

WORD

Old Testament
Highlights:
1 Samuel-Malachi





God's words are alive. He reveals Himself through them, and they transform us as we put our faith and confidence in Him and what He has said. These words are our lifeline; they sustain us and point us to Jesus. God says that if we align our thinking and lives with His Word, we'll be transformed from the inside out.

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Congratulations

on taking part in one of our

Local Bible Studies

We're glad that you have taken this step to increase your Biblical knowledge, understanding and confidence. We want to help you to develop your skills in reading God's Word, understand it in context, and apply your lives to it wholeheartedly.

The topics for each week will be:

Week	Subject	Reference
One	The Rise and Fall of the Monarchy	1+2 Samuel, 1+2 Kings, 1+2 Chronicles
Two	The Wisdom Books	Job, The Psalms, The Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon
Three	Pre-Exilic Writing A	Hosea, Amos, Jonah, Nahum, Obadiah
Four	Pre-Exilic Writing B	Joel, Zephaniah, , Micah, Habakkuk, Isaiah, Jeremiah
Five	Exilic Writing	Lamentations, Daniel, Ezekiel
Six	Post-Exilic Writing	Ezra, Esther, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

Have fun and all the best on your journey!



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Using this personal study guide:

This Personal Study Guide has been created for use within your Local Bible Study. It will help direct your study, highlight key things for you to think about and allow room for your thoughts and notes. Feel free to make it yours! Let us share with you what to expect along the way.

What to expect from this Personal Study Guide

These Bible studies are designed to be largely inductive. By this, we mean that by their very nature they will be explorative, fairly open-ended and very discussion-led. We want you to actively engage with God's living Word, rather than sit there and be told to write down a bunch of things that you're likely to forget by the end of the night...

To help this, our learning philosophy is built around four key questions. Knowing this will help you get the best out of your Bible Study.

1. What do we already know?

You – yes, even you – know something about the Bible (it might be as little as that it is a big, dusty book on Grandma's shelf). But you know something. Bring what you know to the table. Start on a win.

2. What would you like to know?

You might want to know about a particular person or event – like when God rescued the Israelites from Egypt (what was all that about?). Or you might have a situation in your life that you'd like advice on, so you want to know what God says about it. All of us have something that we want to know, so don't be afraid to ask.

3. What does God want you to know?

What's your blindspot? What is it that you don't even know that you don't know? While it's good to go looking for specific answers to specific questions, the power of God's Word often lies in the element of surprise – the way it manages to teach you something that you didn't realise you still needed to learn, but God did.

4. What is going to change now?

We expect your life to change. The strength of today's reading is seen in tomorrow's actions. Make a decision to look for (and pray about) areas of your life that need to grow or die. The Word of God is alive and it can mess you up in so many good ways if you're prepared to let it change the way you think, speak and act.

What you will find in your Personal Study Guide

Your Personal Study Guide has been crafted to help you along your journey. The Old Testament is massive, and we could not hope to cover every single piece of interesting information. So we'll help you with the general storyline, and then focus in on bits that are particularly interesting.

Use these headings to help you:

The story...

Here we'll try to let you know the general story of what's been happening along the way. It's not exhaustive, but it will help you keep track of the action.

Focus in...

This is where we focus in on something that is particularly good for you to know. It might be a specific person or event, or any other highlight that you just have to know about.

Read...

Read the scripture. It's not rocket science.

Respond...

Jot down the ideas and thoughts that are by now probably flooding into your head.

Discuss...

Here's the chance to get into it. Chat. Share. Discuss. Maybe even argue (nicely). Just make sure it's ultimately encouraging.

Reflect...

Take a moment to reflect on what this means to you. You can get as deep and philosophical as you like.

Prelude to Old Testament Highlights:

First Samuel to Malachi

We left our first study at the end of the Book of Ruth. By the end of this story we saw that although Israel had entered the Promised Land, they were still largely 12 loose tribes who were led and governed by successive judges. But without a king, it was pretty much a free-for-all, with everybody just doing ‘what was right in their own eyes’ (Judges 21:25).

Boaz and Ruth had given birth to Obed, who was to become the grandfather of the next ‘game-changer’ in the Israelite story: David. David was to rise from a lowly shepherd boy to become a mighty warrior and king, and to establish the monarchy in Israel. He is also the recipient of the last great Old Testament covenant (can you remember the previous covenants of Adam, Noah, Abraham and Moses?).

This study essentially begins at the time of David, and traces the development of the Israelite people between approximately 1100 BC to 400 BC as revealed in the books spanning from 1 Samuel to Malachi.

During this time, Israel briefly united under a king before splinting into two smaller nations. Each of these nations was then overtaken by outside forces: one was completely disintegrated while the other was exiled. At the end of the Old Testament, the exiles were eventually allowed to return home and rebuild Jerusalem.

It is important to know that the structure of these sessions will not follow order of the books as presented in our Bible, which have been allocated largely according to literary genre. Rather, we will divide the books according to their location in history:

- **The Rise and Fall of the Monarchy, c. 1050 to 560 BC**

Details the installation of the Israelite monarchy, its peak under the ‘United Kingdom’, the civil war and the subsequent split into the Northern (‘Israel’) and Southern (‘Judah’) kingdoms.

- **The Wisdom Books, c. 1400 to 450 BC**

A collection of personal writings by authors as historically spread as Moses, David and Solomon. Though they are not intended to cover

historical events, they do detail how the authors responded to many of life's happenings and challenges. This also includes the Book of Job.

- **Pre-Exilic Writing A, c. 850 to 605 BC**

Prophetic writing aimed at the Northern Kingdom, prior to going into Assyrian Captivity in 740 BC. These also includes three pieces written to non-Jewish people groups (the Assyrians and the Edomites).

- **Pre-Exilic Writing B, c. 835 to 570 BC**

Prophetic writing aimed at the Southern Kingdom, prior to going into Babylonian Exile in 605 BC.

- **Exilic Writing, c. 605 to 538 BC**

Books containing details of the Southern Kingdom's Babylonian Exile.

- **Post-Exilic Writing, c. 538 to 400 BC**

Historic and prophetic writing of the Southern Kingdom's return from Babylonian Exile.

You'll find that by following the historical events detailed in the Bible, the writing will become so much richer for you. As we saw in our previous study, every passage in the Bible was written a) by a specific person, b) to a specific person (or people), and c) for a specific reason. By recognizing the historical context of each piece, you'll better understand the full significance of its words. You'll also be able to better resist the temptation to make an interpretation that isn't true to the text, which helps you to become a better Bible reader.

And that's our goal.

Week One

Topic: The Rise and Fall of the Monarchy

My Preparation

The story so far...

1 and 2 Samuel detail the uniting of Israel under its first king (Saul), then the rise of the monarchy under its greatest king, David, roughly between the years of 1100 to 970 BC. 1 and 2 Kings cover the events between 970 to the mid 500s BC, including the split of Israel into rival northern and southern nations, their disobedience and ultimately their destruction. 1 and 2 Chronicles actually cover much of the same period and events as the prior four books. They were written much later (probably by Ezra in the 400s BC). As such, we won't cover these last two books in much detail at all.

The authors of these historical books are not stated in the books themselves, so it's hard to be completely sure who wrote each piece (though we know Second Samuel would not have been Samuel, as it was written after his death).

Read

- 1 Samuel 8-10: Israel's search for a king
- 1 Samuel 17:20-58: David's rise to prominence
- 2 Samuel 5:1-13: David proclaimed as king of Israel
- 2 Samuel 7:11-16: The Davidic Covenant
- 2 Samuel 11: David's unraveling
- 1 Kings 2:1-12: king David dies; king Solomon is crowned
- 1 Kings 3:6-14 king Solomon's prayer is answered
- 1 Kings 9:1-9 king Solomon builds the First Temple

Respond

Write down 2 or 3 things that came to mind as you read these passage. Include any questions that arise when you think about it closely.

Our Discussion

The story of Israel's Monarchy

Samuel is regarded by many as Israel's final great "judge". His birth is recorded in 1 Samuel 1:20. Though Samuel was a God-fearing man on par with Moses, as he aged it became apparent that the sons who would replace him would reject God's righteous ways (1 Samuel 8:3). Fearing their rule, Samuel's elders pleaded for him to install a king before his death.

Focus in...

Israel's request for a king was in itself not evil (God had promised them a king from the days of Abraham), but the motivation for one was dishonourable to God. They wanted a king so that they would be like the other nations (1 Samuel 8:6), and they rejected God as their king (1 Samuel 8:4-9). They wanted a human to lead them and fight for them, despite the fact that God had faithfully fought for them for generations. Samuel tells the elders about the burdens that a king will impose upon them, but they refuse to listen. So God instructs Samuel to select Saul as Israel's first royal leader (1 Samuel 9:15-17).

