result from debating the teachers. In contrast, Timothy and his leadership team are to keep the main thing the main thing; they should focus on the core storyline and message of the Scriptures, which, in Paul's day, meant primarily the Old Testament. "These Scriptures," Paul says, "are able to give you wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in the Messiah Jesus."

He's saying that the whole point of the Scriptures is to tell you a

unified story that leads to Jesus and that has wisdom to offer the whole world. Then Paul talks about Scriptures' nature and purpose. He says all Scripture is divinely breathed, literally God-Spirited. It's a reference to the Spirit's role in guiding the biblical authors, so that what they wrote is what God wanted his people to hear. And God speaks to his people in the Scriptures for a very practical purpose. He says they're useful for teaching, telling me things I didn't know before. They're useful for challenging, getting in my face about the things I say I believe, but I don't actually live consistently with. They're useful for correcting me, exposing my messed-up ways of thinking and behaving. And they're useful for training me in righteousness, showing me a new way to be truly human. And this is all so that God's people will be prepared for doing good.

Conclusion

Paul closes the letter by reminding Timothy that he's probably not going to make it out of prison alive, so he asks Timothy to come as soon as possible, before winter. He doesn't want to freeze in his cell, and so he's going to need his heavy coat that he had to leave behind, and also could Timothy please bring those personal documents that he left in Troas (likely when he got arrested). He also mentions Alexander, who's an especially dangerous man, that Timothy should avoid. He's probably responsible for Paul's most recent arrest.

Paul concludes by mentioning how nearly everyone has abandoned him in prison, and his only source of comfort now is the personal presence of Jesus, who stands with him and will deliver him even if he dies.

And so the letter ends. The letter of 2 Timothy stands as a reminder that Paul's very influential life and mission were marked by persistent challenge and suffering and struggle. Following Jesus involves risk and sacrifice; it means inviting tension and discomfort into your life. And these things are not a sign of Jesus' absence; rather, as Paul discovered with generations of Christians after him, that precisely in those dark and difficult moments, Jesus' love and faithfulness can become the most tangible and real. And that's what 2 Timothy, Paul's final letter, is all about.

Titus

Introduction

Paul's letter to Titus. Titus was a Greek follower of Jesus, who was for years a trusted coworker and traveling companion of Paul's. He had helped Paul in a number of crisis situations in the past, and in this letter, we discover that Paul had assigned him the task of going to Crete, a large island off the coast of Greece, to restore order to a network of house churches.

Now Cretan culture was notorious in the ancient world. One of the Greek words for being a liar was *kretizo*—"to be a Cretan!" These people were infamous for treachery and greed. Most of the men on the island had served as mercenary soldiers to the highest bidder, and the island cities were known as being unsafe, plagued by violence and sexual corruption. However, the island of Crete had many strategic harbors, and they serviced cities all over the ancient Mediterranean Sea. And so from Paul's point of view, Crete was the perfect place to start a network of churches.

Now we don't know the details, but somehow these churches came under the influence of corrupt Cretan leaders. They said they were Christians, but they were ruining the churches, and so Paul assigned Titus with the task of going there to set things straight. And this letter provided the instructions. It has a pretty straightforward design.

Chapter 1

After a brief introduction, Paul gives Titus clear instructions about his tasks in the church. He then offers guidance about the new kind of household and then about the new kind of humanity that the Gospel could create in these Cretan communities. Paul then closes the letter with some final greetings. So Paul opens the whole thing by reminding Titus that his message as an apostle is about the hope of eternal life, that is, the life of the new creation that is available starting now through Jesus the Messiah. And this hope was promised long ago by the God who does not lie. Now this little opening comment introduces an important theme underlying the whole letter.

One of the problems in the Cretan churches was that they had assimilated their ideas about Jesus, the Christian God, to their ideas about the Greek gods that they grew up with, specifically Zeus, their chief God. Cretan people claimed that Zeus was actually born on their Island, and they loved to tell stories and mythologies about Zeus's underhanded character. He would seduce women and lie to get his way, and Paul wants to be really clear the God revealed through Jesus is totally different than Zeus. His basic character traits are faithfulness and truth, which means the Christian way of life will be about truth also, which will be a real change for these Cretans.

So Paul then addresses Titus with a two-fold task. He says the first one is to appoint new leaders for each church community, a team of what he calls elders: mature husbands or fathers whose way of life is totally different from Cretan culture. They are to be known for integrity, total devotion to Jesus, for self-control, and generosity both in their families and in the community at large. And these new leaders are to teach the good news about Jesus, and replace the corrupt leaders who need to be confronted. That's Titus' second task.

Paul identifies the teachers as "those of the circumcision," in other words, they were ethnically Jewish Cretans who said that they followed Jesus. But similar to the problems in Galatia, these people demanded that non-Jewish Christians be circumcised and follow the laws of the Torah if they really wanted to become followers of the

Jewish Messiah. Paul says that they're obsessed with Jewish myths and human commands, and to top it off, they're just in the church leadership business to make money. And so Paul, in a brilliant move, he pulls a quote from an ancient Cretan poet, Epimenides, who was very frank and honest about the character of his own people. He said, "Cretans are always liars, vicious beasts and lazy gluttons." They blur the lines between true and false, between good and evil, and they're just in it for the money. And so while these leaders claim to know God, their Cretan way of life denies him. They have to be dealt with, and this leads Paul into the next section.

Chapter 2

Because of these corrupt leaders, many Christians in these churches now have homes and personal lives that are a total wreck. And three different times, Paul highlights the result of all this. The message of Jesus is discredited. Their non-Christian neighbors now have good cause to make evil accusations, and all of this makes the teaching about God the savior totally unattractive and not compelling to anybody. So Paul paints a picture of the ideal Cretan household that is devoted to Jesus.

It would be elderly men and women who are full of integrity and self-control, so they can become models of character to the young people. And the young women shouldn't be sleeping around and avoiding marriage, as was fashionable in Crete at the time; but rather, they should be looking for faithful partners, so they can raise stable, healthy families. And the young men are to do the same. They're to be known as productive healthy citizens. Christian slaves on Crete were in a unique position because we know that because of the Gospel, they were treated as equals in Paul's church communities. However, there was a danger that they would use that equality as license to disrespect their masters and then become associated with slave rebellions, which would further discredit the Christian message.

You can see Paul negotiating a fine line here. He believes that the Gospel about Jesus needs to prove its redemptive power in the public square if it's really going to transform Cretan culture, and

that's not going to happen through social upheaval or by Christians cloistering away from urban life. The Christian message will be compelling to Cretans when Christians fully participate in public life, when their lives and homes look similar on the surface because after a closer look, their neighbors will discover that Christians live by a totally different value system out of devotion to a totally different God. And that's the difference that Paul beautifully summarizes at the end of chapter 2. He says the value system driving the Christian way of life is God's generous grace, which appeared in the person of Jesus and will appear again at his return. This grace was demonstrated when Jesus gave up his honor to die a shameful death on behalf of his enemies, so that he could rescue and redeem them. And it's that same grace that calls God's people to say no to corrupt ways of life that are inconsistent with the generous love of God.

Chapter 3

Paul then zooms out from the Christian household to a vision of Christians living like new humans in Cretan society. Of all people, Christians should be known as the ideal citizens—peaceable, generous, obedient to authorities, known for pursuing the common good. But this is really different from how Cretans grew up. How are Christians supposed to sustain this counter-cultural way of life? And Paul believes the power source is the transforming love of the three-in-one God announced in the Gospel, and he explores this with a really beautiful poem.

He says God's kindness and love are what saved us despite ourselves, so that through the Holy Spirit, God washed and rebirthed and renewed people, and through Jesus, has provided a way for people to be declared right before him. And all of this opens up eternal life, that is, a new future in the new creation. This living story is so powerful, it can produce new kinds of people. Paul's convinced that Spirit-empowered faithfulness to the teachings of Jesus will declare God's grace all over the island of Crete and all over the world. Paul concludes by promising to send backup for Titus, either Artemas or Tychicus, and then he says hello to their common friends. And so the letter ends.

Conclusion

The letter of Titus shows us Paul's missionary strategy for churches to become agents of transformation within their communities. It won't happen by waging a culture war or by assimilating the Cretan way of life; rather, he calls these Christians to wisely participate in Cretan culture. They need to reject what is corrupt but also embrace what is good there. If they can learn to live peaceably and devote themselves to Jesus and to the common good, Christians will, in his words, show "the beauty of the message about our saving God." And that's what the letter to Titus is all about.

Philemon

Introduction

Paul's letter to Philemon. It was written during one of Paul's many imprisonments, and it's actually his shortest letter in the New Testament, but don't let its size trick you. It's actually one of the most explosive things that Paul ever wrote. Here's the backstory that we can piece together from details within the letter. Philemon was a well-to-do Roman citizen from Colossae, who likely met Paul during his mission in Ephesus, and he became a follower of Jesus.

