

**These devotions are meant to take you on a journey across the high points of scripture. They will not cover every verse but will let you see the flow of scripture so that you can understand individual sections in your personal study. Follow them and read the focus passages so that you might gain an appreciation of the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation.**

## **1. Congratulations, it's a boy and a girl – Creation**

**Focus passage: Genesis 2-3**

They are three of the highlights of my life. They are the days that each of my three children was born. My wife, Joan, and I had always wanted kids to share our life with and God granted that request. Three beautiful children with all their fingers and toes were given to us. Oh, the joy and the heartaches! Yet, part of the bliss has been and continues to be watching them grow. Helping them through the trials and watching their lives blossom. I may be jaded, but I picture God in the darkness before creation wanting children. I picture Him wanting to have someone to invest in and to watch grow and bloom. It is a scene in four acts.

**Preparing the nursery Genesis 1:1, In the beginning**, was a void like the darkest room that you can imagine with no light and no sound. Into that space, God created a world for His children to live. He filled it with light, sea, and land wrapped in an atmosphere in three days. Next, He took three more days to fill it with time and animals. The nursery was ready and it was good. No, it was perfect for nothing but the best would be good enough for the ones God loved.

**The delivery room Genesis 1:26** Now, on the end of the sixth day, God brought the man He loved into being. He was shaped out of the dust by the hand of God and given the image or quality of God so that he could communicate and understand God. Since man was alone, God gave him a partner created from his rib and told them to care for his world and have children so God would have more people to love.

**Creation broken Genesis 3:6** God had not wanted slaves, but rather children who chose to love Him so he gave them a choice. An angel named Satan, who had already made the choice to not love God, lied and made false promises and lured the man and woman God loved to make the same bad choice. They saw the fruit as a way to be like God. With that choice, creation was broken. Men would kill one another and the world would become evil so that love for God was not natural.

**D. Creation reborn Titus 3:5** Yet God still loved man and could not abandon him. God promised a savior to a people who often turned their back on God. That Savior was God's Son, Jesus, who would die on a cross so man could be loved by God again. God wants to live with us forever. He wants to walk with us and help us every day of our lives. He sent His son and tells His story so that we can feel His love and love Him in return.

The Bible is the story of love. A lot of people think that the Bible is a rule book or is just a musty history book. God wants you to know that it is a love story about the love that God has for people. God is love and He wants you to feel that love. He wants you to share that love with others so more people can feel His love and respond with love. Those who feel God's love are the luckiest people in the world. They have a God who is their Father and who promises to provide and protect His people. They will build a loving relationship with God that will give them an edge in life.

## 2 God gets personal - Abraham

### Focus passage: Genesis 12-35

If I were to grow a crop, I would plant a whole tray of seeds to make sure that I got six or eight good tomato plants. I would look for the hardiest and throw out the rest. In the time of the patriarchs, God does something entirely different. He throws himself totally into one family. He calls Abraham and no one else. There is not a plan B if Abraham doesn't work out. To me, that is just crazy and dangerous. Yet, God will throw everything He has into this one man and his family. He will nurture them, save them from themselves, and protect them against enormous odds. No other God has ever shown such love and devotion. Some of the things he does make us scratch our heads and wonder why he does them. We can see how much He will do to help us thrive.

**He plants the seed – Gen. 12:2** God plants a seed in the dirt of an ordinary man. It is unlike anything ever given to men anywhere else in history. God has a dream for this man of dirt. He will take this childless man and make him a great nation. Through this man, God will change the world. Yet, we scratch our heads when we hear it. What if he or his descendants fail?

**He waits for growth – Gen. 15:2** Abraham starts to doubt after ten years of waiting. Yet, Abraham has to grow before the promises can be fulfilled. He will wait for 25 years for the child to come. During that time, God will teach his child Abraham what it means to be a child of God. When God makes a promise, we want it fulfilled now. Yet, the wise learn to trust God's timing.

**He prunes the vine – Gen. 22:2** God does the unthinkable. He asks Abraham to sacrifice his one and only son. God is pruning his children Abraham and Isaac of all self-dependence. As Abraham and Isaac walked down the hill that day, they have learned a lesson of God's eternal love and commitment to them. The wise see that the greatest lessons are often forged in the fire of hardship and pain.

**He nurtures the fruit – Gen. 32:30** As the story continues, the next generation is born. Esau seems to reject the Lord from the beginning. The other son, Jacob, believes in the Lord but starts poorly. You begin to wonder if God's plan has been derailed. With a lot of work, God keeps the promise alive by nurturing this wayward grandson of Abraham. Isn't that what a father does?

God is still willing to work with simple people like you and me. As you look at the patriarchs, you see how God nurtures and prunes people to help them grow. God still gives the same care that He gave to Abraham to people today so that they become strong and courageous people by their faith relationship with Him. Some like Lot or Esau resist God's nurturing and pay the price. Others like Abraham and Jacob grow in faith and receive the blessing. The lesson is that it is not your standing or your money that determines your eventual fate. It is your faith and your relationship with the Lord. A loving heavenly Father gives His people an edge in life.

### 3. Put down the selfie stick - Joseph Focus passage: Genesis 37-50

Athletes have them. Politicians have them. Even high school graduates sometimes have them. They all have dreams. It may be to win the World Series or to make lots of money as a doctor. Yet the problem with many of those pictures is that they are all about the dreamer. Great dreams include others. It is the person who wants to find a spouse and have a family. It is the person who wants to find a cure for cancer or feed the hungry in a third-world country. These require surrendering something of ourselves for the good of others. Joseph starts with a dream that is all about him like a picture taken with a selfie stick. God gives him a big picture dream that will change the history of the world. His life is a lesson in why we need to stop focusing on ourselves and look at God's big dreams for us.

**Taking a kingly selfie Gen. 37:9** He is the arrogant seventeen-year-old son of Jacob. He is not afraid to snitch on his brothers because he is a teenager who thinks he knows it all. He has two self-centered dreams picturing his family bowing down to him as if he is the king. He shows his immaturity by rubbing his brother's faces in this self-portrait instead of keeping the dreams to himself. His pride shows that he is not yet ready to be a leader in the family.

**In a prison photo Gen. 37: 27** His brothers hate him for his arrogant dreams. When Jacob sends Joseph to report about his brothers, the brothers bind him and sell him as a slave to traders in a caravan bound for Egypt. So much for the self-proclaimed king. In Egypt, he is falsely accused, thrown in prison, and forgotten. His conceit has taken him from prince to dungeon. Thirteen years of hardship will mold him and refine him into a useful tool for the Lord.

**The big picture Gen 41:25** God sends Pharaoh a dream of warning. Seven healthy cows are eaten by seven sickly cows. No one can interpret the dream. Suddenly, someone remembers Joseph. A humble Joseph gives God the credit and offers to give God's message to Pharaoh. He tells the Pharaoh that there will be seven good years and seven years of famine. His words will save the Egyptian people from starvation. Because of the importance of the task, Pharaoh gives him the assignment of putting God's dream into practice.

**A family photo Gen 45:7** For seven years, the harvest is abundant, but then the years of famine come. Jacob and his sons need food or they will die. Now, fifteen years after they last saw Joseph, the brothers bow before him and ask for food just like his dream of long ago. On the second visit, Joseph reveals himself and forgives them. Hardship has changed Joseph into a humble servant. He feeds them all and makes them a home in the best part of Egypt. Joseph has given up his dream for God's dream.

Joseph's original dreams were like selfie stick photos taken at the expense of others. God used hardship to refine Joseph so that the arrogant young man matured into a meek servant who would save his people and the nation of Egypt from famine. God will break into our dreams of self-glory. He will let those dreams crumble and blow like dust in the wind. Those who listen to the Lord will become people whom the Lord can use for greater dreams. Put down your selfie stick for God has something better. He will make us part of the big picture so we can impact the world in which we live. If you swap your dreams for His, you can see a brighter picture develop around you.

#### 4. Pharaoh, Pharaoh, Oh, Oh Let My People Go! - Deliverance Focus Passage: Book of Exodus

We all have them. You know, those tough stretches in life. The car breaks down, the company cuts back on salaries or benefits, someone you love gets sick. You may not be having one of those times, now, but you know you will. What will it take you to cry out to the Lord? How bad does it have to get before you pray about it for five minutes or an hour? How bad does it have to be before you ask others to pray about it? Usually, it has to be pretty bad and that is a shame. We cause ourselves a lot of pain by not crying out to the Lord. The book of Exodus is the story of a nation crying out and a God who delivered them. God was waiting to help, but it took a long time for them to call.

**A cry after centuries Exodus 3:7** When they had first come to Egypt, life was good. Joseph was the second in command and he gave his family of 70 people the best land in Egypt as their own. Over the years they became numerous and that brought trouble. The leaders of Egypt began to be afraid of them and enslaved them to build the pyramids and other government projects. Finally, it got bad enough that they thought of God. They cried out to a God that they had largely forgotten.

**An unlikely hero Exodus 3:11** Who would God use to save His people? God prepared a man named Moses. God worked it so that Moses was trained in Egyptian schools along with the kids from the noble families. Yet, he threw it all away in a fit of anger when he killed an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Jew. Everything God has worked on for forty years was almost destroyed. Forty years later, eighty-year-old Moses saw a burning bush where God called him to save God's people. The man doesn't have to be impressive, because the real hero is God.

**God rolled up His sleeves Exodus 6:1** Moses was to go and stand before the most powerful person in the world and tell him that God wanted Pharaoh to let God's people go. Each time Pharaoh said no to God, God brought another plague on Egypt. 10 plagues in all were directed at the gods of Egypt like Sun God Ra and Mother God Isis. Every aspect of Egyptian life was covered from water to sun and bugs to cows. Nothing was left untouched. Face it, God will not be mocked. Those who stand in His way will face His wrath. Those who refuse to listen to God will find their lives get difficult.

**New horizons Exodus 12:31** Finally, Pharaoh gets the message when the last plague takes his son, the crown prince. He acts in anger more than faith. On their way out of Egypt, the Jews plunder the Egyptians. As they leave Egypt, they leave a wealthy nation with the possessions needed to build a future. God will lead them to the Promised Land where He wants them to build a nation of faith and live in peace. Everything that God promised to Abraham 600 years before is ready to happen. God has a plan for His people.

The good news in this story is the mighty miracle that God worked for His people. The bad news is that they waited 400 years to ask with generations in slavery before freedom came. Think of the pain that they could have avoided if they called God even 100 years earlier. How bad does it have to get in your life before you call on the Lord? Think of the pain that you and I can avoid if we are praying daily to the Lord. God is the hero in this story and the story of the Exodus shows how much God will do for His people. He took on a powerful Pharaoh and a mighty nation. What could God do for you in your troubles without working up a sweat?

## **5. Creating a Little Heaven on Earth - 10 commandments**

### **Focus Passage Exodus 15-40, Leviticus**

It seems like a picture out of one of those epic movies. A half-million ragtag refugees come out of Egypt into the desert. They have no rules and no real leadership as they flee the land that their God has just punished with ten plagues. They have freedom, but they are not a nation. God leads them to the sacred mountain where He will plant three seeds that are needed to build a community. By the time that they get to the Promised Land, they will have the tools that they need to build a lasting society that will become powerful people. This is the story of the transformation from exodus exiles to one nation under God.

