



Route 66 Week 1

Why Read the Bible?

We are about to start an exciting trip. Go ahead, fasten your seatbelt and adjust your seatback. Get comfortable. Over the next few weeks we will be covering an overview of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Before we start, it would be good to ask a simple question:

Why are we going on this trip?

This is a great question. I don't know about you, but I always ask this question before committing to a long trip. If I'm going to spend a lot of time traveling, I want to know whether it will be interesting and worthwhile. I want to know what's in it for me. It's just a guess, but I imagine you want to know the same about this trip.

I want to assure you that there are a number of great reasons to study all of the Bible. They all add up to one big benefit: **This trip can change your life and bring you peace, joy, and an unshakable meaning in life.** I'm pretty sure that this is what God wants to do in your life, and isn't this what we're all after? Well, let's get going. We have quite a bit of territory to cover.

Why Read The Bible Reason #1

The Bible helps reveal the meaning of human existence. Looking at this question from the highest level can be helpful. Let's start with why God made you. Did you know that your purpose on earth is to become fully what God intends you to be? In the book of Ephesians, the apostle Paul talks about it this way.

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. [9] Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. [10] For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. Ephesians 2:8-10

Our journey begins with salvation. Paul reminds us that God saves us from a hellish eternity to a heaven-filled life through His undeserved favor, which is grace. No one can earn eternal salvation through works. This is simply a gift from God. Like any gift, you must choose to receive it, open it, and use it.

If you are not sure whether you have accepted Jesus' death on the cross as a payment for all of your sins, bring this up to your small group leader or one of the pastors at church. It is a critical decision and commitment to make. You can of course read the Bible without this commitment, but to experience the full power of the Bible this commitment is essential. The benefits of receiving eternal salvation start here on earth.

In verse 10 we are reminded that each Christian is God's masterpiece. Don't gloss over the word, masterpiece. Spend a little time thinking about what a masterpiece is. It is a rare work of art that is incalculably valuable. It is unique in all of the world and another one will never come along. As a Christian you are all of this. You have been made and renewed by God, and never again will he make or renew another person like you. You will never occur again and he has a plan and a design for your life. There is someone unique for you to be that no one else will ever be. There is something unique for you to do that cannot be done in the same way by anyone else.

The final phrase of verse 10 really emphasizes this "doing" part of your masterpiece-ness. God has things for each Christian to do on earth. We must choose to say yes to these assignments. God has chosen to further his influence by inviting you to step into his calling for your life. So God has connected your masterpiece-ability to how he changes the world and brings about his purposes and plans on earth! Your life is incalculably critical to goodness winning the day in this world.

We need to be careful at this point. Remember Ephesians 2:8-9. It pointed out one cannot earn salvation through good works. Doing good works is external evidence of the internal change God has made in your heart. Doing God's work is not something you "have to do," it is something you are "made to do" as a response to the greatest gift you ever received. You finally get to live the life you were meant to live.

Getting back to "the good things he planned for us long ago." God has uniquely gifted you to accomplish His chosen tasks. One of God's great desires for you is to have a full life on earth:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:10 (NIV)

You can experience life "to the full" by doing God's "good things." For years the Army used the slogan, "Be all you can be." It was an encouraging call to become the best that you could be. God's promise to live life to the full builds more into that encouragement. God promises to work in you to "be all that God knows you can be."

To me that's a pretty exciting invitation. Perhaps you are wondering, "How do I figure that out?" GOOD QUESTION!

Why Read The Bible Reason #2

The Bible reveals your heart and the heart of God. I don't know about you, but figuring out God's purpose for my life can seem pretty overwhelming. In trying to figure out God's purpose for my life, I find it helpful to think of the analogy of being a player on a sports team. The goal is to win the all-universe championship. On this team, God is the coach, I am the player, and the Bible is the playbook. Thinking in this way helps to clarify my role and my expectations for God and the Bible.

As in all sports, the coach sets the strategy, designs plays, and calls the plays during the game. The players are responsible to know the plays and execute them as directed by the coach. The playbook contains all of the plays.

Players must read and memorize the playbook so they can execute the desired play. Every player must fulfill a specific role to make a play work. If even one player does not know his or her role, the play is unlikely to succeed.

Success for the team rests on each player knowing and doing what is necessary to make the plays work. In this analogy, the Bible is the playbook, you and I must read, memorize chunks of it, and understand it. The following passage commands Christians to be transformed into a new person who is more Christ like with each passing day.

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. Romans 12:2

Being transformed is a choice. Note the phrase, "but let God transform you ..." This tells us that God does the transforming. However, you have to allow God to transform you. If you don't, God doesn't bully or use force.

Those who are transformed will be able to recognize God's good, pleasing, and perfect will. This means transformed people can run God's play as He calls it. The Bible also tells us that God's word is one of the most important tools for being transformed into "a new person."

For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. Hebrews 4:12

The author describes the word of God, the Bible, as the sharpest sword capable of cutting to the very depths

of your being. It helps you to understand your own heart and motives. It also reveals God's heart and his motives. Sometimes there is a connection between you and God, and sometimes there is a disconnection. When you are connected, this clarity can create the desire to abandon your ways and adopt God's. It is a daily ongoing activity. As you connect more and more deeply with God's ways, you will increasingly experience "life to the full."

To summarize, the Bible is the playbook for all Christians. You, the player must know the playbook so you can run the play. Every Christian needs to read the Bible so he or she can know God and His unique plan for them.

However, knowledge alone is insufficient to grow spiritually. There has to be something that activates that knowledge. Something to put that knowledge into practice. If we are to live God's intended full life, then we need something more than just knowing.

Why Read The Bible Reason #3

The Bible helps you to obey God and become fully what God intends you to be. It is helpful to be clear about what obedience is. Obedience is defined as: dutiful or submissive behavior with respect to another person. In this discussion, the other person is God. This definition is helpful because it really looks at two ways that we obey God: one is dutiful and one is submissive. In thinking of the long term and living out the fullest life, one of these kinds of obedience is preferable.

Whether you obey God out of duty or submission will create two very different results. Obedience out of duty is done grudgingly. It seeks to do the minimum to meet the standard. My mom frequently asked me to clean the garage when I was growing up. I did it grudgingly. My work reflected that attitude. One time I did a pretty good job of sweeping but decided to push all the dirt behind our bicycles. Unfortunately, my mom discovered my shortcut. I was embarrassed and she was disappointed. No one wins with dutiful obedience.

Obedience motivated by submission is quite different. Jesus defined submissive obedience as follows:

Jesus replied, "All who love me will do what I say. My Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with each of them. [24] Anyone who doesn't love me will not obey me. John 14:23-24a

We need to unpack this passage to get the full meaning. This is a "sandwich" passage. Like any sandwich, there are two pieces of bread and some meat in the middle. The first piece of bread is Jesus' first statement. He tells us obedience is an act of love. If you love God, you will do what he asks. The last phrase of this passage is the second piece of bread. Here Jesus tells us the opposite is also true. If you do not love God, you will not obey Him. One cannot disobey God and love him at the same time. The two are mutually exclusive.

The middle of this passage is the meat. Jesus tells us when you love him, He and his Father will love you and come and make their home with you. What a promise! Jesus is saying He and the Father actively are present and build a relationship with those who love them. Can you believe that?! The God of the universe actually lives with you when you are obedient to Him.

The real danger in this whole thing is that loving God takes obedience. And obedience requires both hearing and doing what God commands. If you hear God but do not do what he has commanded, you are not obedient:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. [23] Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror [24] and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. James 1:22-24

This passage tells us that those who listen but do not obey are deceived. This means they think everything is good when it is not. They think they know who they are, but they don't. They think they know the effect they

are having on other people and the world around them, but they don't. Disobedience is sin, and sin separates us from God, each other, and our own true selves.

There is one more important element to obedience. It changes as your relationship with God grows. As your ability to understand and know God's will increases, more obedience is expected. When you think about it, this makes sense. Think about children as they grow up. When a child is two, it is acceptable that the child can only follow simple commands like: Sit down. Put that away. Don't do that. Your expectations for the child grow as he or she gets older. When your child becomes a high school student, you expect him or her to be obedient to all the commands from the first one they can remember to the one given most recently.

In the same way, as you grow and mature in your relationship with God, He expects you to be able to follow his will more and more completely. In essence, the expectation for obedience expands with maturity. The goal as a Christian is to hear God's commands and obey them. When you fail, confess and repent and God will forgive and purify you from all unrighteousness:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9

The word of God is able to not only help you know what to do but it becomes motivating in your journey of obedience. The Holy Spirit is active when we read God's word. The Spirit is touching our hearts and shaping our souls. So not only is knowledge found in the intellectual engagement of scripture, but the Spirit is working on our hearts to accept these truths and commands and working on our wills so that we can apply them to our everyday lives. The Bible becomes a powerful source for both hearing and obeying.

Questions for Discussion:

According to Ephesians 2:10, what is one of the purposes of salvation? What must you do to accomplish this? What happens if you do not accomplish this purpose?

Fill in the blanks for understanding the God's purpose analogy. God is the _____. You are the player. The Bible is the _____.

What are the two responsibilities of every player?

A.

B.

What do you need to do to fulfill these responsibilities? What happens if you don't?

Reread Romans 12:2 and Hebrews 4:12. According to these passages, who and what transforms the minds and spirits of Christians? What role does the Christian play in this process?

One of the points John 14:23-24a makes is that if you love God you will obey him. What constitutes obedience? Can you be fully obedient under your own strength?

According to John 14:23-24a, what happens when you obey God? What does that mean?

When you fail to be obedient to God, what is that called? What happens to your relationship with God when you do that? What does 1 John 1:9 say to do if you sin? What does God do after you confess your sin?



Route 66 Week 2

Why Read the Bible? Part 2

We are continuing our journey exploring why we are going to be reading portions of the 66 books of the Bible for 66 days. We are going to give a lot of time and energy to this journey, so we are exploring why we would take the journey at all. Our overarching belief is that this trip can change your life and bring you peace, joy and an unshakable meaning in your life. Last week we went through three ways the Bible does that:

1. The Bible reveals the meaning of human existence
2. The Bible reveals your heart and the heart of God.
3. The Bible helps you obey God and become fully what God intends you to be.

There is just one key reason left to talk about, but it is big and complicated. We said last week that the Bible is the human “playbook” for life. There are a lot of other play books that can be studied and followed. It is really important to explore why out of all the things we could study, we have chosen the Bible.

Why Read The Bible Reason #4

The Bible is the best playbook we have. Christians believe that the Bible gives us the most compelling picture of God and the best explanation for the world and how it works. It offers us amazing hope and great guidance as to how to connect to God, each other, and our own true selves.

Christians believe the Bible is authoritative which means it is:

- God’s inspired word
- the source of all truth
- true and trustworthy
- life changing

Entire books have been written on each of these features of the Bible. We are going to take a high level overview of each. If you would like to know more please refer to the sources provided at the end of this study.

The evidence for these claims about the Bible is overwhelming and consistent. However, it is not 100% bulletproof. Detractors can, and do, reject all of these claims about the Bible. At some point, one must exercise faith to accept these claims. We believe based on good evidence, but not absolute certainty.

This is similar to looking at the universe and choosing to believe in God. As science unravels more and more insights into the universe, we begin to appreciate the true complexity of His creation. It is hard to believe the universe is not the product of intelligent design, namely God. Yet, many choose to say there is no God and all of this came about by chance. Neither belief can be proven beyond a shadow-of-a-doubt nor disproven. Both views require faith.

The Bible is authoritative. Television news programs frequently use outside authorities to explain complex situations. Typically, an authority has spent his or her entire career studying a single issue or problem. Years of study and thought give them the ability to focus on the important factors of the issue. The best authorities can summarize a situation clearly and concisely and point towards solutions that are most likely to succeed. We rely on their knowledge and understanding to guide us through difficult situations.

Christians believe the Bible is the ultimate authority on life. It is a record of God's word, inspired by God, and written by men. We accept that it is the final authority on all situations. That is a pretty big claim. You may wonder, can this be true? It's a big book, but it would take volumes to cover every conceivable situation past, present, and future. The answer is quite simple. The Bible is written with principles rather than rules.

Principles and rules are quite different. Learning the difference between them is at the heart of developing a deeper understanding of the Bible.

PRINCIPLES tend to describe what must be done or accomplished. They do not tell how to accomplish the objective. Numerous rules fall under a principle. Principles are more difficult to measure. They contain few, if any, easily measured actions.

RULES tend to describe how an objective can be accomplished. They are limited to specific situations. Separate rules are needed for different situations. Rules provide easily measured actions. Either the action is completed or it is not. Every rule falls under a principle; sometimes they can fall under more than one principle.

It is like the time my wife woke me up, at two in the morning, in labor with our second child. Her contractions were 3 minutes apart and we were 40 miles from the hospital. Not wanting to deliver the baby in our car, I ran every stoplight, stop sign, did not follow any lane designations, and drove considerably over the speed limit. We arrived safely, and our daughter Becky, was delivered about 20 minutes after my wife arrived in the delivery room.

Stoplights, stop signs, yield signs, lane designations, and speed limits are all traffic rules. I broke them all and still arrived safely at the hospital because I obeyed the traffic principle: one must pass through an intersection safely. It captures all traffic rules. At two in the morning, there was no traffic. The rules were unnecessary. One can break the rules, yet obey the principle. Just a point to the wise, if you do not have an emergency making it necessary to break traffic rules, you may find it difficult to explain this difference to an officer.

Rules apply to a limited set of specific situations. Principles apply to many situations. As you can see from this illustration, by understanding a principle one is equipped to deal with many situations. The Bible is written in principle form. If one understands a Biblical principle, he or she can figure out the best action for any situation. That is how the Bible becomes so authoritative in our lives. Now let's look at some of the other claims that come with the bible's authority.

The Bible is God's inspired word. The Bible serves as a witness that it is the word of God in a couple different ways. First, 2 Timothy 3:16 claims that all Scripture is inspired by God.

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. 2 Timothy 3:16 (NLT)

In the NIV version, the phrase God-breathed is used in place of "inspired by God." Just as God breathed life into Adam in Genesis, God breathed life into Scriptures when it was written.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 2 Timothy 3:16 (NIV)

Secondly, the Bible records direct quotes from God and prophecies God directed numerous prophets to deliver. These sayings contain phrases such as "says the Lord," "the Lord said," and "the word of the Lord." There are hundreds of passages following this pattern. In some cases, the prophets indicate their words are directly from God. The passages below provide a couple examples. In other cases, people confirm that God gave the prophet the words which they say.

The Bible is the key source of truth. The following two passages claim the Bible is the truth. There are others.

Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth. John 17:17

Do not snatch your word of truth from me, for your regulations are my only hope. Psalm 119:43

It is important to be clear on what the word "truth" means. In modern times, the meaning has become distorted. Secular humanism has popularized the idea that people can have different truths. This suggests that truth can be more than one thing. Let's examine that idea.

What does 2+2 equal? According to secular humanism, everyone can choose how to answer this question. Worse yet, all answers besides 4, which is the correct answer, would be accepted as truth. If every person can have his or her own truth, then there is no truth. This leads to total confusion.

Truth is a single unchanging entity. It does not change with circumstances, other people's attitudes or thoughts, or time. A truth is true today, tomorrow, and forever. Christians believe the Bible presents the truth about God and his relationship with people. There is one minor glitch. Making the statement that the Bible contains all truth assumes that people can understand all of the truths presented in the Bible. For the most part, this is a good assumption. However, there are exceptions.

In a limited number of cases, scholars and theologians have studied certain passages for centuries. Despite the enormous effort, there is no agreement on what these passages mean. This does not mean the passages are not true. It means human thinking is limited and incapable of comprehending all of God's truths. Some refer to situations like this as a mystery.

It is completely reasonable that people may not always understand an all-knowing, ever-present, all-powerful God. This would be like expecting a one-year-old infant to diagnose and treat a severe disease in another person. It's not going to happen. The infant is incapable of understanding the situation. Similarly, there are certain passages humans are incapable of understanding on this side of heaven. The Bible warns us of this possibility:

"My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the LORD. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. [9] For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. Isaiah 55:8-9

The Bible is true and trustworthy. When people ask me what I think of the Bible, I reply, "Bible is a key source of truth." I frequently get the following response, "The Bible has contradictions." Their statement is partially true. The Bible does have some apparent contradictions. There are many reasons for these. The Bible is written in many literary forms. Poetry, analogy, parable, hyperbole, imagery, literal and others are used. A failure to recognize which literary form is being used leads to many apparent contradictions. One needs to recognize which form is being used to know the true meaning. An example of how the literary form can lead to difficulties is found in the book of Isaiah.