Discuss...


- Faithful human leadership is a gift from God. However, we can often look to leadership to provide what God wants to personally provide. In what ways have we replaced God with human leaders (parents, church, civic authorities, government)? What would be a better way to approach this area in our lives?

The story continues...

Saul begins his kingship well: he is modest, direct and generous (and apparently quite good-looking), but begins to take liberties with his authority. Because he offers the sacrifice that only a priest was authorized to make (1 Samuel 13:9-14) and openly defies God's direct instructions regarding war (1 Samuel 15), Samuel rebukes him and makes plans to replace him as king. Enter David.

Focus in...

The story of David's rise is well known. While he is still a young shepherd boy, David is anointed by Samuel to replace Saul (1 Samuel 16). With God's help, he magnificently defeats a giant Philistine warrior named Goliath (1 Samuel 17) and becomes something of a

A silhouette of a muscular man, possibly a warrior or a deity, standing on a rock. He is holding a glowing orb in his right hand, which is the source of a bright light and lens flare. The background is a clear blue sky. On the right side of the image, there is a spiral binding with circular holes.

*Your house and your kingdom
shall endure before Me
forever; your throne shall be
established forever.*

2 SAMUEL 7:16

cult-figure in Israel – the local women even sang songs about his exploits in war (1 Samuel 18:6-9). Jealousy overcomes king Saul, and his heart turns against David and he plots to take the young man's life (1 Samuel 19:1).

Discuss...

Jealousy really is an evil trap. Saul had been chosen by God and anointed for a honourable task, yet he allowed David's success to become his focus. Jealousy does this – it makes us discontent with what God has given us, and it makes us somehow think that we deserve more.

- Why do we get jealous? What are the “fruits” of jealousy? What does jealousy steal from us?
- What is the opposite of jealousy and how can we experience it more?

The story of David's reign

Saul's jealousy causes David to become a fugitive and he is forced to live the life of an outlaw, leading a somewhat ragtag bunch of bandits into numerous wars. Despite this, David is still grieved upon hearing the news of Saul's death (2 Samuel 1:11). He returns to his native land where he is immediately crowned king over his tribe of Judah (2 Samuel 2:1-7). Following a prolonged civil war with the other tribes (the “house of Saul”), David is victorious. He is appointed king of all of Israel and reigns as monarch for a total of 40 years.

One of the most important passages in the entire Old Testament canon is found in 2 Samuel 7:8-17, the story of the Davidic Covenant. In this covenant, God promises to establish the throne of David forever. By doing so, God commits to bringing forth a royal line that would never cease. Though Israel had some good and many bad kings, God preserved this thread because of His promise to David. Eventually, this promised successor to David's throne would be born in Bethlehem one thousand years later (Matthew 1:6-16) and will come again in power to usher in eternity (Revelation 19:11-16).

However, as with so many of us, the victorious and righteous life of David began to unravel. He was a triumphant warrior, a just king and a supporter of the priesthood. Yet his success allowed him to retreat from the frontlines to the luxury of his palace, where he succumbs to adultery with Bathsheba and arranges the murder of her husband (2 Samuel 11).

Focus in...

David was considered a 'man after God's own heart' (1 Samuel 13:14). Yet his passionate desire for God didn't stop him reaping the consequences of his sin, which was really the culmination of a progressive series of disobedient choices. As a result of his waywardness, his family line was marred by rebellion, rape, coups, incest, fratricide and civil war. Though God accepted David's repentance, He didn't resist all of the consequences of his actions.

Discuss...

- Do you think it's possible for us to allow passion to become a substitute for obedience? If so, how?
- In what ways does God allow us to experience the consequences of our disobedient choices?
- How do we reconcile this with our understanding of God's infinite love and grace?

The story of Solomon's reign

In his last days, king David names Solomon as his successor to the throne (1 Kings 1:28-30). Solomon's request for wisdom to lead the people of Israel well was met with pleasure by God, who granted him not only wisdom but also incredible wealth, fame and military strength (1 Kings 3:1-16). During Solomon's reign, Israel reached its peak in prosperity. As the nation's borders enlarged and the population exploded, great wealth was brought into Solomon's hands. Kings and queens from surrounding nations came to hear his wisdom, and his people lived in peace and abundance (1 Kings 4:20-34).

Focus in...

As with most nations (even modern ones), it was at this time of peace and prosperity that Solomon embarked on his greatest building project – a magnificent temple which would become the permanent home of worship for God (1 Kings 6). Built between 966 and 959 BC, the temple was a remarkable architectural achievement and splendid in every way. The design of the temple was patterned on the tabernacle (except it was a permanent site, twice the size and contained a few additions) and had ornate decorations with overlays of pure gold (2 Chronicles 3 and 4 detail some of the furnishings). The temple was the focal point of Jewish worship and culture.

This temple is often referred to as the “First Temple” or “Solomon’s Temple” (you will see why as we progress). It consisted of five primary areas (from external to internal):

1. The Outer Court
2. The Inner Court
3. The Porch
4. The Holy Place
5. The Holy of Holies

Discuss...

- In 1 Corinthians 6:19, Paul tells us that our physical bodies are now “temples of God”. Using what you know about the temple, what do you think this means?

The story of Solomon’s descent

Despite Solomon’s wealth and wisdom, Israel once again plummets into disarray (seems to be a fairly obvious cycle now). It was during his early reign that Solomon had amassed a tremendous amount of our current Biblical literature, including much of the wisdom literature (which we will look at next week). However, his human wisdom only extended so far. He accumulated wealth, horses and wives far beyond that which was allowed for a king, and he allowed them to influence his moral and spiritual choices (see 1 Kings 11), eventually leading to complete apostasy.

God withdraws His blessing from Solomon’s reign and upon his death (c. 931 BC, recorded in 1 Kings 11:43), the kingdom begins to fragment. Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, initially ascends to the throne, but one of his official servants, Jeroboam, wrestles him for control of the nation. Eventually the kingdom splits: Rehoboam takes the southern “Kingdom of Judah”, comprised of two of Israel’s original tribes (Judah and Benjamin) and keeps his capital in Jerusalem; Jeroboam takes the northern “Kingdom of Israel”, comprised of the remaining ten tribes, and makes his capital in the northern Samaria. Israel’s golden age of a united, successful kingdom has come to an end in just three generations.

The remainder of 1 Kings and 2 Kings details the strained relationship between these two kingdoms. It is during this time that many of our known prophets lived: Jonah, Amos and Hosea in the north and Obadiah, Joel, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Isaiah and

Jeremiah in the south.

The story of the Exiles

The end of our books sees both kingdoms taken captive. The Southern Kingdom has 20 kings who reign for 370 years, but they only have one dynasty – the Davidic dynasty. Their kings ranged from the wise and just (Jehospat) to the downright awful (Manasseh), but God always remained faithful to his covenant with David. In 605 BC, God uses the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, to attack them, beginning what we know as the Babylonian Exile. But in His faithfulness, the punishment does not endure and they are eventually allowed to return to their land from 537 BC. The majority of the remaining Old Testament writing is centred on the activities of the Southern Kingdom, Judah.

The Northern Kingdom is not so fortunate. It has 19 kings (from seven dynasties) who reign for 250 years, but not one of them rules well in the eyes of God. In 725 BC, Israel is overwhelmed by the neighbouring Assyria. Ultimately, Israel completely succumbs in 722 BC after a three year siege. The Assyrians had a policy of transplanting their captives to other parts of the empire, mixing them in order to make them lose their identity and culture. The Northern Kingdom never really recovers from this, as the Assyrians are eventually overrun by the Babylonians, who in turn are invaded by the Medo-Persians. They never receive permission to return to their homeland, and their descendants become known as the “Lost Tribes” (sometimes called “half-Jews” – or who you might know as the despised “Samaritans”).

Reflect...

- What is ‘profitable’ for us from today’s readings?
- What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected? How will you outwork what you have learnt?
- What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.



Please feel free to use this page for your notes

Week Two

Topic: The Wisdom Books

My Preparation

The story so far...

These five books are vividly personal and experiential books. Whilst the earlier books covered the group history of the Hebrew people as a family and nation, these five books cover the history of individuals and, perhaps more importantly, how they handled all that life threw at them. Though we have called them ‘wisdom’, they are also frequently referred to as the ‘poetry’ books.