#### **God's threefold plan**

**Creating community Exodus 18:18** - The line of needy people stretched over a football field long every morning as people came to Moses for help and guidance. God's first task is to create a caring community and the structure to go with it. There will be leaders over thousands, hundreds, and tens. Loving neighborhoods will be created so that people can care for each other. It is the beginning of the modern church working together for common goals for the benefit of all.

**Recreating Eden Exodus 20:3** - Yet, what does that good life look like? God gives His vision of what that society looks like. They are people with a relationship to God as they create a Sabbath to rest in Him and they respect His name. They are people who think about others so that they don't steal, hurt or lie about their neighbor. It is a return to the principles of the Garden of Eden. If the nation will live by these truths, they will live in harmony with one another and will have a life filled with joy.

**Centered on God Exodus 25:8** - The final part of God's vision for the nation was to have God dwelling in their midst. The tabernacle is built right in the middle of their camp. They will build a relationship with God so that they depend on Him and can become a godly community. God is not to be on the edge of their lives but will be the center of their lives. They have a God who will provide for them and care for them. It will be like having a little heaven on earth.

People often call the Ten Commandments, the "thou shalt not". I think that is because we often chafe under the rules and want the freedom to do whatever we want. Yet as we look around, third-world nations where there are no rules are places where every man lives in fear and must fend for himself. God wants something better. He pictures a nation where everyone has each other's backs. People were there when you were sick and helped you with tasks that were hard for you. People had deep friendships and laughed and cried together. In their midst was a God who used His power for His people. Such a world is still possible for us. We have God's vision of what the world should look like. Those who live in that vision will find a bit of heaven here on earth. They will thrive while others struggle. They will survive while others around them perish. It is still God's vision for happiness given to His church.

## **6 Follow the leader – Desert wandering**

### **Focus Passage: Numbers and Deuteronomy**

The diamondback roller coaster at Kings Island sounded like a great idea. The three high school boys laughed and joked as they waited for a half-hour in line. Yet, when the tension bar came down over Ted's shoulders, he was starting to have second thoughts. The ride started with a jolt and Ted began to wish that he was still in line. Tens of thousands of people rode this ride safely each year. Would he be on the one trip that would miss some turn and dash into the ground? As Israel wanders in the desert, the nation had to follow the Lord to the Promised Land. This story is one about their disbelief and what happens when you and I don't trust the Lord to lead us, but rather try to tell God what to do.

**Grumble, grumble Num. 10:33** Twelve tribes left Mt. Sinai led with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. As many as a million people walking together from the mountain up to the land that the Lord had promised over six hundred years before. Yet peace lasted only a few days. The Israelites started complaining about food and water. They knew what was better and God should do what they wanted not to make them follow Him.

**Turning against God Numb. 14:3** From the edge of the Promised Land, spies are sent to survey the land. The nation rebels against God when the spies give a fearful report that the people of the land will be too hard to overcome. They complain that God has had evil motives and just brought them here to die. Sadly, they are not ready to trust God or truly follow Him. This generation of adults will die in the desert as God takes the next 40 years to teach his children to trust him.

**The leader fails, too Num. 20:12** Forty years of wandering and the people have not stopped complaining. God provides the water the people need when Moses falls facedown before the Lord. Yet, Moses is angry and strikes the rock instead of obeying God. How long will he have to put up with these people and their complaints? The Lord answers that question for Moses. He will not be allowed to enter the Promised Land. He has disobeyed the Lord. It will soon be time for another to lead.

**Taking baby steps of trust Num. 21:34** As the people finally march north to the Promised Land, there are still questions. How will we conquer the people of these lands? God's answer is simple. They need to trust God and believe that He is strong enough to conquer the nations. The enemy is strong, but the Israelites need to see that their God is stronger. Amazingly, the people follow their God and watch as one after another nation falls before God.

It was a matter of trust. None of the Israelites had been outside of Egypt but Moses. They didn't know where to go, but God did. All they had to do to get to the Promised Land was to follow the Lord. We could ask the same question as ourselves. Do you know where to go in the future or the challenges that you will face? I don't, but I know that God does and He will lead me there if I listen and follow. God has a special future prepared for you. The Christian faith is not just about getting to heaven. It is also about following God and living with values that will lead to blessings. He will walk beside us and lead all who will listen to the life that He has prepared for us. We would wander by ourselves for a lifetime and never find what He will lead us to. As a Father, He loves you and wants to make your life the best it can be.

## **7. Do we dare? - Joshua**

### **Focus passage – book of Joshua**

For forty years, the people have followed Moses. Now Moses is gone just as they are ready to enter the Promised Land and claim the promises given to Abraham long ago. The giants are still in the land like they were forty years before. How will they go and claim the opportunity that the Lord has given them? Who will lead them into the Promised Land? Joshua is the story of God building a people so that they can go and do the impossible. He will build up leaders and people so that both are ready to claim His promises. He will show them that they will succeed if they follow Him and fail when they try to move forward without Him.

**Faith building for Joshua - Joshua 1:9** Who was this Joshua? He was Moses' second in command. Yet the job was terrifying. How do you step into the shoes of Moses? How do you lead a million people so that they can claim the promises God made to Abraham 600 years before. God begins the task by building up the leader. God tells him that the answer lies in scripture and that he should meditate on Moses' five books so he follows the Lord.

**Faith demonstration for the people - Joshua 3:13** Once Joshua is built up, God must now build up the faith of his people. The Jordan River is at flood stage and there are a million people to get safely across. God's command is one of faith. Carry the ark, the holy seat of God from the tabernacle into the water. I will go before you. As the priests step into the water, the river dries up so the people can walk across dry land just as they did at the Red Sea with Moses over 40 years earlier. It was a demonstration that nothing would be impossible for God.

**C. Trusting God to do the impossible - Joshua 6:3** How do you take a fortified city when you follow God? You depend on Him. The plan was simple but made no sense. Walk around the city for seven days with the Ark of God in the middle and horns sounding your advance. Battles are won when you follow God's plan. We must learn to walk by faith no matter how strange it sounds. It is calling on God to make the impossible work. It is calling on God to overcome the things that are beyond us. Faith listens to God and follows God's will for us.

**D. Failing to obey - Joshua 7:20** How do you cause certain failure? Failure comes when people fail to listen to the Lord or try to do their own thing and make God follow them. In the book of Joshua, a man named Achan took some of the spoils of Jericho even though God forbid it. You ask why he faced death. His sin caused the deaths of 36 other people who unknowingly attacked the next town and died. Failure comes when people think that they can forget what God has said. Disaster comes when you think you are above God's law.

As they stand at the edge of the Promised Land, this is a defining moment for the people of Israel. They failed to follow God once, would they do it again? Would they try and do things their way as they had before or would they walk behind their God trusting Him to keep His promises? Every church that I have known has such moments. They can play it safe and expect God to make things work the way that they want them to or they can go forward into the unknown where God is working with trust. It is the defining moment that determines much of the success or failure of every Christian group.

## **8 Downward spiral - Judges**

### **Focus passage – book of Judges**

There are times that we are doomed to repeat failure again and again. You work out, eat better, and lose 25 pounds. Yet, little by little it came back. Now you have to work at it all over again. The same is true with other behaviors like getting up early, stopping smoking, or cutting back on television. It is easy to commit to something drastic when there is a crisis, but when things start going well, we fall back in the old habits. Doomed to repeat our failures is the theme of the book of Judges. Over these 330 years, the people fell away from God, were conquered by a neighboring people, and helped by God only to do it all over again. They just couldn't remain loyal to God.

**Everyone does their own thing - Judges 6:10** Judges begins in the days after Joshua. The conquest of the Promised Land and the miracles that God had done seem long forgotten. The people had shown enormous faith in Joshua's day. Now, their children had forgotten God and started worshipping the sensuous false gods around them. God rescues them from their enemies and they had believed in Him for a while only to return to their wicked ways. You would have thought that they had learned, but the people were fickle and wanted to do their own thing.

**God chooses the weakest to show His greatness Judges 6:15** Yet when the people cried out, God sent help. God picks a man who is the least in a very weak clan in the nation to save them. He is not the man anyone would have picked, but God did it for a purpose. He wanted everyone to see that salvation would come by God's power and not because some great warrior came out of the woodwork. Amazingly God is patient and slowly builds Gideon's faith so that the people can be rescued.

**God demonstrates He is worth following Judges 7:7** So Gideon calls for an army and amazingly 32K men showed up to fight the Midian army that had over 200K. God begins to pare down the army to only 300 men. He doesn't want anyone to say that the army saved them. It was time for them to see what the Lord could do so that they might trust Him. God would defeat this mighty army with just a few men. He would do a miracle so that people might remember what God had done.

**Doing their own thing again Judges 8:33** Yet, the death of Gideon brought an end to Godly faith and found the people worshipping Baal again. The people forgot what God had done for them. They went back to their old ways and worshipped gods of clay and wood that they could see instead of the almighty God who had saved them. They wanted gods who would do whatever the people thought was best. The spiral continued and an opportunity for revival is missed.

The Book of Judges is the story of a people destined to repeat their pain. They remember God only long enough to call out in their pain. As soon as times get nice, they want to do their own thing. They wanted the pleasures of life and the easy way. God was soon forgotten. And so the cycle will repeat for them. Wanting to live without God, they will live outside His protection. They will live without His wisdom and stuff will just happen. They will find themselves in trouble and wonder why God didn't protect them. They are fools and doomed to repeat disasters through life. The wise will build a lasting relationship with the Lord that carries through good and bad times. They will let the Lord guide and protect them. They will lean on Him and learn from Him. God's dream for His people still has this same struggle today.



## 9 When you feel like God gave up on you - Ruth

### Focus passage: Book of Ruth

We have all met people like Tina. In her freshman year of college, she was free of her parents and free to make a lot of bad decisions. There were parties filled with alcohol and there was the wild boyfriend. She was having the time of her life. Then suddenly she was pregnant and the boyfriend dropped her. All the promise of a great life seemed gone. Seeing no place to go but home, she packed her things and hoped they would accept her. Her parents cried, but they embraced her and welcomed her home. Life could be rebuilt with their love. Ruth is the story of a heavenly Father who embraces a lost family and gives them a future. It shows that our loving Father is always ready to help repair and renew lives.

**A series of mistakes Ruth 1:10** Our story begins with a famine. A man decides to go to a heathen nation with his wife and two children rather than trust that God. He goes to a place where God is not worshipped. This was the first mistake for they abandon God and seek to make things work in their way. The second mistake is that the sons both take pagan wives. Here was a family that wasn't just going to live for a little while in this pagan land, but was settling in and living without God.

**The courage to return to God Ruth 1:6** God comes to the aid of His people in Judah, but not to the disobedient family in Moab. Those who have left the Lord behind only hear of his blessings but never experience them. The answer is to repent and return. Sadly, Naomi goes home but doesn't get it. She desired to go home for food and not for God. She will be in the right place for blessing, but she has much to learn and sins to confess.

**Allowing God an opportunity to help Ruth 2:2** Oddly, it is a pagan woman Ruth who throws herself on God's mercy. Jewish law said that the poor could glean fields already harvested. It was one of God's programs for the feeding of the poor. She took the promise of God at His word and allowed God to work in her life by living in His law and trusting in His mercy. She was not lazy nor proud. She was hardworking and humble and God was more than ready to act.