You will live in joy and peace. The mountains and hills will burst into song, and the trees of the field will clap their hands! Isaiah 55:12

I don't know about you, but I have walked through many hills and mountains and never heard one sing. Neither have I witnessed a tree clapping. If one took this passage literally, then each of these should happen on a daily basis. Obviously, this is poetry. It uses imagery to emphasize the sense of peace and joy one experiences when living in obedience to God. The passage exemplifies this truth.

Other apparent contradictions result from authors using the same information but intend to make a different point. To fully understand each, one must carefully assemble the whole situation and understand the focus of the author.

For example, I took my daughter with me to watch my son's soccer game. After the game I treated both of them to ice cream at Dairy Queen. When we got home, my wife asked each child how things went. My daughter, who could care less about the outcome of my son's soccer game, exclaimed, "We went to Dairy Queen and I had an M&M blizzard. It was great!" My son on the other hand, talked about the refereeing, how he played, and that the team won. Taken at face value it sounds like the two children were on completely different trips. However, both are true. In order to understand that, one would have to know the full story.

Many contradictions in the Bible can be resolved by understanding the full story. This would include cultural context, historical timing, and many other factors. On top of this, each author may choose to emphasize a small portion of the full story to make the desired point. As you can see, this can easily lead to an apparent contradiction.

A second issue regarding the trustworthiness of Scripture is the word for word transcription through the ages. Scholars have, and still do, spend an entire career studying whether the Bible has been accurately transcribed and translated through the ages. The bottom line is this: the vast majority of scholars agree that the Bible has been transmitted accurately. As always, there are a few detractors.

The entire New Testament has more than 5000 partial or complete manuscripts covering its entirety. Contradictions between various copies are minor misspellings and word order changes. Each of these contradictions can be shown to be transcription errors by comparing overlapping manuscripts. Multiple copies confirm the correct spelling and word order. Scholars estimate the Bible is 99.5% accurately transcribed.

The Bible is life changing. Hebrews 4:12 is one of my favorite passages in the Bible. It tells us:

For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.
Hebrews 4:12

This passage is packed with meaning. The first phrase tells us the Bible is alive. This supports at least two major points. First, alive means it applies to people in the past, the present, and the future. This is a consequence of the Bible being written in principle form. A principle always holds its meaning. Secondly, when something is alive it interacts with others. As you read the Bible you will find it will change what you think and how you think. You will find yourself desiring to know God's will and to be more obedient with each passing day.

Next, we are told that the word of God is powerful. This is an equally important point. The Bible not only helps us to understand what God wants us to do, it also provides the power and ability to become obedient. Without God's help, none of us would be able to overcome our sinful natures.

The last two sentences tell us the Bible is capable of identifying truth and untruth in the deepest, secret, and hidden areas of our life. It helps us to identify and overcome sin in our lives. Without the Bible, each of us would continue in our self-deceived ways where we believe sin is okay and has no consequences. We would remain separated from God and unable to enjoy God's promises for a life full of peace and joy.

The following verse in James tells how one must read the Bible to enjoy its life-changing power.

But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does. James 1:25

You must read the Bible intently and continually until you can remember what it says. This involves truly and honestly seeking to understand the truth in the Bible. The Bible confirms that you must study and meditate on Scripture on a consistent basis to gain understanding:

Think about what I am saying. The Lord will help you understand all these things. 2 Timothy 2:7

The James passage promises those who do this will receive freedom and blessing. We need to be clear about the meaning of freedom and blessing. Freedom does not mean you can do anything you want. This passage is talking about freedom from sin. Looking intently into the perfect law permits you to understand your sin, see your need for salvation, and cause you to accept Jesus' death on the cross as payment. Now sin has no power over you. You are free to follow and obey God as He intended. This is true freedom.

Blessing results from following and obeying God. This allows you to fulfill your purpose on earth, to become fully what God intended you to be. There is no greater blessing. God's intent is that you will have a full relationship with him. Only in that relationship will you experience unconditional love and know that all your needs will be met. There is no greater security than that.

God's freedom and blessing is available to anyone who understands and obeys God's truths. Give it a chance and see what happens to your life.

Questions for Discussion:

Are principles or rules more specific? Which of these two is valid all of the time?

What makes the Bible "living and active?"

Fill in the blanks. The Bible was written by _____ and inspired by _____. What does that mean to you when you think about reading the Bible?

How does believing that the Bible is true and there actually is knowable truth in the spiritual realm of life impact your understanding of faith choices? What does that mean about all the different sacred texts of all the different faiths? Is that hard or easy to believe? Is that hard or easy to share with others? Why?

How does Isaiah 55:8-9 explain some of the apparent contradictions in the Bible?

According to Hebrews 4:12, how does the Bible change people?

James 1:25 explains how one must read the Bible to receive the promised benefits. What is the promised benefit? How must one read the Bible to receive the benefit?

After these first two weeks of thought and conversation, why do you think reading the Bible is so important? What kind of resources or structure might you need to keep up with the reading schedule?



Route 66 Week 3

Genesis through Deuteronomy

Genesis . . . The Book of Beginnings

"Beginnings" is precisely what the term genesis means and what occurs in the fertile pages of this first book of the Bible. For example, we find here the inception of

the universe . . . time . . . this earth . . . the starry heavens . . . life . . . marriage and family. . . sin . . . redemption . . . civilization . . . languages . . . the races . . . divine judgment . . . government . . . and maybe a dozen other significant beginnings.

For fifty chapters, Moses narrates us through some of the most dramatic scenery of human history. Perhaps the simplest way to remember the founding events is to break this book down into two sections.

1. Chapters 1-11: The earliest history of the human race. In this first section are four great events that happen over thousands of years.

- Creation (chaps. 1-2)
- The Fall into sin (chap. 3)
- The Flood in the days of Noah (chaps. 6-9)
- The birth of the nations (chaps. 10-11)

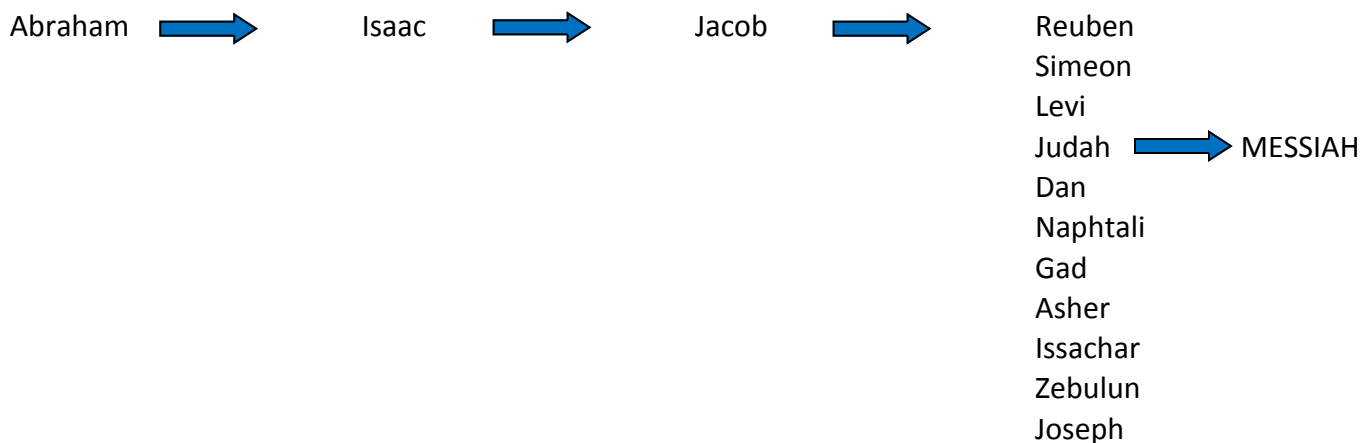
2. Chapters 12-50: The earliest history of the Hebrew race. In this three hundred year section there are four great men.

- Abraham: Father of the Jews (Chapters 12-25)
- Isaac: The Promised Son (Chapters 25-26)
- Jacob: Whose Name was Changed to Israel (Chapters 27-36)
- Joseph: From Pit to Pinnacle, A Man of Character (Chapters 37-50)

Once Abraham was on the biblical scene, God covenanted to begin through him a distinctive race of people who would come to be known as Hebrews or Jews. Genesis 12:1-3 records the promise God made, which He ratified many times down through the centuries.

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives
And from your father's house,
To the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And so you shall be a blessing;
And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who curses you I will curse.
And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

From this time forward, God's focus is on His people whom He promised to bless and protect. Now note this carefully: simply put, the rest of the Old Testament is nothing more than a record of God's dealings with His people, the Jews, and His fulfillment of the promises stated in Genesis 12:1-3. One promise, in particular, was that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" because of Abraham (v. 3). How? Because through him God preserved a messianic line through which the Redeemer, Christ Jesus, would come.



By the end of Genesis, the Hebrew people, now known as Israel are settled and prospering in Egypt—thanks to Joseph, who had been promoted by Pharaoh to be his prime minister. With the last verse of the book, Moses then tells of Joseph's death, which brings us to the border of our next book.

Exodus . . . The Book of Deliverance

After Joseph's death, a new king arose in Egypt who feared the growing size and strength of the Jewish nation. So, he appointed taskmasters to force the people into hard labor (Exod. 1:8-11). After four hundred years of this bondage, the Lord raised up Moses to lead His people out of Egypt and to the Promised Land in Canaan. As the title suggests, this second book covers that time when the Jews made their exodus out of Egypt. Geographically, the forty chapters of Exodus take us from the Hebrew ghetto in Egypt to Mount Sinai, where God gave His Law to Moses. Broken down into chapters, we could divide this particular portion of Israel's history into three sections.

- Chapters 1-12: The Hebrews are in Egypt
- Chapters 13-18: Israel goes from Egypt to Sinai
- Chapters 19-40: God's people are at Sinai

Once at Sinai, two significant events took place. First, the Israelites were given the moral law, the Ten Commandments (20:1-17); and second, they were given the blueprints and interior design for a portable place of worship—a tent church called the tabernacle (25:1-27:21; 35:4-38:31; 40:1-38).

Leviticus . . . The Book of Worship

Next we come to meticulous details governing worship, which Israel received while still encamped around Mount Sinai. These laws included "many regulations pertaining to daily living and practical holiness." Basically, the Law God gave Moses for the children of Israel was comprised of three essential elements.

1. The moral code: The Decalogue or Ten Commandments
2. The spiritual code: Instructions for knowing how to approach God and maintain fellowship with Him through blood sacrifices (key verse is Leviticus 17:11)
3. The social code: The practical side of life, covering every-thing from personal hygiene, soil conservation, and family life to maintaining their national distinctiveness

Numbers . . . The Book of Wanderings

Now, some people tend to wander off and get lost right about here because they fail to realize that,

geographically, Numbers starts where Exodus stopped. So let's stay together as Israel moves out from Sinai and heads once again for the Promised Land (Numbers 1:1-10:10).

Once the Israelites reached the edge of Canaan at a place named Kadesh, they sent in twelve spies to scout the land and its inhabitants. Ten returned convinced that it was hopeless to possess the land even though God promised them it was theirs for the taking! Because the people listened to the scouts and grumbled against God and Moses, all adults, aged twenty and older, were sentenced to die wandering in the wilderness.

It took forty years of aimless drifting before God's divine discipline was complete. The doubters were left in the dust of the desert as Israel's next generation emerged to claim Canaan for a second time. Thus, the history of Israel recorded in Numbers can be re-remembered using this simple outline:

- Chapters 1-14: The old generation
- Chapters 15-20: The wilderness wanderings
- Chapters 21-36: The new generation

The last chapters of Numbers record Israel's arrival at the plains of Moab, right on the southeast corner of the Promised Land. Once again Israel faced the choice of believing God or doubting His promise. This time there was no turning back. The Hebrews had learned an unforgettable lesson, but Moses drove it home to them in several sermons before they entered Canaan. These sermons are recorded at our next stop-off.

Deuteronomy . . . The Book of Transition

The title Deuteronomy means "second law," and in this book Moses reviews God's Law and warns the people against disobeying His words. It is a momentous time of transition for Israel. They're about to exchange their nomadic ways to become wealthy home owners in a rich land. Knowing that prosperity brings its own subtle temptations, Moses charges the people again and again to not forget the cost of disobedience and to love and obey the Lord without doubt or failure. He does this beginning in chapters 1-11 by looking backward to review and reflect on Israel's history from Mount Sinai to the present at Moab. Then, in chapters 12-34, he looks forward, reminding and reassuring them of God's laws and blessing on their obedience.

Sadly, this first leg of our journey ends with the death of that great deliverer, leader, lawgiver, and guide—Moses. Let's pull aside in Deuteronomy 34 and pay our last respects to the prophet who paved the way for us through the first five books of the Bible.

Now Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. And the Lord showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, and all Naphtali and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, and the Negev and the plain in the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. Then the Lord said to him, "This is the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there." So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. And He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor; but no man knows his burial place to this day. Although Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, his eye was not dim, nor his vigor abated. So the sons of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses came to an end. (vv. 1-8)

Concluding Thoughts

Just about everyone who has gone on a long road trip returns with a whole trunkful of souvenirs. Everything from spoons to postcards to pictures. A memory we'd like for you to treasure from our travels today is a parallel between the books we've toured and an outline of the Christian's experience in God's family.

As in Genesis, we all had our beginning. We came to God by faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. As in Exodus, we were delivered, led out from our bondage to sin to become God's people. As in Leviticus, we were then introduced to real worship, to the pursuit of personal holiness out of obedience to a holy God. As in Numbers, we've all experienced wanderings and periods of disobedience when God had to discipline us. And as in Deuteronomy, we need reviews and reminders of God's laws and His faithfulness to strengthen our faith.

Living Insights

Take a moment and write down a couple of significant things you want to remember about each book in this section. Then write down at least one question you have about each book.

Genesis...the Book of Beginnings

Insights:

Questions:

Exodus...the Book of Deliverance

Insights:

Questions:

Leviticus...the Book of Worship

Insights:

Questions:

Numbers...the Book of Wanderings

Insights:

Questions:

Deuteronomy...the Book of Transition

Insights:

Questions:

If you were to describe your own Christian experience right now, which of the five books from our study would you choose and why?

_____ Genesis: Is this a time of new beginning, new challenges for you?

_____ Exodus: Have you recently escaped a difficult situation, relationship or addiction that held you in bondage?

_____ Leviticus: Are you enjoying a unique time of intimacy with God through worship?

_____ Numbers: Does life feel like a wilderness right now, barren and lonely?

_____ Deuteronomy: Has God reminded or warned you recently of some key spiritual truth He wants you to remember?



Route 66 Week 4

Rise of a Nation/Joshua—2 Samuel

As we get ready to put our minds in gear and take off down God's Route 66 again, let's warm up our engines with a brief overview of today's itinerary.

Book/Chapters	Main Characters	Major Theme
Joshua (24)	Joshua	Invasion, conquest, and distribution of the land of Canaan.
Judges (21)	Thirteen leaders who served as judges among the Jews.	Repeated cycles of disobedience, bondage, deliverance and peace (<i>a depressing book</i>).
Ruth (4)	Ruth and Boaz	A story about redemption, and how faithfulness is rewarded.
1 Samuel (31)	Samuel, Saul, and David	Beginning of the Hebrew
2 Samuel (24)	David	Establishment, growth and development of the united kingdom

These five historical books trace the Hebrews' transformation from a scruffy tribe of nomads to a powerful, united nation. In the midst of this transformation, Israel's form of government also changed from a theocracy, with God as the ruler, to a monarchy, where various men will assume the role of king.

We have a lot of ground to cover, don't we! So let's begin right away with the story of Moses' successor in the book of Joshua.

Five Books that Continue the Story

In our last lesson, we left off with Moses' death on Mount Nebo just as Israel's new generation was about to enter Canaan. Now it is Joshua's turn to lead; now it is time for fighting, for military strategy, for overcoming the Canaanites, and settling down in a new land.

Joshua . . . A Book of Conquest

Now it came about after the death of Moses the servant of the Lord that the Lord spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' servant, saying, "Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel. Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you, just as I spoke to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon, even as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and as far as the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun, will be your territory. No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them." (Josh. 1:1-6)

And Joshua was strong and courageous in leading the conquest of Canaan, as the following outline of his book shows.