Historically, the details of these books fit largely into the history of the books that we have already covered. The Book of Job (written by an unknown author many, many years after the events) details the life of a man who is considered to have lived around 2000 years before Christ (making his life probably earlier than Abraham). The Psalms, which are attributed predominantly to king David, but also to other authors, date between Moses’ time (1400 BC) and the Babylonian exile (500s BC). The Proverbs are primarily king Solomon’s writings (900s BC), as is Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes (though the author of the latter is not specifically stated, he is identified in the opening chapter as being a “son of David” and one who had “more wisdom than all they that have been before me”. Sounds like Solomon, don’t you think?).

In this session, we will look at passages that reasonably capture the essence of each of these wisdom books.

Read...

- Job chapters 1 (the story opens), 3 (an example of Job’s lament), 40 (an example of God’s response), 42 (the finale).
- Psalm 23.
- Proverbs 3.
- Ecclesiastes 5.
- Song of Solomon 7.

Respond...

Write down 2 or 3 things that came to mind as you read these passages. Include any questions that arise when you think about it closely.

Our Discussion

The story of Job

The Book of Job contains what many consider to be one of the most wondrous ancient literary pieces we have. Head of a large family, Job is a wealthy, just and upright man. Everything seems to be going just brilliantly for this gentleman – until God points out to Satan just how impressive Job is. The devil then asks for permission to attack Job – first his possessions, then his family, (1:13-22), and then his health (2:1-13). The next forty chapters cover Job’s response to such a tragedy: his pain and lament, the “wise advice” of his friends, his memories of his great past, his assertion of innocence and integrity, and most emphatically, his wrestle with a sovereign God who seems not to lift a finger to ease his agony or offer a reason for his torment. This story is the seminal tale behind the ‘why do bad things happen to good people?’ question.

In chapter 38, God finally responds to Job – not by explaining His actions, but by declaring His majesty and man’s finiteness. God takes Job on a tour of creation – from the unfathomable stars of the heavens, the majesty of lightning and the consistency of the oceanic tides, all the way down to the mighty beasts of the field and the monsters of the sea – and essentially says, ‘If you can come anyway close to

the splendor of Me, then I will listen to you, but if not, it's probably best if you stay quiet for now...' Job acknowledges his immeasurable insufficiency when compared to God, and he 'repents in dust and ashes' (42:6).

Focus in...

Job's experience with pain, suffering and loss is one that most of us will experience at some point in life. The fact that his account is a part of our sacred scripture is, perhaps, a solemn reminder that being a Christian doesn't make us immune to sorrow and ache. However, we can learn many things from Job's chronicle that will help us journey through such times.

Discuss...

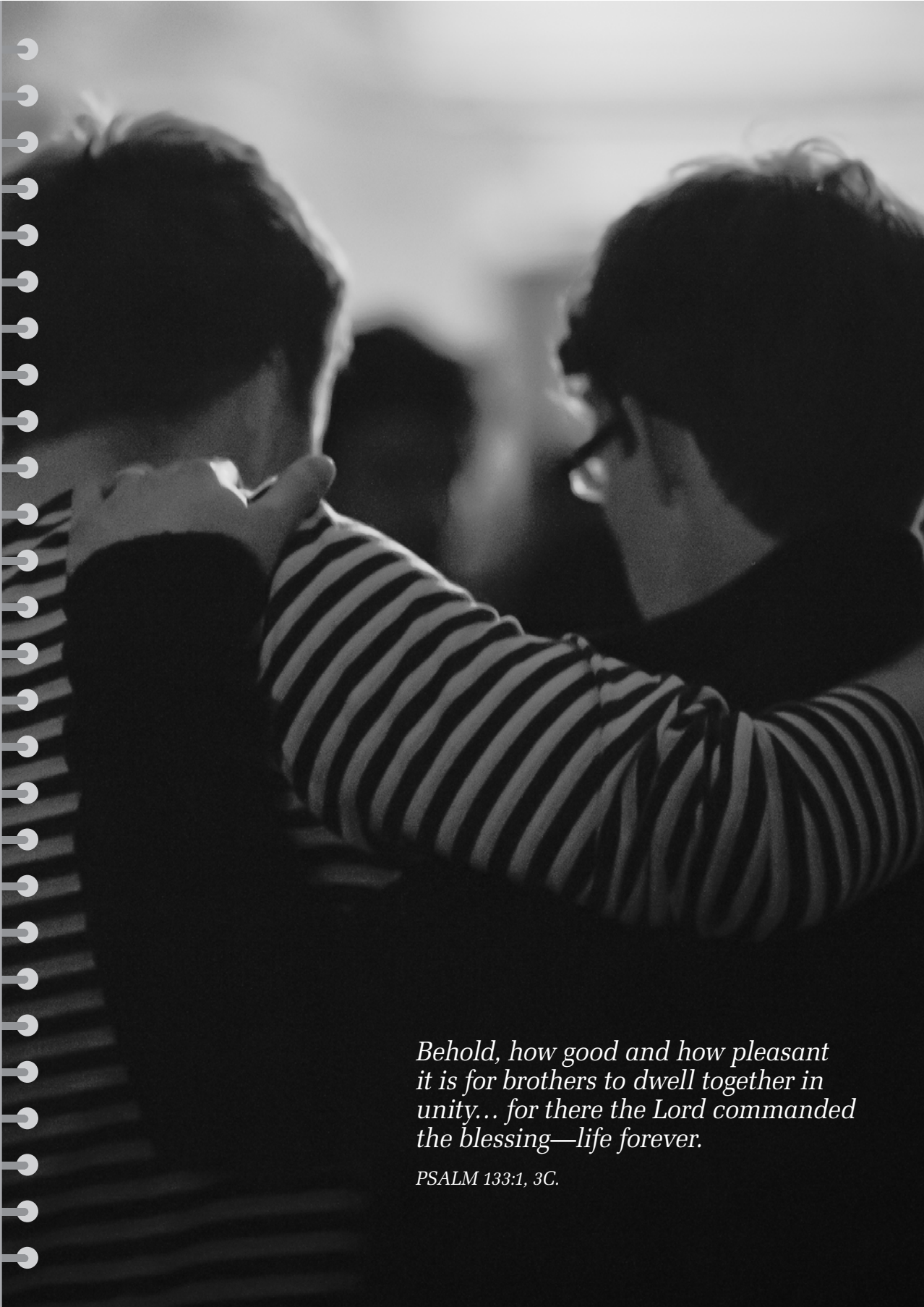
From Job's story, discuss the following questions:

- What do we know about the causes of human suffering?
- What might we learn about God and ourselves through suffering?
- What does Job's suffering tell us about the suffering endured by Jesus on the cross?

The story of the Psalms

The Book of Psalms is a compilation of Jewish prayers, songs, praises (and a few complaints) from across the centuries and from the hand of multiple authors. Some have noticed that the Psalms seem to correlate with the books of the Pentateuch: Psalms 1-41 are predominantly about man (paralleled with Genesis), 42-72 are about deliverance (Exodus), 73-89 concern the sanctuary (Leviticus), 90-106 speak of wandering and unrest (Numbers) and the final psalms centre on the Word of God (Deuteronomy). This is not the only observation on the structure of the writing, but it *is* an interesting one.

The Psalms hold a tension between God's majestic providence and man's futile endeavours: the Psalmist boldly proclaims God's goodness in Psalm 19, cries for help in Psalm 3, declares everlasting praise in Psalm 147, and seeks forgiveness following sin in Psalm 51. The 150 Psalms contain the full spectrum of the human response to God and man, success and failure, joy and sorrow.



*Behold, how good and how pleasant
it is for brothers to dwell together in
unity... for there the Lord commanded
the blessing—life forever.*

PSALM 133:1, 3C.

Focus in...

Psalm 23 is perhaps the most loved of the psalms, and it is more than likely that you've heard it referenced in a message, song, speech or funeral at some point in your life. Its charm is perennial and its message is enduring: the Lord is our shepherd!

Discuss...

- Take a moment to read the passage as a group using its words to encourage yourself and each other.
-
-

The story of the Book of Proverbs

Proverbs: short, pithy and memorable sayings that encourage people to live wisely in their daily life. There is no storyline or plot in Proverbs, just a series of practical tips for living. Work, money, temptation, sex, drinking, laziness, parenting – it's all there.

You'll notice that there is consistent pattern in how the proverbs are written. Proverbs can be:

- *Contrastive*: 'As a ring of gold in a swine's snout, so is a beautiful woman who lacks discretion' (11:22).
- *Complimentary*: 'Like cold water to a weary soul, so is good news from a distant land' (25:25).
- *Comparative*: 'Like a trampled spring and a polluted well, is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked' (25:26).

When you read a proverb, try to identify its pattern – it will help you draw a greater picture from its words.

Focus in...

The Book of Proverbs is largely an encouragement that wise living will be rewarded. Read chapter 3, highlighting two things:

1. What specific character traits are encouraged?
2. What blessings are promised?

In what areas, have you already seen this work in your life?