Then later, when Paul's coworker Epiphysis started a Jesus community in Colossae, Philemon became a leader of a church that met in his house. Now Philemon, like all household patriarchs in the Roman world, owned slaves, one of whom was named Onesimus, and at some point these two had a serious conflict. Onesimus wronged Philemon in some way, maybe it was theft, or maybe he cheated him; we don't exactly know. But afterwards, Onesimus ran away. Eventually Onesimus came to Paul in prison, likely to appeal for help, and in the process, he became a follower of Jesus and then a beloved assistant of Paul. And so Paul finds himself in a very difficult and delicate situation as he writes this letter. He's going to ask Philemon not just to forgive Onesimus and receive him back, but to embrace him as a brother in the Messiah and no longer as a slave. Here's how he does it.

Verses 1-7

Paul opens with a prayer, first praising Philemon and thanking God for the love and faithfulness he has shown to Jesus, to his people, and he then paves the way for his request with this line, "I pray that the partnership that springs from your faith may effectively lead you to recognize all the good things that work in us, leading us into the Messiah." Now a keyword here is partnership, or in Greek, *koinonia*. It means sharing or mutual participation; it's when two or more people receive something together and share in it, becoming partners. Paul's saying that faithfulness to Jesus means recognizing that all of his followers are equal partners who share together in the gift of God's love and grace. And for Paul, this experience of *koinonia* among Jesus' followers, it's not just an idea that you think about; it's something that you do in your relationships, which moves Paul on to his request. He finally brings up Onesimus.

Verses 8-20

He says that he has become Paul's child in prison, meaning that Paul led Onesimus to dedicate his life and allegiance to Jesus. And so Paul and Onesimus are now family members in the Messiah. He's been serving Paul faithfully in prison, and even though Paul wants to keep him around, he knows this unresolved conflict with Philemon has to be reconciled if they say that they're followers of Jesus, which moves Paul onto his bold request: that Philemon receive Onesimus back, no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave, as a beloved brother in the Lord.

Now this is a really tall order. Under Roman law, Philemon had every legal right to have Onesimus punished or put in prison, and Paul's not only asking him to forgive Onesimus, but to welcome back his former slave into Colossae as a social equal, as a family member. This is way more than kindness. This is unheard of! It's freeing a slave and then treating them like a family member. It upsets the status quo of the Roman social order. Why should Philemon do such a thing?

And here Paul pulls a brilliant move. He recalls that keyword from the opening prayer. He says, "If you're truly a partner with me (it's that Greek word *koinonia* again), then welcome Onesimus as if he

were me. And if he's wronged you or owes you anything, charge it to me, and I will repay it." So in this request, we see the heart of Paul's Gospel message being acted out. It's first of all about reconciliation. It's just like he told the Corinthians. In the Messiah, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting people's sins against them.

So in this situation, Paul is putting himself in the place of Jesus. He will absorb the consequences of Onesimus' wrongdoing. He will pay the costs, so that he can be reconciled to Philemon. But Paul's message was about more than just a legal transaction. It's also about *koinonia*. Onesimus and Philemon and Paul are all equals before God. They all share the same need for forgiveness, and so the ground is level before the cross, which means that Philemon and Onesimus can no longer relate to each other as master and slave. They're family members. They're brothers in the Messiah, or as Paul told Philemon and the whole church of Colossae, in God's new family, people are not Greek or Jewish or circumcised or uncircumcised or foreigners or uncivilized or slave or free, but the Messiah is all and is in all people.

Verses 21-25

Paul closes the letter stating his confidence that Philemon will do even more than Paul's requested, and he asked him to prepare a guest room because he wants to visit as soon as he gets out of prison. And then with some final greetings, Paul ends the letter.

Conclusion

Paul's letter to Philemon is powerful for many reasons. It's the only letter of Paul that does not explicitly mention Jesus' death or resurrection. And this is not an oversight. He doesn't need to explain the cross with words because he's demonstrating it through his actions. Paul's embodying here the meaning of the cross; he has made himself the place through which Onesimus and Philemon are reconciled to God and then to each other.

This letter also shows us that the implications of the good news about Jesus, they are extremely personal and never private. The fact that Philemon and Onesimus are now brothers in the Messiah,

it makes their master-slave relationship totally irrelevant. The family of Jesus' people is the place where all are equal recipients of God's grace. It's a new kind of society, or a new humanity as he called it in the letter to the Colossians, where people's value and social status is not defined by race or gender or social or economic class. In the Messiah, there are simply new humans, who are equal partners, who share together in God's healing mercy through Jesus, and that's what Paul's letter to Philemon is all about.

Hebrews

Introduction

The letter to the Hebrews. The author of this letter is anonymous, and people have wondered for a long time whether Paul wrote it or maybe one his coworkers like Barnabas or Apollos, but really we just don't know.

In chapter 2, we discover that the author had a first-hand relationship with the disciples, who were themselves around Jesus, so we know that this letter is anchored in the teaching of the apostles. We also don't know who the audience of this letter was or even where they lived. The author knows them really well, and he assumes that they have a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, especially the storyline of the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, about how Abraham's family became the nation of Israel, about how Moses led them out for slavery in Egypt to Mount Sinai, where they received the Torah and they made a covenant with God, where they built the tabernacle, where the priests offered sacrificed, and also about how they wandered through the wilderness on their way to the promised land. The author just expects that the readers know all of the details about these stories, and so most likely the audience is made up of Jewish Christians. That's where the name of the letter comes from.

We also have clues from chapter 10 that this church community was facing persecution and even imprisonment because of their

association with Jesus. Some in the community were walking away from Jesus and abandoning the faith altogether, and this explains the purpose and the structure of this letter.

First there's a short introduction, which is followed by four sections where the author compares and contrasts Jesus with key people and events from Israel's history. Jesus is first compared with angels in the Torah, second with Moses and the promised land, third with priests and Melchizedek, and lastly with the sacrifices in the covenant. And the author has two main goals in all of these contrasts. The first goal is to elevate Jesus as superior to anyone or anything else, showing that Jesus is worthy of all their trust and devotion. But his second goal is this: it's to challenge the readers to remain faithful to Jesus despite persecution. So in every section, he includes a strong warning not to abandon Jesus. So let's dive in now and see how this all unfolds.

Chapters 1-2

The elevation of Jesus begins in the opening sentence of the introduction: "In the past, God spoke to our ancestors in many different ways, but in these last days, he has spoken to us in his Son." So the author's saying that Jesus is superior to all of the previous ways that God has revealed himself to Israel. He then makes this astounding claim that Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's nature. These metaphors are making the closest possible identification between Jesus and God. So Jesus is what the rays of light are to the sun, or Jesus is what the wax impression is to the signet ring. For this author, there is no God apart from Jesus. Jesus is God become human as the Son, and it's this elevated view of Jesus that's then explored throughout the rest of the letter.

In the first section, the author compares Jesus with angels, which might strike you as kind of odd, like, why angels? In Jewish tradition, it was taught, based on Deuteronomy chapter 33 verse 2, that the Torah and the words of God were delivered to Moses at Mount Sinai by angels. And so by saying Jesus is superior to angels, the author is claiming that Jesus and his message of good news are superior to all previous messengers of God's word. And so the first warning

flows from this very point. If Israel was called to pay attention to the Torah that was delivered by angels, how much more should we pay attention to the message that was announced by the Son of God? And not only that but given Jesus' status high above the angels, how remarkable is it that he gave up that high status to become human to suffer and to die? In Jesus we see God's greatest glory and God's great humility as Jesus sympathetically joined himself to humanity's tragic fate.

Chapters 3-4

In chapters 3 and 4, the author moves on to argue that Jesus is superior to Moses, who led the people of Israel through the wilderness and built the tabernacle. Jesus is also the leader of God's people, but in him, we see not the builder of just a tent but of all creation. Then the author retells the story of how the Israelites rebelled against Moses in the wilderness, and they lost their chance to enter into the rest that God offered them in the promised land. And so here comes the second warning. If Jesus is greater than Moses, how much higher are the stakes if we rebel against him? We also are in a wilderness-like environment, where we have to trust God for the future rest in God's new creation, so let's make sure that we don't rebel like Israel did in the wilderness and lose out on God's gracious offer to enter his new creation.

Chapters 5-7

In chapters 5-7, the author then compares Jesus with Israel's priests that come from the line of Aaron. Their role was to represent Israel before God and to offer sacrifices that atoned for or covered over the sins of the people. But he points out the priests were themselves morally flawed people, and so they constantly had to offer sacrifices for their own sins as well as for everybody else's. Something more was needed, and so he then argues that Jesus was that something more. He's the ultimate priest, but Jesus did not come from the line of Aaron; rather, Jesus was a priest in the order of Melchizedek, that mysterious priest-king from ancient Jerusalem, and he appears in the stories about Abraham. We also find in Psalm 110 that the Messianic King from the line of David will be a priest in the order of

Melchizedek, so the author's whole point is this: Jesus is the ultimate priest-king. He's morally flawless, he's eternally available for his people, and so he's superior to any other mediator between God and humans, and thus comes his warning in this section. To reject Jesus is to reject one's best and only chance to be fully reconciled to God, so don't do that, which transitions us into the last comparison in chapters 8-10.