- I. Chapters 1-5: Invasion of the land
- II. Chapters 6-12: Subjection of the land
 - A. Central campaign (chaps. 6-9)
 - B. Southern campaign (chap. 10)
 - C. Northern campaign (chap. 11; key verse is 11:23)
- III. Chapters 13-22: Distribution of the land
- IV. Chapters 23-24: Joshua commissions the people

Even though Joshua's campaign into Canaan was overwhelmingly successful, all of Israel's enemies were not killed or driven out. Many pagans remained deeply entrenched in various pockets of the Promised Land. So each Hebrew tribe was commissioned to carry on the task of expelling their adversaries in whichever part of the country they settled. To that commission Joshua added this warning:

"Be very firm then, to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, so that you may not turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left, in order that you may not associate with these nations, these which remain among you, or mention the name of their gods, or make anyone swear by them, or serve them, or bow down to them. But you are to cling to the Lord your God, as you have done to this day...Take diligent heed to yourselves to love the Lord your God. For if you ever go back and cling to the rest of these nations, these which remain among you, and intermarry with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, know with certainty that the Lord your God will not continue to drive these nations out from before you; but they shall be a snare and a trap to you, and a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good land which the Lord your God has given you." (23:6-8, 11-13)

Obey and prosper, disobey and suffer—the choice was Israel's. And the Hebrews made a bad one. Several bad ones.

For Discussion:

1. Why were the Israelites so easily influenced by the surrounding culture? Are we like that today?

2. What are the qualities of Joshua that we could learn from?

Judges . . . A Book of Compromise

The first verse of this book is a telling one.

Now it came about after the death of Joshua that the sons of Israel inquired of the Lord, saying, "Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?" (Judg. 1:1)

Without a strong leader like Joshua to anchor the people's faith in the Lord and lead them in battle, Israel drifted in both spiritual and military commitments. The people failed to finish the task of driving their enemies completely out of Canaan. Instead of stunning victories, they settled for chummy compromises.

"Everyone did what was right in his own eyes"(21:25), and the consequences were disastrous.

Look closely at the steps that led to their downfall:

1. They failed to drive out the heathens (1:28).
2. They became idolatrous, like the heathens (see 2:10-12).
3. They intermarried with the heathens (3:6-7).

The Israelites lost their distinctiveness as a holy people, and that always resulted in one thing—bondage. God's promised discipline. And this didn't happen just once, mind you, but again and again in a cycle of misery that can be summed up in five words: liberation...which led to relaxation...which led to deterioration...which led to subjugation...which led to petition...which led, by God's grace, back to liberation.

Each time the Israelites humbled themselves before God, He sent them a deliverer known as a "judge" to free them from their bondage. What do we know about these remarkable people? First, unlike kings, these individuals were not chosen on the basis of royal birth. Second, they were local tribal heroes more often than national ones. Third, for the most part, they were military leaders. And fourth, they were typically they were recognized as leaders after they had freed part of the nation from bondage. Rather than being chosen or appointed as judge, they earned the title, much like a general in the military.

Altogether, thirteen of these heroes are etched in the history of Judges, and we should at least honor them by acknowledging their names.

1. Othniel (3:8-11)
2. Ehud (3:12-30)
3. Shamgar (3:31)
4. Deborah (4:4-5:31)
5. Barak (4:6-5:31)
6. Gideon (6:11-8:32)
7. Tola (10:1-2)
8. Jair (10:3-5)
9. Jephthah (11:1-12:7)
10. Ibzan (12:8-10)
11. Elon (12:11-12)
12. Abdon (12:13-15)
13. Samson (13:1-16:31)¹

The book of Judges is a dismal account of some of Israel's darkest days. It begins with disobedience and ends in horror and disgrace. Yet in the midst of this ugly stretch of history, God has preserved an oasis in our next book.

For Discussion:

1. Have you ever seen the kind of cycle of misery found in Judges at work in your own life or the life of others? Give an example.

2. What are things that break that cycle?

Ruth . . . A Book of Love

This is the moving story of a young Moabitess named Ruth who lived, most likely, during the early days of the judges. Her story assures us that not every home was wicked during that period of Israel's history. Love, godliness, and grace mark the domestic scene tucked in the folds of the following outline.

Ruth's choice Chapter 1

Ruth's occupation..... Chapter 2

Ruth's claim Chapter 3

Ruth's reward Chapter 4

Synopsis: The Book of Ruth is named for a Moabitess who had married a Hebrew man living in Moab. After the death of her husband, Ruth migrated with Naomi, her widowed Hebrew mother-in-law, to Bethlehem in Israel. There God providentially provided for her and led her to marry Boaz, a prosperous Hebrew farmer. Ruth became the great-grandmother of King David. She is listed in the genealogy of Christ listed in Matthew 1:5.

The book of Ruth begins with loss and ends with gain. It begins with sorrow and ends with joy. It begins with death and ends, not only with life, but with a son whose descendants will ultimately give birth to "the way, and the truth, and the life"—Jesus.

For Discussion:

Why do you think a non-Israelite like Ruth is included in the lineage of Jesus? What does this tell us about God and God's people?

1 & 2 Samuel . . . Two Books of Tragedy, Triumphs, and Trials

The first book of Samuel covers the transitional period when Israel's government shifted from theocracy to monarchy. Why would the Hebrews make such an unwise trade? Let's turn to 1 Samuel 8 for some answers. And it came about when Samuel was old that he appointed his sons judges over Israel. . . . His sons, however, did not walk in his ways, but turned aside after dishonest gain and took bribes and perverted justice.

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah; and they said to him, "Behold, you have grown old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations." (vv. 1, 3-5)

The people of Israel gave Samuel three reasons for wanting a king (v. 5):

1. Samuel was too old to continue.
2. Samuel's sons were unfit to replace him.
3. They wanted to be like all the other nations.

Following Samuel (chaps. 1-8), the next significant person to appear is Saul, Israel's first king (chaps. 9-15). For the first time in their history, the Jews became a united kingdom under one human monarch. And though Saul was humble in the beginning, he became proud, rash, stubborn, and disobedient to the Lord. The third significant person to take center stage in 1 Samuel is Israel's second king, David (chaps. 16-31). He was insanely envied by his predecessor Saul, but never retaliated for the king's mistreatment of him. And even though he was anointed as king by Samuel, David graciously waited until after Saul's death before assuming the throne.

Five significant chapters to remember from this book are:

- Chapter 8: Why do you want a king?
- Chapter 16: David is anointed.
- Chapter 17: David fights Goliath.
- Chapter 28: Saul makes a desperate visit to the witch of Endor
- Chapter 31: Saul commits suicide.

Where Saul failed miserably as Israel's first king, David succeeded beyond anyone's wildest imaginations, as we shall see in our next and final stop, 2 Samuel.

In the early part of his reign, recorded in chapters 1-11, David never knew military defeat or domestic conflict. He rose to an unparalleled pinnacle of power, godliness, and prosperity. Here is just a scant list of some of his achievements:

1. He unified and strengthened the nation.
2. He obtained a royal capital.
3. He developed Israel into a military power.
4. He subdued all her enemies.
5. He extended her boundaries from approximately 6,000 to 60,000 square miles.
6. He created national pride.
7. He brought dignity and respect to the nation's throne.
8. He extended trade to other nations.
9. He provided Israel with her greatest period of prosperity in her long history.

Yet all this he put at risk with a forbidden affair. For from the moment he sinned with Bathsheba and then tried to cover it up, trouble and pain haunted the man to his grave.

So if you were to draw a diagram of 2 Samuel, it would resemble a rooftop. Everything leading up to chapter 11 is great and successful, and everything from chapter 11 to the end of the book slopes down with sadness and disappointment.

Another way of looking at this stretch of biblical history is to outline it by chapters.

David's successes and triumphsChapters 1-10

David's failure and troublesChapters 11-22

David's last days..... Chapters 23-24

Despite his failure and the ensuing consequences, David's reign was still the reign referred to again and again

in Scripture as the model for other kings to follow. Also, David is referred to more often in the New Testament than any other Old Testament individual.

For Discussion:

1. As you think about the life of David, both his successes and his failures, what do you learn that could be helpful in your own life?

2. What is your favorite part of the David story? Why?

Concluding Thought

We've covered many, many miles of Israel's history along this section of God's Route 66. Looking back in our rearview mirrors, we can still remember seeing the Hebrews in battle and bondage, conquering and compromising, strong and weak. Through it all, we can also see that God never abandoned His people or broke the promise He had made with Abraham. The Lord brought the Jews into their land, made their nation great, and blessed them abundantly. Why? GRACE! The same undeserved favor He extends to all of us. For we can all look in the rearview mirrors of our lives and note similar patterns of advance and retreat, victory and defeat. Nevertheless, He continues to love us as He did them. He knows us the best and loves us the most, and nothing any of us does as His children can ever separate us from His love.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:35, 38-39)

Living Insight

The road ahead is not always clear. Some days the fog of uncertainty blocks our vision. Some days the driving rain of bitter tears blinds us. Some days, adversity blackens everything, leaving us to grope and stumble in a dark night of the soul. And then there are those beautiful rain-rinsed, wind-spun, sun-drenched days when the road before us suddenly seems magnified as if to say, "Here, look, rejoice! God is good, there is hope!" We can see again-and it feels good.

Looking ahead, however, is not all that lightens our hearts. It's also catching a breath taking glimpse in our rearview mirrors of how God's grace guided us through the difficult times when we felt blinded and alone. And we must carefully record those glimpses of His grace in our hearts. For when the road ahead becomes obscured again, and it will, our best comfort is to retrace His faithfulness in the past.

How many years of bondage and despair would have been avoided if the people of Israel had only remembered God's faithfulness each time they faced a seeming roadblock? Think of the detours and dead ends they experienced because they constantly forgot and complained instead of remembering and trusting. None of us know what road conditions we will face tomorrow. What we can know is that God will not forsake us, just as He did not forsake the children of Israel. Take a moment to look in the rearview mirror of your own life and record the glimpses of His grace that you see.

The next time the road ahead is not clear, focus on what is—God's faithfulness to you.

Let your character be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said,

"I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you," so that we confidently say,

"The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What shall man do to me?" (Heb. 13:5-6)



Route 66 Week 5

Decline and Fall of a Nation/1 Kings—2 Chronicles

Are we there yet?

We'll not quite. We've come a long way though. Speeding along God's Route 66, we've traveled through the lives of the patriarchs, across the hardships of the wilderness, and into the Promised Land and the rise of the Hebrew nation. It's been an eventful trip, but we still have a way to go . . . and the roughest stretch of road is just ahead.

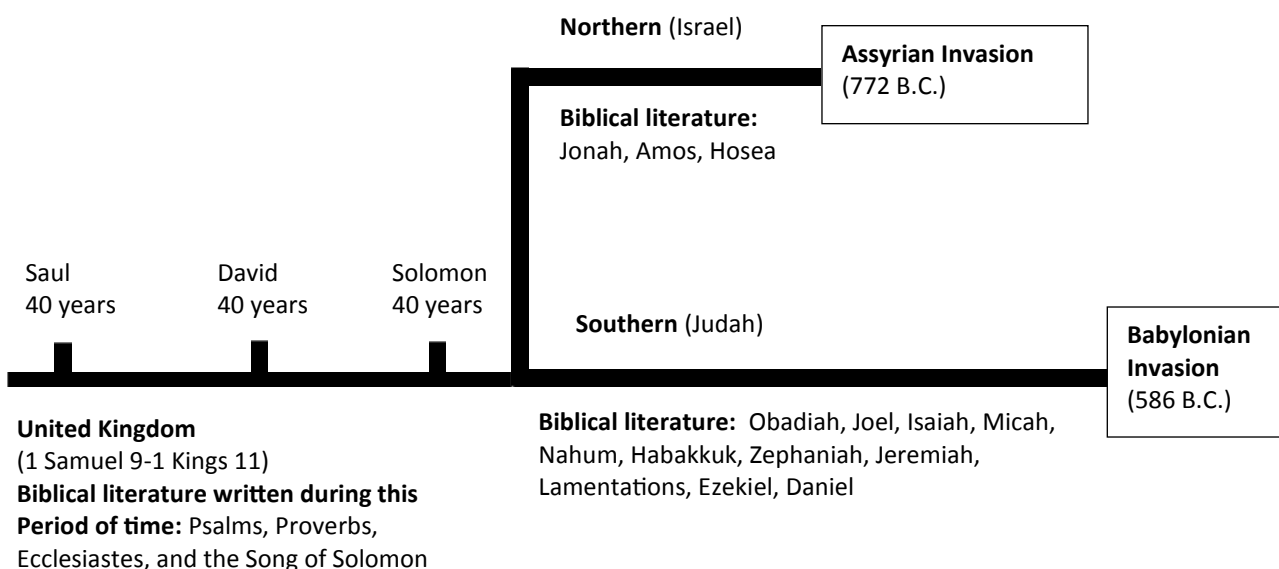
As we enter the books of Kings and Chronicles, potholes of idolatry and pride will crater the highway. Cracks of immorality will snake across the interstate. Eventually, the road will disintegrate into a jigsaw puzzle of buckling asphalt. Better fasten your seat belts for a rugged ride!

What caused this national destruction? A slow and silent force called erosion. Roads or nations or marriages or businesses, don't crumble suddenly; it takes years of steady, thoughtless decay. And most of the time no one notices until everything starts falling apart, but then it is too late.

1. An undermining of the dignity and sanctity of the home, which is the basis for human society.
2. Higher and higher taxes, and spending public money for free bread and circuses for the populace.
3. A mad craze for pleasure, with pastimes every year becoming more exciting, brutal and immoral.
4. Building great armaments, although the real enemy was within—the decay of individual responsibility.
5. Decay of religion: faith fading into mere form, losing touch with life and losing power to guide the people.

It wasn't military might that really conquered the empire; Rome fell from the inside out. Israel followed a similar course of internal collapse. This period of Jewish history we'll journey through in this chapter is tragic. We might add, it is also rather complicated. To get our bearings let's spread out a historical map and trace the route that leads us through the decline and fall of the Hebrew nation.

Timeline of the United and Divided Kingdoms



Saul's forty-year reign over Israel's twelve tribes marked the beginning of the united kingdom period (see 1

Sam. 9-31). When Saul died, the crown passed to David, who also reigned forty years (see 2 Sam. 1-24). Then he handed the scepter to his son Solomon who ruled forty more years (see 1 Kings 1-11).

During the united kingdom period, David and Solomon penned their most exquisite spiritual poetry, including portions of Psalms and Proverbs, the book of Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. Under their influence, the scattered seeds of the twelve tribes grew into a single, luxuriant vine, and the world marveled at the flourishing little country with its burgeoning treasury and magnificent temple.

However when Solomon's son, Rehoboam, came to power, he foolishly started governing the people with an iron grip. In 931 BC, the northern ten tribes shook free of his tyranny, seceding to form their own nation and crown their own king, the wicked Jeroboam. Thus the beautiful vine split apart and the divided kingdom period began.

For 209 years, the rebel flag waved over the northern kingdom. Twenty kings paraded across its landscape, and all of them followed Jeroboam's sinful example. Finally, in 722 BC, the Assyrian army wielded its sword, and the northern kingdom collapsed in the sink-hole of its own sin.

Meanwhile, the southern kingdom clung to the map for 136 more years. As in the north, twenty kings mounted the throne. Most of them were bad, but about eight of them were godly, rejuvenating memories of David's golden years. These good kings slowed the spiritual erosion, but they could not stop it; and in 586 BC, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem.

Three Keys That Help Unlock the Mystery

Northern kingdom, southern kingdom . . . good kings, bad kings . . . names like Amaziah and Ahaziah . . . Joram and Jehoram . . . Elijah and Elisha. It's downright baffling! To unlock some of the mystery surrounding this period of Jewish history, here are three keys to slip into your mental pocket.

First understand that civil war has occurred. Consequently, the writers of Kings and Chronicles must trace the history of two nations at the same time. Sometimes the authors highlight the southern kingdom in one chapter, then switch to the northern kingdom in the next. While you read the accounts, try to determine which side of the border the author is talking about, the northern or the southern.

To do that requires a second key: remember the titles given to the kingdoms. Let's look at a few of the names the writers use.

<u>The Northern Kingdom</u>	<u>The Southern Kingdom</u>
Israel	Judah
Ephraim	Jerusalem
Samaria	

Finally, keep on hand a list of the kings and their reigns. A Bible dictionary or a good chart of this period will help you keep straight the reigns of the kings. The chart we have provided at the end of this chapter shows where the many prophets and their ministries to specific nations and kings fit in.

And Now . . . a General Overview of the Era

Now with our map open on the seat beside us, let's resume our trip, looking out for signs of spiritual erosion.