**A new future Ruth 4:17** A son was born named Obed. The child would be able to claim the farmland of Naomi's husband and would provide food and shelter for Naomi and Ruth. The child would be part of God's plan to change the world as Obed would have a grandson named King David and a descendant named Jesus. There is no limit to what God can do if people will live with faith. God can take people whose lives are shattered and lift them to places of honor and great joy.

The bible is filled with people who would seem beyond help. There is the thief on the cross, Saul who imprisons Christians and even a tax collector named Matthew. Every one of them seems beyond reclamation, but God lifts them all because all of them called on Him in faith and changed their lives. We all know people who think that they cannot be reclaimed. They think that God is against them and that the roof would cave in if they walked through these doors. Yet, the story of Ruth shows that God can and would like to reclaim them all. As we read this story, we can get all caught up in the love story of Ruth and Boaz, but that is not the point of the book of Ruth. It is a story of the lost being remade by a loving Father. There is no reason for people to live without hope.

## **10 Be weird, be different! - Samuel and Saul**

### **Focus passage: 1 Samuel 1-15**

**A weird lesson from Dave Ramsey** - Dave Ramsey has made me weird. I am not in debt and have a budget so that my wife and I manage our money instead of it controlling us. God's people are weird, too. They aim to be married for life, are willing to make sacrifices for others, and have a set of values that make them the friend you always wanted to have. That makes them weird in an age where people justify bad behavior by saying that "everyone else is doing it". The story of Samuel and Saul is about a time when everyone wanted to live just like the people around them and God's battle to make them different. God wanted them to be moral and godly people who would lead others to a better life.

**Sadly, Israel was just like everyone else 1 Sam 2:22** Our story begins at the end of the time of the judges. The priests were wicked and stole from the Lord. The people had forgotten the lessons of the Exodus. It had grave consequences. The ark was captured by the Philistines and the nation struggled. Even today, when God's people forget their God, they face the consequences. God wants his people to be different and not like everyone else.

**God calls them to be different 1 Samuel 7:3** God had prepared a leader who would bring His people back to Him. His name was Samuel. People came to see that Samuel spoke for God and so, in desperation, the people finally came to Samuel for help against the Philistines. Samuel laid their sins before them and made them put away their false gods and their evil ways. When the sins are great, we must return to the Lord and confess. If we want our nation, our community, and our own lives to be restored, we must throw ourselves on God's mercy and follow Him.

**Even after years of peace, the people want to be like everyone else 1 Samuel 2:22** As Samuel gets old, the people look for a successor. Yet instead of asking God to raise another Godly prophet, they seek a worldly solution to their problems. They want a king just like everyone else has around them. They are rejecting the ways of the Lord and seeking to be just like everyone else. They want to put their trust in a strong king and his army instead of trusting the Lord to protect them against all their enemies.

**God looks for a king who will be different 1 Sam 13:14** God leads them to a man who looks kingly and strong who was named Saul. Things were good for a while and Saul follows the Lord. Yet, there is a danger when men lead. Pride begins to enter Saul and he begins to think that he doesn't need God. He gets impatient and decides to take on battles without the Lord. In the end, the Lord must reject Saul. He is leading the people to be just like their neighbors. God wants his leaders and people to be God-centered and trust God can do all things.

God wants something better for His people. Our constant struggle is that the culture tells us to take the easy way, the fun way, or the way of the crowd. It wants us to be miserable like them serving our emotions and passions instead of living in God's wisdom. Yet, to have that better life, we have to live differently than the world. That is why I believe that weird is wonderful. It is wonderful to have a loving wife and children who attend church virtually every Sunday. It is nice to be someone who greets the waitress with a smile and who helps their friends and neighbors. Think of how it would change our community if every person loved their spouse, were honest and hardworking, and went out of their way to help one another. It pays to be weird.

## 11. The man who had God's heart – Young David

**Focus passage: 1 Samuel 16 – 2 Samuel 7**

When we consider who to hire as our doctor or mechanic, we often consider their skill and knowledge. We want a doctor who has done this procedure dozens of times and was at the top of their class. We want a mechanic who has worked on this model car with years of experience. They need to get it right. When God looks at a person, he is not impressed with their skill or knowledge. He can give both to any fool. What he cares about is the heart. Is this a person who will be honest and have values? Is this a person who will follow God and believe in God? What stood out with David was his heart. He was a man of character who loved the Lord more than anything else. His early life was dedicated to the Lord.

**David is chosen by God for his heart 1 Sam. 16:7** Saul has been rejected by God for his stubbornness and unwillingness to follow God or repent of his sins. When Samuel sees David, God says this is the one. Anoint him to be the next king. He has the heart that I am looking for. He is the one who has what is needed to lead my people. I will be like a father to him and will nurture him and make him the greatest king that the world has seen. David has God's heart, but what is that?

**Those with God's heart fight for God's Honor 1 Sam 17:45** It is about a year later and David is still too young for the army so his father sends him with food for his older brothers as they battle the Philistines. There in the valley, Goliath is shouting curses against the true God. David is incensed that this giant would defile the name of the true God. He is willing to fight Goliath for the honor of God. He is willing to lay his life on the line rather than have the world and the Israelites think that their God is weak and ineffective.

**Those with God's heart keep themselves pure 1 Sam 24:10** Advance about ten years and we find David hiding in the desert from Saul who wants to kill him. A rare opportunity comes when Saul relieves himself in a dark cave. David's men who are tired of running and see this as an opportunity from God want David to kill Saul and be done with it. Yet, David will not kill the king of God's people. David will keep himself pure. The Lord stands behind the righteous and not the evil. How can David expect the Lord to protect him if he is no better than Saul?

**Those with God's heart accept God's Will 2 Sam 7:2** David has now been king for about twenty years and the Lord has brought his wealth and power. He wants to use this time of peace to build a temple to the Lord so that all the world will honor God and worship Him. Surprisingly, God says no. You must continue to lead these people with your example of godliness so that they truly become a godly nation. Saddened, David accepts the Lord's will. It was a plan that came from a Godly heart, but it was not God's plan.

Never underestimate the heart. God's people do not need strength or great resources, God will provide those. They need to be dedicated to the Lord and be open to being His tool in the world. Those who have His heart are the ones that God can use to work in the lives of the community and the nation. God will choose them because their open heart is willing to follow Him and to do His will. It is something that we can develop in our children as well if we want their happiness. God's heart is the greatest asset that a person can have. Imagine how it would change your life if you were more like David. Think of the mistakes you would not make because you had God's values. Think of the help and blessings that God could bring into your life because you are now open to following Him and building a relationship with Him. God is looking for people with His heart whom He can love and help all the days of their lives.

## 12 Willing to repent - King David

### Focus passage: 2 Samuel

Was David a Godly man? The young David surely followed the Lord. Yet, as we follow him through life we see a man who seems eviler than the king that he replaced. Saul never committed adultery, murdered a man, or allowed his children to do the evil that David did. Yet, David was honored by God, and Saul was discarded. On the surface, it doesn't make sense. What David had was not a perfect life, but a humble heart. He sinned but was open to the Lord's rebuke. As you follow David, you see the power of being open to the Lord. No one is without sin, but how you react to sin can make all the difference. David repented when he sinned so that the Lord might restore him.

**Even the mighty fall 2 Samuel 11:4** David's downfall began on a rooftop. The troops were out at battle and the middle-aged David was bored and wandering the palace. He sees a beautiful woman and has to have her. A simple one-night fling with a pretty woman begins a downfall that will haunt the rest of his life. He murders her husband and brings others into the deadly cover-up. David has fallen.

**Sin's consequence 2 Sam 12:11** A year passes, a baby is born and it seems like no one has noticed. Because His servant has not repented, the Lord sends the prophet Nathan to David. In a simple story, God convicts David of his sin and rebukes him for its destruction upon God's people. David will not die for the sin as the law demands, but there will be consequences for his sin. His own family will fight and cause him great pain. His sin will destroy his family.

**A Saint repents Psalm 51:4** David doesn't try to make excuses for what he has done or blame God. He admits freely that he deserves punishment. He appeals to the Lord's mercy and asks for forgiveness for he knows that he cannot undo what he has done or make things right. Then he does something most of us never think about. He asks the Lord to make his faith stronger so that he might not sin like this again. His desire is not just to get past the consequences, but to be more like God.

**Humble before a perfect God 2 Sam 22:31** Unlike Saul, David is honest about his sins and their effects. He speaks from the heart about God's mercy when enemies attack or when his character fails. The Lord was his refuge and strength in life. Even punishment from God did not change that. He knew of the character of God and how God was always right in the things that he did. God was David's bedrock that kept him level amid all the troubles that he often felt.

The Bible shows David's repentance. He humbles himself before God and willingly accepts the consequences of his sins and the opportunity to learn from his mistakes. Unlike Saul, he never tries to excuse what he has done or blame the Lord for the situation. Every Christian has two choices when they stumble. They can reject the Lord and try to make things work like Saul did or they can humbly return to the Lord and confess their sins as David did. The proud will be rejected and not get up, while the humble before the Lord will be restored. David shows us how to survive sin with repentance and faith. It is what separated him from Saul and what made him a great king. His strength was from the Lord at the tabernacle where he worshipped and built a strong relationship with the Lord. He let the Lord lift Him up and so must we. **David shows that God doesn't give up on the repentant sinner.** God will forgive and restore those who return to Him.

### 13 Laughing, Crying, Cursing, Sighing - Psalms The Psalms span from Moses (Ps.90) to after the Exile (Ps.137)

God created man and woman to have feelings, and they often express those feelings in song. Celebrations are announced with trumpets lifting our hearts. Sadness is often voiced by saxophones playing the blues in a minor key. The ups and downs in the story of life are often expressed in music. It may be for that reason that many Christians claim the psalms as their favorite book. It is real life expressed from the heart. It paints a variety of emotions in such a way that we feel the author's triumph and tragedy with our hearts. Sometimes, the mood is happy as the author praises the Lord for what He has done. Other times, the mood is sad as the author expresses his pain and begs the Lord for help and deliverance. At other times, we find the psalmist cursing their enemies or sighing as they confess their sins. We find them pondering God's work or praising God as a community in worship. The variety among the 150 psalms is incredible. As we understand the moods of the psalms, we can pray with them in worship to our God.

**Times to laugh:** The psalms of thanksgiving express the variety of situations in which our God helps us. We may thank God for His care (Psalm 23), His deliverance (Psalm 30), His forgiveness (Psalm 32) or His kindness (Psalm 118). Sometimes the praise to the Lord details an individual experience or just a broad picture of His love. Our hearts reach out and announce to all what God has done. These are psalms help you rejoice and tell everyone what God has done in your life.

**Times to cry:** At times, life has caused us pain and tears streak down our face. Forty-three personal laments and six community laments are scattered across the pages of the Psalms. The laments can be a cry for help (Psalm 70), a longing to be with God (Psalm 42), or a remembrance of God's power in the midst of our pain (Psalm 77). Such psalms often tell the story of a person's pain, express confidence that God can help and ask for God's grace in their time of need. These psalms help us when we hurt so that we pray focusing on God and not just our pain.