In what areas are you challenged to apply a more wise approach?

The story of the Book of Ecclesiastes

We have seen in the Book of Proverbs that wise and righteous living can bring blessing, joy, satisfaction and security. But here comes Ecclesiastes – a book where man’s wisdom is useless, learning is (probably) not worth the effort, the wicked prosper at the expense of the virtuous, and both hard work and the easy life lead inevitably to death. Everything, it would seem, is ‘vanity’.

Though unstated, the profile of the book points unmistakably to Solomon. Some say he wrote this after he had experienced all that wealth and success could offer, and was still unfulfilled (others say that the negative tones arise from being married to hundreds of wives, but we’d never say that...). There is very little historical narrative here, it is just Solomon wistfully sharing his own personal pilgrimage through the shortcomings of life. He repeatedly asks, ‘What profit has a man from all his labour?’ (2:22 and 3:9) and spends a large time processing this dilemma. He recognises that despite all of man’s hard work and best intentions, we all, ultimately, are part of an unfair world, and we all return to the dust. Meanwhile, the sun still rises and sets each day, seemingly oblivious to the troubles of humanity beneath it.

Focus in...

Solomon’s declaration that ‘all is vanity’ is the primary message of this book (1:2, 12:8). By this, he means that life is fleeting (like a vapour, it is over just as it begins), futile (in the end, we all die anyway) and incomprehensible (many of our deepest questions will never be answered).

This might sound depressing, but take hope – throughout this all, he never lost his faith in a God above all our circumstances. His final conclusion on the purpose of human life is simple: fear God and keep His commandments (12:13).

Discuss...

- What can we learn from Solomon about the kind of life worth living?
- What kind of work or activity do we know will have eternal value? What kind will not have any value in eternity?

"I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me"

SONG OF SOLOMON 7:10



The story of Song of Solomon

Our final book for today's study is Song of Solomon, and many (probably the married ones) might say that we've saved the best for last. This is a love story where a dark-skinned beauty falls in love with a king, and both are captivated by each other. Through eight chapters, the two lovers admire one another physically and emotionally, and express their love and affection. We expect that Solomon is the "the beloved" man, but the identity of the maiden remains obscure.

The strictly romantic content of the book provides many interesting repercussions. God is never mentioned in the book (many English translations insert 'the Lord' into 8:6, but this is not in the Hebrew), there is no formal theological theme discussed or expanded, and the book is never quoted in the New Testament. Nevertheless, the Jewish people recognize this as a sacred text, and read it particularly as part of their Passover literature.

Focus in...

Though many have tried to interpret the book's contribution to the canon in various ways (is it a metaphor for God's love to Israel?), it is perhaps most satisfying to take it at face value: the exaltation of God's plan for marital affection as a pure and joyful gift, where sexual intimacy between a man and his wife is a beautiful and sanctified experience. Chapter 7 is particularly eminent in expressing this union – a committed, life-long relationship between a man and his wife is conveyed in the Bible as God's greatest intent for the expression and enjoyment of sexual intimacy.

Discuss...

- What are the benefits of sexuality enjoyed in this type of relationship (these can be benefits to the individual, the couple, potential children and the community as a whole)?
- What do we potentially lose when we disregard this relational setting (again, think about the individual, couple, potential children and the community as a whole)?

Reflect...

- What is 'profitable' for us from today's readings?
- What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected? How do you outwork what you have learnt?
- What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.



Please feel free to use this page for your notes

Week Three

Topic: Pre-Exilic Writing A

My Preparation

We saw in Week One that following Solomon's death, the Kingdom of Israel broke into northern and southern kingdoms. After a period of national decline and rebellion in both groups, God uses foreign nations as tools of discipline: the Assyrians overcome Israel in 722 BC and Babylon invades Judah in 605 BC.

A large amount of the Old Testament is devoted to literature forewarning the two nations of the impending onslaught. These books are known as the "Pre-Exilic Writings". In our study, Pre-Exilic Writing A is the writing addressing the Northern Kingdom, and some gentile nations. Pre-Exilic Writing B is addressed to the Southern Kingdom. The writing is largely prophetic in nature.

Biblical prophecy is an incredibly significant part of Scripture. Prophecy itself is simply "speaking from God". At times, the prophets wrote down history *before it happened*, giving us an unassailable demonstration of the inspiration (written by God) of Scriptures. However, in most instances the prophetic voice was a reminder to someone of God's views on particular actions or motivations (such as Amos 2). In these cases, the prophets were reminding the people that they had broken God's covenant, and that without repentance judgment would be swift.

In general, the content of a prophet's writing seemed to follow a standard scheme:

- A judgment speech, comprising of an accusation and the resulting judgment.
- An exhortation or call to repentance.
- An announcement of the Lord's saving grace.
- A description of salvation and what God's blessing might look like.

These days many people tend to take one of two extremes when reading a passage dealing with prophecy – they either get confused or scared and ignore it completely, or they try to interpret every minute detail and become absorbed in looking for the signs of a prophecy's fulfillment. A healthy approach to prophecy will be one of interest and curiosity in this part of God's revelation – but without becoming obsessed.

The healthy reader will look for significance and profitability, without over-eisegesis (over-interpreting). Here are a few thoughts to help you stay healthy with your reading of the prophetic literature.

Always remember:

- Some prophecies are predictions, but some are reminders. Treat each one appropriately.
- Each prophecy is given within a certain context. It had a historical background, a speaker and an audience. Try to be familiar with the context before looking for significance. Try not to take a prophecy given for a particular situation and immediately generalize it to wider circumstances.
- In many cases of predictive prophecy, the interpretation is given in Scripture itself (in Daniel 2, Daniel explains ‘You are the head of gold’).
- In many cases of predictive prophecy, events were fulfilled in Biblical times (in Daniel 5, we read that Belshazzar’s reign has already come to an end).
- In times where the prophecy is a prediction for a much later event, symbolism is often used (this is often necessary – imagine being John, a first century Jew, trying to write the Book of Revelation and communicate to other first-century events that would not happen for at least 2000 years? How would he describe a helicopter, a computer or a microwave? Let’s cut him some slack). Symbolism may have been used in difficult-to-describe situations, or God may have wanted to use specifically symbolic illustrations as a way of disguising details. Either way, remember that behind each symbol is an actual event.
- Be slow (very slow) to attribute not-yet-fulfilled prophecies to current situations. Many people have fallen hard by claiming a certain person or event is the fulfillment of a prophecy. Don’t join their ranks.

Always remember, the ultimate result of Biblical prophecy is an affirmation that God is glorified and sovereign, almighty and omniscient. He is capable of knowing the end from the beginning, and He is skilled at bringing to life that which He has planted.

Read and Respond...

Read the following passages, taken from Pre-Exilic writing to the Northern Kingdom. For each passage, see if you can identify the common elements of a prophetic writing. Write it down in your own words (make sure you give the verse number).

Amos 5:21-24

The accusation from God: _____

A call to repentance: _____

An announcement of God's saving grace: _____

A description of what God's blessing might look like: _____

Hosea 13-14

The accusation from God: _____

A call to repentance: _____

An announcement of God's saving grace: _____

A description of what God's blessing might look like: _____

Now read the following passages taken from Pre-Exilic writing to a non-Jewish nation. Each passage refers to a message from God regarding that particular people. Write down what you think it is.

Obadiah 1:15 (to the Edomites, the long-term enemy of Judah)

Our Discussion

The messages of Amos and Hosea are to the northern tribes of Israel, who were enjoying a time of relative prosperity under the long and secure reign of Jeroboam II (c. 782 to 753 BC). The external threats of Assyria had been (temporarily) subdued earlier that century and Israel

experienced relative peace amongst neighbouring people groups. Yet the country was morally and spiritually bankrupt – religious apostasy, widespread crime, social injustice and violence were the marks of the society. To use a phrase from Dickens, ‘It was the best of times; it was the worst of times...’

Upon the king’s death, complete anarchy set in. Internally, four of Israel’s last six kings were assassinated by their successors. Externally, the mighty Assyrian army was preparing to march. In a very short time, Israel would be no more.

The story of Amos

The prophet Amos is the only person in the Old Testament who carries this name. Writing c. 750 BC, Amos arose neither as a prophet or a prophet’s son [7:14] but, rather, as a herdsman and horticulturalist that was later appointed personally by God to prophesy [7:15]. Amos’ contemporaries were Hosea and Jonah in the north, and Isaiah in the south.

The Book of Amos is the story of God using the “little guy” to take on the rich and powerful members of Israel’s society and condemn them for their treatment of the lowly and poor. Though they observed all the ritualistic requirements of worship (4:4-5), they had turned their hearts against God (5:6) and ignored His expectations of justice to the poor (5:10-13). For their rebellion, God would bring judgment at the hands of the Assyrians (9:8).