The United Kingdom

The stretch of highway before us first crosses through the united kingdom period already passed by the reigns of Saul and David in the last chapter, let's continue through Solomon's reign which begins with some very impressive scenery.

Now God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of mind, like the sand that is on the seashore. And Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt...He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. And he spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish. And men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom. (1 Kings 4:29-30, 32-34)

Even the famous queen of Sheba heard about Solomon's wisdom and wealth. Wanting to see him for herself and "test him with difficult questions," she led a great caravan of camels bearing gold and jewels and precious spices up the slopes to Jerusalem (10:1-2). When Solomon answered her questions, and when she saw "the house that he had built, the food of his table, the seating of his servants, the attendance of his waiters and their attire, his cupbearers, and his stairway by which he went up to the house of the Lord, there was no more spirit in her. (vv. 4b-5)

Putting it in today's terms, she was blown away! Solomon's glittering palace was like an ancient Fort Knox.

Now the weight of gold which came in to Solomon in one year was 666 talents of gold, besides that from the traders and the wares of the merchants and all the kings of the Arabs and the governors of the country...Moreover the king made a great throne of ivory and overlaid it with refined gold. . . . and all King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the house of the forest of Lebanon were of pure gold. None was of silver; it was not considered valuable in the days of Solomon...

So King Solomon became greater than all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom (vv. 14-15, 18, 21, 23). Yet no amount of gold could overlay the sin eroding Solomon's soul. The first breach appeared in his uncontrolled affections.

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the sons of Israel, "You shall not associate with them, neither shall they associate with you, for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods." Solomon held fast to these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away. For it came about when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. (11:1-4)

Tragically, when it came to matters of the heart, wise Solomon acted the fool. Wanting to please his wives more than the Lord, he set up idols in Jerusalem and joined in the worship {vv.5-8). Eventually, what began as a crack within the king's heart for the Lord led to a yawning rift within the nation when the kingdom divided into north and south. Overall, four factors contributed to the split of the kingdom:

- Spiritual decline, due to the influx of idolatry
- Economic burden, from Solomon and his son overworking and overtaxing the people (12:3-14)
- Political competition with Jeroboam, whom the people of Israel chose to be their king (vv. 1-2, 20)
- Moral and personal failures in Solomon's family, because they broke God's covenant.

The Divided Kingdom

Bump. Jar. Clatter. Jolt. Got your seat belt on? The road through the history of the northern kingdom, Israel, gets rougher and rougher. Finally, everything crumbles under the chariot wheels of the mighty Assyrian army

The southern kingdom, Judah, miraculously resisted the Assyrian invasion; thanks to the spiritual leadership of Hezekiah (see 2 Chron. 32:9-23). But subsequent generations turned away from God, so "the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, until there was no remedy. Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand. (36:16b-17)

The weeping prophet, Jeremiah, described the horror of this holocaust in the book bearing his own name (see Jer. 52:1-34). Survivors were taken to Babylon as exiles for seventy years—the number of years the nation ignored God's Sabbath requirements for the land (2 Chron. 36:20-21; see also Leviticus 25:4, 11; 26:34-35) While in exile, the people lingered over each sunset, yearning to follow the sun to their homeland in the west. During this period, Jeremiah wrote the book of Lamentations... From Babylon, Ezekiel and Daniel were written, as well as a few of the Psalms, such as the mournful Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down and wept,
When we remembered Zion.
Upon the willows in the midst of it
We hung our harps.
For there our captors demanded of us songs,
And our tormentors mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion."
How can we sing the Lord's song
In a foreign land? (vv. 1-4)

We leave the Jews in their tears, bearing the full weight of their sorrow. But God does not abandon them. He hears their cries and is behind the scenes, protecting His people during their exile. Eventually the Persian king, Cyrus, allows the Jews to return to Palestine (see 2 Chron. 36:22-23), and the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe their triumphant rebuilding of the temple and the city walls in Jerusalem.

Two Lasting Lessons to Be Learned

For now, as we drive slowly and somberly through the rubble of the Hebrew nation, we see two principles rising from the dust. First, enjoying the blessings of obedience is a rewarding but responsible way of life. Gardeners, for example, must be responsible throughout the year to prepare the soil, sow the seeds, and nurture the young plants if they expect to enjoy the spring flowers. In the same way, we must daily pursue an obedient lifestyle in order to enjoy the blessings of obedience.

This brings us to a sobering second principle: enduring the consequences of sin is a painful but permanent method of instruction. Anyone who has endured divine discipline and suffered the consequences of wandering away from God has that lesson painfully and permanently etched in his or her heart. Also there, though and held ever so sensitively and delicately, is the restorative touch of God's gracious forgiveness and His gift of "a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11).

Living Insights

Are there any hairline cracks developing in your devotion to Christ? Only you and the Lord really know what is going on beneath the surface of your life. Invite Him right now for an inspection tour of your heart. Let him reveal to you any signs of spiritual erosion that you may be overlooking. Take a moment to pray David's prayer as your own:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way. (Ps. 139:23-24)

We'll leave you some space to record what the Lord may reveal. As your pen flows across the page, let it spill out your confession to God.

Now ask for Christ's forgiveness; allow it to repair the cracks and build a solid foundation of obedience in your life. "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit!" (Psalm 32:1-2)

1. Confession is such a profoundly simple way to protect ourselves against the effects of spiritual erosion—even a child can do it. Yet Solomon didn't. Why do you think this man who was so wise refused to face the destructive sin in his heart? You may want to read the account of his downfall in 1 Kings 11:1-8.

2. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:21). Sadly, Solomon's great treasures and passions stole his heart away from the Lord. If that can happen to the wisest, richest, most powerful man on earth, it can happen to us. Is there anything or any person in your life that is robbing your devotion to the Lord? If so what do you need to do to restore your first love to Christ?

As the years go by, remember Solomon. Never outgrow your need for confession, no matter how old or wise or powerful you become. And always view Christ as your richest treasure.

Digging Deeper

The return of the exiled Jews to Palestine is a fascinating story. The Lord had promised them, through the prophet Jeremiah:

When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill my good word to you, to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:10-11)

For years, they waited in exile for their Shepherd to lead them home. Finally, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in

Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up!” (2 Chronicles 36:22b-23)

And go up they did! Zerubbabel led the first group of returning Jews, and right away, they started rebuilding the temple. After the foundation was laid, though, their torrent of enthusiasm dried to a trickle when the local inhabitant opposed them and an edict from King Artaxerxes stopped them “by force of arms” (Ezra 4:23). For sixteen years, the project lay undone, until Haggai and Zechariah rallied them to finish construction. Finally, in 516 BC, the temple stood once more—seventy years after its destruction.

Later around 458 BC, Ezra led the second band of Jews to Palestine. He passionately preached spiritual commitment to the new generation of Jews, who had already begun showing signs of internal erosion just like their fore fathers—compromising the Law and marrying foreign women. Remember Solomon’s fall?

Ezra’s spiritual reforms paved the way for Nehemiah, who led a third group of Jews from Babylon around 445 BC. Under his leadership, the people rebuilt the walls of the city in record-setting time: fifty-two days (Nehemiah 6:15).

The flock of Israel was home, and yet...in the years that followed, they would wander away from the fold and wolfish leaders would steal away their hearts. Eventually, the Good Shepherd Himself would come and provide them and us entrance to a lasting spiritual home in heaven.



Route 66 Week 6

The Books of Poetry/Job—Song of Solomon

Whew! After last chapter's jarring ride through Israel's decline and fall, it's time for a refreshing side trip. Let's exit the historical highway, roll back the top of our convertible—breathe the clean mountain air, and enjoy the scenic beauty of God's Word. Which road shall we explore? Here's a section of scripture with some spectacular vistas: the books of poetry—Job, psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs (Solomon).

It's Helpful to Keep in Mind . . .

Since we'll be passing through a different literary style than that of the history books we've been through so far, a few facts about the poetical books will help prepare us for our trip. First, each book has its own historical setting. But understanding the author's world and his reasons for writing, we can gather important clues to unlocking the meaning of his poetry.

Job, for example, probably lived during the era of the patriarchs; he might have been a contemporary of Abraham. His book, then, is most likely the oldest of the Bible, written before Moses wrote Genesis. Psalms is a collection of songs written over many years, spanning from the exodus from Egypt to the return of the exiles from Babylon. The bulk of the psalms, though, were written during the united kingdom era by King David himself. Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs (Solomon) and most of Proverbs were also penned before the kingdom split, during the reign of Solomon.

Second, remember that Hebrew poetry does not rhyme. Instead, the Hebrew writers used a poetic structure called parallelism—which is a good thing. It would be extremely difficult to translate rhyming Hebrew words into English and retain the poetic elegance. As it is, the poems can be translated into any language and the beauty remains.

The Hebrew authors relied on many forms of parallelism in their writing. For instance, they sometimes used synonymous parallelism, repeating an idea one line after the other:

He who sits in the heavens laughs,
The Lord scoffs at them. (Ps. 2:4)

To contrast a thought, they also use antithetical parallelism:

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps. 1:6)

And they used synthetic parallelism to develop their thought through several lines that amplified or explained the first.

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
And forget none of His benefits;
Who pardons all your iniquities;
Who heals all your diseases;
Who redeems your life from the pit;
Who crowns you with loving kindness and compassion;
Who satisfies your years with good things,
So that your youth is renewed like the eagle. (Ps. 103:2-5)

Third, poetry should be enjoyed rather than dissected and analyzed. We miss the beauty of biblical poetry when we read it through a microscope, scrutinizing every noun and preposition to extract detailed doctrines.

As works of art, like Da Vinci's paintings or Mozart's symphonies, poetical books are meant to stir our souls and lift our hearts. The authors didn't craft them to be technical instruction manuals. They intended them to touch us on a more intimate level. According to commentator Ronald Allen:

Poetry is a special use of language...Poetry is not designed basically to communicate information. One might wind up with a rather grotesque contraption were he to use a poem to build a barn. I would not wish to drive a car that was repaired by a mechanic on the basis of a poem. One might drown if he used a poem to learn how to swim. A good poem might, however, give me an experience of being in a barn, or driving, or swimming that could be intense and satisfying. Poetry is the language of experience.

If we try to force the lyric loveliness of biblical poetry into the emotionless tones of theological treatises, we run the risk of misinterpreting the central truth of the poem or proverb. Most tragically, though, we miss an opportunity to share a common bond with the poets themselves, whose lives form some of the most striking scenery along our route through Scripture.

Brief but Probing visit with Three Inspired Poets

Winding our way through the countryside, our first vista reveals the towering, weather-battered cliffs of the life of Job.

Job, a Businessman and Father Who Lost it All

Like the cracked and craggy layers of the cliffs, Job's life portrays a history of the calamitous storms he endured. The first two chapters of the book narrate the story of how he lost everything in one day: his servants, his business, and his children. Later, he even lost his health when Satan afflicted him with excruciating boils covering his body. Yet, like the stalwart mountain face, his faith withstood the pressure to crumble, for "in all this Job did not sin with his lips" (Job 2:10b).

The first two chapters, then, are a practical narrative of this man's losing everything. Beginning in chapter 3, Job himself starts to speak in the expressive language of poetry. In this second section, chapters 3-37, "friends" counsel Job that he must have brought his suffering upon himself. "Sorry comforters are you all," he replies, contending that he is innocent (16:2b). A philosophical debate ensues, which offers the sufferer no relief; he needs the perspective only the Lord can offer. So in the poem's theological section, chapters 38-42 God answers Job out of the whirlwind, satisfying his inner turmoil. As the book closes, He restores Job's prosperity twofold.

The ancient poetry of Job touches those of us who must also endure the scouring winds of suffering. Job is our brother in pain; he knows how we feel when, on our journey through sorrow, we realize that no one really understands but God. He also reminds us that although suffering is horrible, it teaches us our most permanent and priceless lessons about life. Job is a true poet.

David, a Shepherd-Musician Who Became a King

Our scenery changes from sheer cliffs to lush valleys as we come to the life of David—the shepherd, musician, and king. He's the songwriter of the Bible, composing the lyrics of nearly half the songs in the Hebrew hymnal, the book of Psalms. His psalms are particularly meaningful because they open a window into his soul during the best and worst times of his life.

Providing the historical back drop to his poetry are the superscriptions that preface many of the Psalms. For instance, the superscription for Psalm 18 tells us that David wrote this song "in the day that the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul."

Has the Lord ever rescued you from the hand of an enemy? If so, perhaps the words of David express your

own relief and joy:

I love Thee, O Lord, my strength
The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,
My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge;
My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.
I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised,
And I am saved from my enemies. (vv.1-3)

We see ourselves in the lines of David's psalms, as well as the psalms written by other poets such as Moses, Solomon, and Asaph. But most importantly, we see the Lord. When we read the psalms, the Lord lifts the world off our shoulders and returns it to its proper place. Our eyes turn upward, and we praise and worship Him alone.

Like the songs on the radio, the psalms come in a variety of types of psalms. Some are majestic songs of worship, some are warnings of disaster, and some are devotional compositions for quiet meditation.

In our hard-edged, pressure-filled lives, the psalms are soft corners that invite us to rest and recover. When troubles pour down like rain, they put a rood of hope over our heads and give us songs for our hearts to sing.

Solomon, A Pampered Genius Who Drifted Too Far

We enter Solomon's rich forests of wisdom on the next leg of our trip. During his reign as king of Israel, God lavished on him great wisdom; and the poetry of Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon and most of Proverbs are the results.

The book of Proverbs is a collection of pithy, brief axioms or statements of truth that differ in style and purpose from the flowing psalms. The following chart lists some of the contrasts.

Psalms	Proverbs
Fellowship with God on the vertical plane	Fellowship with others on the horizontal plane
How to get along with the Lord	How to get along with other people
For our devotional life	For our practical life
Excellent preparation for worship on Sundays	Excellent preparation for work during the week
Theme: Worship	Theme: Wisdom

The bite-sized morsels of truth the book of Proverbs offers usually come in one of three kinds of couplets. Some are contrastive, indicated by the word but, as in 12:22:

Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord,
But those who deal faithfully are His delight.

Other proverbs are complete, with the words and or so being the key, as in 16:3:

Commit your works to the Lord,
And your plans will be established.

Finally, others are comparative, using the combination better/ than or like/so, as in 15:16-17:

Better is a little with the fear of the Lord,
Than great treasure and turmoil with it.

Better is a dish of vegetable where love is,
Than a fattened ox and hatred with it.

Conveniently, they are arranged in thirty-one chapters—just the right number for us to digest one chapter each day of the month!

In Ecclesiastes, we get a glimpse into the king's private journal. Here he records his search for happiness apart from God. A billionaire by today's standards, Solomon employed his power and money to explore every alternative path to fulfillment: knowledge, pleasure, possessions, wisdom, and work. However, all his endeavors led him to a dead end.

Vanity of vanities, says the preacher
Vanity of vanities! All is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

Solomon evaluated a God-less life in reality's bare light. The book would leave us despairing but for its hopeful finale:

The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil. (12:13-14)

As Ecclesiastes is philosophical, the Song of Solomon is passionate. It's the story of courtship and affection, of love and sexual intimacy between a man and his newlywed bride. Some allegorize the song, identifying Christ as the husband the church as the bride. But, applying the adage "when normal sense makes the best sense apply no other sense," it's best to take the book at face value as a delightful and romantic story.

Here's a tip to help you understand who's talking to whom in the book: when you read "my darling," it's usually the husband addressing his wife; "my beloved" is the way the young bride addresses her husband. For example:

How beautiful you are, my darling,
How beautiful you are!
Your eyes are like doves.
How handsome you are, my beloved,
And so pleasant!
Indeed, our couch is luxuriant!
The beams of our houses are cedars,
Our rafters, cypresses. (1:15-17)

The poetry of Scripture impresses us with its beauty and color and vivid scenery. As we read the poetical books, we need to let the pictures of worship or despair or romance fill our senses and speak to our humanity. If we get to know the poets themselves, they'll teach us some lasting lessons.

Job, for instance, teaches that even a genuinely righteous person can suffer terribly. How we wish that only the wicked and not the innocent would languish in dark prisons of pain. Until the final judgment, however, bad things will happen to good people. Job reminds us of that and offers his hand of sympathy during our suffering.

David teaches us that even a man after God's heart can fall into tragic sinfulness. It is hard for us to believe that the same David who could sing glorious praises to the Lord one moment could kiss the forbidden lips of Bathsheba the next. Yet aren't we all just as capable of committing as great a sin as David's? And isn't God just as willing to restore us if we repent?