Chapters 8-10

The author shows how Jesus' death on the cross was the ultimate sacrifice, superior to all the animal sacrifices offered in the temple. Those sacrifices had to be offered constantly, both daily but also yearly on the Day of Atonement. Jesus offered his life once and for all, and it was sufficient to cover the sins of the whole world. And so the author warns the audience from walking away from Jesus. It's like turning your back on a gracious offer of God's forgiveness. Why would you do that? Jesus' sacrifice is permanent, he says, and it's the foundation for the new covenant spoken of in the prophets where all sins are forgiven.

Chapters 11-13

So now that the author has elevated Jesus through all of these contrasts, this final section is one big challenge to follow Jesus. So think big picture. In Jesus, they have found God's very word. In Jesus, they have hope for the new creation. Jesus is their eternal priest; he's the perfect sacrifice, and so now they should follow all the great models of faith found throughout the story of the Scriptures, and they should remain faithful to Jesus, trusting that despite whatever hardship and persecution, God will not abandon his people.

Conclusion

That's the basic flow of thought throughout the letter, which the author calls right here at the very end "a brief word of exhortation." Here's a couple of extra tips for reading this letter. Whenever the author quotes from the Old Testament Scriptures, which is like every other sentence, stop and go look up the reference and read that quotation in its original context. And sometimes you'll be puzzled,

but more often you'll see all kinds of extra, cool connections that you would never notice otherwise. It's totally worth the effort. You should also just know that these warning passages, they're going to make you uncomfortable, and that's kind of the point. They're not there to make you afraid; they're there to show you that rejecting Jesus is foolish because he's so awesome. These warnings all serve the larger purpose of the letter to show that Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God's love and mercy, and that's what the letter of the Hebrews is all about.

James

Introduction

The letter of James, or at least that's his name in English. If you look in the Greek, you'll see that his name is Lakobos, which translates to his Hebrew name Ya'akov, and that's why most ancient and modern translations render his name as Jacob. That's what we're going to call him in this video. Now there are many Jacobs in the New Testament. Two of them belong to Jesus' inner circle of the twelve disciples, but this letter comes from the Jacob who was the half-brother of Jesus himself.

Now we learned this Jacob's story from the book of Acts and from Paul's letters. After Peter moved on from Jerusalem to go start new churches, Jesus' half-brother Jacob rose to prominence as a leader in the mother church in Jerusalem. It was made up mostly of Messianic or Christian Jews. This was the first Christian community ever, and we know that it fell on hard times during the twenty years that Jacob was its leader. There was a famine that led to great poverty in the region, and these Messianic Jews were being persecuted by Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. But through it all, Jacob was known as a pillar of the Jerusalem church. He was also known as a peacemaker who led with wisdom and courage, until he was tragically murdered. And in this book, we have the legacy of Jacob's teaching and wisdom condensed into a short and very powerful work.

The book begins like a letter. He greets all the Messianic Jews who were living outside the land of Israel. But this does not read like one

of Paul's letters, where he addresses specific problems in one local church; rather, this book is a summary of Jacob's sage wisdom for any and every community of Jesus' followers. And Jacob's goal isn't to teach new theological information; rather, he wants to get in your business and challenge how you live. Jacob's wisdom has been heavily influenced by two sources. The first is Jesus' teaching about life in the Kingdom of God, especially the Sermon on the Mount, which he's constantly echoing and quoting in the book. The second key influence is the biblical wisdom book of Proverbs, especially the poems in Proverbs 1-9. Jacob literally grew up with Jesus and with the book of Proverbs, and so now his own teaching sounds like them. It's stamped by their language and imagery.

The book consists of short, challenging wisdom speeches that are full of metaphors and easy to memorize one-liners. And in essence, Jacob is calling the Messianic community to become truly wise, by living according to Jesus' summary of the Torah—to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Chapters 2-5

The body of the book is in chapters 2-5, which consists of twelve short teachings that call God's people to wholehearted devotion to the way of Jesus. And all together, they don't develop one main idea in a linear way. Each teaching kind of stands alone and concludes with a catchy one-liner, but all of these teachings are connected through key repeated words and themes. It's really cool.

At the opening of the book's body, there are two teachings, first about favoritism and love. Jacob exposes how we tend to show favor to people who can benefit us, and we neglect people who can't, usually because they're needy. Jacob says this is the opposite of love as Jesus defined it. He goes on to show what genuine faith does and does not look like. So if someone says that they have faith in God, but neglects people who are needy or poor, this person's faith is dead, he says. Their actions betray what they say they believe, and genuine faith always results in obedience to Jesus' teachings.

Now scattered throughout the body of the book, we find three different places where Jacob develops Jesus' own teaching about

our words. So with the same mouth we unleash pain upon people, and then go offer praise to God—so messed up. And also we judge people, and then go talk badly about them behind their backs. And we also all tend to distort the truth to our own advantage. How we talk about people opens up a window into our hearts and our core values. Our words tell the real truth about our character.

Jacob also believes that God's Kingdom community, as Jesus taught about it, is the kind of place where the divisions created by wealth and social status are dismantled. So he warns first about the arrogance that wealth can create in people who believe it will be around forever. He says, "No, your wealth will one day rot just like you." In contrast, God's people are to live with patience and hope for Jesus' return to set all things right, and this should inspire a life of faith-filled prayer. Now this part of the book, all of these teachings, they're so powerful, and there's way more than we have time for in this video. But seriously, read all of them and slowly.

Chapter 1

Now placed in front of these twelve wise teachings is the introductory chapter. It's a flowing stream of wise teachings and one-liners, and they're designed to sum up the main ideas of the entire book. This chapter actually introduces you to all the keywords and themes that you're going to meet in chapters 2-5. Jacob opens by saying that he knows from personal experience; life is hard. He was martyred after all, not long after writing this letter. But he believes that life's trials and hardships are actually paradoxical gifts that can produce endurance and shape our character. God can do amazing work inside of us in the midst of suffering and help us become perfect and complete.

Now that word "perfect," it's really important for Jacob. He repeats it seven times in the book. In biblical Hebrew and in Greek, this word refers to wholeness. It means living a completely integrated life, where your actions are always consistent with the values and beliefs that you've received from Jesus. Jacob knows that most of us actually live as fractured people with big inconsistencies in our character. We are all more compromised than we want to admit.

However, God is on a mission to restore fractured people—to make them whole—and it begins with wisdom, the ability to see my hardships through a new perspective. God will generously give this kind of wisdom to people who ask for it in faith without doubting God’s character. And when we realize our humble and frail place before God, we are forced to choose between anxiety or trust. And true wisdom means choosing to believe that God is good, despite my circumstances.

So if it’s poverty that’s forcing you into hard times in life, Jacob says, “Try and view it as a gift that forces you to trust in God alone. And besides, wealth is fleeting; it’s all going to pass away like wildflowers in the summer heat.” And so when we do fall into hard times, don’t accuse God. Rather, let your circumstances teach you what Jesus taught about God’s character—that the Father is generous, that he’s there to meet us in our pain, and that he’s trustworthy. It’s this God, who, through Jesus, has given us new birth to become new kinds of humans who can face their suffering with total trust in the Father, just like Jesus did.

And this new humanity is something we discover when we not only listen to God’s word, but do what it says. Jacob calls God’s word here “the perfect Torah of freedom.” He is referring here to the greatest command of the Torah, as passed on to us through Jesus, that he freed us to love God and love our neighbor. And Jacob shows practically what that kind of love looks like. It means speaking to others in a kind and loving way, it means serving the poor, and it means living with wholehearted devotion to God alone. Now you can see how this opening chapter contains all the keywords and ideas explored more deeply in the twelve teachings of chapters 2-5.

Conclusion

Jacob immersed himself in the wisdom of Jesus and of the Proverbs, and he’s given us a great gift in this book of his own wisdom. This is a beautifully crafted punch in the gut for those who want to follow Jesus, and that is what the book of James—or Jacob—is all about.

1 Peter

Introduction

The first letter of Peter. His name was Shimon, or Simon, when he first became a follower of Jesus, and he was part of the inner circle of the twelve disciples. When he made his confession that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus changed his name to Kephas, which is Aramaic for "rock," which was later translated into Greek as Petros or Peter. Jesus promised that he would become a leader among the apostles to guide the Messianic community in Jerusalem through its earliest years, and that's what happened (remember the early chapters of the book of Acts).