Focus in...

In 5:12, Amos criticizes the treatment of the poor by the powerful. It is not surprising then, to find the poor person located at the city gates, which were a boundary between the city (where systems of law and order were in place) and the rural land (where feudal disorder was the norm). The city gates thus provided a place where the judges met in order to settle disputes and administer justice. The poor person sitting at the city gates was, therefore, likely to be very vulnerable and would seek the just protection of the decision makers. However, Amos notes that they were most likely just to be ignored in their time of need – an act of cruel injustice. In verse 15, he cries for justice to be established at the gate, imploring an attitude of integrity and righteousness whenever the disadvantaged are involved.

Discuss...

Though we might not consider ourselves to be rich and influential, we all carry some degree of power over other people. Some distinctions of power are obvious: parents have power over their children and employers have power over employees. Some distinctions are more concealed: when you open your mouth to speak you have the power to tell the truth or to tell a lie, when you see an injustice you have the power to speak up or to ignore. We all have power, and God is very concerned with how we use it.

- What other areas of power do we all hold? In what ways can we abuse our power? How can we make sure that our power is used as a blessing and not a curse for those around us?

The story of Hosea

Hosea prophesied to the Northern Kingdom between the years of 750 and 722 AD. His primary concern was their apostasy and lack of loyalty to God. Hosea was called to let the people know that although they had enjoyed God's abundance and provision, their abandonment of Him would force Him to use their enemies as an instrument of judgment.

Focus in...

To help Hosea understand the kind of betrayal and abandonment that God experienced from Israel, He instructs Hosea to marry Gomer, a prostitute (1:2). Gomer bore Hosea three children (though we can't be sure that they were actually his), and he was made to bear the full brunt of having an unfaithful wife.

Discuss...

- Why do you think that God used the illustration of a marriage to describe His relationship with Israel?
- In what ways can we be “unfaithful” to God?
- How does the situation of the Northern Kingdom before the invasion compare to many modern societies (such as ours)?
- What can we learn from this letter?

The story of Jonah

Let's move to the much loved story of Jonah. It's a tale many of us know well: defiant Jonah gets caught out at sea in a storm, distressed Jonah gets swallowed by a giant fish, reluctant Jonah preaches to a repentant city, angry Jonah yells at God... Anyone who has been to Sunday School has heard the story of Jonah.

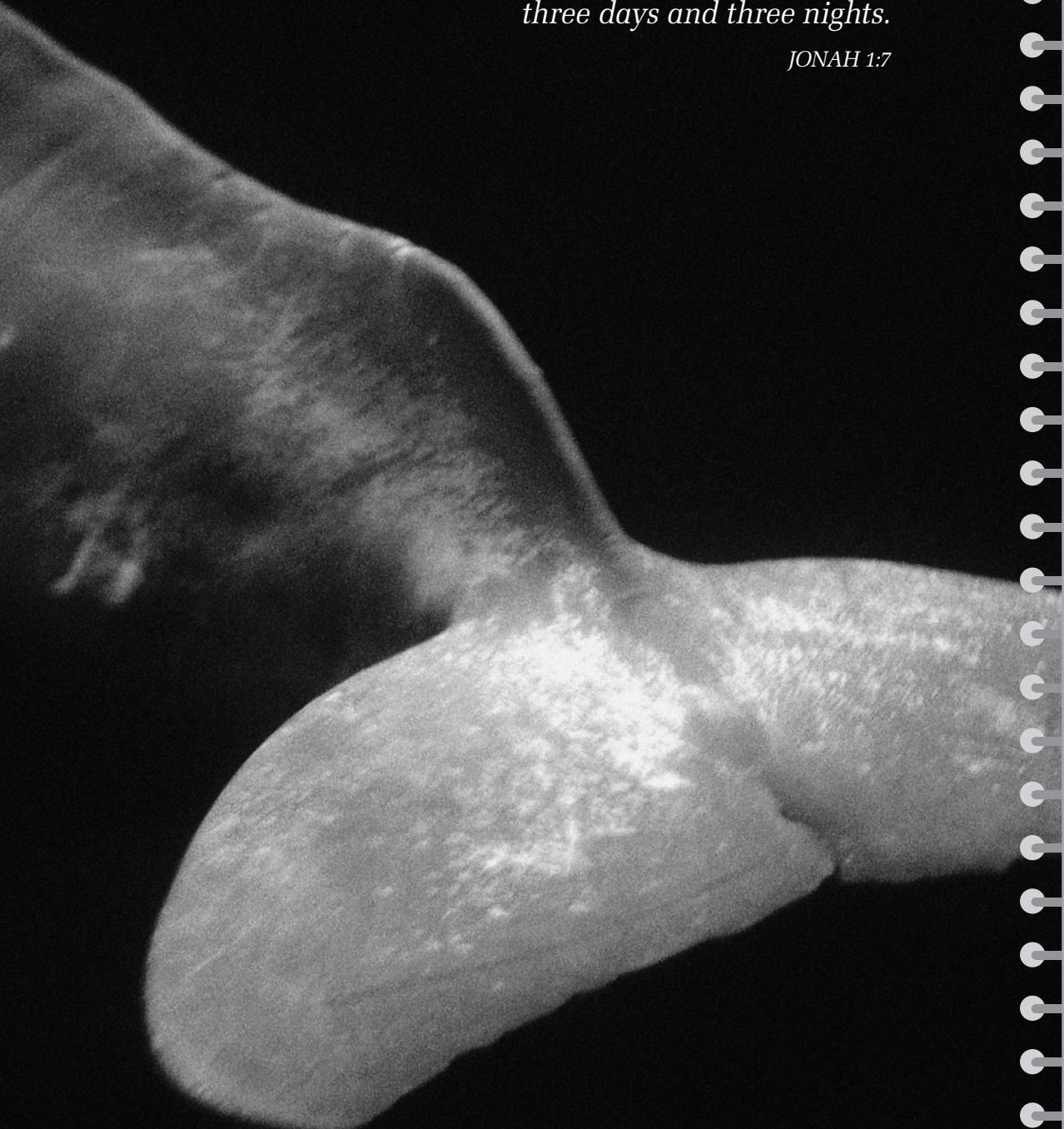
Let's put Jonah into his historical context. Jonah was from the small village of Gath Hopher, about three miles north of Nazareth (making him the only Old Testament prophet from the Galilee region). Jonah also prophesied during the reign of Israel's king Jeroboam II, suggesting that the events took place around 760 BC (just prior to Amos). Although the book doesn't mention Jonah the author (in fact it refers to him in third person), it relays information about such unusual events that it would be hard to resist the idea that Jonah himself wrote it.

Jonah is called by God to preach repentance to Nineveh, a massive city at the very heart of the Assyrian regime. His reluctance to do so is probably both spiritual and personal: as the capital of a gentile nation, Nineveh was looked upon by the Israelites with disdain and derision (“Why would we possibly want those pagans to enjoy our God's blessing?”). But it was also known for its cruelty – especially to Israel and Judah. Any Jewish prophet going there had to be prepared for a fight.

So Jonah runs the other way, but God convinces him to return (three days thinking time inside a fish probably helped...), and Jonah soon finds himself walking the streets of Nineveh, warning them that they had forty days before the game was up. But to his surprise (actually, the Bible says ‘displeasure’), the whole city repents and causes God to rescind His judgment. The city is saved.

*And the LORD appointed a great
fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah
was in the stomach of the fish
three days and three nights.*

JONAH 1:7



Focus in...

A general glance at the Old Testament would suggest that the God of Israel had a violent vendetta against anyone not from that nation, but the Book of Jonah powerfully shows otherwise. Jonah's tale is unsurpassed in illustrating that God's concern and interest is for all people groups, and that He desires all of humanity to repent and return to Him (see Jonah 4:11). It is especially poignant for Christians, for we too were once "Ninevites" – rebelling against God and deserving of His wrath, yet our response to the gospel and the repentance of our heart has spared us from judgment (Romans 5:8-9).

Discuss...

Jonah thought that the Ninevites didn't deserve God's compassion and mercy. He enjoyed his privileged position and didn't think it fair to welcome the "other lot" into the family of God. His religion became exclusive, not inclusive.

- In what ways can we become "exclusive" with our relationship with God? Is there ever anyone that we think doesn't deserve God's compassion (or at least, not as much as we do)?
- What does Jonah's story teach us about the "inclusiveness" of the gospel? What can we learn about God's concern for every single person?