Solomon teaches us that even a literary genius can miss some of life's most basic truths. Solomon may have

been the wisest man in the world, but in the end he foolishly gave his heart to idolatrous women. Ironically his own words tells us,

Watch over your heart with all diligence,
For from it flow the springs of life. (Proverbs 4:23)

Are you keeping a close vigil on your heart? Does the Lord have first place in your affections? If He does, you're wiser than King Solomon!

Living Insights Study One

The counsel for the defense may present his case.

Thank you, your honor. The prosecution charges that my client—the highly-esteemed art of poetry—is out of date in our high-tech age and demands that it be sentenced forever to the lyrics of pop music and greeting cards. Member of the jury (that's you, dear reader), I intend to prove that my client has been maligned and falsely accused. I call to the stand my first witness, the respected theologian Ronald Allen. Dr. Allen please tell the court your opinion of the value of poetry.

Literature is a language of experience, and poetry is the most concentrated form of literature. Poetry is therefore the most powerful literary means of expressing experience.

I see. And what kinds of experiences and emotions does poetry help us express, Dr. Allen?

How very many times, for example, must Psalm 23 have been recited in funeral settings! Now chanted, now recited by rote; sometimes read with fervor, other times haltingly, with tears blurring the worlds—the Psalm of the Shepherd will never lose its luster...In fact, consider any of the familiar lines of the Psalter meditatively, and you will discover how appropriate they are in mirroring the variegated moods of the life of faith. We, who so often find our tongues stammering, our emotions choked, and our minds muddy, find our very necessary expressions of reality in these lines from the Psalms. Whether our mood is blue or bright, whether we feel like singing or like weeping; we can do these in the Psalms.

Your honor may I impose upon the course a simple test to prove Dr. Allen's thesis concerning the power and relevance of poetry?

Proceed, counsel.

Members of the jury, printed here for you is the psalm to which Dr. Allen referred, Psalm 23. Please read it slowly and thoughtfully. Then in the space provided, write down its relevance to a certain situation in your life—perhaps how it comforts you or gives you courage. Take your time. You may begin.

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd;
I have all that I need.
- 2 He lets me rest in green meadows;
he leads me beside peaceful streams.
- 3 He renews my strength.
He guides me along right paths,
bringing honor to his name.
- 4 Even when I walk
through the darkest valley,[a]
I will not be afraid,
for you are close beside me.
Your rod and your staff
protect and comfort me.
- 5 You prepare a feast for me

in the presence of my enemies.
You honor me by anointing my head with oil.
My cup overflows with blessings.
6 Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I will live in the house of the Lord
forever.

What is the relevance to your life?

Your honor, the defense rests.

Living Insights Study Two

Bidding you to come follow them through the scenic beauty of their poetry are the three poets—Job, David, and Solomon. Are you suffering? Take Job’s hand. Does your soul long to praise the Lord? David is your guide. Do you need wisdom? Sit at the feet of Solomon. Which of these three men would you like to become familiar with during this season of life? Why?

What other Psalms or Proverbs are meaningful to you? When did those become important to you?



Route 66 Week 7

The Prophets/Isaiah– Malachi

“Watch for Overheating.” “Next Gas 50 Miles.” “Carry Water.” Road signs like these must have been common along the section of Route 66 that rolled through the swirling dust bowls of Oklahoma and Texas. Traversing this American Sahara, thousands of cars fell victim to the intense heat, sputtering and wheezing to the side of the road in a cloud of radiator steam. Only the toughest machines made it through.

Such unyielding engines were like the tough-minded prophets of the Bible who endured the heat of a difficult calling. Surviving blistering criticism and fiery threats on their lives, they kept driving onward, determined to speak the word of the Lord no matter what the cost.

To help us understand these courageous and unconventional people, let’s begin with four general facts about their role in Hebrew history.

Some Helpful Reminders about the Prophets

First, keeping this part of God's Route 66 clear in our minds is easier if we understand the difference between a prophet and a priest. Priests were people’s representatives to God, while prophets were God's representatives to people. If the Hebrews wanted God to forgive their sins, they called out to Him through a priest who offered prayers and sacrifices on their behalf. But if God desired to communicate with them, He spoke through a prophet.

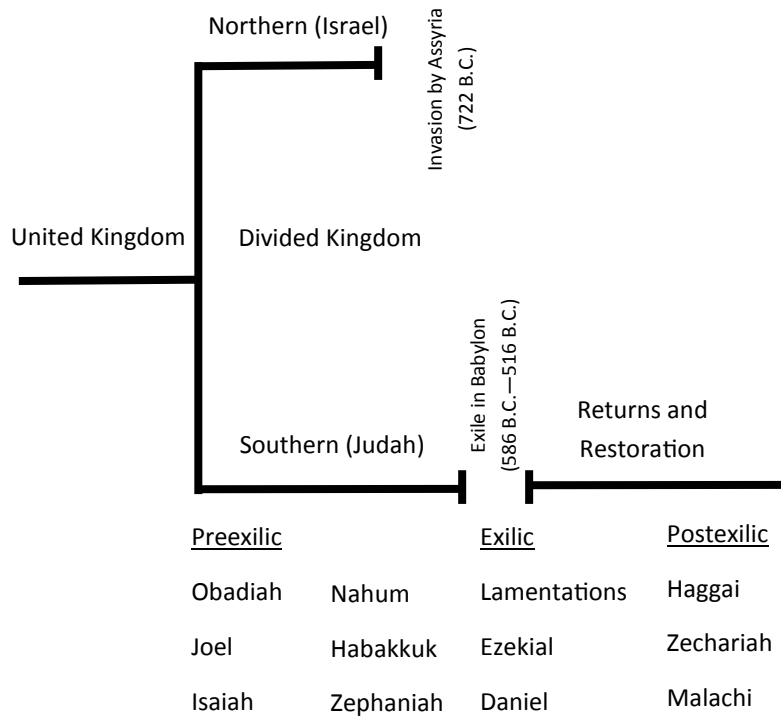
Second, the prophets' ministry was both forthtelling and foretelling. Prophets would "tell forth" God’s message to the people, firmly revealing to them the truth they needed to hear for today. They would also "foretell" the future, predicting God's judgments as well as His hopeful plan for tomorrow. How could you know whether a prophet was true or false? By the acid test of total accuracy. If even one prophecy missed the bull's-eye, the prophet was discredited as a phony (see Deut. 18:11-11).

Third, the prophets' primary messages concerned human sin and God's righteousness. These two themes weave their way through all the prophetic books, as do two others—the people's need to repent and the blessings God would give if they did. The prophets weren't always proclaiming dark oracles of death and doom. Shimmering like silken threads were God's hopeful promises that if the people returned to Him, He would forgive their sins and comfort them.

And fourth, the prophets’ ministries fit into three major sections of Jewish history.

- The preexilic period; from the dividing of the kingdom to the invasion of the Babylonians
- The exilic period: from the exile of the Jews in Babylon to their return to Jerusalem
- The postexilic period: after the return to Jerusalem, which occurred in three phases under Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah

The following chart shows how the prophetic books fit into these periods.



Whatever era they ministered in, the prophets usually weren't appreciated until years later (compare Ezek. 33:30-33). Jeremiah for example, was imprisoned in the depths of a mud-filled cistern (Jer. 38:1-6), and tradition holds that Isaiah was the one “sawn in two” in Hebrews 11:37. Theologian Leon Wood explains what kind of person could fulfill such a risky calling.

Prophets had to be people of outstanding character, great minds, and courageous souls. They had to be this by nature and then, being dedicated to God they became still greater because of the tasks and special provisions assigned them. Thus they became the towering giants of Israel, the formers of public opinion, the leaders through days of darkness, people distinguished from all those about them either in Israel or other nations of the day.

Let’s get to know these remarkable men and their writings better.

An Overall Look at the Prophets

Many other prophets traveled the roads of Hebrew history besides the sixteen listed in our Bible's table of contents. There were the more well-known prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha; and some lesser-knowns, such as Nathan, Gad, Jehu, and Shemaiah; as well as the prophetesses Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah. For our purposes, though, let's just look at the writing prophets-the ones who authored the books that have been placed in Scripture.

The Categories . . . and Why We Have Them

We can group these sixteen prophets into two categories:

<u>Major Prophets</u>	<u>Minor Prophets</u>	
Isaiah	Hosea	Nahum
Jeremiah (Lamentations)	Joel	Habakkuk
Ezekiel	Amos	Zephaniah
Daniel	Obadiah	Haggai
	Jonah	Zechariah
	Micah	Malachi

Unlike baseball's major league and minor league, these designations have nothing to do with the importance of the prophets. The relative size of the books and the extensiveness of the messianic prophecies are the only considerations-the major prophets' books are longer and speak more about the coming Christ than those of the minor prophets.

As far as we can tell, all the books were written by the person whose name appears in the title. Some of the prophets open a window into their own lives, like Jonah, whose personal story makes up the whole of the book. Daniel is another who invites us to see God at work in his life; half his book consists of his story while the other half records his prophecies. Isaiah and Jeremiah write mostly of God's messages, adding just a sprinkling of autobiography; while many of the minor prophets record only the word they received from the Lord.

The Prophets . . . Where They Ministered and When

Based on the prophets' own information about themselves, we can get an idea of when they lived and to whom they spoke.

The prophets who ministered in the northern kingdom of Israel were Jonah, Amos, and Hosea (862-725 B.c.). All were preexilic, but that's where their similarity stops. Jonah's reluctant word was not directed to Israel but to one of her enemies-the Assyrian city of Nineveh. Blunt Amos, a fig-picker actually from Judah, withheld none of God's piercing rebukes to Israel, saying, "The Lord God has spoken! Who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8b). And Hosea's marriage became his painful sermon, painting the spiritual adultery of God's people in vivid colors.

The southern kingdom of Judah was the preexilic home for eight of the prophets who voiced the word of the Lord from 887 to 586 B.C. They were Isaiah, known as the Prince of Prophets; Jeremiah, the Weeping Prophet; Joel, who warned of the locusts' devastation; Obadiah, who directed his prophecies to neighboring Edom; Micah, who told of the time when swords will be hammered into plow, shares; Nahum, another of Nineveh's doomsayers; Habakkuk, de, crying the violence of his time yet exalting God for "hinds' feet... on my high places" (Hab. 3:19); and Zephaniah, who spoke of the fearsome Day of the Lord.

Then, from 595 to 397 B.C., the exilic and postexilic prophets stepped in. As part of the early group of exiles, Ezekiel and Daniel wrote to reassure the disheartened Jews living in Babylon that God was still in charge of the future. When the Jews were finally allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple and the city

walls, three postexilic prophets picked up their pens to help rebuild the people's hearts: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

The prophets came from all walks of life. Some were princes, some farmers, some priests. Some, like Daniel, wore the silks of royalty; while others, like Jeremiah, wore the rags of a prisoner. Some traveled the world, while other knew only their own hometown. But despite their diversity, they all accomplished the same result—they pricked the nation's conscience, making comfortable people feel very uncomfortable in their sin.

How did the people respond? With deep regret and a desire to change? No, rather than getting rid of their sin, the people got rid of the prophets—they smashed the fire alarm instead of dousing the fire. They hunted down the prophets and threw them into prison. They taunted, tortured, and killed them. And when God sent other prophets, they silenced them too. In the end, the house of Israel collapsed in flames.

The Writings . . . and What They Tell Us about the Writers

What kept the prophets going through their deserts of persecution? The same thing that can fuel us to keep speaking the truth during scorching opposition: character. Several qualities of the prophets' character shine through their writings. Let's thumb through some of the books and list a few of these qualities.

- They were uncompromising individualists (see Dan. 1:1-16).
- They were men who stood alone, fully conscious of God's divine calling in their lives (see Jer. 1:4-10).
- They were men of rugged determination (see Ezek. 2:1-7).
- They were men of prayer and untarnished integrity (see Dan. 6:1-10).
- They were outspoken critics of social ills (see Amos 5:10-13; Hab. 1:1-4).
- They were zealous for the things of the Lord (see Hag. 1:2-8).
- They were men who saw and wrote of the coming of the Lord (see Zech. 14:1-11).

A Couple of Remaining Principles to Ponder

The next time you page through your Bible for some inspirational reading, flip to one of the prophetic books. Now that you know a little about the background of the authors, you'll be able to understand them better. As you read, keep in mind the following two principles.

When a prophet brings the warnings of God, his words should prompt the fear of God. Let the message sensitize your spirit to God's commands for your life and give you a hearty respect for the Lord.

When a prophet reveals the will of God, our souls should entertain new dimensions of the plan of God. There's something panoramic about the ministry of the prophets that helps us see the beginning and the end of the game. That broad perspective can impact your life today and give you courage to face the challenges of tomorrow.

Living Insights Study One

What picture comes to mind when you think of a prophet? Perhaps it's the looming figure of the street-preacher Karl Menninger describes in his book [Whatever Became of Sin?](#)

On a sunny day in September, 1972, a stern-faced, plainly dressed man could be seen standing still on a street corner in the busy Chicago Loop. As pedestrians hurried by on their way to lunch or business, he

would solemnly lift his right arm, and pointing to the person nearest him, intone loudly the single word "GUILTY!"

Then, without any change of expression, he would resume his stiff stance for a few moments before repeating the gesture. Then, again, the inexorable raising of his arm, the pointing, and the solemn pronouncing of the one word "GUILTY!"

The effect of this strange j'accuse pantomime on the passing strangers was extraordinary, almost eerie. They would stare at him, hesitate, look away, look at each other, and then at him again; then hurriedly continue on their ways. One man, turning to another who was my informant, exclaimed: "But how did he know?" No doubt many others had similar thoughts. How did he know, indeed?

"Guilty!" Everyone guilty? Guilty of what? Guilty of over parking? Guilty of lying? Guilty of arrogance and hubris toward the one God? Guilty of "borrowing," not to say embezzling? Guilty of unfaithfulness to a faithful wife? Guilty only of evil thoughts-or evil plans?

If that is your image of a prophet, you are right. Prophets did stand up to commoners and kings alike, pointing their bony fingers of judgment. "Guilty!" they would announce, like Nathan before adulterous David. "You are the man!" he cried, slamming down God's gavel of guilt (2 Sam. 12:7).

But prophets had a more tender side too. "The Lord also has taken away your sin; you shall not die," breathed Nathan after hearing David's confession (v.13). And when Solomon, Bathsheba's second child by David, was born, it was Nathan, like a doting godfather, who called him Jedidiah—"beloved of the Lord" (see vv. 24-25).

Do not fear the prophets. Do not run from them, covering your head in shame. As you read their books, open your heart to their words. Let them do their cleansing work in your soul, and feel God's tender touch of forgiveness.

Living Insights Study Two

How far would you go to communicate God's words of warning to your friends? Would you call them on the phone? Write them a letter? Travel a hundred miles? Certainly!

But suppose they don't listen. To really get the message across, would you shave your head? Would you lay on your left side for 390 days? Would you eat bread baked over cow dung? Well. . .

These are the lengths to which God told Ezekiel to go in order to tell the exiled Jews of Jerusalem's destruction (see Ezek. 4:1-5:12). Of course, God isn't asking us to do strange stunts like these. But it makes us think, *What sacrifices of love would we make w communicate the truth to our friends?*

Perhaps you know someone who is making wrong choices and heading for disaster. You've tried warning him or her, but to no avail. Could now be the right time to try again? Is God calling you to be His prophet's voice in their life? If so, how can you confront them in a way that shows your love for them, on the one hand, and the seriousness of their sin on the other? What should you say?

Before you put on the prophet's garb, double-check your motives. Make sure there are no logs in your eye before pointing out the specks in your friend's eye. Ask the Lord to cleanse your heart of any judgmental attitudes. Be prepared to keep loving your friend, whether he or she listens to you or turns away. Only then will you be a prophet in the truest sense.



Route 66 Week 8

The Four Gospels/Matthew-John

The intertestamental chasm fades in our rearview mirror as we rejoin God's Route 66 in the New Testament and cruise into the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Named for their authors, each of these books paints a detailed portrait of Jesus Christ. So, because we're in a hurry, we'll just pick one of them and . . . That's not a good idea, you say? But what's the use of covering the same ground four times? This is a survey—we need to keep moving.

You say each author may paint Christ's life from a different perspective? And if we put them all together, we'd have a more complete picture of him?

Well, I suppose you're right. Then let's plan to follow all four writers through the life of Christ simultaneously.

A Helpful Chart of the Gospels

To help distinguish each book from the other, let's summarize their unique slants in an overview chart.