Eventually Peter was called to carry the good news of Jesus beyond the borders of Israel, however, and this letter was written decades into that mission in the wider Roman world. We discover at the conclusion of this letter that Peter is in Rome, which he calls Babylon, and we learn that while Peter commissioned the letter, it was actually composed by a man named Sylvanus, who was a coworker of Peter. This was a circular letter sent to multiple church communities in the Roman province of Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey. And Peter learned that these mostly non-Jewish Christians were persecuted. They were facing hostility and harassment from their Greek and Roman neighbors, and so Peter wrote to encourage them in the midst of their suffering, and this helps explain the letter's design and its main themes.

It opens with a greeting, and then it moves into a poetic song of

praise to God, which introduces the key themes that are explored in the main body of the letter, where he first affirms the new family identity of these persecuted Christians, which will help them see their suffering as a way to bear witness to Jesus. And this has a way of focusing their future hopes on the return of Jesus. Let's dive in, you'll just see how all the pieces work together.

Chapter 1

So Peter opens by greeting these churches as the chosen people of God, who are exiled around the world. Now Peter makes clear throughout the letter that these Christians he's writing to are Gentiles. But here he describes them with phrases from the Old Testament that describe how God chose the people of Israel, the family of Abraham, who was himself an exile and wanderer. This is a key strategy that Peter repeats through the whole letter. He wants these suffering non-Jewish Christians to see that through Jesus, they now belong to the family of Abraham. And so they're wandering exiles just like him—misunderstood. They're mistreated, and they're looking for their true home in the promised land.

Peter continues this idea in the opening song. He praises God for causing people to be born again into a living hope through Jesus' resurrection in the power of the Spirit. God's inviting all people into a new family centered around Jesus, a family that has a new identity as God's beloved children and who have a new hope of a world reborn by God's love when Jesus returns as King. And for people who have this hope, suffering and persecution is actually a strange gift because it burns away false hopes and distractions, like a purifying fire, and it reminds us of our true home and hope. And so paradoxically, life's hardships actually deepen our faith; they make it more genuine. From here Peter's going to move on into the body of the letter, but he's going to explore all these ideas in greater depth.

Chapters 1-2

So he first develops the theme about the new family identity of God's people. He takes even more memorable Old Testament images about the family of Israel, and then he applies them to these Gentile Christians. So like the Israelites who left Egypt, they too are

to gird up their loins and leave behind their former way of life on the way to a new future. So they are the holy people of God now, who are journeying through the wilderness. They are the people of the new exodus, who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus, who's the ultimate Passover lamb. They are the people of the new covenant, who have God's word buried deep inside them, restoring their hearts and renewing their minds. They are the new temple, built on the foundation of Jesus himself, and they're the new Kingdom of priests, who are serving God as his representatives to the nations. Now by applying all of these amazing images to these persecuted Gentile Christians, Peter is placing their suffering within a brand new story, and this leads into the next section.

Chapters 2-4

Their persecution can actually help bring clarity to their mission in the world, to bear witness to God's mercy among the nations. So Peter first encourages them to submit to Roman rule, even if it's oppressive. Yes, he acknowledges their persecution; their suffering is unjust, but violent resistance solves nothing. Not to mention that it betrays the teachings of Jesus, who loved his enemies instead of killing them.

Peter then specifically highlights the very difficult situation that Christian slaves and wives faced when they lived in Roman households, where the patriarch did not follow Jesus. The problem was that it was expected that everyone in the household would submit to and worship the patriarch's gods. And so Peter's aware that giving allegiance to Jesus will generate suspicion. So Peter says it is true; all Christians, including Roman wives and slaves, have been fully liberated by Jesus, but they are to demonstrate that freedom not through rebellion, but by resisting evil the same way Jesus did: through showing love and generosity to your enemies. And in homes where the husband is also a Christian, it's a different story. They are to treat their wives totally different from their Roman neighbors, regarding them as equals before God who are worthy of honor and respect. And Peter is hopeful that this imitation of Jesus' love and

upside-down Kingdom will give power to their words as they bear witness to God's mercy and show people the beautiful truth about the way of Jesus.

But Peter's also a realist. He knows that Christians will continue to be persecuted, and so he reminds them of their future vindication. He recalls how Jesus himself was unfairly persecuted and murdered by corrupt human powers, but in reality, he was dying for the sins of his enemies, and afterward he was vindicated and given resurrection life by the Spirit. And now Jesus is exalted as King over all human and spiritual powers. Then Peter shows how baptism points to the vindication of Jesus' followers. So like Noah, they've been saved through the waters not as a magic ritual, but as a sacred symbol that shows their change of heart, their desire to be joined to Jesus in his death and his resurrection. And so now even if they are murdered for following Jesus, their hope is in future vindication and exaltation alongside their King, which leads Peter into the final movement.

Chapters 4-5

He recalls Jesus' words that his disciples should consider it an honor and joy to be persecuted, just like he was. Peter then calls on church leaders to care for these suffering Christians and to show the same kind of servant leadership that Jesus did to his followers. And finally Peter reminds these Christians about the real enemy that they are facing. This hostility isn't simply cultural, or even political; there are dark forces of spiritual evil at work, inspiring hatred and violence. And they are to resist this evil by staying faithful to Jesus and his teachings and by anticipating his return and ultimate victory over such evil.

Peter concludes with a prayer for divine strength, and he sends a greeting from the church in Rome, which he calls Babylon. Now this is cool. Peter's adopting here the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, for whom the name Babylon became an archetype for any and every corrupt nation. And so Rome has become the new Babylon, and its empire is where God's people are now exiled from their true home in the renewed creation.

Conclusion

Peter's first letter is a powerful reminder of Christian hope in the midst of suffering. God's people have been a misunderstood minority from the very beginning, and they should expect to face hostility because they've chosen to live under the rule of a different King, Jesus. However, persecution can become a strange gift to the Church because it offers a chance to show others the surprising generosity and love of Jesus, which is fueled by the hope of his return. And that's what 1 Peter is all about.

2 Peter

Introduction

The second letter of Peter. It's addressed to the same network of churches as Peter's first letter, and it's likely written from the same location in Rome. Peter's become aware of the fact that he's going to die soon, and the evidence that we have from early tradition was that Peter was executed by the Roman authorities during the reign of Emperor Nero. And so this letter acts as Peter's farewell speech. He begins by offering a final challenge: that Jesus' followers must be people who never stop growing. And then this is followed by two final warnings about a growing number of corrupt teachers, who are leading Christians in these church communities astray, first by their corrupt way of life, and second by their distorted theology. Throughout the letter, Peter is countering accusations made by these teachers against himself and the other apostles. And Peter's goal is to restore confidence and order to these church communities.

Chapter 1

So Peter opens by reminding these churches that through Jesus, God has invited people to become a participant in his own divine nature, that is, to share in God's own eternal life and love, which is mind-blowing, and it requires a lifelong response. To receive this gift means a commitment to developing the same character traits that mark God's own divine nature. Peter lists here seven traits to strive for, and the final one encompasses and crowns all of the others.

It's love, which, according to Jesus, means devoting oneself to the well-being of others, no matter their response or the cost. To love, according to Peter, is to share in God's own life.

Peter then states the letter's purpose. It is going to act as a memorial of his teaching that can be passed on to later generations because he's not going to be around to give it much longer in person. So before he dies, he wants to address these objections and accusations being made by the teachers who distort Jesus' teaching and that of the apostles.

So Peter first addresses an accusation repeated by the skeptics present and future, namely, that he and the apostles just made up all of this stuff about Jesus being risen from the dead and King of the world; Jesus isn't really going to come back one day. So Peter offers his eyewitness testimony of the powerful moment of Jesus' transformation on the mountain (remember the story in Mark chapter 9). The apostles saw Jesus exalted as King, and his resurrection means that he is alive as King and will return to rescue our world one day. And so the future return of Jesus to bring God's Kingdom, this will fulfill what all the ancient Scriptures have been pointing to all along. The words of the Old Testament prophets, they're not fabricated fantasies; rather, through these human words of Scripture and through the human Jesus, God himself has spoken to us.

Chapter 2

Peter then moves on to address the threats raised by corrupt leaders in the Church, and he focuses on more objections that they raised. So first these teachers denied the idea of a final reckoning, when God's going to hold all people accountable for their choices. And this denial is what conveniently allows the teachers to ignore Jesus' teaching about money and sex because they're making tons of profit by teaching in the churches, not to mention the fact that they're sleeping around. But Peter reminds the readers that God can and will meet rebellion with his justice. He recalls three ancient examples when God did this.

He first mentions the story about "the sons of God" in Genesis 6, as it was interpreted in a popular Jewish work of the time called 1 Enoch.

1 Enoch says the sons of God are rebellious angels, who crossed the line and slept with women, earning God's judgment. Peter then brings up the story of the ancient flood, and then the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. In each case, there was a rebellion that led to divine judgment. "But," Peter says, "God was always faithful to deliver his people." And he uses the story of Lot to provide an example. Peter then connects these ancient stories to the teachers' corrupt way of life.