The story of Nahum

Jonah, Part 2 – that's the Book of Nahum. Around 760 BC, Jonah preached and Nineveh repented. By the mid 600s BC, the city had returned to their sins of idolatry and cruelty (3:1-4) and Nahum, who is unknown outside of this piece, delivers a clear, concise and decisive message of judgment on the city. Despite being at the height of her military power (the city had walls 100 feet high and a moat 150 feet wide), the Assyrian capital would soon be overtaken by the marching Babylonian armies. Three judgments were pronounced: the king of Assyria would lose all descendants, his idols would be destroyed, and ultimately he would lose his life (1:14). This destruction is reiterated and descriptively expounded in chapters two and three.

In contrast to Jonah, there is no record of any repentance from Nineveh (actually, we don't even know if Nahum travelled there to give them warning). In 612 BC, Nebuchadnezzar ransacked the city and claimed it for Babylon. What was the world's greatest city had been reduced to rubble by the arm of the Lord.

The story of Obadiah

With just one chapter comprised of 21 verses, the Book Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament. It was written circa 850 to 840 BC (making Obadiah a probable contemporary of Elijah and Elisha) and it is a brief but poetic call for retribution – God declares that everything that the Edomites had done to Jerusalem would be revenged upon them. Where they had indulged in treachery, they would perish through treachery (1:7). Where they sought to rob Judah, they would themselves be robbed (1:6). Where they had indulged in violence, they would perish by violence (1:10).

But who were the Edomites? In Genesis 25:23, it is prophesied that Isaac’s wife Rebekah held “two nations” in her womb – the twins Jacob and Esau. The Edomites were the nation descending from Esau, and they had continuously opposed the Israelites. Over the centuries they had resisted the Israelites as they fled Egypt, opposed Saul, fought against Jehoshaphat and rebelled against Jehoram. They were conquered under Amaziah but were freed under Ahaz. In many ways, the ancient grudge between these two households makes that of Capulet and Montague look like a kindergarten squabble...

The message of Obadiah is a confirmation of God’s faithfulness to His Word. This prophecy of reprisal is a confirmation of the promise made to Abraham many, many generations before (‘I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse those who curse you’, Genesis 12:3).

Reflect...

- What is ‘profitable’ for us from today’s readings?
- What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected? How do you outwork what you have learnt?
- What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.



Please feel free to use this page for your notes

Week Four

Topic: Pre-Exilic Writing B

My Preparation

The Pre-Exilic Writing to the Southern Kingdom of Judah is a hefty part of our Old Testament canon. It contains forewarnings from prophetic heavyweights Isaiah and Jeremiah, as well as an ensemble of the Minor Prophets – Joel, Micah, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk. Remember, in traditional Biblical scholarship, the “Major Prophets” are Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. These three gain the title “major” because of their length of content (they simply wrote more than the “minor” prophets).

Following the split with the northern kingdom, Judah’s fortunes fluctuated between times of war (1 Kings 15:6) and peace with the north. The plague on the Davidic family carried on through the generations, with the royal line coming close to extinction (read 2 Chronicles 21, 22). It was revived greatly under king Uzziah (reigned c. 790 to 739 BC), who returned Judah to a time of great prosperity and security. The priestly class was also rising in power: Zadok and Abiathar were little more than domestic chaplains of David, yet when Azariah and his fellow priests were confident enough to confront Uzziah, the king came off second best (2 Chronicles 26:16-21).

The Assyrian annexation of Israel in 722 BC brought a newfound sense of patriotism for the still-free Judah. Hezekiah the king and Isaiah the prophet formed a strong alliance, and the prophet rose to a position of influence in state affairs that was never to be seen again. It wasn’t to last, however, as a later king, Josiah (reigned c. 640 to 609 BC) saw Judah succumb to Egyptian dependence. The Pharaoh soon installed a vassal-king into Judah, which meant that when the Pharaoh was defeated in 605 BC by Nebuchadnezzar (the ruler of the rising Babylonian power), Judah became a dependency of Babylon.

Read and Respond...

Read the following passages, taken from Pre-Exilic writing to the Southern Kingdom. For each passage, see if you can identify the common elements of a prophetic writing. Write it down in your own words (make sure you give the verse number).

Micah 2

The accusation from God: _____

A call to repentance: _____

An announcement of God's saving grace: _____

A description of what God's blessing might look like: _____

Zephaniah 3

The accusation from God: _____

A call to repentance: _____

An announcement of God's saving grace: _____

A description of what God's blessing might look like: _____

Now read the following passages from Isaiah and Jeremiah:

Isaiah 6:1-9 (Isaiah's commission)

Jeremiah 18:1-12 (God's right to do as He pleases)

Both of these prophets have astonishing insights into the character of God. Write down your observations and thoughts and be prepared to discuss with your group.

Our Discussion

The story of Joel

Joel ('The Lord is God') is a short and powerful tale of judgment and deliverance. We know that the prophet is a son of Pethuel (1:1), but very little else is known. His familiarity with pastoral and agricultural life and his comments towards the priesthood (chapter 1) suggest that he is not a Levite. He is speaking about the Southern Kingdom (3:20) but mentions no kings and very little historical detail. Unlike other prophets that denounced idolatry or injustice, Joel simply calls for repentance without even mentioning a specific sin. All of this makes an accurate dating difficult. Some scholars suggest that his writing was as early as 800BC, others argue for a late date closer to the return from the exile. Fortunately, the absence of a date doesn't greatly affect his theological message, which is the coming 'Day of the Lord' (1:15, 2:1, 2:11, 2:31, 3:14).

Focus in...

Though many other Old Testament authors use the phrase, ‘The Day of the Lord’, the Book of Joel offers the most sustained treatment. But what is this event? It is best understood as a period of time in which God displays His magnificent power, His wrath against sin, and His blessing upon His redeemed people. It is the consummation of the Kingdom of God and the cessation of all attacks on it. It is frequently associated with seismic disturbances (2:31), cosmic upheaval (2:3) and is described as ‘great and very awesome’ (2:11). At times, some writers use actual historical events as examples of the final event that will take place at the consummation of history. For instance, Joel uses the examples from the current “day” – a physical plague of locusts, widespread drought and mass starvation (chapter 1) – as a historical illustration of a future “day” – an onslaught from the spiritual realm (chapter 2).

Fortunately, God graciously offers the hope of His presence throughout this terrible period (2:27). He offers three promises that will be markers of His presence: material restoration of the land (2:21-27), spiritual restoration through the outpouring of His Spirit (2:28-32) and national restoration through the divine judgment on the unrighteous (3:1-21). Joel’s ‘Day of the Lord’ can be read as both a short-term prophetic word against Judah, and an eschatological prophetic word with significance for the end times.

Discuss...

Again, we encourage you to be careful when taking prophetic words offered for the nation of Israel and applying them to your Christian life (what crosses over and what doesn’t is a far more complicated study!). One thing we can be assured of is, that to those who oppose God, the Day of the Lord will be a day of terror, but to those who are for Him, it will be a day of joy.

- What can we learn from the message of Joel?

The story of Micah

Micah is a delightful little book. We know the author's name means 'Who is like the Lord?', which suggests a Godly heritage. His roots can be traced to Moresheth (1:1), which is a productive agricultural area in the foothills of Judah. Like his Northern Kingdom counterpart (Amos), God calls Micah from the countryside to speak to the kings and rulers of the southern nation of Judah (1:2). Also like Amos, Micah delivers a condemnation of religious corruption (see 3:7) and social injustice (see 2:1-2). His message cycles between doom and hope: doom because the people have rebelled, hope because after each punishment God will remain faithful to His unchanging covenants with their forefathers, and again, show them compassion (7:19-20).

Micah 5:2-5a is another example of God's hand in the writing of the Scriptures. Here, Micah predicts that the birth of a future King will take place in a little backwater town called Bethlehem. This King "goes forth from the days of eternity" (He existed for all time), will rise up in the strength and majesty of the Lord, and will not just bring peace, but will be our peace.

Seven hundred years after writing, this prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus (Matthew 2:1).

Focus in...

On our journey through the Old Testament, we come across what seems like an endless list of laws to "keep God happy." Some make more sense than others: not murdering someone (Exodus 20:13) seems fair, while not getting a haircut (Leviticus 19:27) seems a bit odd... In fact, most Jewish scholars would agree that there are 613 individual commandments that a faithful Jewish person would do their best to observe (how these relate to the Christian is a larger discussion...). In a passage that is both magnificently descriptive and spitefully terse, Micah summarizes what the Lord requires of His people: 'Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God...' Since its writing, this passage has been a treasured source of inspiration and direction for Jews and Christians alike.

Discuss...

- What does it mean to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly before God? What might this look like in our lives?