**Times to curse:** Sometimes people hurt us so much that we want revenge. The Psalms have a better idea. Six Psalms consider the enemies of Israel to be enemies of God. They ask the Lord to deal with people who have caused them pain. These psalms may seem harsh when we think of Jesus' appeal to love our enemies (Matt. 5:38-44), but are just a call for God's justice. They ask the Lord to judge and to deal with evil instead of the people of God bringing vengeance. These are psalms you can pray when you have been deeply hurt and seek answers from God.

**Times to sigh:** Finally, every person sins and needs the forgiveness of God. When your sin leaves your heart sighing under the weight of sin, seven psalms can help you approach God. These psalms are built on the bedrock of God's forgiveness and mercy. We can lay our sin before God confident that our God will forgive us. These psalms can be prayed when life has been shattered by sin.

God's people have sung the Psalms over the ages. The messages have a lyric quality that often rolls off the tongue and echoes the deep yearnings of the heart. As I page through the Psalms, I often find the psalmist expressing feelings that I have deep in my soul. As I speak my emotions in the words of the psalm, the psalmist directs me to new understandings and healing as his faith speaks to mine. I find direction for my prayers as I learn about the nature of my God and His help for my life. More than anywhere else, the Psalms speak to my inner being and bring my soul closer to God.

## 14 Throwing God's blessings away - Solomon

Focus passage: 1Kings 1-11, 2 Chron. 1-9

Solomon's annual income was 25 tons of gold a year and the riches were all around him. He sat on an ivory throne overlaid with gold, received tribute from kings and merchants, and drank from goblets made of gold. He was so rich that silver had almost no value in the days of Solomon. Yet it was all thrown away in a generation. The kingdom would be torn in two. The riches would disappear and the peace would never be seen again. Solomon had it all, but threw it away for the lust of women and because he forgot the true God. We forget how wealthy we are and like Solomon, we are in the process of throwing it all away as we become a nation that is discarding God. Solomon is a lesson for us all.

**A. If that wasn't enough, God gave Solomon wisdom 1 Kings 3:12** God had blessed the nation during the time of David. It was the best time that any nation had seen. God had secured the throne for Solomon and comes to him and wants to give Solomon even more. Solomon in his wisdom asks for a discerning heart so that he might rule the people well. He wants to have a heart that knows what the people need and will be a blessing to all of Israel. It takes a good king and makes him great.

**B. There is more to come if you honor God 1 Kings 9:4-5** If that was not enough, God came later and was ready to offer even more. Solomon would be the beneficiary of all the promises that the Lord made to David. Yet there was a condition and that condition was obedience. Solomon needed to be a man like his father. He needed to be one who worshipped the Lord and led the people to follow their God and live with his values. Only a Godly nation could become the beacon that God had in mind.

**C. Solomon began to turn away from God 1 Kings 11:4** It was lust that took Solomon away. He filled his life with women – 700 wives and 300 concubines from the nations that he conquered. He permitted these women to worship their gods instead of insisting that they worship the Lord. Then he began to worship their gods with them because of his love for these women. Soon the nation followed his lead and God was not the center of the kingdom of Israel.

**D. God began raised rivals to turn Solomon back to faith 1 Kings 11:14** As Solomon forgot God, God began to send rivals from the surrounding kingdoms to cause Solomon and the people pain. The rivals were to lead the nation to call upon the name of the Lord as they had in the days of the Judges. Yet, nothing seemed to work. Solomon had forgotten the true God and sold his soul to his many wives and their gods. Camelot was over because of the unfaithfulness of David's son and heir.

According to the book of Ecclesiastes, forgetting God made life meaningless for Solomon. He had wealth, power, and wisdom; but it meant nothing. He pursued one pleasure after another, but it only left him empty. Such was life without God. It was a life of having everything but it was all a waste. Take away God and nothing else matters. Yet the same book shares Solomon's wise answer to it all. If you want to have a joyful life, be content with what you have and thank the Lord for it all. Don't just wish for food, be thankful that God made you so you can taste it. Don't chase the created things, live in a relationship with the creator. Real joy comes in having a relationship with God and in the knowledge that you and I have a heavenly Father who will keep on giving.

## 15 Will they walk with God? - Divided kingdom

Focus passage: 1Kings 1-11, 2 Chron. 1-9

Strong and weak presidents have changed the course of our nation's history. Washington would be one of the great presidents in almost anyone's book. Buchanan is often rated as one of the worst presidents. He sat and watched the country fall apart in the years before the civil war. As we look at presidents and other leaders, we can see how they are instrumental in the shape of a country or a company. The same is true of the kings of the Jews. Solomon got the people started on the wrong path and his successors made things even worse. Yet the constant in the time of the kings was the Lord. He had made promises that the nation would continue and he worked to keep Israel as a nation. He brought the people through this time so that the Messiah could be born among them and could change the world.

**The kingdom is divided. 1 Kings 12:15** Rehoboam is the forty-one-year-old Son of Solomon who takes the throne from his father. The people rebel over the high taxes and forced labor that Solomon had imposed on them to support his wealth. Instead of listening to his father's older and wiser counselors, he tells the people that they will have to put up with the taxes. There are consequences when a nation forgets God and thinks that all the wealth and power that they have is of their own making.

**Jeroboam takes them from God 1Kings 12:28** God had given the Northern kingdom to a man named Jeroboam. He was an administrator of Solomon's who had fled from his wrath. Yet, he feared that people returning to Jerusalem to worship God would have allegiance to Judah and not to his kingdom. He decided to create false gods so that the people would have allegiance to him and the new nation. A leader can take people away from God completely. He can deny the true God or deny God's truths.

**Rehoboam waters down the faith 1 Kings 14:23** Rehoboam, the grandson of David, walked for three years with the Lord like his grandfather David did. Yet, when he felt secure, he began to water down worship like his father Solomon. The temple was there, but he also allowed and participated in the worship of idols. Leaders can water down the faith by adding activities and promoting things that are contrary to God. Expect that the nation will face consequences for its sinful behavior.

**God still keeps His promises 1 Kings 15:4** God was still faithful to David and to the promises that God made to David. The Northern kingdom would have 9 dynasties rule as kings were overthrown. David's family would rule for 350 years. Most of the kings of Judah were evil, but God kept a remnant that would believe through to the time of Jesus Christ. Even when the church began to forget its God, God would not let it be destroyed. He continued to help his people.

What do we learn as we read about this era? First, we learn to pray for our leaders. Pray for good and bad leaders that the Lord might protect the nation. Ask God to send His Spirit upon our leaders so that they govern wisely and that they learn His will. The path of the nation depends on it. Second, we learn that God is dependable even when a man is not. The God who sacrificed His son on a cross will not abandon His people but will seek to find ways to bring revival and renewal to the nation. You can either walk with God or against him. Think of one of those moving sidewalks at the airport. If you walk on it the wrong way, you will find yourself constantly struggling. If you walk with it, life becomes easier and you get to your destination. The time of the kings was a time when many walked against God. It was a time of fools who destroyed themselves.

## 16 Come Home Wayward People - God's Messengers

Focus passage: 1Kings 1-11, 2 Chron. 1-9

It was a Father's heartache. Tom had been the apple of his father Jim's eye. Tom was smart and very athletic. Father and son had been so close throughout his high school years. When he got to college, Tom got caught up in a bad crowd and soon he had dropped out and Jim didn't hear from Tom for a while. Jim finally heard that Tom was out west somewhere and had run on hard times. His friends had deserted him and he was on drugs. Jim called the cell phone that he had given his son in college, but no one ever answered. He finally heard from a friend where Tom was living and went to see him. In the days of David and Solomon, Israel had been the envy of the world. It was powerful and had enormous wealth. It showed the greatness of God to a world that wished they could belong to Yahweh. In the last days of Solomon, the nation ran away from God and worshipped others. God would send prophets to them to demonstrate His power through miracles. He called them and prophets spoke of His great love for them. The message was always the same. Return to me and I will restore you. Here is the story of God's heartache with His wayward son.

**I will show them my power 1 Kings 18:38** Fifty years have passed since the days of Solomon and the wicked King Ahab sits on the throne of the Northern Kingdom. Elijah calls a meeting with Ahab and proposes a challenge between the true God and Ahab's false gods to see who the true God is. 450 prophets of Baal called on their god for hours with no response. God sends fire down from heaven that consumes the water, the sacrifice, and the wood. The people cry out that Yahweh is the true God, but sadly their faith doesn't last.

**I will show them the depth of my love Hosea 3:1** Now, 180 years have passed since Solomon and God calls the prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute. It is a visual message showing how much the Lord loves the nation of Israel which has prostituted itself to the false gods around it. Sadly, Hosea would love this woman and have children with her, but she would run away. Hosea was commanded to buy his wife out of the prostitution that she was now enslaved in. It was a visual message about how God had bought Israel out of slavery and sin again and again.

**I will give them one last warning Amos 9:8** The end is near. Israel is on the verge of destruction and so the Lord sends the prophet Amos. His message is a message of punishment for Israel and Judah. If Hosea shows gospel love, then Amos shows law justice. Israel is within a generation of being destroyed. It is time to repent before it is too late. Yet, the people see no reason to repent. In the end, their rejection of the Lord will put them out of God's protection and their evil living will bring its destruction.

This is the story of a God who stuck with His people for over 200 years. It would have been easy to have just destroyed Israel or to have allowed it to fall quickly to its neighbors. Yet God loved them and sent prophets to them with demonstrations of power and a visual demonstration of love. Neither worked. Our God does not give up on His people. He shows them His power and His love. He is a heavenly father who loves his children even when they are amid sin. It is never too late to cry out to the Lord and seek His mercy and His help. His love never ends and never fails. The message of the prophets is still the message of God today. God is calling His people to return to Him so that He might restore them. He loves His church and will not give up on it. **Regardless of how far you have strayed, come home!** It is the message that God says to us and that we have to be saying to others. It is the message that can change America as it builds families, ends violence, and gives people lives that work.



## 17 Watered-down faith – Late Monarchy

### Focus passage: 2 Chronicles 29-33

Judah was warned. The year was 722 BC and the Northern Kingdom was captured never to be seen again. The Assyrians swooped down from the north and after a three-year siege destroyed the nation and carried its people off to foreign lands to be assimilated into other nations. 208 years had passed since the death of Solomon and now ten of the twelve tribes were gone. During that time, the people had never worshipped the Lord. They had worshipped the gods of their neighbors like Baal. They had sacrificed their children to Molech. Their evil was so bad, God abandoned them. This is a story to warn what will happen when people forget their Lord. When a nation abandons the true God, they leave themselves defenseless and open to pain.

**A. Hezekiah gives his heart to God 2 Chronicles 29:2-3** At first, Judah was exempt from the destruction of the North. A good king reigned on the throne of Judah whose name was Hezekiah. He began his reign, even as the Northern Kingdom was under siege by reclaiming God's temple which his father, King Ahaz, had closed down. He also wanted to claim the hearts of the people and so he dedicated fourteen men to teach the people about the God that so many of them did not know. He wanted revival in Jerusalem. He wanted the hearts of the people to be lifted to the Lord and refused to have empty worship.