They too are after money and sex. They despise God's authority, and they lead other people to think that God doesn't care about moral decisions. He says they teach a message of Christian freedom and use it as a license to do whatever they want. And this is why Peter is going to bring up Paul's letters later on in chapter 3. It appears that these teachers have distorted Paul's message of liberation in Christ, but that's not the kind of freedom Paul meant. And Peter makes clear that these teachers are not really free. In reality, they're slaves to their bodily impulses. And the fact that they're Christians makes it even more tragic because knowing Jesus' teaching makes them doubly accountable. They have become pitiful examples of the ancient proverb about a dog returning to its vomit and a washed pig going back to the mud.

Chapter 3

Peter then addresses the reasoning behind the teachers' denial of the final reckoning. They say, "Generations of God's people keep coming and passing away without seeing the fulfillment of their hopes. Where is this promised return of Jesus?" Peter responds by showing how shortsighted this objection is. "Look around," he says, "at this remarkable universe that we inhabit. The fact that we exist at all means that at some moment in the past, God's word intervened in a dramatic way to bring something out of nothing and to bring order out of chaos. And he can do so again."

And so the real question is: why is God taking so long? But Peter reminds us that our human conception of time is extremely limited. The long expanses of time through which God works don't fit neatly into the framework of our very short lives. These long amounts of

time are actually a sign of God's patience because each generation has been offered the chance to recognize its own selfishness, to humble itself and repent before God's generous grace. And God's grace will bring the story to a close on the Day of the Lord.

Here Peter draws upon the prophetic poetry of Isaiah and Zephaniah, who described the Day of God's justice as a consuming fire. Peter says the heavens will pass away and the "stoicheia" will melt by fire. This is a Greek word that could refer to the elements, in which case it means the dissolution of the material universe. Or more likely it refers to heavenly bodies, in other words, the stars. That's what this word means in Isaiah chapter 34, where Peter is quoting from. And in that case, this line is a metaphor about the sky being peeled back, so to speak, before the God who sees all.

And so this is why Peter says the Day of the Lord will result in the earth and all its works being exposed. The ultimate purpose of God's consuming justice is not to scrap the material universe; rather, it's to expose evil and injustice and remove it, so that a new kind of heavens and earth can emerge, one that is permeated with righteousness, full of God's love and people who know and love God and love their neighbor as their selves.

Peter concludes by saying this is the true Christian hope that Jesus and all the apostles have been announcing, including Paul, whose writings can be misunderstood if you rip them out of context. But all the apostles are on the same page. And so Peter ends his final address to the Church.

Conclusion

Now the tone of 2 Peter, it feels really intense, but his passion comes from a firm conviction that God loves this world and he's determined to rescue it through Jesus. And so this means that God's love must confront and deal with the sin and injustice that ruins his beloved world, and in God's own time, he will do so, opening up a new future for humanity and for the universe itself.

And so 2 Peter has a wide, expansive vision of hope for the whole world, and it challenges us to examine our everyday lives. That's what the second letter of Peter is all about.

1-3 John

Introduction

The letters of 1, 2, and 3 John. 1 John is actually anonymous, but 2 and 3 John are written by someone who is called “the elder.” Now the language and style of all three of these works are identical to each other and to John’s Gospel, and so most people think that all of them come from “the disciple that Jesus loved.” Now that could be John the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles, or it could be another John among Jesus’ earliest disciples, known as “John the elder.” Whichever John it was, he’s now in his old age, and he’s overseeing a network of house church communities that are likely around the city of ancient Ephesus.

Now from clues within the Gospel and from these letters, it seems that these communities were made up mostly of Jewish followers of Jesus and that they had recently gone through a crisis that motivated John to write these letters. He mentions that a group of people have broken off from these churches. These people no longer acknowledge Jesus as Israel’s Messiah or as the Son of God, and they’re stirring up hostility among those who stayed faithful to the churches. In fact, 2 and 3 John clearly addressed this conflict.

2, 3 John

2 John is a warning to a specific house church. There are people who deny Jesus—John calls them deceivers—and they’re probably going to come looking for validation or support, and this church

community is not to offer any. 3 John is actually written to a member of one of these house churches, a man named Gaius, and the elder asks him to welcome legitimate missionaries who are going to arrive soon. He has to tell him to do this because the leader of that church community, Diotrephes, is acting like a jerk, and he's rejecting anybody associated with John the elder. And so these letters give us a window into the tension and conflict that John faced in these churches.

And 1 John was written as a response to all of this as a form of damage control. The elder assures those who still believe in the Messiah Jesus that God is with them as they adhere to the truth. And so all of this helps us understand the uniqueness of 1 John, which is actually not a letter at all. It reads more like a poetic sermon sent to these churches. John says that he's not communicating new information. In fact, almost all of the key ideas and words in 1 John come right out of Jesus' teachings in the Gospel of John. And so John's goal is to remind them and persuade these Christians to stay true to what they already say they believe.

The poetic quality of John's sermon is really cool. He doesn't develop his ideas in a linear or logical way; rather, he uses a well-known technique of ancient rhetoric called amplification. So John has just a few core ideas he wants to communicate about life and truth and love, and he's going to cycle around these ideas repeatedly each time offering a little bit different of an angle or emphasis. He uses a lot of hyperbole; he uses very stark contrast with simple images of light and dark, and love and hate, and good and evil. But don't let the simplicity of 1 John fool you. This work is deeply profound.

There's a clear introduction to 1 John and then a clear conclusion, and the flowing cycles of the sermon in between these two don't follow any kind of rigid literary design, but there do seem to be two larger sections. Each one is marked off by the introductory phrase, "this is the message." And then each is followed by a repetition of images about how God is first light and then how God is love. And all of the ideas in these two parts flow out of and cycle back into these two core ideas.

1 John 1

So the introduction is very similar to the prologue of the Gospel of John. It has echoes of Genesis chapter 1, and Proverbs chapter 8. John speaks of the word of life that was with God in the beginning. For John, the word "God" refers to both the Father and the Son, who came to bring life into the world. And so those who saw and heard and touched the Son are called "we." John's referring to himself and the apostles, who were eyewitnesses of Jesus. And so now "we" have a message for "you," the next generation of Jesus' followers. So when the apostles share the word of life with others, these others are also brought into fellowship with the Father and the Son through the apostles. The word fellowship here is "koinonia" in Greek; it means a participation or sharing. When people hear the message about Jesus through the apostles, that message brings them into a real relationship with Jesus himself and into a real participation in God's own love and life.

1 John 1-3

And so this flows right into the first main section. "This is the message; God is light." This is the message of the apostles, that the God revealed in Jesus is light. And so if people want to participate in God's own life through Jesus, they need to keep walking in the light, which is a really cool image, but what does it mean? It means, for John, to keep Jesus' commands, and that's hard. So when you fail, Jesus' atoning death will cover for your sins, and then once again you are called to get up and obey Jesus' teachings, but which one of his teachings? John reminds the churches of Jesus' old/new command given to the disciples at the last supper, that they love one another as he loved them. Doing this is walking in the light. Now if God's light is now shining through Jesus, then that means the world's darkness is passing away, which also means that God's children, already in this moment, have victory over the sin and evil and death that reigns in the world.

And so that leads John to challenge the churches. "Don't love the world because it's passing away too." He's referring here, specifically, to pride and sexual corruption. Likely these are problems connected

to the conflict that was happening in the churches. And so this leads John to warn the churches about these people who have left the communities and who deny Jesus as the Messiah. John calls them the anti-Messiahs and deceivers, but he's confident that those who still know the truth about Jesus are, in fact, the true children of God. And they are loved by the father, and they show that they are part of God's family when they do righteousness and when they love one another, unlike the deceivers, who are generating anger, and strife, and division.

1 John 3-5

And so this transitions into the second main section of the sermon. "This is the message of the apostles," John says, "that God is love." And so God's children should love one another and avoid hatred. "Don't be like Cain from Genesis chapter 4," John says, "his hatred led him to murder his brother." But for Christians, love is defined by giving up one's life as a sacrifice for the well-being of others. That's what Jesus did. And when God's children trust in that love for them, it changes them.

And so John warns once again of the deceivers. This time he calls them false prophets. When they deny Jesus is the Messiah, they apparently claim to speak for God, but John says to test the spirits. If anyone claims to speak on God's behalf, but doesn't focus on Jesus as the crucified Son of God, they do not speak for God, John says. God's true children will center their whole lives on the crucified and risen Jesus because that's where we see God's true heart revealed. We see on the cross that God is a being of total self-giving love, and that love is what compels Jesus' followers to love others in the same way.