	<i>Matthew</i>	<i>Mark</i>	<i>Luke</i>	<i>John</i>
<i>Portrait</i>	Mighty King	Humble Servant	True Humanity	Absolute Deity
<i>Addressee</i>	The Jews	The Romans	The Greeks	The World
<i>Theme</i>	Royalty and Authority of the King	Work and Service of the Servant	Jesus as Man	Jesus as god
<i>Key Verse</i>	Matthew 21:4-5	Mark 10:45	Luke 19:10	John 20:31

We can see already that each of the writers had in mind different purposes and audiences. None attempted to videotape Jesus' life from start to finish; rather, they took snapshots of various scenes, editing and arranging them according to specific themes.

Since the accounts are not identical, some critics have accused the authors of contradicting one another. Differences, however, don't necessarily mean disagreement. For example, if four people stood on the four corners of an intersection and witnessed the same car accident, their stories would differ according to their points of view—but all the facts would still be accurate.

In the same way, because the gospel writers wrote about Christ from various angles, we should expect their stories to differ too. Moreover, if they were exactly the same, we'd probably wonder if they copied each other and question their reliability. Rather than dispute their authenticity, the variations between the accounts actually support it. Let's get a brief feel for some of the distinctions of each gospel.

Matthew

Examining the chart a little more closely, we notice Matthew paints Christ as a mighty king, dresses in royal robes, full of authority. A Jew himself, Matthew writes to a Jewish audience and includes Jesus' genealogy to prove that He is the Messiah, a descendant of David from the line of Abraham. Because it is vital for his readers to know the ways Jesus fulfills prophecy, Matthew quotes Old Testament more than any of the other gospel writers. A quotation from Isaiah, in fact, is the key verse of his book. It appears in Chapter 21—the section that describes Jesus' kingly entrance into Jerusalem the week before His crucifixion:

Now this took place that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold your King is coming to you, Gentle, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'" (vv. 4-5)

Mark

In contrast, Mark portrays Jesus as a humble servant. He doesn't include a genealogy, because his Roman readers would not be interested in a servant's family history—they would want to see Jesus' strength and character. So, rather than dwelling on unfamiliar Hebrew prophecies and long discourses, he packs a lot of action into his brief gospel. The key verse in the book sums up Mark's theme well:

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (10:45)

Luke

The third writer is Luke, a Greek physician who addresses a Greek audience. His readers appreciate achievement, beauty, culture, and large ideas. With all the human drama of a Rembrandt portrait, then, he depicts Jesus as the ideal man. Thoughtfully, he sketches in the subtle details of Christ's life—His genealogy tracing Him back to Adam, His birth, His childhood, His relationships, and His suffering. He highlights more of Jesus' teachings than the other writers, featuring the cherished stories of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. As displayed in this book's key verse, Jesus' compassion for fallen humanity emanates from Luke's gospel:

"For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." (19:10)

John

Writing years after the other authors completed their works, John dips quill in ink to draw an inspiring portrait of Christ's deity. A king, a servant, an ideal man—Jesus is all that, but even more He is God. Addressing the whole world with this message, John presents a masterful defense of Jesus' deity, selecting seven signs that prove beyond a doubt that Jesus is the Son of God. These miraculous signs include:

- changing water into wine (2:1-11)
- healing the royal official's son (4:46-54)
- healing the man by the pool of Bethesda (5:1-9a)
- feeding the five thousand (6:5-14)
- walking on the water (6:16-21)
- healing a man born blind (9:1-7)
- raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-45)

Like any work of art, John's gospel stirs a response in us. Either we accept Jesus as God's Son and receive life,

or we reject Him and wander into death. The book's key verse expresses the author's passionate hope concerning the choice we would make:

Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. (20:30-31)

A Few Clarifying Remarks about the Gospels

Now that we recognize some of the distinguishing characteristics of the Gospels, it's easier to tell them apart. Before we take our tour of them, though, let's rummage through the glove box for a few more facts to help us along the way.

First, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as the Synoptic Gospels. The word synoptic literally means "seen together" (sin—"together"; ópsis—"view").³ They are grouped together because of their similar viewpoints on Christ's life. The fourth gospel, John, is unique. It was written much later and includes information not found in the other gospels—such as the private words of Jesus to the disciples the night before He was crucified (see chaps. 13-17, commonly known as the Upper Room Discourse). Unlike Matthew, John provides us no genealogy; unlike Mark, no emphasis on action; and unlike Luke, no parables. John, as a writer, is more profound and deep. So his book is not put in the same category as the synoptics.

Second, the Gospels were never intended to give us a complete and uninterrupted story of Jesus' life. According to John, even if they wanted to, they couldn't.

And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books which were written. (21:25)

Third, to study the Gospels thoroughly, we need to "harmonize" them. Reading the Gospels is like listening to a choir. If you want to hear just the high part, you can sit in the soprano section. Or to experience the other singers' perspectives, you can sit with the altos or tenors or basses. But the best seat for absorbing the full impact of the music is in the center of the auditorium, where you can hear all the parts harmonizing together. In a similar way, by blending the four gospels together, "harmonizing" the different perspectives on the same story, we can experience the full impact of Jesus' life.

But reading the Gospels that way requires a lot of flipping back and forth from one account to the next, doesn't it? Fortunately, scholars have prepared harmonies of the Gospels for us—books that conveniently display the accounts side by side and in chronological order.

Fourth, the gospel accounts include the same general outline. Some Bible teachers outline the life of Christ geographically, walking along with Him as He traverses the land of Palestine. Others arrange the events in Christ's life around a central theme, such as the kingdom of God. But all the outlines follow the same general flow of events, which we will explore next.

Tracing the Major Events through the Gospels

The best place to start is the beginning. With Christ, however, the beginning is not so obvious.

Jesus Christ's Existence Before Time Began

The first three gospels pick up the story of Jesus' life in the womb of a young girl named Mary. John, however, reaches farther back in time in search of Christ's origins.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. (1:1-2)

Literally, he says, "In a beginning," leaving out the definite article the. The implication is that the Word existed before time, "in a beginning that never had a beginning." A few verses later, John identifies the "Word":

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (v. 14)

The Word is Jesus Christ, who always existed and who created us and the world we live in (see v. 3). John calls Him the Word because He communicated the deepest thoughts and innermost feelings of God in a way we could all understand, by coming and living among us.

His Coming and Living Among Humanity

John says that Jesus "dwelt," or, literally, "tabernacled" with us. He pitched his tent on Earth; then, about thirty years later, He pulled up stakes and returned to His home in heaven. As God, He could have come to us in any form He chose, as a brilliant light or a thundering voice. Instead, "the Word became flesh."

"Incarnation" is the term Bible teachers use to describe Jesus' entrance onto Earth's stage, the moment the Son of God became a man. Make no mistake about it, He was fully human. When He hurt, He wept; when He was cut, He bled; when He was tired, He slept. He felt the full range of human emotions, from compassion to rage, from elation to grief. In every way, He was just like us . . . we should say, in every way but one-He never sinned. The perfect, unblemished Lamb of God, Jesus was the only One qualified to be slain on the altar for our sins.

Our Lord's Suffering and Death in our Place

At the apex of each gospel stands the Cross. Dare we rush by this holy place without pausing in solemn wonder? Here the Son of God stretched Himself on a torturous altar of wood and suffered for the sins of the world. Because of their significance to our lives and to the message of Scripture, we'll stop to examine Jesus' final day on earth and His momentous death in the next two chapters.

The Savior's Resurrection and Ascension from Earth

As the Gospels come to a close, the sky brightens with the colors of a new day. The grave cannot hold the Son of God for long, and like the sun's rays, He bursts forth from the darkness of the tomb triumphant and glorious. 11 four gospel writers revel in this magnificent event, underscoring two facts: Jesus rose bodily-not just in His spirit; and He rose miraculously-His body was not stolen away as some were claiming (see Matt. 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20).

Only Mark and Luke tell us what happens next, and then just briefly. Jesus leaves the earth to take His rightful place by the Father's side (see Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51). In the book of Acts, Luke fills in the details,

saying that while the disciples watched, "a cloud received Him out of their sight" (1:9b). Then two angels appeared beside them and said:

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11)

The King Returns as Ruler over Earth

Today, we're still looking for Christ to part the clouds and step from heaven to Earth once more. Jesus taught that His return would be unexpected and sudden, "just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west" (Matt. 24:27). Years later, Jesus showed John in a vision what His coming will be like, and John recorded what he saw in the book of Revelation. Someday, Christ will come again not as a mere man but as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. What a day that will be!

Living Insights Study One

Do you long to know Jesus more deeply? The desire to know Christ possessed the nineteenth-century preacher C. H. Spurgeon, who cried out,

As the river seeks the sea, so Jesus, I seek thee! O
let me find thee and melt my life into thine forever!?

Is that your desire too? The Gospels were written so that you may know Jesus and, in knowing Him, believe in Him. Has it been awhile since you've read the Gospels? If so, Matthew is calling you to come follow him; Mark is bidding you come as well, and so are Luke and John. Won't you let them be your guides to knowing Christ and trusting Him more? Make a plan now to read a little every day as you stroll down the road with Christ, taking your time to get to know your Savior.

As you follow the biblical authors, invite a modern writer to go along with you. We recommend the following author and his books as amiable traveling companions:

Gire, Ken. Intimate Moments with the Savior. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989.

— — — Incredible Moments with the Savior. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990.

— — — Instructive Moments with the Savior. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992.

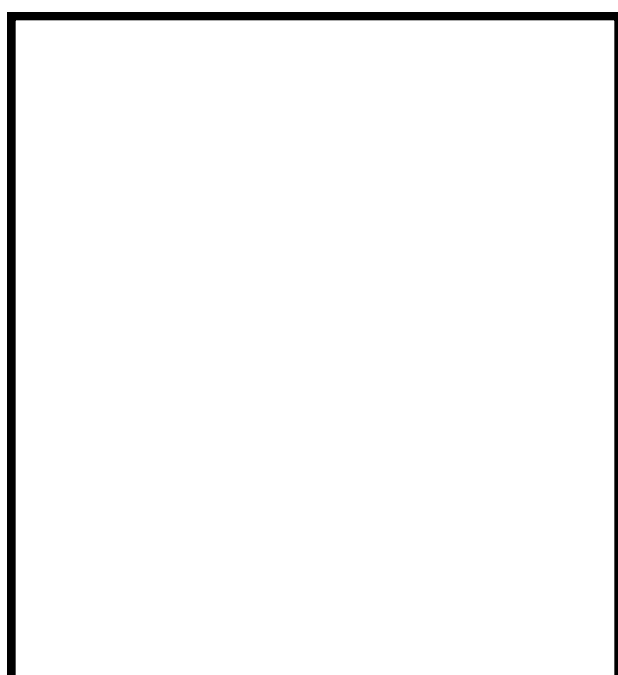
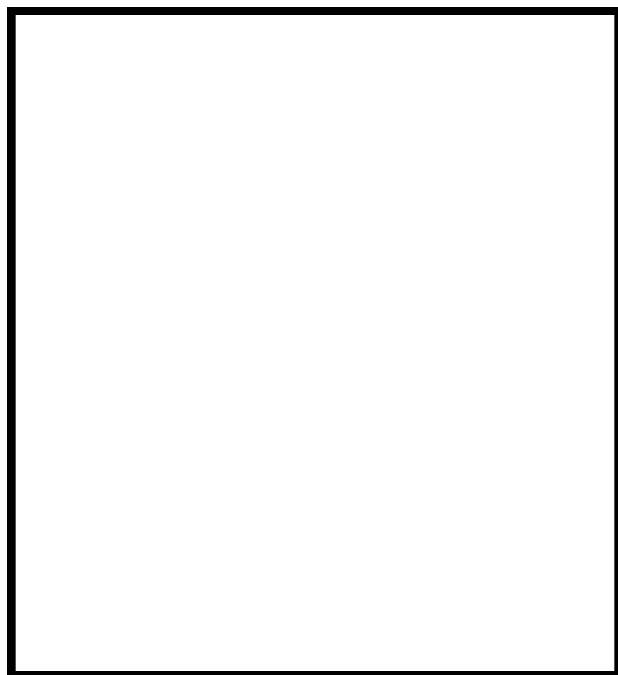
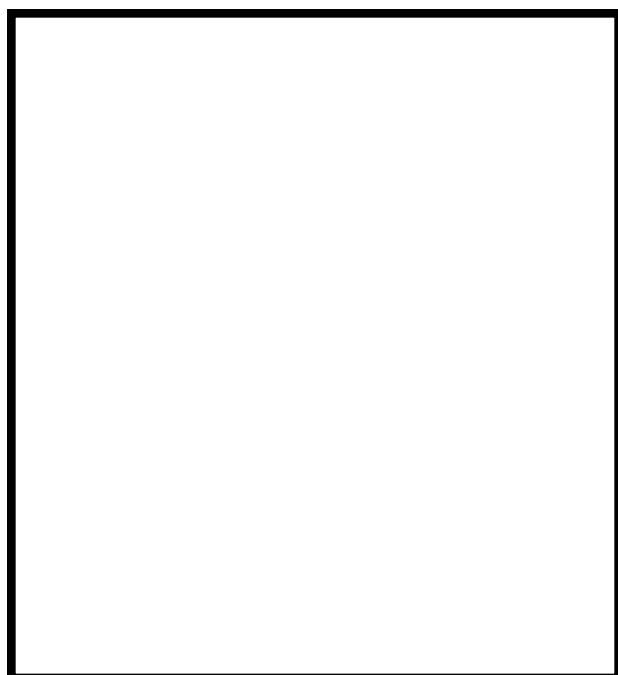
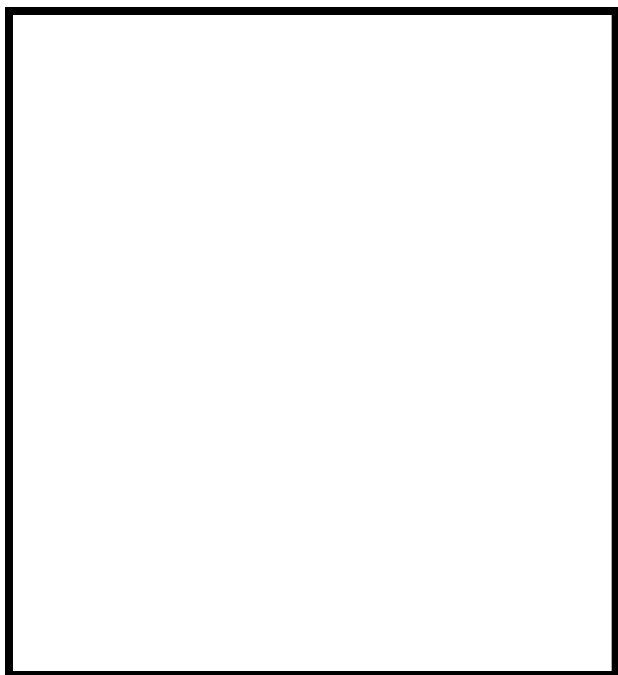
Living Insights Study Two

Why four gospels? J. Sidlow Baxter summed up the answer best with an illustration.

Some time ago I was visiting a friend whose wife had recently died. On a cabinet in his sitting-room there was a satin-wood, gold-embroidered, quadri-folding photograph-holder, standing concavely to the room and containing four coloured pictures of his lost loved-one. He explained that those four gave him just the characteristic expressions which were dearest to him. No one photograph was enough- all four were needed. Sometimes this one, and some, times that one, spoke most to him, but each in its own way brought a flood of affecting memories to his mind.

In the same way, no one account of Jesus' life is enough. We need all four to bring to mind the many wonderful attributes of Christ. In the following four boxes, write down the features about each gospel you

can recall from the lesson. Imagine Christ's picture in each frame as the gospel writer presents Him, and recall that image whenever you read from that gospel in the days to come.





Route 66 Week 9

The Acts of the Apostles/Acts

Before we get rolling again on our bible all cross-country journey, we need to linger over one more place... Jesus' tomb. Or, more accurately, Jesus' empty tomb. For His story does not end in death on a cross but in glorious miraculous life.

Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. And his appearance was like lightning, and his garment as white as snow; and the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. And the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said." (Matthew 18:1-6)

On that bright Sunday morning, with one sweep of His Hand, God pushed back death's cloud and allowed the rays of hope to burst through. Jesus was alive!

In subsequent days, He appeared before His followers with several surprise visits, commissioned them to carry His flame of life to the world: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (v.19a), but instructed them to first "stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49b). Then "while He was blessing them, He parted from them" and ascended to heaven and into His Father's welcoming arms (v. 51).

As Luke closes his gospel, the disciples are in hopeful spirits. Their saga continues as Luke picks up his pen to write his sequel, The Acts of the Apostles.