*He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the
Lord require of you, But to do justice, to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God?*

MICAH 6:8

The story of Habakkuk

Let's summarize what we know about the man Habakkuk:

He's a prophet (1:1).

That's it.

Actually, we also know that he's really annoyed that his native Judah – God's chosen and covenant people – was about to get overrun by the pagan and despised army from Babylon (the 'Chaldeans' of 1:6). Following their overthrow of Assyria in 612 BC, the Babylonians were on the march towards Judah (set to arrive in 605 BC). Habakkuk may well have been watching their invasion with his own eyes.

Understandably, Habakkuk was dismayed, though not at the actions of the invaders. He was more disheartened of the apparent silence, inactivity and unconcern of God. How could God allow an evil people to conquer Judah? While Habakkuk may have been able to understand God's punishment of Judah for their sins (1:1-4), he struggled with equating God's righteous character with His apparent use of evil to achieve His goals (1:13).

Like Job, this prophet argued with God. Through this experience, Habakkuk achieved a greater understanding of God's character and an increased resolve to trust Him despite the uncertainty. The finale of his piece (chapter 3) is almost psalm-like in its poetry, and Habakkuk concludes that regardless of the situation, he will still exalt in the Lord, the God of his salvation (3:18).

The story of Zephaniah

Zephaniah, who introduces himself in his first verse with the longest genealogy of all the prophets, doesn't continue his writing on a happy note. His second verse is ominous: "I will completely remove all things from the face of the earth" declares the Lord.'


Like Joel, Zephaniah's message is centred on the coming "Day of the Lord" (1:7). His "day" refers firstly to an historical event, when Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian military would overrun Judah (1:4-13). He additionally switches to the end-time "day", when God's wrath is finally poured out upon the inhabitants of the earth (1:18). But the end day promises to bring salvation as well as retribution. From 3:8, Zephaniah prophesies that the Lord will restore Israel, ushering in blessing and restoration. As the victorious warrior for His people (3:17), God promises to gather them (3:18), deal with their oppressors (3:19), save the lame (3:19), turn their shame into renown (3:19) and restore their fortunes before their very eyes (3:20).

The story of the Major Prophets

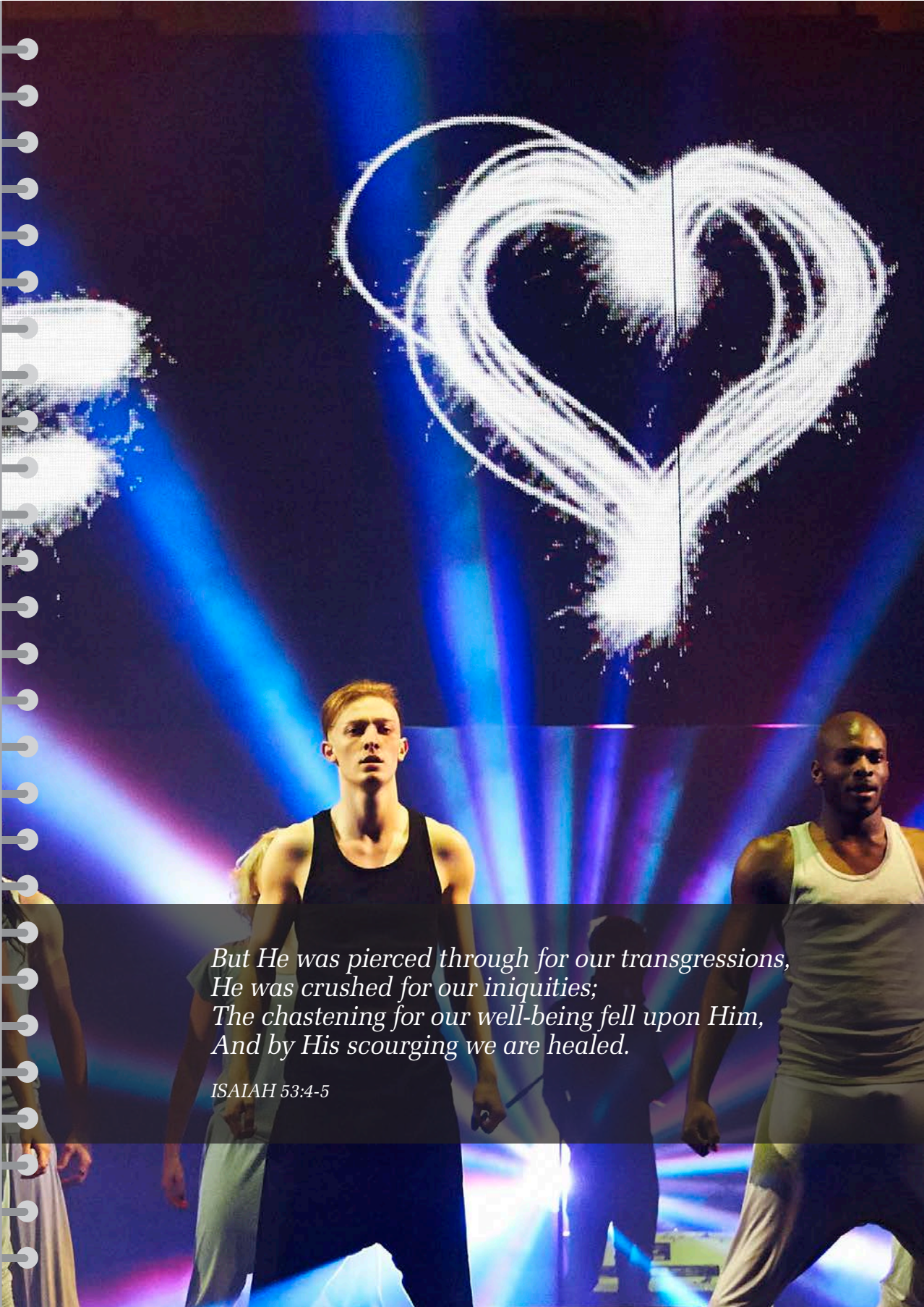
Isaiah, whose name means ‘The Lord is salvation’, ministered in and around Jerusalem as a prophet to Judah between the years of 739 BC and 686 BC. Though we don’t know his exact background, we expect that he came from a notable family, given his easy access to the king (7:3). He was married with two children (7:3, 8:3) and upon receiving a call from God to prophecy, Isaiah responded with cheerful readiness (6:8). Early prophecies that were fulfilled in his lifetime were timely indicators of his prophetic gift from God: the invading Sennacherib would fail to capture Jerusalem (chapters 36-38), Hezekiah would be healed (38:5 and 2 Kings 20:7) and the Persian ruler Cyrus would deliver Judah from captivity (44:28-45:1).

Isaiah was called to address the failing purity of Judah, the empty ritualism and the idolatry of the people (1:10-15, 40:18-20). The centerpiece of Isaiah’s prophecy, though, concerned the coming Messiah. This person would be both a suffering servant (chapter 53) and a reigning king (chapter 11). He would be born of a virgin (7:14), be an heir to the throne of David (9:7) and have God’s Spirit rest on Him (11:2). As society rejects Him (53:1), He will be spat on and struck (50:6) and disfigured by suffering (52:14) and die amongst criminals (53:12). Nevertheless, His death would provide our substitute (53:6), bear our sins and sorrows (53:4) and save those who believe in Him (53:12). As the victor, He will heal the brokenhearted (61:1), judge the world with righteousness (11:4) and reign in peace for eternity (9:7)! Isaiah’s message of future redemption and restoration tempered his visions of woe and destruction.

In preparation for Isaiah’s calling, God gave him a vision of His majestic holiness (6:1-7) that was so staggering it would leave him completely devastated in the realization of his own sinfulness. The experience was probably similar to John’s prophetic vision in Revelation 4, and many would argue that it was in fact the Second Person of the Trinity (Jesus) who Isaiah had seen on the throne (cf. John 12:41). The vision happening in the year that king Uzziah died was a gracious gift from God (6:1). Uzziah had been a worthy king, gaining remarkable economic achievement and reasserting Judah’s political power. His death would have bought mourning and uncertainty for the future – and it is amidst this uncertainty that God presents Isaiah with an image of He who sits unrivalled upon the eternal throne.



*Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.*



*But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.*

ISAIAH 53:4-5

Focus in...

The depiction of God's glory in His temple is astonishing:

- His throne was 'high and lifted up', emphasizing His majestic stature.
- The 'train of His robe filled the temple', indicating his sovereignty (typically, a sovereign would have servants to carry the 'train' as they walked – the more servants, the longer the train could be. For the Lord to have a train that filled the temple suggested that He is attended to by multitudes of servants).
- He was surrounded by seraphim – an order of angelic creatures of such extraordinary power that the temple itself shook when they spoke (yet in spite of their immense capability, what was their choice of activity? Declaring God's goodness!).
- The primary thrust of the angel's worship was to declare God's holiness – He is complete in perfection, untainted by sin and wholly separate from fallen creation (remember when we discussed God's holiness in Exodus 3?).