And when people meet this God of love, it does away with fear and angst forever, which is part of what John means by having victory over the world. When you realize that God so loves you, that he is crazy about you despite your deepest flaws and failures, that love becomes the thing that grounds your entire life. This love is what comes through trusting in the crucified Jesus. It comes through trusting God's testimony about Jesus given by the Spirit and is

trusting in the message from the apostles about Jesus. And when God's love gets a hold of you, it opens up eternal life. It's a life permeated with God's own presence and life and love, and it begins now carrying on into eternity.

Conclusion

And so this leads John to the climactic conclusion of his sermon. He says, "We know the Son of God has come, and so we can know the one who is true, and we are in the one who is true. In his Son, Jesus the Messiah. This is the true God and eternal life." Now if your head's kind of spinning after hearing that sentence and you're wondering: Wait. Who is the "one who is true"? Who is the "one who gives true life"? Is it Jesus, or is it God? And John's answer is, of course, yes. John doesn't know any God apart from Jesus, and when he and the other apostles encountered Jesus, they discovered the God who loves us so deeply that he has chosen not to exist without us despite our failures. And this God is so surprising, so unexpected that John's final words call us to keep away from idols, that is, to resist any temptation to remake this surprising God in our own image. To know Jesus is to know the God of creative life-giving, others-centered love. This, John says, is the one true God. And that's what the letters of John are all about.

Jude

Introduction

The letter of Jude, or more accurately Judah, according to the pronunciation of his name, both in Greek and in Hebrew. Judah was one of Jesus' four brothers who are named in the Gospel accounts. None of the brothers followed Jesus as the Messiah before his death, but afterwards they saw him alive from the dead and then became his disciples. All these brothers of Jesus became leaders eventually in the first Jewish Christian communities, and Judah was known as a traveling teacher and missionary, and this gives us the background to understand the purpose of his letter.

We don't know what specific church community he wrote to, but it was likely made up of mostly Messianic Jews. His writing style assumes a deep knowledge of the Hebrew Old Testament Scriptures as well as other popular Jewish literature. Judah had become aware of a crisis facing this church, and so this helps us understand the letter's design. It begins with an opening charge, followed by a long warning and accusation against corrupt teachers who have influenced this church, and then Judah closes by completing the charge about what this church is supposed to do.

Verses 1-4

Judah begins by charging this church to contend for the true Christian faith. He says his plan was to write a longer work that explored our shared salvation through the Messiah, but that project, he says,

got delayed when he heard the urgent news about this church. And so he fired off this very thoughtful but very short letter. Judah doesn't begin with how they are supposed to contend for the faith; rather, he first goes into why. It is because of the corrupt teachers, who have infiltrated this church, and it's not their teaching that he targets, but their way of life. Their moral compromise is what tells you they have bad theology.

Verses 5-10

First of all they've distorted God's grace as a license to sin. They think that they're forgiven, and they have God's Spirit, so now they can do whatever they want, especially when it comes to money and sex. And so Judah says they betray Jesus by rejecting his authority and his teachings. And Judah wants this church to know that the appearance of these teachers is no surprise. He transitions into a longer warning to stay away from them.

He first offers two sets of three Old Testament examples. The first trio is about rebellious people, who, in the past, received divine justice. So the Israelites who rebelled against God in the wilderness, they got what they wanted, and they died out in the middle of nowhere. Then he brings up a story about angels who are imprisoned for rebellion until they face God's justice. He's referring to the interpretation of the story in Genesis chapter 6 offered in the popular Jewish work called 1 Enoch, where "the sons of God" are interpreted to refer to angels who rebelled against God, then had sex with women, and were judged accordingly.

Judah links this story to his third example about the ruin of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis, where violent men tried to have sex with angels. Both these stories are about rebellion against God's order that led to sexual immorality, and that's precisely what the corrupt teachers are guilty of. After this, Judah brings up a bonus example from a popular Jewish text called The Testament of Moses. Like Enoch, it was not part of the Old Testament Scriptures, and it was a creative retelling of Moses' final days and words based on

Deuteronomy. In the section that Judah quotes from, Moses has died, and there's a good angel Michael, who is refuting the devil's accusations against Moses, but he decides to leave final judgment for God alone.

Now these stories might seem kind of odd to you, but for Jewish people who were raised on this literature, Judah's warnings make good sense. The behavior of these corrupt teachers has ancient roots—rebellion against God's authority, sexual immorality, rejecting God's messengers.

Verses 11-13

And this connects to the second trio of examples. They're all about rebels who went on to corrupt other people. So Cain, he murdered his brother, but then he went on to build a city where violence reigned. Balaam the sorcerer, he couldn't curse Israel, and so he lured them into idolatry and sexual corruption. And then Korah, the Levite, he led a rebellion against Moses that ended in disaster for others. Judah concludes the second trio with a barrage of Old Testament images to describe the teachers. They're like the selfish shepherds of Ezekiel, or like the clouds with no rain from Proverbs, or like the chaotic waves from Isaiah. Their self-absorption betrays their claim to follow Jesus. They create chaos wherever they go. Judah concludes his warning by quoting from two other warnings, one ancient and one recent.

Verses 14-19

The first comes again from the popular book of 1 Enoch, which claimed to contain the visions of the ancient figure Enoch from the book of Genesis. Now what's fascinating is Judah quotes from the opening chapter of Enoch, which is itself quoting about half a dozen Old Testament texts about the final Day of the Lord's justice on human evil. Judah then matches Enoch's ancient warning with a more recent one from the apostles. Peter, John, Paul, they all predicted that corrupt teachers would arise and distort the good news of Jesus, and they themselves were echoing Jesus' early warning about this same thing. And so this church should need no more convincing. These teachers have to be dealt with.

Verses 20-25

So Judah then moves into his closing charge. He picks up his opening line about contending for the faith, and he unpacks how to do so with a cool set of metaphors. He describes the community of Jesus as God's new temple, and so they are to build their lives on the foundation of the most holy faith, which refers to the core message of good news about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for our sins. On that foundation, the church is to build itself through a dedication to prayer, by devoting itself to the love of God through obedience. And the integrity of this building will be maintained by staying alert for the return of Jesus to bring his justice and his mercy. And in doing this, they will help each other stay faithful to Jesus. Judah then concludes by praising the God who will protect his people and keep them from falling too far from his grace.

Conclusion

The short letter of Judah is powerful and puzzling for many modern readers, who ask why he quotes from texts that aren't today considered part of the Hebrew Bible, like 1 Enoch and The Testament of Moses. It's important to remember that Jewish culture in this time was immersed in religious texts. Jesus, his family, all the early Jewish Christians grew up reading the Hebrew Bible along with many later books that were based on and inspired by the Scriptures. And we know there were ancient debates about whether or not some of these later books should be viewed as Scripture.

But regardless, they're still important. A book doesn't have to be in the Bible to speak an important message to God's people, and so we have many Jewish texts from this period. They are known today as the collections of the Apocrypha, also called the Deuterocanon, along with the Pseudepigrapha. These were all preserved and read in Jewish and Christian communities. They were treated with great respect. It doesn't mean they were originally designed as part of the Hebrew Bible, but they are part of the biblical tradition.

And so Judah, knowing his readers, that they would value words from 1 Enoch, he used them to communicate his message, which is this: God's grace, through Jesus, demands a whole-life response,

not just intellectual assent. Notice that Judah doesn't criticize or focus on the teachers' theology, but their immoral way of life, which denies Jesus. And so Judah is, here, applying what Jesus first told his disciples. "If you really love me, then you will obey my teachings." For Christians, how you live is the most reliable indicator of what you actually believe, and that's what the letter of Jude is all about.

Revelation Ch. 1-11

Introduction

The book of the Revelation of Jesus. The author of this book, which is not called “Revelations” by the way, is named at the beginning. It was written by John, which could refer to the beloved disciple who wrote the Gospel and the letters of John, or it could be a different John, a Messianic Jewish prophet who traveled about and taught in the early Church. Whichever John it was, he makes clear in the opening paragraph what kind of book he has written.

He calls it first of all a revelation, or “apocalypse.” The Greek word is “apocalipsis,” and it refers to a type of literature very familiar to John’s readers from the Hebrew Scriptures and from other popular Jewish texts. Apocalypses recounted a prophet’s symbolic dreams and visions that revealed God’s heavenly perspective on history and current events, so that the present could be viewed in light of history’s final outcome. And John says this apocalypse is a prophecy, which means it’s a word from God spoken through a prophet to God’s people, usually to warn or comfort them in a time of crisis. By calling this book a prophecy, John’s saying that it stands in the tradition of the biblical prophets and is bringing their message to a climax. And this apocalyptic prophecy was sent to real people that John knew.

The book opens and closes as a circular letter that was sent to seven churches in the ancient Roman province of Asia. Now seven is a meaningful number for John. It’s a symbol of completeness based

on the seven-day Sabbath cycle in the Old Testament, and John has woven sevens into every single part of this book. Now with this opening, John has given us clear guidance about how he wants us to understand this book—Jewish apocalypses communicated through symbolic imagery and numbers.