**B. In the time of danger, God will answer the prayer of the faithful Isaiah 37:14** It has been perhaps ten years since the fall of the Northern Kingdom and Assyria has decided to expand its kingdom again – this time into Judah. They conquer the western part of the nation and then the south leaving Jerusalem as the last bastion of the kingdom of Judah. Yet, instead of fearing the Assyrians, Hezekiah takes the letter and spreads it before the Lord in prayer. Hezekiah and his officers humble themselves before God and seek His protection. Because of their prayer and their submission to God, an angel of the Lord was dispatched who put to death 185,000 troops camped around the city of Jerusalem in a single night.

**C. Forgetting God leads to punishment 2 Chron. 33:10-11** You would think that a miracle like that would cement the people to the temple and the worship of the one true God. Yet, Manasseh, the son of this Godly king would lead them away from God only fifteen years or so after their salvation. He would rebuild all the false altars that his father had gotten rid of. God sent messengers to warn Manasseh against what he was doing, but the king and the people did not listen to the Lord. The mighty Assyrians came again and they captured Jerusalem and the king. They led him off with a hook in his nose and bound him in shackles. God will not be mocked.

**D. Are halfhearted reforms enough? 2 Chronicles 33:17** God didn't give up on Manasseh. As a captive, he called out to the true God and was freed by the Lord and brought back to Jerusalem. He then began to prove that his conversion was true as he tried to undo all the evil that he had done and reestablish the worship of the Lord. Yet, the revival was not as full as the revival of Hezekiah, his father. Manasseh allowed the people to continue to sacrifice at the high places. He accommodated the worship of God to the customs of the people. In a sense, he watered down the faith. They worshipped God, but they did so in their way.

Halfhearted reforms are the beginning of the end. One of the reforms that Manasseh could not make was the reform of his son's heart. All those years of idol worship had left an impression on his son Amon. The text says that Amon worshipped at the idols that his father had made and that were still up. The watered-down religion never touched his heart. He did not humble himself before the Lord, but rejected the Lord and began to reinstitute pagan worship the way it was through most of Manasseh's kingship. The father and son team of Hezekiah and Manasseh ruled Judah at the height of Assyrian power. The revival of Hezekiah brought 100 years of God's mercy. The halfhearted worship of Manasseh had little impact and the nation was soon on the way to destruction. A nation of halfhearted worship will find that God's blessings will not last.

## **18 God's warnings fall on deaf ears. - The fall of Jerusalem**

### **Focus passage: 2 Chron. 36, Jeremiah and Ezekiel**

**How many warnings does it take?** How many warnings does it take from God before people start to listen? The last forty-five years of Israel's history were filled with warnings from people like Jeremiah and Ezekiel. No one seemed to take the warnings seriously. In the end, they paid the price. Yet mixed into those warnings was a parent's love. God wasn't angry with the people of Judah, he was just concerned for them. Like any parent whose kids misbehave, you know that someday your child will get burned. That doesn't stop you from warning them because you care that much.

#### **Countdown to Oblivion**

**A. 50 years away – Words of warning Jer. 3:6** The first set of warnings would come from Jeremiah and start over 50 years before the captivity would be final. The people talked about God but worshipped the gods of the surrounding people. Jeremiah would continue to warn the people for fifty years through five kings and three attacks by the Babylonians. He would be arrested, beaten, and thrown in a well to die. Yet, God would not stop warning the people through this prophet that became a thorn in the side of the kings of Judah.

**B. 20 years away – First Captivity warning 2 Kings 24:1** Jeremiah had warned of the “boiling pot facing north (Jer. 1:11), but Jehoiakim refused to listen. And so in his fourth year of kingship, the Babylonians came and conquered Judah. They took Daniel and the best of the young men. They took the gold of the nation and the temple and made Judah a vassal of Babylon as a warning of things to come. It should have made them turn to the Lord.

**C. 11 years away – Second captivity and more words of warning Ezekiel 6:3-4** After four years of rebellion, the Babylonians had seen enough and came and attacked the nation again. All of the treasures and leaders were taken leaving Judah desolate. They had been a separate nation, now they were a conquered state with a puppet king put in place to rule them. All that Jeremiah had prophesied was coming true. God added another voice at this time as well. Ezekiel began prophesying to the Jews in Babylon.

**D. 0 years - 586 BC – Judah is taken 2 Chronicles 36:19** After eleven years of the Jews trusting Egypt to save them instead of the Lord, the Babylonians came the last time and laid siege to the city. In the end, they would break down the walls of the city, capture and maim the wicked king and destroy the temple. Judah as a nation ceased to exist for a time. The Jewish people would not have their nation again for 400 years only to lose that nation to the Romans in the years before Jesus. The powerful nation of David seemed to be gone, but we will see that it was God's way of teaching his children.

**Destruction is not God's final word Ezekiel 36:24-25** The Lord through the prophet Jeremiah had promised that the people would return to the Promised Land 70 years from the time of the first captivity. In Ezekiel, God promises to bring a revival in the nation of Israel. Not only will he gather them back, but the people who come back will also be forgiven and taught to put away their idols. In common language today, we would call it tough love. You can talk all you want, but sometimes you have to have tough love. Such is the depth of God's love for His people. Many will not listen to the Lord, but there will always be a remnant who will find the Lord at their side caring for them and loving them no matter how far the nation has fallen. God can't stop loving even when so many don't love Him back.

## 19 The blessings of obedience - Daniel

### Focus passage: Daniel

It had started as a simple Boy Scout camping trip, but things had gone all wrong. The weather turned violent with high winds and blowing snow. The scouts and their leaders panicked and things looked hopeless. Yet, Tom kept his head. He relied on his scout training and built a shelter with a campfire near to the van. Others started calming down and the smoke showed the rescuers where they were. One scout made the difference between life and death. So it was with Daniel. He was taken in the first wave of captives and never gave up his faith in God. He didn't picket or hold protests, He just stood firm in his faith in God. This man of faith had a big impact on the people of God and the nation of Babylon. We think that it takes an army to change a world when all it takes is one Godly person.

**605 BC – A Young man with a conscience Dan. 1:8** He was just a teenager taken hundreds of miles from home as his home nation became a vassal to the Babylonians. He would learn their language and culture, but he would not break God's food laws. This shows the first reason that he was great. He would not compromise the ways of the Lord. He stepped forth and his friends were willing to step out with him and all benefited.

**604 BC – Faith turns disaster into opportunity Dan. 2:24** The king has a dream and doesn't trust his advisors. He wants them to interpret the dream without telling them what it was or he will kill them all. Daniel is facing death so he turns to prayer. God answers the prayer giving Daniel the dream and the meaning. What had been a disaster became an opportunity to witness the power and majesty of God. The whole kingdom sees the power of God.

**538 BC – An exemplary life promotes jealousy Daniel 6:5** At the age of 80, Daniel's reputation of being trustworthy and extremely loyal to His God is known by all. Those jealous of him can find no fault in him. They set a trap that will put him in a lion's den for worshipping the true God. Daniel sees the trap and worships God openly. God is more important than life. His values and faith have a great impact on Jew and Gentile alike and glorify the Lord because of Daniel.

**538 BC – A leader prays for his people Dan 9:2** In the year Daniel faced the lion's den, Daniel is on his knees praying for his people. 70 years have passed and it is time for the people of God to return to the Promised Land as Jeremiah had foretold. Daniel had on his heart, the needs of his people and the future of the Jews. He was too old to return, but he called upon God to show mercy to His people without delay. God listened to his prayer and within a short time, the Jews could go home to Israel.

In Daniel, we see the power of one Godly man. At the same time that the Kings of Judah were leading people from God, the teenage Daniel was standing up for the Lord before Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. He refused to deny his God and God used Daniel to bring glory to God's name. Here in this pagan place filled with idols to the gods of Babylonia, Daniel worshipped God and was used by God to do miracles so that the pagan kings acknowledged the Hebrew God as the God of Gods. He was willing to die for his Lord and led others to the same level of faith. One person can be powerful if that one man or woman is willing to give the Lord their heart soul and mind. They can influence nations and rulers. They can defeat the demons and the false gods of the world because, by prayer and obedience, they harness the power of the one true God. We think that it will take an army to change the world. Daniel shows us what one man or woman can do if they are willing to keep the values and worship of God central in their life.

## **20 Return Home – After the Babylonian Captivity**

**Focus passage: Ezra 1-6, Haggai 1-2, Zechariah 1, 8**

**We start but don't finish.** How many half-finished projects do you have around the house? Maybe there is a sewing project that was supposed to be done for last Christmas. Maybe there is a yard project that is hoping to be done next spring or summer. We all have them. We started something and just didn't finish it. Why do churches have the same problem? We say that the parking lot needs to be fixed, but just never get around to it. We say that someone needs to organize Sunday servants, but no one ever does. Churches today are not the only ones that have half-finished projects. As the people of God came back from Babylon, the temple needed to be rebuilt and the project got bogged down for fifteen years.

**A. 537 BC They started, but then they stopped Ezra 4:24** The exiles return from Babylon to Judea and after a short time, they begin to rebuild the altar and the foundations of the temple. Yet, the people around them did not want God or a rebuilt Jerusalem in their midst. They wanted the Jewish people to go back to wherever they came from. Rather than fighting for what they thought was important, the people just gave up. They had a letter from King Cyrus that they could build a temple, but they found it too hard and started doing other things.

**B. 520 BC You forgot God as you cared for your own needs Haggai 1:4** Fast forward about fifteen years. God sends two prophets named Haggai and Zechariah to the people to lecture them and give them hope. God is tired of waiting and knows that the people will never become the Jewish nation if they don't start putting God first. The people have paneled homes, that is finished homes that are warm and snug. God's house is still a pile of rubble. It is past time to get busy.

**C. Putting God second has given you less Haggai 1: 6** What the people have failed to notice is that putting God second or twenty-second in their life has harmed their lives. They work hard to harvest or pay the bills and they never have enough. They are never warm in their fancy clothes or paneled homes. The prophet reminds them that their priorities are wrong and that they have taken away the great advantage that they should have compared to their neighbors.

**D. 520 BC God fulfills His promises Ezra 5:5** The messages of the prophets spurred on the people and the work began again. Immediately the workers again faced opposition from the nations around them. Yet they did not stop working but continued to build the temple. After four years, the temple was rebuilt in Jerusalem and the people celebrated the dedication of the temple. God was now at the center of the kingdom because the people trusted the Lord to remove the obstacles.

**Do we see the value in ministry?** The people let the building of the temple slide because it just didn't seem important. It was more important for them to have warm homes and fields full of grain. From the earth's perspective that would make sense. From God's big picture, we see that it is short-sighted. I see that the stress people feel and many of the problems they face come directly because God gets put last. They expect him to fix their lives and make things easy while they pursue happiness and prosperity outside of God. It doesn't work. God won't fix lives we don't give Him. Even more important is whether we include God in our plans. How many ministries have not been undertaken or have stopped because we didn't think that we had the money or the people to do them? If the church would spend as much time asking God for help and direction as we do in making excuses or in wringing our hands, the church could do the impossible.

## 21. It is my problem - Esther

### Focus passage: Esther

**It is not my problem.** Bombarded with the problems of the world each night on the news and problems of people we know, we can easily feel overwhelmed. An earthquake or snowstorm is burying a city. A family is hurt in a car accident. A friend has just come down with cancer. We expect that others will take care of it. Let the government send them food. Let the family take care of the accident victim or the cancer patient. We just can't deal with all the pain. But sometimes, we can't avoid the problem. It is our family member with cancer or our home hit by a flood. We may not be able to help everyone, but we need to help someone.