Contrasts between the Gospels and Acts

Peering down the road, we can see the scenery changing as we pull out of the Gospels and head toward Acts. In the Gospels, Jesus modeled Christianity; in Acts, everyday people model Christianity. In the Gospels, the spotlight was on Christ; in Acts, His followers take center stage. The following chart explains more contrasts to watch for.

Gospels	Acts
The Son of God offers His life Physically	The Son of God offers His power spiritually.
The original "seeds" of the church are planted: "I will build My church" (Mt. 16:18)	Those seeds take root and begin to sprout, grow, bud blossom, and bear fruit.
Christ ministers, dies and rises from the dead.	Christ ascends, is seated and exalted as head of His Body, the church.
The emphasis rests on Jesus, the second person of the Trinity.	The emphasis rests on the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.
The events occur between about AD 1 and AD 30.	The events occur between about AD 30 and AD 60, from Christ's last words to Paul's first imprisonment.

Christ sparks the flame in the Gospels, and in Acts, His handful of followers ignite the world with that fire.

The once-skeptical commentator Manford George Gutzke marveled at their amazing achievement:

His few followers were insignificant and discredited people. They faced stubborn hostility. The Jewish authorities opposed them. The Roman Government opposed them and eventually came out in bitter persecution against them...

Even as a skeptic, I had to amidst that this Christian Gospel had tremendous strength. It became a movement and crossed every barrier. It crossed the oceans, the deserts, and the mountains. It leaped from one country to another. It spread around the world, and today it is being preached in more than a thousand different languages and dialects. From an historic point of view, Christianity is the most amazing phenomenon the world has ever seen.

Traveling through the book of Acts is bound to be a thrilling trip, so let's start the engine and get going!

Various ways to Outline the Acts of the Apostles

Hmmm. Which route through the book shall we take? Several choices stretch before us.

Geographically

The first way to outline the book is to track Christianity's spreading flame geographically from its flash point in Jerusalem to its farthest perimeter in the world. In Acts 1:8, just before the Ascension, Jesus maps out a three phase course for His disciples to follow:

"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

The chapters in Acts unfold geographically according to Jesus' master plan:

- Acts 1-7: The events in Jerusalem
- Acts 8-12: The gospel spreads to Judea and Samaria
- Acts 13-28: Christianity expands to "the remotest part of the earth"

Chronologically

Our second route through Acts takes us chronologically through five corridors of time marked by certain major events.

1. The Ascension to Pentecost (Chapter 1). The first chapter of Acts picks up where the Gospels leave off, with Jesus issuing His final words and rising into the clouds. As the awestruck disciples watch Him go, two angels appear and reassure them that their Lord "will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven" (v.11). Comforted, the small band of believers hurries to Jerusalem and waits for the mysterious power Jesus told them would come. And come it does.

2. Pentecost to the stoning of Stephen (chapters 2-7). On the Jewish holiday of Pentecost, the believers are all together, when suddenly there came from heaven noise like a violent, rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. (2:2-3)

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Christ's lambs rush into the streets like lions, proclaiming the death and resurrection. Miraculously when they open their mouths to speak, outcome languages they have never know

before. All the people gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost are able to hear the Good News in their own tongue. However, not everyone receives the news gladly. During this period, the early church endures three persecutions:

- Peter and John are imprisoned (chapter 4)
- The apostles are beaten and forbidden to speak of Christ (chapter 5)
- Stephen is stoned to death—the first Christian martyr (chapter 7)

3. Stephen's death to Saul's conversion (chapters 8-9). Stephen's shocking death sends waves of frightened Christians out of Jerusalem. On their heels is Saul, the fierce young legalist who held the executioners' cloaks at the martyr's stoning (see 7:58). Determined to bring these blaspheming Christians back home in chains, he sets out for Damascus in a murderous rage. On the way, however, Jesus appears to him in a brilliant light, saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (9:4). Blinded and humbled, a changed Saul arrives in Damascus. After a few days, the Lord opened his eyes, showing him a new direction for his life. Saul—later called Paul—will be Christ's principal flame-bearer to the Gentile world.

4. Saul's conversion to the missionary journeys (chapters 10-12). Although the Lord has accepted and forgiven Saul, the Christians fear opening their arms to this former enemy. Compassionate Barnabas, however, extends Saul his friendship, and together they become influential teachers in Antioch.

5. The missionary journeys to Paul's imprisonment in Rome (chapters 13-28). The remainder of Acts is a travelogue of Paul's four trips: three missionary journeys and his voyage and his voyage to Rome as a prisoner to stand trial before Caesar. During this period, Paul writes thirteen letters to various churches and individuals; these letters have been preserved as our New Testament epistles. By reading about Paul's experiences during his travels, we can gain rich insights into his writings.

Here is a brief itinerary of Paul's trips—you may want to follow along with the maps of his journeys in the back of your Bible.

- The first journey: Antioch, Cyprus, Pamphylia, Southern Galatia, and back to Antioch; Acts 13-14:28 (Some scholars think Paul wrote Galatians after this journey).
- The second journey: return visits to Syria and Cilicia, Derbe and Lystra in Galatia; on through Asia Minor to Troas; across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia, Athens, and Corinth; and back to Antioch via Jerusalem; Acts 15:36-18:22 (Paul wrote 1 & 2 Thessalonians after this journey).
- The third journey: from Antioch to Ephesus, Macedonia, Greece, along the coast of Asia Minor, and to Jerusalem; Acts 18:23-21:17 (Paul wrote 1 & 2 Corinthians and Romans after this journey).
- The trip to Rome: across the Mediterranean Sea to Crete, shipwrecked on Malta, on to Sicily, and finally Rome; 27:1-28:31 (While in Rome, Paul penned the prison epistles: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon during his first imprisonment, and during his second imprisonment he wrote 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus).

Biographically

A third way to tour Acts focuses on the book's two most prominent figures: Peter—chapters 1-12, and Paul—chapters 13-28. When we divide the book like this, some fascinating contrasts emerge between the two sections.

Peter Acts 1-12	Paul Acts 13-28
Central location: Jerusalem	Central location: Antioch
Emphasis on Jews	Emphasis on Gentiles
Movement from Jerusalem to Samaria	Movement from Samaria to Rome
Five great persecutions	Four great journeys
Period of refinement	Period of fulfillment

Several Firsts in the Book of Acts

Traveling through Acts reminds us of our trip through Genesis back in chapter 4. In many ways, Genesis is to the Old Testament what Acts is to the New Testament—both are the seedbeds in which several key biblical themes get their start. For example, the Hebrew nation begins with Abraham in Genesis and branches out into subsequent Old Testament books. Likewise, some of the many firsts in Acts bear fruit in the rest of the New Testament. In Acts we find:

- The first permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of Christ’s universal church (2)
- The first formation of local assemblies of believers (2-4)
- The first act of church discipline (5)
- The first organization of church government (6)
- The first martyr (7)
- The first missionary: Philip (8)
- The first time the gospel is delivered to Gentiles: Peter and Cornelius (10)
- The first use of the name Christians (11)
- The first organized approach to world evangelism (13-28)

Trace the vital New Testament concepts to their roots, and you’ll so be digging up the stories of people, events, and ideas found in the book of Acts. For that reason, it’s important to keep in mind three facts while reading this book.

Three Valuable Facts to Remember

First, because many of the people mentioned in the New Testament are introduced in Acts, get acquainted with them here. Get to know Mark and Timothy and James, not just Paul and Peter. You’ll read the Bible with much greater interest if its characters are your familiar friends.

Second, since most of the events that pertain to the church are recorded in Acts, become a student of them here. Reading Philippians, for instance, will take on a whole new meaning if you first know what happened to Paul in Philippi (see Acts 16).

Third, because many of the truths addressed later in the Epistles find their origins in Acts, familiarize yourself with them here. The great creeds of the church and those wonderful doctrines into which we sink our theological roots begin right here, in the book of Acts.

Out of the four ways to analyze Acts—Geographically, Chronologically, Biographically, Firsts—which appeals to you the most and why?

Living Insights

Persecution has never held back the church. On the contrary, fierce storms drive the ship onward. The day Stephen was killed, a great persecution launched the believers from their dock in Jerusalem. As a result, a church was established in Antioch and became the hub for Gentile outreach. From there, Paul sailed through Asia and Europe, propelled by the howling winds of persecution. Eventually the oppression forced him as far as Rome. But even while under arrest, he kept on

preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered (28:11).

Unhindered. The word unfurls like a banner at the end of the book. Nothing could restrain the church, neither threats not beatings nor prison walls.

Today rancorous people and evil forces still try to shipwreck the church and its gospel message. Have you ever felt those forces in your life? What confidence does the story of Acts give you to face these storms and keep on sharing the kingdom of God “with all openness, unhindered?”

What a whirlwind tour of Acts! To help nail down what you’ve learned before it blows away from your memory, take time to review some of the people, places, and events you’ve become acquainted with in this exciting book.

If I wanted to spend time with...

Stephen
Philip
Paul on this first journey
A newly Spirit-filled disciple
Peter and Cornelius
Jesus before He ascended

I would go to chapter(s)...

If I wanted to visit...

Jerusalem
Rome
The Damascus Road
Judea and Samaria

I would travel through chapter(s)...

If I wanted to learn about...

Pentecost
The first church discipline
Salvation extended to Gentiles
The formation of Church government

I would study chapter(s)...



Route 66 Week 10

The Letters Part 1/Romans—Thessalonians

Romans . . . A Book of Rich Theology

Romans is perhaps the New Testament letter from Paul which is studied most. Paul did not found the church in Rome, and perhaps this is why Romans is so thorough as Paul summarizes his thoughts so the Romans could get a correct perception of his ministry. In this way the letter serves as a recommendation for Paul as he seeks the support of the Roman church as he carries out his ministry in new places. In this letter Paul addresses some rumors about his ministry: (1) that he teaches people to do evil so that good may come of it (3:8), (2) That his teachings are anti-law and challenge the positive special role of Israel (3:1-2), and (3) That his teachings will provoke the state to rise up against the Christians. In this way Romans is a diplomatic masterpiece, aimed at gaining the Romans’ trust.

The book of Romans can be divided into a section on teaching doctrine, or core Christian beliefs, (1:16-11:36) and a section encouraging the readers to live as Christians (12:1-15:13). In the teaching section, Paul writes on the righteousness, sin, and the law (1:18-3:20), our justification by faith apart from the law (3:21-4:25), and God’s salvation for those justified by faith (5:1 – 8:39).

Many advocate looking at the “Romans Road to Salvation” that Paul leads us on through the letter: all have sinned (3:23), the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ (6:23), for Christ died for us while we were still sinners (5:8), and if we confess with our mouth and believe in our heart that Jesus is Lord we will be saved (10:9)! Romans is an inspiring look at God’s wisdom, knowledge, and plan of salvation in a powerful way! “Oh how great are God’s riches and wisdom and knowledge!” (11:33a).

• • • If you had to summarize, what are the core Christian beliefs (doctrines)? What are the crucial ones for your faith journey?

1 Corinthians . . . A Book Guiding Christian Community

In response to the conflicts in the community, in 1 Corinthians Paul develops his understanding of community and in 2 Corinthians his understanding of himself as an apostle. In some of Paul’s letters (like Galatians) he is writing to correct those who are trying to make following Christ about the law rather than about following the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). In Corinthians he is struggling with a community that is taking being free from the law and following the Spirit to the extreme. For these believers in Corinth this extreme led them to two major errors.

The first is that Corinthians felt that since they were free from the law and lived by the Spirit that anything was permissible. Paul comes down hard on some of the extreme immorality in the church, and points out that even though we live by the Spirit, not everything is beneficial for us to do and we must not be ‘a slave to anything’ (6:12). While we are free in the Spirit, the Spirit leads us to freedom from slavery to sin.

The second is that Corinthians began to regard ecstatic spiritual experiences, like speaking in tongues, as the key to really experiencing God. Paul teaches them that what God really wants is for us to direct the energy of the Spirit into providing well-being for those around us. Paul says that it is love, and not ecstatic experiences, which is the highest gift of the Spirit (13:1). Paul encourages the Corinthians who are better off to be more

thoughtful and fair to the other ordinary believers. Here Paul gives us the image of the church being like ‘the body of Christ’ where each individual is an important part of that body (12:12).

Rival missionaries were also a problem to the Corinthians. Some were identifying themselves with the ministries of other missionaries, and this was causing splits within the church. Paul makes the point that Christ is not divided, and we were not baptized into a certain missionary, but into Christ (1:13). Paul addresses the different factions and stresses unity in Christ in 1:10-4:21.

Paul concludes his teaching with a look at the resurrection of the dead (15:1-58). Christ was raised from the dead, and we too will be raised from the dead. In our new body we will inherit the kingdom of God. In that great day death will be swallowed up in victory!

• • • Do you think that immorality is a problem in our church? Why do you think that is?

• • • Have you ever had an “ecstatic” spiritual experience? Do you know people who have? What are your thoughts about those experiences and their place in our faith lives?

2 Corinthians . . . A Book of Building Up Faith

In this letter Paul defends himself and his ministry against attacks from rivals. Paul points out that the cross of Christ means reconciliation. God made peace between himself and human beings, and Paul implores the Corinthians to be reconciled to God through the gospel (5:20). Paul challenges the community to test and see if they are really in the faith (13:5). Paul concludes by saying that his authority over the church has been used in this letter not to tear down the Corinthians, but to build them up (13: 10). Throughout this letter Paul defends himself, establishes his authority, and uses that authority to guide the Corinthians into a closer walk with Jesus.

• • • How do you “test” your own faith life? What are signs to you that your life is going well with God or signs that things aren’t going well with God?

Galatians . . . A Book of Transition and Clarification

In Galatians, the Apostle Paul is helping, assisting, and often confronting the church in Galatia, as the community learns what it means for Jews and Gentiles to now be together in God’s family. Paul challenges the Jewish Christian group which is seeking to make the Gentiles strictly adhere to Jewish law. Paul reaffirms

the one true gospel, and points out that if being set right with God (righteousness) comes through the law then Jesus life and death were unnecessary! The demand for circumcision and strictly following Jewish law and customs negates the true gospel.

Paul continues on speaking about the freedom found in Christ and the life lived by the Spirit. This freedom from the law is not to be free so that we can sin but so that we can be free to love (5:13). On the contrary, this love includes carrying each other's burdens and gently helping others to overcome sin (6:1-2). The life of following the Spirit leads to a greater freedom from sin and a closer walk with the Lord. We are to be new creations who exhibit the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (5:22-23). Paul powerfully states the obvious, that "there is no law against these things!" Everyone loves what the Spirit does, so let us live like that!

- • • Where have you experienced freedom in your life? Has your faith life been a part of that freedom?
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Ephesians . . . A Book of Celebration and Adoration

Paul writes a beautiful letter to the church in Ephesus, which is full of adoration of our Lord and almost feels like it should be sung rather than studied! In addition to poetically detailing the glories of being in Christ, this lyrical letter begins by reinforcing the Christian identity of the readers ("You also were included in Christ..." 1:13) and then calling the Christians to live in line with their status of being in God's family ("put on your new nature, created to be like God – truly righteous and holy" 4:24).

Chapter 2:1-10 is a must see, as Paul begins by pointing out that the Ephesians were once dead in their sins (v.1) but then leads us through the process of salvation noting that we are "made alive in Christ" (v.5), that salvation is by grace through faith (v.8), and that "we are God's masterpiece" (v.10). In chapter 6:10-17 Paul closes by encouraging the Ephesians to stand strong, putting on "the whole armor of God," a metaphor which recognizes that there is a great cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil and gives us the spiritual tools for the battle!

- • • What theme(s) from this letter are speaking to you right now? Why?
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Philippians . . . A Book of Unity and Friendship

Throughout this friendly letter Paul makes it clear that Jesus Christ is the foundation for the friendship and unity between he and the Philippians. Humility is a prominent theme, as service and obedience are the proper response to God. The theme comes full circle, pointing out that Jesus humbled himself in obedience to the Father to the point of death (2:8). The resurrection power that raised Jesus from his obedient death gives us hope. "I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!" (3:10-11).

We are to live in humbleness and unity in this life to serve our Lord, who was not only a model for humility but was also exalted that every knee should bow and confess that He is Lord (2:10-11). Indeed, everything else is “worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord!” (3:8).

- • • What examples do you see of genuine humility do you see in your life? What do you think is gained when we as followers of Jesus do follow Jesus’ example of humility?
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Colossians . . . A Book of Christ’s Supremacy

In Colossians, Paul stresses Christ as the great reconciler, and a tie to him is what reconciles us with God and gives us freedom from all the powers of the world. After the introduction Paul moves into a poem which praises Christ’s Lordship (1:13-23). By Him all things were created, He holds all things together, He is the head of the church, and He has reconciled us to God and made peace through His blood!