It is not a secret predictive code about the timing of the end of the world; rather, John is constantly using these symbols that are drawn from the Old Testament, and he expects his readers to go discover what the symbols mean by looking up the text he's alluding to. Also the fact that it's a letter means that John is actually addressing the situation of these first-century churches. And so while this book has much to say to Christians of later generations, the book's meaning must first be anchored in the historical context of John's time, place, and audience, which brings us into the book's first section: Jesus' message to the seven churches.

Chapters 1-3

John was exiled on the island of Patmos, and he saw a vision of the risen Jesus exalted as King of the world, and he was standing among seven burning lights. And John's told this is a symbol of the seven churches in Asia Minor that's been adapted from the book of the Prophet Zechariah. And Jesus starts addressing the specific problems that face each church. Some were apathetic due to wealth and influence; others were morally compromised. Their people were still eating ritual meals and sleeping around in pagan temples, but others among the churches remained faithful to Jesus, and they were suffering harassment and even violent persecution. And Jesus warns that things are going to get worse. A tribulation is upon the churches that will force them to choose between compromise or faithfulness.

By John's day, the murder of Christians by the Roman Emperor Nero was past and the persecution of Christians by Emperor Domitian was likely underway. And so the temptation was to deny Jesus, either to avoid persecution or simply to join the spirit of the Roman age. And Jesus calls them to faithfulness, so that they can overcome or literally conquer. And Jesus promises a reward for everyone in these churches who does conquer. Each reward is drawn directly from the

book's final vision about the marriage of heaven and earth. And so this opening section sets up the main plot tension that will drive the storyline in this book. Will Jesus' people endure? Will they inherit the new world that God has in store? And why is faithfulness to Jesus described as conquering? The rest of the book is John's answer.

Chapters 4-5

After this, John has a vision of God's heavenly throne room. And he describes it with imagery drawn from many Old Testament prophets. Surrounding God are creatures and elders that represent all creation and human nations, and they're giving honor and allegiance to the one true creator God who is "Holy! Holy! Holy!" In God's hand is a scroll that's closed up with seven wax seals. It symbolizes the message of the Old Testament prophets and the sealed scroll of Daniel's visions. These are all about how God's Kingdom will come here fully on earth as in heaven, but it turns out no one is able to open the scroll until John hears of someone who can. It's the lion from the tribe of Judah and the root of David; he can open it. These are classic Old Testament descriptions of the Messianic King, who would bring God's Kingdom through military conquests.

Now that's what John hears, but then what he turns and sees is not an aggressive lion-King but a sacrificed bloody lamb, who's alive standing there and ready to open the scroll. Now the symbol of Jesus as the slain lamb, this is crucially important for understanding the book. John's saying that the Old Testament promise of God's future victorious Kingdom was inaugurated through the crucified Messiah. Jesus overcame his enemies by dying for them as the true Passover lamb, so that they could be redeemed. Because of the resurrection, Jesus' death on the cross was not a defeat; it was his enthronement. It was the way he conquered evil.

And so this vision concludes with the lamb alongside the one sitting on the throne, and together they are worshiped as the one true creator and redeemer, and the slain lamb begins to open the scroll. It's a symbol of his divine authority to guide history to its conclusion, which brings us to the next section of the book: the three cycles

of seven, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. And each cycle depicts God's Kingdom, in justice, coming here on earth as in heaven.

Chapters 6-8

Now some people think that the three sets of seven divine judgments represent a literal, linear sequence of events that either happened in the past, or could be happening now, or are yet to happen in the future when Jesus returns. But notice how John has woven all the sevens together, so the final seven bowls come out of the seventh trumpet and the seventh seal, and the seven trumpets emerged from the seventh seal. They're like nesting dolls. Each seventh contains the next seven. Also notice how each of the series of seven culminates in the final judgment, and they have matching conclusions. So it's more likely that John is using each set of seven to depict the same period of time between Jesus' resurrection and future return from three different perspectives.

So the slain lamb begins to open the scroll's first four seals, and John sees four horsemen. It's an image from the book of Zechariah chapter 1, and they symbolize times of war, conquest, famine, and death, in other words, a tragically average day in human history. Then the fifth seal depicts the murdered Christian martyrs before God's heavenly throne, and the cry of their innocent blood rises up before God like smoke from the altar of incense. And they're told to rest because more Christians are yet to die. We're not told why, but we are told that it won't last forever. The sixth seal is God's ultimate response to their cry. He brings the great Day of the Lord that was described in Isaiah and Joel, and the people of the earth cry out, "who is able to stand?" And then all of a sudden John pauses the action with an intermission to answer that question.

John sees an angel with a signet ring coming to place a mark of protection on God's servants who are enduring all this hardship, and he hears the number of those who are sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand. It's a military census like the one in the book of Numbers chapter 1. There are twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Now pay attention. The number of this army is what John heard, just like he heard about the conquering lion of Judah. But in both cases, what he then turned and saw was the surprising fulfillment of those military images in Jesus the slain lamb. So when he sees this Messianic army of God's Kingdom, it's made up of people from all nations fulfilling God's ancient promise to Abraham. It's this multi-ethnic army of the lamb, who can stand before God because they've been redeemed by the lamb's blood. And now they are called the conquerors, not by killing their enemies, but by suffering and bearing witness just like the lamb. After this, the seventh and final seal is broken, but before the scroll is open, the seven warning trumpets emerge and fire is taken from the incense altar. It symbolizes the cry of the martyrs, and it's cast onto the earth bringing the Day of the Lord to its completion.

Chapters 8-11

Now with the seven trumpets, John backs up and he retells the story again, this time with images from the exodus story. So the first five trumpet blasts replay the plagues sent upon Egypt. And then the sixth trumpet releases the four horsemen that came from the first four seals. But then John tells us that despite all these plagues, the nations did not repent, just like Pharaoh didn't in the exodus story. So it seems that God's judgment alone will not bring people to humble repentance before him. Then John pauses the action again with another intermission. An angel brings the unsealed scroll that was opened by the lamb, and just like Ezekiel, John is told to eat the scroll and then proclaim its message to the nations. Finally the lamb's scroll is open, and now we will discover how God's Kingdom will come here on earth.

The scroll's content is spelled out in two symbolic visions. First John sees God's temple and the martyrs by the altar, and he's told to measure and set them apart. It's an image of protection taken from Zechariah, chapter 2. But then the outer courts in the city are excluded, and they get trampled down by the nations. Now some think that this refers literally to a destruction of Jerusalem that happened in the past or will happen in the future. But more likely, John's following the tradition of Jesus and the apostles, who all use the

new temple as a symbol for God's new covenant people. In that case, this is an image about how Jesus' followers may suffer persecution by the nations, but this external defeat cannot take away their victory through the lamb.

This idea gets expanded in the scroll's second vision. God appoints two witnesses as prophetic representatives to the nations, and once again, some people think this refers literally to two prophets who will appear one day in the future. But John calls them "lamp stands," which is one of his clear symbols for the churches. So this vision is more likely about the prophetic role of Jesus' followers, who are to take up the mantle of Moses and Elijah and call idolatrous nations and rulers to turn back to the one true God.

But then all of a sudden a horrible beast appears—let the reader remember Daniel chapter 7. And the beast conquers the witnesses and kills them. But then God brings them back to life and vindicates the witnesses before their persecutors, and the end result is that many among the nations finally do repent and give glory to the creator God in the Day of the Lord.

Conclusion

Now stop. Think about the story so far. God's warning judgments through the seals and through the trumpets did not generate repentance among the nations, just like the exodus plagues only hardened Pharaoh's heart. But the lamb, he conquered his enemies by loving them, dying for them, and now the message of the lamb's scroll reveals the mission of his army, the Church. God's Kingdom will be revealed when the nations see the Church imitating the loving sacrifice of the lamb, not killing their enemies, but dying for them.

It is God's mercy shown through Jesus' followers that will bring the nations to repentance. And this surprising claim is the message of the open scroll that John has placed at the exact center of the entire book, after this the last trumpet sounds and the nations are shaken as God's Kingdom comes here on earth as it is in heaven.

So now we know how the Church will bear witness to the nations and inherit the new creation, but who was that terrible beast that waged war on God's people, and how will the whole story turn out? John will tell us in the second half of the book of the Revelation.

Revelation Ch. 12-22

Introduction

The Revelation of Jesus given to John the prophet. In the first video, we explored how John composed this apocalyptic prophecy as a circular letter to seven churches in Asia Minor to challenge and comfort these Christians who were suffering from apathy and persecution under the Roman empire. We also encountered John's main symbol for Jesus, the slain lamb, who conquered his enemies by dying for them. He is the one who opens up the scroll containing God's purposes to bring his Kingdom on earth as in heaven.