**A. Opportunity – Esther becomes queen Esther 2:17** Having deposed his wife and lost an important battle, the lusty king starts looking for women for his harem. Esther was taken in this sweep of the countryside, but something happened. The king was attracted to her and so he made her queen and not just another one-night stand. God watched out for her and turned disaster into an opportunity. She was now in a position to do good works. She just didn't know what it would be.

**B. Need – The Jews need someone to speak up Esther 4:8** It doesn't take long for trouble. An evil man named Haman convinces the king to sign a decree that will begin a slaughter of the Jews not seen again until the days of Hitler. Esther is encouraged to speak to the king to protect her people, but she knows that she will be putting her life on the line. To speak to the king when you are not spoken to can mean death and so she asks everyone to pray so the Lord will protect her and help her.

**C. Courage – I am a Jew Esther 7:3** Esther needed a favor from the king. He was the only one who could save her people. What was hard was that she needed to ask the favor in front of the man who wanted all the Jews to die. It took courage to stand up and tell the king that she was a Jew. It required that she trust the Lord to make things work. She put herself on the line for her people. If she was found out, she was going to die anyway.

**D. Answer – Protection for the Jews Esther 8:11** Oddly God is never mentioned in the book of Esther, but you can see God's hand in it all. Evil Haman is disgraced and hanged. Esther is rewarded for her courage as the King is moved to help the Jews. Mordecai is even made Prime minister in Haman's place. In the end, the Jews turn on the enemy as the enemy wants to destroy them and can protect themselves and keep the slaughter from happening.

If there is anything that we can learn from Esther, it is that when we see a neighbor who is struggling that it is our problem. It may be a need in our church or school. It can be a problem with a close friend or family member. We need to help and we need to find others who can help us help this person. The important thing is to know that we are not alone. God will work through you. He put you in a place where you have the opportunity to help and He will provide the resources that you need to do the task because God cares and God wants that person to help. We need to have courage, not because we are a fool, but because we know and believe that God is standing at our side helping in ways that we cannot even see. We go forward trusting that God will help us to help other people. We are not in this alone.

## **22 God rebuilds a people in love – Ezra and Nehemiah**

### **Focus Passage: Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi**

**Where do you go from here?** Have you ever felt lost in life? You have a job. You have a house and a family, but you feel like you are just treading water? A lot of us have had that feeling. We have moved in the direction that we think we are supposed to be, but we just feel empty and feel like nothing good is happening. It must have felt like that for the Jews who returned from Babylon. It took them about 20 years before the temple was rebuilt. Our story today is about sixty years after that. The nation is dirt poor and is under the Persian Empire whose kingdom is far away. God's answer is to send three people to help rebuild his people. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi all have a part to play in the rebuilding of the nation. Their work will end the Old Testament record 400 years before Jesus is born. They are our last stop in the Old Testament as we see a loving Father care for His people.

**A. Rebuilding Worship Ezra 7:17** 60 years after the temple had been rebuilt, God opened the heart of a man named Ezra to bring spiritual renewal to the people of Judah. Now Ezra was a direct descendant of the line of Aaron and the high priests who had devoted himself to the study of the Law of the Lord. He gathered priests and Levite descendants to help him bring the worship of God to the people who were largely just going through the motions of worship. God wanted His people to know Him.

**B. Rebuilding Righteousness Mal. 2:11** Having come before their Lord, both Ezra and Malachi help the people to live like children of God. The times were tough in those sixty years and the people slowly adopted the practices of the people around them. God would reinstruct them in a righteous life. He would show them how to have a better life by having values and character. He would help them to see that they should respond to his love by honoring him with their gifts.

**C. Rebuilding their home Neh. 6:15-16** God realized that if His people were going to keep their values and character, they needed a safe place to live as His people. For that reason, God put it on the heart of a man named Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem so that the people could worship God in peace. He went before the Persian emperor and asked for time and the resources to rebuild the walls. God moved the emperor's heart to grant all that Nehemiah asked. God's people had a home.

**D. Rebuilding Faith Neh. 8:3** Four or five days after the wall was built, there was one more thing to do. God's people had to understand God's ways so that it could enter their hearts in this newfound city. For one whole morning, Ezra read the books of Moses to the people. Then a group of priests fanned out and explained the words of God to the people. It was God reclaiming the hearts of his people. God wanted them to understand His path for their lives.

The pieces are in place, but now the real challenge of rebuilding is whether the people will rebuild their lives. Some argued with Malachi, Ezra, and Nehemiah about what it meant to return. Malachi offers a simple test. Are you giving of your time and resources to the Lord? People still struggle with giving God control of their lives. God offers a simple test. Give yourself to me and see if I don't provide for you and take care of you. God is ready to commit to those who commit to Him. He is ready to bless those who open their lives to Him so that they feel His love and have their needs met. Those who only half build their lives will have only some of the blessings. God wants us to have the full joy and He is ready to do anything that it takes for those who trust Him to have that joy.

## New Testament - 23 Birth of a King - Christmas

### Focus passage: Matthew 1-2, Luke 1-2

They must have thought that God had forgotten them. It had been 2100 years since he was promised to Abraham. Would the Messiah ever come? There are times that we often think that God has forgotten us as well. God, do you care about us? We need your help and you seem so silent. Yet, the child did come and He shows us what is different about our God and our faith. He shows why it is worth holding on until he comes and what he will bring when he gets here. It is worth hearing again because we live in a culture that thinks all religions are alike and all are worthless. He also shows us why we should share him with others so that they can have this blessing in their lives as well.

**Mary – A Friend who thinks you’re special Luke 1:30** The story begins with a teenage girl who was the first to know that Jesus was coming. God called her favored for she would be the mother of Jesus. Her life would not be easy. People would think this virgin mother was a hor. She would have to run for her life to Egypt and watch her son die on a cross. Yet, God would be with her and shower his love on her. She would know God’s love in ways that you and I will never experience.

**Joseph – A Savior in the battle with sin Matt. 1:21** The next one to know about the child was a man named Joseph. This descendant of David would be used by God to protect the child so that God could give them something that they didn’t realize that they needed, which is a savior. Jesus would save people from their sins. He would sacrifice himself on a cross so that our sins would be paid. He would rise so that we might have a future in heaven.

**Manger – A servant who belongs to everyone Luke 2: 7** The angels said that the savior would be for all people. The baby in the manger put those words into action. He was not born in some great palace or even in the temple. Look at the dirty shepherds holding the baby and the unimportant town’s people crowding around his parents. The savior has come for everyone. No one is excluded

**Magi – A God who you can approach Matt 2:11** The magi traveled for weeks just to come and touch him. He is a God that you can approach for he became one of us. No other god has ever become one of his people. We have a God who speaks to our needs in scripture and who we can share anything with prayer. He is approachable.

Other religions are based on lists of things that you have to do to be saved. Those people go it alone in life. Even if their gods were alive, they don’t care about them. Our God is different. He loved us so much that He died for us on a cross. He wants us to succeed in life and so he walks beside us ready to help. He guides us and even works miracles for his people. We are loved by the baby in the manger who we can call a friend. The child makes faith personal. We worship a God whose life is contained in the scriptures. We can imagine that we are sitting on the hill and hearing the actual words that he said in the Sermon on the Mount. We can picture walking with the crowds as he healed the sick and raised the dead. It is what sets our faith apart from all the others. Our faith is different and worth holding on to. One look at the baby will tell you how different it is.

## 24. Living in the light – Ministry of Jesus

Focus passage: Matt 3-4, John 3-4

His miracles were so numerous and powerful that people could not ignore them. Crowds began to follow Him everywhere He went hoping that he would heal their sick. Even the Jewish leaders who came to hate him could not dispute the miracles of healing, providing food, or raising the dead. His teaching attracted crowds as well. He had a way of bringing the most complex doctrines of the Old Testament to light in a way that common people could understand. He spoke as if He knew God personally instead of just reading out of a commentary somewhere. Some would shy away from the light in Jesus' day. Yet those who come into the light of Jesus will find new opportunities and joys.

**A. The Light is announced Matt. 3:1-2** On the scene after 400 years John the Baptist arrives. He comes with power gathering his disciples and proclaiming a message of repentance. The last of the Old Testament prophets has come like an opening act to warm up the crowd for the light to come. He announces the light so all may know Him. He also announces the Light's theme: change. Change is coming and people need to be aware that things will not be just as they have always been.

**B. The Light is powerful Matt 4:10-11** The Light can do amazing miracles. Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, and cast out demons. He is so powerful that the consequences of sin and the power of Satan in people's lives can be overcome by a simple word from Jesus. Yet the true measure of his power is found here in the way that Jesus flicks Satan away. Satan used the three main tricks in His arsenal against Jesus and Jesus pushed them all away without working up a sweat. It was as if Jesus was serving notice that Satan was toast.

**C. The Light brings salvation John 3:17** Nicodemus was a leader of the Jewish people who had come to have a deep talk with Jesus away from the crowds. He and others had seen the power of Jesus' miracles. They had heard his teaching which was more powerful than any rabbi that they had heard. Yet they wondered "Who was this man?" Jesus minced no words but got to the heart of the matter. He was the one who brought salvation.

**D. The Light is available to all people John 4:9** The woman at the well was a half breed with several divorces who was living in sin. By all the Jewish rules, she didn't belong in the kingdom of God. Even she is surprised with Jesus stops to talk with her and offers His love and forgiveness. He was saying that the Light belongs to all people. It was God's plan from the beginning that all men might have light. Jonah was sent to the people of Nineveh. The queen of Sheba came to Solomon to learn of his God.

**Jesus changed everything.** The Jews were looking for a Messiah King who would make life easy and golden like the age of King David. God gave them so much more as He came to be their Messiah and their Savior. Kings and presidents can make life better, but they cannot change things like Jesus can. He changes our past by giving us forgiveness and healing. The light has come. Don't let the past destroy the present. Give it to Jesus. He changes our present by walking beside us and helping us each day with our lives. Those who have the light have an advantage that money cannot buy. He changes your future. We don't need to fear death for we have salvation. You are the keepers of the light. Turn up the wattage of the light in your life so that Jesus can make your life less stressful and more filled with joy. Bring light into the people around you. There is no reason for people to have to live in the Darkness of Satan when the light of Jesus can change everything in their world.



## 25 No Ordinary Man – Person of Jesus

### Focus passage: Gospels

**What is extraordinary like?** Our culture is filled with self-proclaimed and media-proclaimed heroes. They are athletes and movie stars and the ordinary guy who saves a woman from a burning car. What makes someone extraordinary for more than their minute of fame? An extraordinary person does things that no one else can do and does it repeatedly. Jesus was such an extraordinary person. He did things that no one else had ever done. He healed the blind and spoke like He knew God first hand. You want to be around extraordinary people so that you can be better. Those who realize how extraordinary Jesus is and who build their lives around Jesus will be the most blessed of all. Here are four ways that Jesus is extraordinary.