Paul stresses our freedom from this world and that we should set our hearts and our minds on things above, for our life is now with Christ (2:6-3:4). Because we are free and live with Christ we live holy lives and avoid sin, which Paul lists in 3:1-9. Paul closes the letter with some final instruction on how to best live in light of our relationship with Christ.

- • • In what way is knowing that Christ is above all the powers of the world relevant to your life right now?
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1 Thessalonians . . . A Book of Reinforcement

It is quite possible that 1 Thessalonians was the earliest out of all the letters that Paul had written. The church in Thessalonica began as a result of Paul’s evangelistic efforts (Acts 17:1-15), and was made up mostly of Gentiles. Paul extols the congregation for being genuine models of faith (1:7). Throughout the letter, Paul is appealing to what the Thessalonians already know. Paul is looking to reinforce the teachings which the Thessalonians have already been taught, so that they may stand strong in their faith. One major exception is 4:13-5:11, where Paul gives the Thessalonians new instruction concerning the coming of the Lord. Because of Jesus death and resurrection we are not like the rest of the world, which has no hope for those who are dead. Instead we believe that the dead will rise at the coming of Christ (4:16).

- • • Can you name something that you already “know” about, but really need to have reinforced in your faith life? What teachings/ sermons/ messages do you never get tired of hearing again?
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2 Thessalonians . . . A Book of Clarification

In 1 Thessalonians Paul speaks of Christ return as if it is very near as Paul speaks inclusively with those who will be alive at Christ's coming (We who are still living when the Lord returns... 1 Thess. 4:15). In 2 Thessalonians, Paul writes to correct this misunderstanding and explains that certain things must occur according to God's plan before Jesus will return (2:1-12). Paul criticizes members of the community who want to stop working because Christ's return is at hand. The book of 2 Thessalonians seems especially applicable today, when certain doomsday prophets get great publicity announcing the end of the world (like Harold Camping on May 21). Some Christians were so taken by this prophecy that they became the customers of atheist groups who offered to watch their pets after the Christians were raptured. While both 1 and 2 Thessalonians confirm the return of Christ we need to be familiar with God's plan and not be duped by false prophets.

• • • What do you think about the doomsday prophets of our times? How does the knowledge that Jesus will return affect your faith life?



Route 66 Week 11

The Letters Part 2/1 Timothy—Jude

1 Timothy . . . A Book of Mentoring Young Leaders

1 + 2 Timothy along with Titus have been known as the “Pastoral Letters” for hundreds of years. This is because they are written as directions from Paul to a younger generation of church leaders. Timothy was a young man who was presumably converted as a result of Paul’s evangelizing. Timothy joined Paul as a missionary and helper throughout the rest of Paul’s career. These letters contain Paul’s instruction and advice to young Timothy.

In this first letter to Timothy, Paul addresses church structure and order, false (and true) teaching, community relations, and ends by contrasting hope in and love of money with hope in and love of God. In 3:1-7 we see what the qualifications are to be an elder in the church.

• • • What theme(s) from this letter are speaking to you right now? Why?

2 Timothy . . . A Book of Encouragement

Paul begins this second letter by encouraging Timothy not to be timid or ashamed of the Gospel, but to join in suffering for the Gospel and to be strong and do the work of the Lord (1:7 – 2:26). This suffering for the Gospel is so that others can receive salvation (2:10).

Paul again addresses false teaching, saying that Timothy must gently instruct false teachers in the hope that God will lead them to repentance and truth so that they can escape from the trap of the devil! (2:24-26). We can all learn from this focus on gentleness and hope when dealing with those who disagree with us!

Also in 2 Timothy is a powerful section where Paul conveys the importance of scripture (3:14-17). All scripture is inspired by God in order to equip us for “every good work.” It is important that the spiritual leader be soaking (and SOAPing) in the scripture.

• • • What theme(s) from this letter are speaking to you right now? Why?

Titus . . . A Book of Community Structure and Mission

Paul calls Titus “his son in the faith” (1:4) so like Timothy, we assume that Titus was also converted by Paul. Titus makes a brief appearance in the book of Galatians, where Paul uses him as an example of how genuine a Christian and uncircumcised Gentile could be. There are many similarities between Titus and the other Pastoral letters, especially 1 Timothy. Church structure, false teaching, and community relations are again

key themes.

In writing to Titus, Paul lays out the requirements for being an elder (1:5-16). Paul tells Titus to see that there are elders in every town (1:5), who are to be of great character in order to refute all of the deceivers and false teachers who do not know God (1:16). Here we see that church organization is to lead to better equipped congregations who spread the truth. The organization and mission of the church must be carried on, and so Paul encourages mentoring youth in the congregation (2:1-8). Paul concludes by stressing what God has done for us (3:3-7) so that those who trust in God should devote themselves to doing good what is good (3:8).

• • • What theme(s) from this letter are speaking to you right now? Why?

Philemon . . . A Book of Faith Challenging Injustice

In this complicated little book, a slave named Onesimus meets Paul and is converted. Paul then sends Onesimus back to be reconciled to Philemon, his wealthy master. Paul and Philemon were good friends (1:1), and the fact that Onesimus met up with Paul while apart from his master suggests that he was not a runaway slave, but a slave who was seeking out a third party to be an advocate for him in dealing with his master.

Paul definitely advocates for Onesimus! Even though Paul sends Onesimus back to his master, Paul tells Philemon that Onesimus is no longer like a slave, but a beloved brother! (v.16). Paul instructs Philemon to welcome Onesimus back as if he were welcoming Paul himself ! (v. 17).

Some have tried to argue that the Bible condones slavery, but in this passage we see what God's will is! God's will is for reconciled relationships between equals -- between brothers and sisters in the Lord. The story of Philemon and Onesimus is one small part of the large story of how God overturns the structures of evil through his Son Jesus Christ.

• • • What theme(s) from this letter are speaking to you right now? Why?

Hebrews . . . A Book of Encouragement

The letter of Hebrews is interesting in that it does not identify the sender or the recipients. The main purpose of the document seems to be to encourage a group of believers not to lose heart, and not to fall away from their initial profession of faith. In order to encourage the recipients in their faith in Christ, the author articulates the truth about Jesus Christ using the following structure:

1. Superiority of Jesus as God's Son (1:4-4:13)
 - A. Superiority over angels (1:4-2:18)
 - B. Superiority over Moses (3:1-4:13)
2. Superiority of Jesus' priesthood (4:14-7:28)

3. Superiority of Jesus' sacrifice and ministry – inaugurating the new covenant (8:1-10:18)

4. Faith and endurance –

A. Encouragement to profit from Jesus' sacrifice (10:19-39)

B. OT examples of faith (11:1-40)

C. Relationship between Jesus' suffering and the Lord's discipline (12:1-13)

D. Warning against disobedience (12:14-29)

There are many arguments which are grounded in the Old Testament throughout the book of Hebrews. In this way the book highlights the continuity of the faith, and how the old forms of the Jewish faith help us understand who Jesus is today. Some of these OT forms which are touched on are: the purpose of the sacrificial system and how Christ was the perfect sacrifice (9:13-14), Christ as the High Priest (4:14-16), the analogy of the promised land and our future place of rest (4:1-10), and more. As the author begins to conclude the letter he reveals why our past faith is so continuous with and analogous to the new faith: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (13:8).

• • • What theme(s) from this letter are speaking to you right now? Why?

• • • How did the book of Hebrews help you to understand the ancient Jewish faith and how it relates to Christ?

James . . . A Book Challenging the Christian to Integrity

The book of James is traditionally held to have been written by James the brother of Jesus, and is written to Jewish Christians who are scattered among the nations. In this book we see a conflict between empty faith, or the empty profession of religion, and its lively expression. It is from James we get the powerful quote, "faith without works is dead" (2:17,26). We learn from James that a saving faith changes lives, transforming the believer into a doer as well.

Another theme is that of impartiality and wealth. First James points out that it is wrong to favor some over others, especially when we favor the rich over the poor out of our impure motives (2:4). This type of partiality is sin (2:9). We are not to be partial but to love our neighbor (2:8). James continues on this theme when he warns the rich who take advantage of others (5:6), telling the rich that 'the very wealth you were counting on will eat away your flesh in hell (5:3). Strong words! In this warning to the rich, and also throughout the other letters when the authors speak of false teachers, the New Testament writers were often unafraid to offend!

James spends an entire chapter dealing with speech, and controlling our tongues. Like a rudder guiding a ship or a bridle on a horse, our speech can bring about big things! We can praise God and bless others or we can gossip and ruin people with our words. This, as well as the entire book of James, challenges the believer to live a life of integrity.

- • • What theme(s) from this letter are speaking to you right now? Why?
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1 Peter . . . A Book to Encourage the Persecuted

The recipients of this letter were clearly going through some serious persecution. Persecution of Christians was a sporadic although fairly common occurrence for the early church. Here Peter takes many of the symbols of Judaism and applies them to the new Christian church in order to encourage them: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (2:9). The second half of the letter deals largely with how to live amidst the persecution and suffering as the people look to Christ who was a model, for Christ also suffered for since once for all (3:18).

- • • What theme(s) from this letter are speaking to you right now? Why?

2 Peter . . . A Book of Reaffirming the Faith

2 Peter is written to a people who are struggling with false teachers who are looking to do away with some of the elements of the Christian faith which don’t seem to fit with the pagan culture. Much of the letter explains the danger of and judgment on false teachers. We find that these false teachers were challenging the return of Christ (3:4). This is still a question today, “why hasn’t Jesus returned?” Peter’s answer is that the Lord is being patient so more can come to Him for he doesn’t want anyone to perish (3:9). It truly is amazing that the same words which reassured the church 2000+ years ago can again reassure us today.

- • • What theme(s) from this letter are speaking to you right now? Why?
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1 John . . . A Book of How the Characteristics of God Order our Lives

The words of the apostle John were recorded in the Gospel bearing his name, as well as in three additional letters and the book of Revelation. John is widely believed to be the only one of the twelve disciples who was not a martyr, even though several attempts were made on his life.

In this letter John reveals the nature of God and then the implications of God’s nature on the community. For example, God is light and in Him there is no darkness, therefore the community must walk in the light. Another example is that God is love, and so the believers need to love one another (2:3-11). Third, God is righteous, and “everyone who has done right has been born of him” (2:29). John concludes his letter by saying that his purpose of writing is so the community can be sure of their eternal life (4:13), and pleads with his final sentence, “dear children, keep away from anything that might take God’s place in your hearts” (4:21).

- • • What theme(s) from this letter are speaking to you right now? Why?
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2 John . . . A Book Encouraging Living in the Truth

The first two letters of John each have a section warning against false teaching. Both warn against teachers who say that Jesus did not come as a human, or that he did not have a real body. This is a heresy which came in great opposition against the truth of the Gospel in the time of the early church. John is aware of this in his letters, and warns that “if you wander beyond the teaching of Christ, you will not have fellowship with God. But if you continue in the teaching of Christ, you will have fellowship with both the Father and the Son” (v. 9-10). This letter encourages believers to remain in the truth!

• • • What theme(s) from this letter are speaking to you right now? Why?

3 John . . . A Book to Encourage Support of the Ministry

This short letter is written to commend Gaius of his support of ministers (specifically those traveling), and to encourage his good works so that he would not become like Diotrephes (an individual who does not support traveling teachers but says bad things about them). This short letter shows the great importance of helping those individuals who are sent to the world in order that they might spread the Gospel and the truth of Jesus Christ!

• • • What theme(s) from this letter are speaking to you right now? Why?

Jude . . . A Book Challenging False Teachers

The authors of the New Testament frequently take a strong stand against false teachers. As the Gospel spread through the church in its infancy, it was of utmost importance to guard the truth from corruption. These letters often speak of the harsh judgment on false teachers, and Jude is no exception. After denouncing the false teachers for most of the letter Jude ends with a call to remain faithful, “continue to build your lives on the foundation of the holy faith... Live in such a way that God’s love can bless you as you wait for the eternal life that our Lord Jesus Christ in his mercy is going to give you” (v.20-21).

• • • In what ways did the theme of listening to the truth/not listening to false teachers make you think about the spirituality scene today?

• • • What things in these letters were difficult to understand or need greater clarification on? Encourage someone to ask a pastor or do some research and email the group this week with some potential answers.



Route 66 Week 12 Revelation

With the book of Revelation, our Route 66 comes to an end. But its story lives on. John's revelation of the future, like the Pacific, stretches out as far as the eye can see. Enlivened by the crisp salt breeze, we pause to admire the sun as its colors flood the sky and dance on the water. The Morning Star. He set us on our journey in the East, and now he meets us in the west; Christ is indeed the sunrise and sunset of Scripture—and our lives. Commentator John Walvoord reminds us of Christ's overarching role:

In the earlier books of the Bible, Christ is introduced in the Messianic prophecies and the activities of the Angel of Jehovah in the Old Testament. The revelation of Jesus Christ is advanced in the Gospels and the Acts, which unfold the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son of God. The epistles add the theological interpretation of the work of Christ. To all of this dramatic and tremendously significant revelation, the last book of the Bible provides the capstone. It is indeed "the revelation of Jesus Christ" not only as the Lamb that was slain, a familiar portrayal in the book, but as King of kings and Lord of lords, who is certain to return to the earth in power and glory to judge the wicked and reward the righteous.

Many times, though, we are afraid to enter this mysterious book to behold Christ in His glory. Perhaps the enigmatic symbols intimidate us. Maybe we assume we cannot understand the book anyway, so why try? Possibly we fear becoming fanatical about future things, going off the prophetic deep end. Or our hesitance may be a by-product of Satan's goal to veil the truth from our eyes—particularly the truth about his eventual destruction (Revelations 20:1-10).

Don't let these things dampen your enthusiasm to know Christ in Revelation or any other part of Scripture. He is waiting to meet you here, the light of the universe, the One of whom the heavenly creatures will one day sing:

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing...To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever. (Revelation 5: 12-13)

We are reading the first chapters of Revelation and the last chapters. You will get to dig into the letters to the churches and the glorious finale of human history as we know it. But it is not just a finale, it is also the raise of the curtain on a restored human story where we finally live up to all that we are.

Some of the Facts

The book of Revelation was written by the Apostle John, the last living apostle in 95 AD. He has been exiled to the island of Patmos, a small Greek Island in the Aegean Sea. From his imprisonment there, he has a powerful vision from Jesus Christ himself, which he sends out to the churches so that they will be strengthened in the midst of persecution. The Roman Empire is leaning harder on Christians. In some areas of the empire great persecution has broken out and Christians are in fear for their lives. Some must have been questioning if Jesus was really as powerful as the great Roman Empire. Some must have wondered if they had made a mistake in choosing to follow Jesus now that it had become so dangerous. Some are trying to blend with the pagan culture around them to ease the tension a little.

The Apostle John, ever a Pastor, is wanting to offer encouragement to the struggling church. He wants them to be able to see beyond today and the pain they are suffering to truly look into the face of Jesus. To hear his voice. To see him in his power and glory. To remember again why they choose to follow him. As they follow the hard road that their faith demands, John wants to show them the light at the end of the tunnel. The book closes with the words:

He who is the faithful witness to all these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon!" Amen! Come, Lord Jesus! May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's holy people.

Jesus, through John, encourages his church to be faithful and to trust that he will return in victory and power. They have nothing to fear.

• • • Have there been times in your life when you needed to see beyond your current circumstances in order to get through a hard season? Has Jesus been a part of any of those “visions” that helped to encourage you? Have you ever had that feeling that Jesus showed up in a powerful and maybe even unexpected way?

• • • When you think about Jesus coming back, what feelings does that create for you? Why do you feel that way? Does that fit with John’s intention in Revelation? If there is a difference between John’s intention and your experience, why do you think that has occurred?

Overall Reflection

What has been something new you learned about the Bible that has been helpful? Any “Ahah” moments for you?

What book did you enjoy the most and would like to go back and read in full?

Are there any questions you still have that you hoped would be answered by now? If yes, what are those questions?

Now that you are at the end of Route 66, how would you describe where you are at in your relationship to scripture now?

_____ I have loved scripture and continue to love it even more.

_____ I didn't really know much about it, but now I am really intrigued and feel hungry.

_____ I didn't really know that much, and I still feel kind of overwhelmed by it, but I'm willing to keep learning.

_____ I really don't know how to answer this. I feel neutral.

Other: _____