The scroll's opening brought warning judgments like the plagues of Egypt, and like Pharaoh, the nations do not repent. And then John introduced the multi-ethnic army of the lamb, and the open scroll revealed their strange mission. It's to follow the lamb by bearing witness to God's justice and mercy before the beastly nations, even if it kills them. And they will conquer the beast by laying down their lives, just like the lamb, and this will move the nations to repentance. In the remainder of the book, John will fill out his portrayal of this beast and his war on God's people and how the whole story ends. After the seven trumpets, John stops the drumbeat of sevens with a series of visions that he calls "signs." The word literally means symbols, and these chapters are full of them. These visions explore the message of the open scroll in greater depth.

Chapters 12-14

The first one reveals the cosmic spiritual battles that lay behind the suffering of the seven churches under Roman persecution. It's a manifestation of that ancient conflict that began in Genesis chapter 3. The serpent who represents the source of all evil is depicted here as a dragon. It attacks a woman and her seed. They represent the Messiah and his people. Then the Messiah defeats the dragon through his death and resurrection, and it is cast to earth. There the dragon inspires hatred and persecution of the Messiah's people, but they will conquer the dragon by resisting his influence even if it kills them. John's trying to show the churches that neither Rome nor any other nation or human is the real enemy. There are dark spiritual powers at work, and Jesus' followers will announce Jesus' victory by remaining faithful and loving their enemies just like the slain lamb.

John's next vision retells the story of the same conflict, but this time in the earthly symbolism of Daniel's animal visions. John sees two beasts empowered by the dragon. One of them represents national military power that conquers through violence. The other beast symbolizes the economic propaganda machine that exalts this power as divine. And these beasts demand full allegiance from the nations, and that's symbolized by taking the mark of the beast and his number, 666, on the forehead or hand. Now this is an infamous image, and you won't discover its meaning by reading news headlines. John's making a clear Hebrew Old Testament reference here. First of all, this mark is the anti-Shema. The writing on the forehead and hand, it's a clear reference to the Shema, an ancient Jewish prayer of allegiance to God that's found in the book of Deuteronomy. This prayer also was written on the forehead and hand as a symbol of devoting all your thoughts and actions to the one true God. But now the rebellious nations demand their own allegiance, and they force everyone to decide who they will follow.

Then there's the number of the beast, which has fascinated readers for thousands of years, but this was not a mystery to John. He spoke Hebrew and Greek, and Hebrew letters were also numbers. If you spell the Greek words "Nero Caesar" and the word "beast" in Hebrew, each one amounts to 666. Now John isn't saying that Nero

was the only fulfillment of this vision. Nero's just a recent example of the ancient pattern set out by Daniel, that the nations become beasts when they exalt their own power and economic security as a false god and then demand total allegiance. So Babylon was the beast in Daniel's day, but that was followed by Persia, followed by Greece, and now Rome in John's day. And so it goes for any later nation that acts in the same way.

Standing opposed to the beastly nations and the dragon is another King; it's the slain lamb. He's with his army, who have given their lives to follow him. And from the new Jerusalem, their song of victory goes out to the nations in what John calls "the eternal Gospel." And they call everyone to repent and to worship God and to come out of Babylon that will fall; its days are numbered. Then John sees a vision of final judgment. It's symbolized by two harvests. One is a good harvest of grain as King Jesus comes to gather up his faithful people to himself. The other is a harvest of wine grapes. It represents humanity's intoxication with evil. They're taken to the wine press and trampled.

Now throughout all these sign visions, John is placing a stark choice before the seven churches. Will they resist the lure of Babylon and follow the lamb, or will they follow the beast and suffer its defeat? Now that the choice is clear, John replays a final cycle of seven divine judgments symbolized as pouring out seven bowls.

Chapters 15-16

Now we know from the lamb's scroll and from the sign visions that many among the nations do repent, but as the exodus plagues are repeated and poured out through the bowls, there are many people who do not repent. They resist and curse God just like Pharaoh. And so it all leads up to the sixth bowl as the dragon and the beast, they gather the nations together to make war against God's people in a place called Armageddon. This refers to a plain in northern Israel where many battles were fought by Israel against invading nations. And some people think that this sixth bowl refers to an actual future battle. Other people think that it's a metaphor for God's final justice on evil. Either way John's clearly taken images from the book of

Ezekiel about God's battle with Gog. Gog was Ezekiel's symbol of the rebellious nations gathered before God to face his justice. And that's what comes in the seventh bowl. It's the fourth and final depiction of the Day of the Lord, when evil is defeated among the nations once and for all.

Now John has fully unpacked the message of the lamb's unsealed scroll, and now he goes back to expand on three key themes that he's introduced earlier: the fall of Babylon, the final battle to defeat evil, and the arrival of the new Jerusalem. And each one of these explores the final coming of God's Kingdom from a different angle.

Chapters 17-19

So first the fall of Babylon. An angel shows John a stunning woman who's dressed like a queen, but she's drunk with the blood of the martyrs and of all innocent people. She's riding the dragon beast from the sign visions. It's a symbol of the rebellious nations, and she's called Babylon the Prostitute. Now the detailed symbols of this vision, they would be very clear to John's first readers. He's personifying the military and economic power of the Roman empire, but he's also doing more. In this vision, John has blended together words and images from every single Old Testament passage about the downfall of ancient Babylon, Tyre, and Edom. John's showing how Rome is simply the newest version of the Old Testament archetype of humanity in rebellion against God. They come together and form nations that exalt their own economic and military security into a false god. This isn't something limited to the past or the future. It's a portrait of the human condition throughout history, and Babylons will come and go leading up to the day when Jesus returns to replace Babylon with his Kingdom.

Chapters 19-20

But how will Jesus' Kingdom come? Up to this point, the Day of the Lord has been depicted as a day of fire or earthquake or harvest, and now it's depicted as a final battle, and it's told twice. It results in the vindication of the martyrs. Now John takes us back to the sixth bowl where the nations were gathered together to oppose God, and all of a sudden Jesus appears. He's the great hero. He's the word of God

riding on a white horse, and he's ready to conquer the world's evil, but pay attention. He's covered with blood before the battle even begins, And that's because it's his own, and his only weapon is the sword of his mouth. It's an image adapted from Isaiah. John's telling us that Armageddon will not be a bloodbath; rather, the same Jesus who shed his own blood for his enemies now comes proclaiming justice. He will hold accountable those who refuse to repent of the ways that they participate in the ruin of God's good world. And the destructive hellfire that they've unleashed in God's world justly becomes their own God-appointed destiny.

After this, John sees a vision of Jesus' followers who have been murdered by Babylon, and they're brought back to life, and they reign with the Messiah for one thousand years. Then after this, the dragon who inspired humanity's rebellion against God rallies the nations of the world together to rebel against God's Kingdom. But before God's throne of justice, they all face the consequences of eternal defeat. And so the forces of spiritual evil and everyone who doesn't want to participate in God's Kingdom are destroyed. They're given what they want—to exist by themselves and for themselves. And so the dragon and Babylon and all who choose them are eternally quarantined, never again able to corrupt God's new creation.

Now there's a lot of debate about the relationship of the thousand years to these two battles. There are some who think it refers to a literal chronological sequence, Jesus' return followed by a thousand-year Kingdom on earth called the Millennium, followed by God's final judgment. Other people think that the thousand years are a symbol of Jesus' and the martyrs' present victory over spiritual evil and that the two battles depict Jesus' future return from two different angles. Whichever view you take, the main point is clear: when Jesus returns as King, he will deal with evil forever, and he'll vindicate those who have been faithful to him.

Chapters 21-22

The book concludes with a final vision of the marriage of heaven and earth. An angel shows John a stunning bride that symbolizes the new creation that has come forever to join God and his covenant

people. God announces that he's come to live with humanity forever and that he's making all things new. John's vision here is a kaleidoscope of Old Testament promises. This place is a new heavens and earth, a restored creation that's healed of the pain and evil of human history.

It's also a new Garden of Eden, the paradise of eternal life with God, but it's not simply a return back to the garden. It's a step forward into a new Jerusalem, a great city where human cultures and all their diversity work together in peace and harmony before God. And in the most surprising twist of all, there's no temple building in the new creation because the presence of God and the lamb that were once limited to the temple now permeate every square inch of the new world. And there's a new humanity there fulfilling the calling placed on them all the way back on page one of the Bible—to rule as God's image, to partner together with God in taking this creation into new and uncharted territory. And so ends John's apocalypse and the epic storyline of the whole Bible.

Conclusion

John did not write this book as a secret code for you to decipher the time table of Jesus' return. It's a symbolic vision that brought hope and challenge to the seven first-century churches and every generation of Christians since. It reveals history's pattern and God's promise—that every human kingdom eventually becomes Babylon and must be resisted in the power of the slain lamb.

But there's a promise that Jesus who loved and died for this world will not let Babylon go unchecked. He will return one day to remove evil from his good world and make all things new. And that is a promise that should motivate faithfulness in every generation of God's people until the King returns. That's what the book of Revelation is all about.



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