**He has an intimate knowledge of God Mark 1:22** Jesus did not teach like the Jewish teachers of the day. They taught out of a book sharing ideas of past scholars. Jesus taught as if He knew God personally. Jesus is still an extraordinary teacher and we would be wise to hang on to every word that He says. His teaching gives people an edge in life. The bible is filled with insights about how to raise a family, how to be a good employee, and how to manage your money that works.

**He seemed to be able to heal anyone Matthew 15:31** The days of miracles had seemed to have passed. Then Jesus burst on the scene and the lame could walk and the dead were raised. The number and scope of his miracles were like nothing that had ever been seen before. Jesus is still a great miracle worker for those who come to Him in prayer. He is worth following when life is filled with troubles. He still performs miracles of healing and provides for His people when they hurt.

**He could give orders to demons Luke 4:36** Satan had the hearts and lives of many. He controlled them and often they were naked, half-crazed, and out of control. The demons were afraid of Jesus. They cried out in fear when He came. Yet, when Jesus cast them out or commanded them to be quiet, they had to obey. Life can easily be out of control for you and me. We may not believe in demons, but they are still around us. It can be the unreasonable person at work or a string of “coincidences” that are all bad luck. Those are the times to come to Jesus for help.

**He had great compassion for the helpless** He was never too busy to help someone. Even when He was tired, He stopped to heal the mob of people begging for help. He saw their pain and how their illness had destroyed their bodies. It broke His heart. Jesus still has compassion for people like you and me. He hurts when you and I are feeling pain. He grieves when someone dies too early or when a child doesn't have a meal all day. He is the friend that every person needs.

**Those who know Jesus will never forget Him** Sixty five years after Jesus had died, John writes because he still could not get Jesus out of His mind. He had a front-row seat and could call this one his friend. Jesus was so extraordinary that John had lived his whole life for Jesus. He had spent these sixty-five years in a nonstop conversation letting people know all that Jesus had done for him and others. Yet, the best part is that the extraordinary rubs off. The book of Acts describes the change that had come on the disciples because of their connection with the extraordinary Christ. What would you be willing to do to be a little more amazing? Would you be willing to spend a half-hour a day in prayer to have less worry in your life or find a place of service so you can do miracles for God? Jesus is extraordinary and being with Jesus lets the extraordinary rub off on you.

## 26 He is not your equal – Divinity of Jesus

### Focus passage: Gospels

**In the military, a general is still a general.** I have never been in the military. I have never even been in the boy scouts. Yet, rank seems to be everything in the military. When a general gives an order, the soldier doesn't question the order. He just does it. A soldier realizes that the general holds the soldier's future in his hands. Now we make fun of the president and company CEO. The guy on the line talks like he could do the job better. The comic on late-night television makes you believe that he understands the presidency better than Bush or Obama. No wonder there is so little respect for Jesus today.

#### **Jesus is not my equal**

**A. He is the eternal Son of God– John 8:58** He has been speaking of God as a Father and here He claims to be older than Abraham. For two years, the people had seen His miracles of healing, demon casting, and feeding the masses. His works and teaching were undeniable. A Greek would have called it the work of the Gods. The first thing man has to learn about Jesus is our place before Him. He is God, not just some prophet representing God.

**B. He is Lord of all – Luke 8:28** Second, He expects to be obeyed. Now I don't know why the demons give Jesus more respect than the humans, but they do. They also obey him when he issues a command. He is Lord and they obey Him to the letter. It is like His power is so great that they have no other option. They must and do obey even if it means their destruction. The second thing that man has to learn is to obey God instead of trying to make God obey us.

**C. He is one with the Father John 10:29-30** The time for His death on the cross was only months away. The Jewish leaders have seen His miracles and wonder if He is the Messiah who was promised to come. The answer is of course yes, but He is more and he tells them plainly that He is one with God the Father. His position in the trinity is not second to the Father as if He is an inferior God. The third thing that man has to learn is what a gift it is that the Almighty God became a man just to save them.

**D. He is the giver of life – John 20:31** Ultimately, He has our eternal fate in our hands. Who is it that scripture continually declares will judge who gets to go into heaven and who will face the fire of hell? The answer is Jesus. That is why it is so foolish to ignore Jesus. This judgment is the choice of God alone for He created you and Christ redeemed the world. Those who believe in Him have nothing to fear. Those who reject Jesus will find that they are lost without Him.

I have always wondered why we humans think that we have the right to tell Jesus how to run the world or think that we can tell Him what our life should be like. We are not even as powerful as the demons and maybe not as smart as they are. When Jesus commanded, they obeyed. Maybe we still have the option to disobey because we still have the choice and demons don't. We can go against the Almighty and powerful Son of God up till we die and face Him on judgment day. Yet, where is the sense in that? You go against the general and you will pay the consequences. I would rather have Him on my side. Jesus is rooting for you and me. He has offered salvation to every man woman and child whether they take it or not. Moreover, he has given us His Word and a way to contact Him in prayer so that we can have his guidance and help every day of our lives. He is the son of God and I will treat Him that way. As terrifying as His power should be, I am content in His arms for He loves me. He is God and I trust Him with my life.

**27 The great sacrifice - Holy Week**  
**Focus passage: Matt 26-27, Mark 14-15, Luke 22-23, John 13-19**

I walked into the auditorium excited to be at this megachurch for an exciting conference on outreach and preaching. The speakers were first-rate and the conference was sold out. I saw banners proclaiming some of the opportunities for members to work in the inner city with the homeless and posters for several missionaries that they were supporting. Yet, something felt wrong as I walked into this sanctuary. I wondered what it was. Then it hit me. There was no cross in this building. It could have been a college lecture hall or symphony concert hall. What does it mean that Jesus is Savior? For us, the story of the cross is central and we show it, but savior had different meanings to many in Jesus' day.

**A. Some want a Savior who will give an easy life. Matt 17:4** On the way to the cross, Jesus takes three of the disciples up on a mountain for the transfiguration. There they get a bit of heaven. Moses and Elijah are there and Jesus is in all His glory. Here trouble was far away and the gates of heaven were opened. Some still think that Jesus came to give an easy life. They are disappointed when life has problems or when ministry is tough. There is a desire to expect heaven without the cross. And when the Christian life is not easy or people face problems, they think that Jesus has failed.

**B. Some people want a Savior who will provide for their needs Luke 19:38** It is Palm Sunday and Jesus is riding into Jerusalem on a colt. The people decided that the Messiah had come and was ready to take His throne in Jerusalem. He would push out the Romans and would take over the throne of the great king David. Peace and prosperity will be had by all men here in Judea. Some still think of Jesus as the savior from our problems. Feeling sick, Jesus will cure you. Need a job, the answer is a simple prayer away. What if someone doesn't get well or that job doesn't come?

**C. The real Jesus came to be a Savior from sin John 19:30** He never said that His work as Savior was done when he rode into Jerusalem or when He healed some sick person. His work when He died on the cross. It was what God had promised Adam and Eve in the garden and what God had continued to promise through the ages. The Savior had finished it. Mankind was forgiven. It is what all of us are here for. We need someone who will take away the guilt that haunts us from the past and the eternal death that haunts the future.

It isn't pretty to see His beaten and bloody body on the cross. It was something that only one of the twelve disciples could bear to come and see on that day. Yet, it was for this reason that He came. Make Jesus a great prophet who died too early in life or a caring man who helped many who were ill or hurting and you miss the whole point of His life. He came to die. He came to save us from sin. Everything else was secondary to Him and should be to us. The heart of the Bible is that we are all sinners who sin daily and can't save ourselves, but that God sent His son to come and save us by His death and resurrection. Believe in the cross and everything changes. All the other things that people want from Jesus are now possible. Savior can mean many things to many people. What it meant to Jesus was a cross and salvation from sin and eternal death.

## **28 This changes everything - Resurrection**

**Focus passage: Matt. 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21**

**What do people expect?** I see exceptional on an evaluation form for the service of my Honda and wonder what you have to do to be exceptional. Surely, only one or two percent is truly exceptional. Yet, I know from talking to the service rep that they are hoping to expect that most people will check exceptional. As we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, how would you rate this holiday compared to Christmas, thanksgiving, or even the Fourth of July? I find that a lot of people don't expect much of Easter. There are no football games, presents, or even fireworks. It is just Easter. As we celebrate Easter, I want us to see what Easter does for us so that we can enjoy it even more.

**Low expectations of friends and enemies** His friends hid in the upper room trying to figure out what life without Jesus was going to look like. Now it was over. There was an emptiness in their heart and a hole in their life. His enemies feared deception. Jesus had proclaimed that He would rise from the dead. They wanted to make sure that such a hoax did not happen and somehow His cult would survive. They asked for guards to watch His tomb. Three things counteract the low expectations of this day in scripture.

**He is greater than you expected.** This is the day that we can see who Jesus is. The women came expecting to finish embalming a dead body. Sadly, their expectations should have been different. Jesus had told them of the resurrection. He had told them that the sadness of Good Friday would be followed by the joy of Easter. He is still bigger than most of us expect. Jesus' resurrection shows that the disciples' expectations of Jesus as a great prophet or a friend in need were not enough.

**He will change your life more than you expected** At first, it just seemed like a casual walk home and then a stranger joined them. They had hoped that Jesus would change their life, but their hopes were shattered. The stranger with them was Jesus and he began to explain to them how the Messiah had to suffer if the promises of salvation made since Adam and Eve were going to come true. This is a day to hold onto up to the day that you die for it is the day of salvation. The fear and guilt of sin are gone. They have been replaced by hope and confidence.

**He will change not a generation, but all men** But having witnessed these things, you can use them to change the world. I am sure that the disciples in the upper room didn't know what to expect when they saw the risen Lord. Jesus opened up the scriptures to help them see that this was just the beginning. He had risen and they would have eternal life, but that life was not just for them. They were witnesses of everything that had happened. They would receive even more power as the Spirit came into their lives.

**Stand in awe at the power of this day** Easter unleashed a movement. In the weeks ahead, we will follow an explosion as the disciples talked about Easter to everyone that they met. It is estimated that a million people believed in the resurrection by the year 100 AD and that by 350 AD, Christianity had conquered the Roman Empire. So what will you do with this day? All those expectations are meaningless if you don't do something with them. Imagine if every Christian had a deep respect for Jesus. If they wanted to enjoy His love and they understood His immense power. Lives would be changed. People would act differently. Now take that out one step further and ask what would happen if they told others about Jesus' love so that even one or two more people per Christian had the same warm feelings about this day. Easter has that kind of power. It is all about expectations. **What you expect of Easter determines the blessings you receive**

**29 Now what? - Early Church**  
**Focus passage: Acts 1-8 April 3, 2016 – Easter 2**

**Easter is over – Now What? Acts 1:6** The disciples followed Jesus for forty days after Easter. It was like old times. He taught them and he did miracles before them. Yet, it was different. He walked through walls, he didn't need to sleep. Before Easter, they thought that they knew what the ministry was about. Now they were not sure. Curious, they asked him what came next. Is this the time that you are going to restore the Messianic Kingdom? What do you want us to do in this new kingdom? They didn't realize the wave that was about to come. The early chapters of the book of Acts are a call to arms and a pattern for the church to get on fire.

**A. Power: Getting ready for God's commission Acts 1:8** What was to come next was to be witnesses to Easter. Jesus had opened the door to heaven and established a relationship with God, but if no one knew about it, it would have little effect. To accomplish that, they would be given power from the Holy Spirit. He would come on them mightily on Pentecost. In preparation for that day, the people would pray constantly for ten days. They would open themselves up to the Spirit's power for they knew that something big was happening. Prayer shows the vitality of a church. A church that prays had great power.

**B. Witness: Telling what you have seen Acts 2:32** It was the dawning of a new day. The tongues of fire showed the gift of the spirit. Jesus whom many of the people in the crowd had seen crucified was alive. Having received power from God, the disciples simply told what they had seen and heard. The Holy Spirit worked upon the hearts of those who were present for the festival of Pentecost. 3000 people came to faith that day because Peter spoke what finally made sense to him. Let the Spirit explode through us so that this city might hear what Jesus has done for them. If they can reach 3000, can we reach 30?

**C. Power: Constant recharging with Bible study, prayer and fellowship Acts 2:42** Prayer was not a one-time event, it was ongoing in the church. Like rechargeable batteries, they had to recharge the power if they were going to witness the gospel in tough times. They devoted themselves to Bible study and prayer letting the power of the Lord fill their lives. Here is a model for the church. It is to be a people connected with the Lord. Life doesn't go well when you have no energy. How long will you survive without food? How long do you think people survive without spiritual food?

**D. Witness: Overcoming resistance by being witnesses Acts 4:19-20** Thousands had become Christians and the Jewish leaders were worried so they arrested Peter and John and told them to stop preaching about Jesus. Having just healed a crippled beggar, Peter declared that it was by the power of Jesus that this man could walk. When the power comes on God's people, they don't just do witnessing, they become witnesses. Their whole life is about the wonder of the cross. They talk about it. They live it by showing kindness to others as the disciples did. Everyone knows who they belong to and where they stand.

**Easter is over – Now What?** First, you have to recharge your spiritual batteries. You are worthless to yourself and others if you have no Godly power in you. You will have little ability to protect yourself from Satan's temptations and no power to be a witness to others. Commit yourself to daily time in prayer and Bible study. It is something that you see again and again in the book of Acts. And as you are being fed, let your light shine. Not every one of us is a natural evangelist, but we all should have the light. Live in such a way that people see your good works and give glory to God in heaven. Live in such a way that people know you are a Christian and ask you to pray for them. Easter is over - Now what? The answer is simple. Live in the light of Easter as you power up through bible study and prayer so that your life doesn't have to be ruled by the darkness. Then let your light shine so that Easter can dispel the darkness that has taken over the world.

## 30 The Church Expands - Early St. Paul

### Focus passage: Acts 8-16

Change brings blessings. Think what life would be like if we all still used horses and wagons or lit our homes with kerosene lamps. Think of what it is like when your furnace goes out or if the electricity is gone for a night. People used to live like that all the time, but I doubt that we would go back. Yet, churches are not supposed to change. Try and change the style of service or the way the voter's meeting is run and you will have a mutiny on your hands. Yet, as we will see change comes even in the church. The church expanded into new areas and new people. **God wants the church to reach the world and have the blessings that it brings.**

**A. God changes hearts Acts 9:15** Three years after the first Easter, God changed a heart that became a movement. Saul was a persecutor of the church and was one of those who did not want any changes to the Old Testament way of doing things. Then God stepped in with a blinding light and disabling blindness. His message delivered by Ananias to Paul was that Paul would take the Gospel out to the world. God is still changing hearts because he wants the church to expand. People need to know that God wants to include them in His family.

**B. God moves beyond Palestine Acts 13:2** For fourteen years, the gospel had been centered in Palestine. Now it was time for the church to move beyond Judea and Syria. God called Paul and Barnabas to begin this ministry in earnest. The church at Antioch would be their base and give them support for the ministry. God wants us to move beyond these walls to places we care about. It might be a family that needs the comfort of the gospel. It might be a coworker who is struggling and needs a friend. The Gospel was not meant to be contained in these walls. It must expand and reach out into the community.

**C. God moves beyond the Jews to the Gentiles Acts 15:19** Yet the success of the ministry made some uncomfortable. They wanted the Gentile Christians to follow all the Jewish rules if they were to be part of the church. The church wondered, "Did you have to be Jewish to be loved by God?" The answer came back no. Gentiles should obey the Ten Commandments and keep themselves pure, but the gospel was being freely given to them. God wanted all these people to be part of His family just as He did the Jews. God did not want to make it difficult for all men to be saved.

**D. God moves beyond Asia into Europe Acts 16:9** Paul began his second missionary journey seeing many of the churches in Asia Minor that he had started two years before. A new chapter was beginning and it was to places unfamiliar to Paul. The cities of Greece and later Rome were places filled with people crying out for the message of the gospel. These were the home of Lydia, Luke, Pricilla, and Aquila to name a few. God loved the whole world. Today we see the gospel expanding onto all the continents and with all kinds of people. The world is His.

**Expansion of ministry is a blessing Acts 8:1** You might think that it was easy to expand the gospel, but human nature tells you that it was not easy at all. The early church enjoyed the fellowship of each other and did not seem eager to disperse. Expansion is a blessing. We may not want to do it at first, but God knows how much it will be a blessing. The early church moved from the safety of Jerusalem and started going out into the world around them. New people became part of the church and it prospered. God knows the blessings. He knows the new friends that people can make. He knows how the church expanding will impact its community for good. He wants those blessings for His people and so He nudges his people out of the comfortable nest.

## **31 Mission multiplied - Later St. Paul**

### **Focus passage: Acts 16-28**

There is great power in a legacy. Mount Rushmore shows us the legacies of four of our great presidents. Washington is the father of our country. Jefferson wrote its constitution. Lincoln saved the nation. Teddy Roosevelt – well I was told that he was up there because of his stance on nature and monopolies. Imagine Fillmore, Tyler, Harrison, and Buchanan gracing the monument. It is not the same. Four presidents, yes, but not the same effect. It is all about their legacy. St. Paul was one of those who had a legacy that touches every living Christian today. Few of us have not been touched by the books of Roman, Corinthians, or Philipians. Many of us look to his example in life as a guide for our ministry. Today we will look at his legacy and ours.

**A. Paul was always training people as they worked together: Romans 16:21** At the end of the book of Romans, twenty-six people are mentioned by name as having ministered with Paul. Some we know well. Others are only mentioned in the bible here. All had a big impact on the church. His heart and life touched them and they were witnesses together of the gospel. Everyone was better because of their time with Paul. Pastors and people are not to work in isolation. Part of our ministry is to each other. God made it that way so that we could leave a piece of ourselves with each other.

**B. Paul multiplied his ministry by letters: Colossians 4:18** In prison, Paul could not be silenced. They could chain him up and keep him from going to those he served, but they could not stop his pen. 13 letters of Paul are included in the Bible and I am sure that there were others as well. His letters multiplied his ministry as one church got the letter and then copies went out to other churches around them. His letters still touch people's hearts for they are his legacy to us. We sense Paul's faith and his intimate knowledge of God's wisdom and plan.

**C: Paul multiplied his ministry by training coworkers: Titus 1:5** The churches that Paul planted got to be so many that he could not minister to them all. So Paul sent Titus to Crete, Timothy to Ephesus, Crescens went to Galatia and many others went to other churches. Paul multiplied the ministry by training and sending coworkers across the mission field. Paul would probably tell us to mentor someone else and be mentored by them. Invest in someone else and it will pay dividends for years. They, too, will be your legacy for years to come.

**D: Poured out, Paul left an example: 2 Timothy 4:6** Yet one of the greatest legacies that Paul ever left was the example of his life. Second Timothy is the last letter that Paul ever wrote and it talks of his upcoming death. The message is simple: Timothy must follow the example of my life that you have witnessed and participated in. People don't look at your achievements, they look at your life. What were your values and what was the character that you exhibited? All the degrees and accolades don't mean as much as the example that you showed others and the way that you poured yourself out in life.

**People are our greatest legacy.** I think of several pastor friends who have retired lately and some churches around us that have closed and I wonder what they left behind as a legacy. The pastors may have rooms named for them or churches had massive building projects that doubled their size. Yet what they leave behind are the memories of the people who they helped. It may be the person with cancer that the pastor and people helped for months. It may be a children's program that brought a family to the Lord. The currency of legacy is people. **How do you want to be remembered?** How would you like people to remember Bethany? How do you want them to remember you? Legacy is built now. What we do today can have an impact for generations to come.

## **32 Hold on! - Revelation**

### **Focus passage: Book of Revelation**

**How do you encourage people to keep going?** How do you motivate an athlete to give his best or get a person who has suffered a heart attack or who just has diabetes like me to change their diet and exercise because their life depends on it? Did someone scream at them like on the biggest loser? We could ask that of the church. Record numbers seem to be dropping out of the church and leaving the Lord. How does the church engage people who think that the church is boring or that they are too busy for religion? Such was the question in the early church. Persecution was heavy and temptations to leave the church were all around them. It was time for a view from above and a peek at the ending so people could be encouraged and not fall away.

**They have lost their first love. Rev. 2:4** It had been over sixty years since Jesus had died on the cross. Most of the first generation Christians were gone and the second generation was growing weak in their faith. The seven letters enumerate how Satan was chipping away at the church. The once strong church of Asia Minor was slipping away. This book was a plea for the church to hold on and not give in to persecution or apathy. It is a message well taken today. Satan is killing Christians around the world who must die for their faith and filling our American lives with busyness and hobbies.

#### **Three things should convince you to stay with God**

**A. The first battle has been won Rev. 7:14** God has already won the first battle. Through the cross of Jesus, He has saved both the Jew and the Gentile from the coming wrath here on earth and the last day. John is pleading with the people to not throw away the victory that is theirs in Christ. They can see the beginnings of the fall of the Roman Empire. They can look to Jerusalem and see the temple destroyed. Don't throw away your protection and future that you have in Jesus.

**B. It is going to get tough. Rev. 16:1** There will be waves of famine, war, and seas of blood. Sadly, the evening news is filled with these occurrences every night. It is the result of a world filled with sin in which men kill each other and people starve in the aftermath. God will allow these things to happen to break down man's pride. A world upside down shows that man cannot fix things. This is a time to hold onto the Lord. You and I cannot control what is coming in the world. We can protect ourselves, but God can. For those who have the Lord, they would be wise to not let go.

**C. Satan will be destroyed Rev. 20:10** In the end, Satan and all the things that people rely on will be destroyed. False religions based on works or false gods will be gone. Technology and governments that people think will provide the answers will be destroyed. Satan himself will be judged and spend eternity in hell. Yes, they will wage war against God and the church. They can't win the war because they cannot overcome the Lord. As strong as Satan is, he is not stronger than God. In the gospels, Jesus only had to utter one word and the demons obeyed.

**God's future reality- New Jerusalem Rev. 21:1** For those who do hold on, there is a vision of what the future can look like. It is a beautiful place filled with God's people living and communing with God. In heaven, you will find the ones who overcame. Satan tempted them and they did not give in. For that reason, they will spend eternity celebrating. I want you to see all the scary things of Revelation and place yourself in God's hands. Hold on to him and let him help you through the trials that are coming. Don't find yourself outside His hands and trying to deal with illness, violence, and the harm of others by yourself. You can't handle it. Revelation is a plea not to give up on God. He is your future and brings the promise of great things to come in eternity for those who just hold on.