When he realized that he was in the presence of Perfection, Isaiah crumbled in repentance. The vision of God's holiness vividly reminded him of his own unworthiness that deserved judgment, yet God graciously (if not painfully) cleanses him (6:6). His only response is "Here I am. Send me."

Discuss...

In our modern church culture, it can be easy to see God as a "pal" or "buddy" (didn't Jesus call His disciples His friends?). While the intimacy of being family and the familiarity of being friends is important, do we ever forget the other side of the coin? That He is GOD?

- In what ways can we become over-familiar, or even disrespectful, towards God as the Almighty?
- In what ways is it tempting to think that we are somehow worthy of God's attention, or a necessary component for Him to fulfill His plans?
- What can we learn from Isaiah's experience in the throne room?

The story of Jeremiah

Our second major prophet is Jeremiah, who wrote both the Book of Jeremiah and Lamentations (though not stated, it is traditionally attributed to Jeremiah). One of seven Jeremiahs found in Scripture, this Jeremiah ('Jehovah establishes') was the son of a priest and personally served as both a priest and a prophet. His ministry to Judah spanned the five decades from 626 BC to beyond the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 586 BC.

Known as the 'weeping prophet', Jeremiah's message points to Judah's consistent sin and rebellion, leading to an invasion, siege and destruction. Once the people refused to listen to his plea to repent and the attack began, Jeremiah appealed for them not to resist the Babylonian conquest in order to prevent total obliteration. Life wasn't always cheery for this man of God – because of his pessimistic predictions, he was threatened, tried for his life, put in stocks, forced to flee from king Jehoiakim, humiliated by a false prophet and thrown into a pit.

Jeremiah ministered in Judah for forty years, yet he never received a grateful response from anyone. His preaching was never popular and he was frequently plagued by feelings of inadequacy and doubt. At one point, he cried that he wept day and night for his people (9:1). At another, he despaired that the Lord had deceived him, and he cursed the day of his own birth (20:7, 14-18). Nevertheless, he always brought his grief to God, and sought solace and protection in Him alone.

Jeremiah addressed the covenantal relationship between God and His people using the analogy of the suzerain-vassal relationship. In the Ancient Near East, a suzerain nation was a supreme nation who ruled over a vassal. The suzerain offered benevolence, and in response, the vassal would show appreciation by giving exclusive allegiance to their ruler. In our story, God had powerfully rescued Israel from the Egyptians, and in response, He expected obedience and allegiance (note that the obedience didn't earn the rescue, it simply showed appreciation for it). Obedience furthered the covenantal relationship, disobedience reflected ingratitude and violated the covenant. These patterns of blessings and curses formed the fundamental message of Jeremiah's activity.

Focus in...

In Jeremiah 18, we are given a striking picture of God’s relationship with His people. God sends Jeremiah to a potter’s house, where he witnessed a skillful potter molding his clay on a spinning wheel. If the clay began to misshape, the potter would begin again, remaking it into another, more pleasing vessel. God explained the meaning behind this analogy (18:5): if a nation that was becoming “misshaped” would repent, He would be faithful to restore them, but if a nation that was being prepared for greatness rebelled, then He would withhold His blessing. The potter was clearly in control, but would respond to the actions of the clay.

Discuss...

- What right does God have to bend human lives in anyway He likes?
- How does the story of the potter and his clay parallel with our lives? How does it relate with the trajectories of our nations?
- How have you seen God ‘bending’ and ‘moulding’ you in your life? How do we normally respond? What did you learn from your response?
- What is required on your behalf to be made into a vessel that God is ‘pleased with’?

Unfortunately, the people of Judah did not yield willingly to the potter, and they refused to repent. We know from our reading that Judah succumbed to Babylon, and that Jerusalem was besieged and razed. Jeremiah 52 (his last chapter) details the historical fall of the city, and Lamentations shows us the prophet’s own personal anguish at seeing the city in ruins.

Reflect...

- What is ‘profitable’ for us from today’s readings?
- What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected? How do you outwork what you have learnt?
- What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.



Please feel free to use this page for your notes

Week Five

Topic: The Exilic Writing

My Preparation

In 597 BC, the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, ordered a siege of Jerusalem. Upon their surrender, he pillaged the temple and all goods of value, razed it to the ground and immediately deported the Jewish king (Jeconiah, also known as Jehoiakim) back to Babylon. Through a wave of deportations, Nebuchadnezzar eventually moves much of the able Jewish population into exile.

The short but poignant book called ‘The Lamentations of Jeremiah’ was written after Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians (586 BC). It is a brief but despairing poem about the city’s fall, containing no words of joy or optimism, only distress and despondency over this once-beautiful municipality. It is likely that Jeremiah saw the destruction of the walls, towers, homes, palace and temple first-hand, writing down his memories while the event was very fresh in his mind.

The Book of Daniel chronicles the life of one of the exiles, and covers the span of the exilic period from approximately 605 BC – 538 BC. We attribute authorship to Daniel himself, though this is disputed (for instance, the writing switches from third person to first person in chapter 7). As a teenager of noble birth (1:3), Daniel and three of his friends were taken captive and exiled to Babylon in order to be indoctrinated into the culture of this foreign oppressor. Daniel made the most of his opportunity, successfully exalting God by his character and service. In scenes reminiscent of Joseph, Daniel quickly rises to become a statesman and prophet of four ruling kings.

Daniel is an intriguing and fascinating book worthy of occupying a complete session by itself. Along with Joseph (and Jesus), Daniel is the only major character in the Bible of whom no record of wrong is found. His book is both historic (detailing the current condition of the Israelite people) and prophetic (showing imminent world events, including the future reign of Christ). Many have noticed that what Revelation is to the New Testament, Daniel is to the Old Testament. Ezekiel, Habakkuk, Jeremiah and Zephaniah were Daniel’s prophetic contemporaries.

Daniel’s book contains many of our most vivid and treasured stories: Daniel interprets a king’s dream and is given great rewards (chapter 2);

Daniel and his friends are thrown into a blazing furnace for refusing to worship one king's idol (chapter 3); the next king is terrified when he sees a human hand writing about his downfall on the wall before him (chapter 5); and Daniel is punished by yet another king - this time cast into a den of lions for praying to God (chapter 6). Along the way, he prophesies about the rise and fall of great world empires (chapters 7-12), and introduces us to the term 'son of Man' (7:13-14) – a term frequently adopted by Jesus when referring to Himself.

The Book of Ezekiel, written by Ezekiel himself ('strengthened by God'), was a word to Judah given from the mouth of this prophet-in-exile. Like Daniel, Ezekiel was a prophet of the Exile (Daniel was taken in the first wave, Ezekiel in the second). However, unlike the reverent, orthodox and generally neat-and-tidy Daniel, Ezekiel was wonderfully peculiar – at times he locked himself in his home (3:24); he was struck mute (3:26); he laid on his left side for 390 days, and then on his right for 40 days (4:4-6); he shaved his head and beard (5:1) and wasn't permitted to mourn the death of his wife (24:15-24). He also built himself a model city (well, actually just a brick with the word 'Jerusalem' scrawled on it...) and pretended to lay siege to it (complete with miniature walls, ramps, camps and battering rams – you can read it in 4:1-3). It seems that God directed many of these experiences so that Ezekiel would have a personal understanding of the message that he was giving Judah. His initial prophecies seemed to have been received poorly (3:25), but as time passed the people's acceptance of his ministry and message seemed to grow (8:1, 14:1, 20:1).

Ezekiel uses extensive symbolic language to describe some quite extraordinary events. In chapters 1 and 10 he has a vision of the throne of God surrounded by four "living creatures" (cherubim, or angels), each who had a different face (lion, ox, man, eagle). Chapter 28 describes the corruption of a human king, which many have taken to be a portrayal of Satan before his fall. Ultimately though, Ezekiel's writing is focused on the condemnation and then restoration of Israel. His vivid account of the famed 'valley of the dry bones' (chapter 37) is perhaps Scripture's most dramatic image of God's power to resurrect and restore life to an otherwise dead humanity. In our study, we will focus on one of three passages which each tell a different part of the Daniel narrative, and one from Ezekiel.

Read...

- Daniel 1 (introduction to Daniel)
- Daniel 2-3 (Daniel interprets the king’s dream, is rewarded, then punished)
- Chapter 7 – Daniel’s vision of the future
- Ezekiel 37:1-14 (God will resurrect and restore Israel)

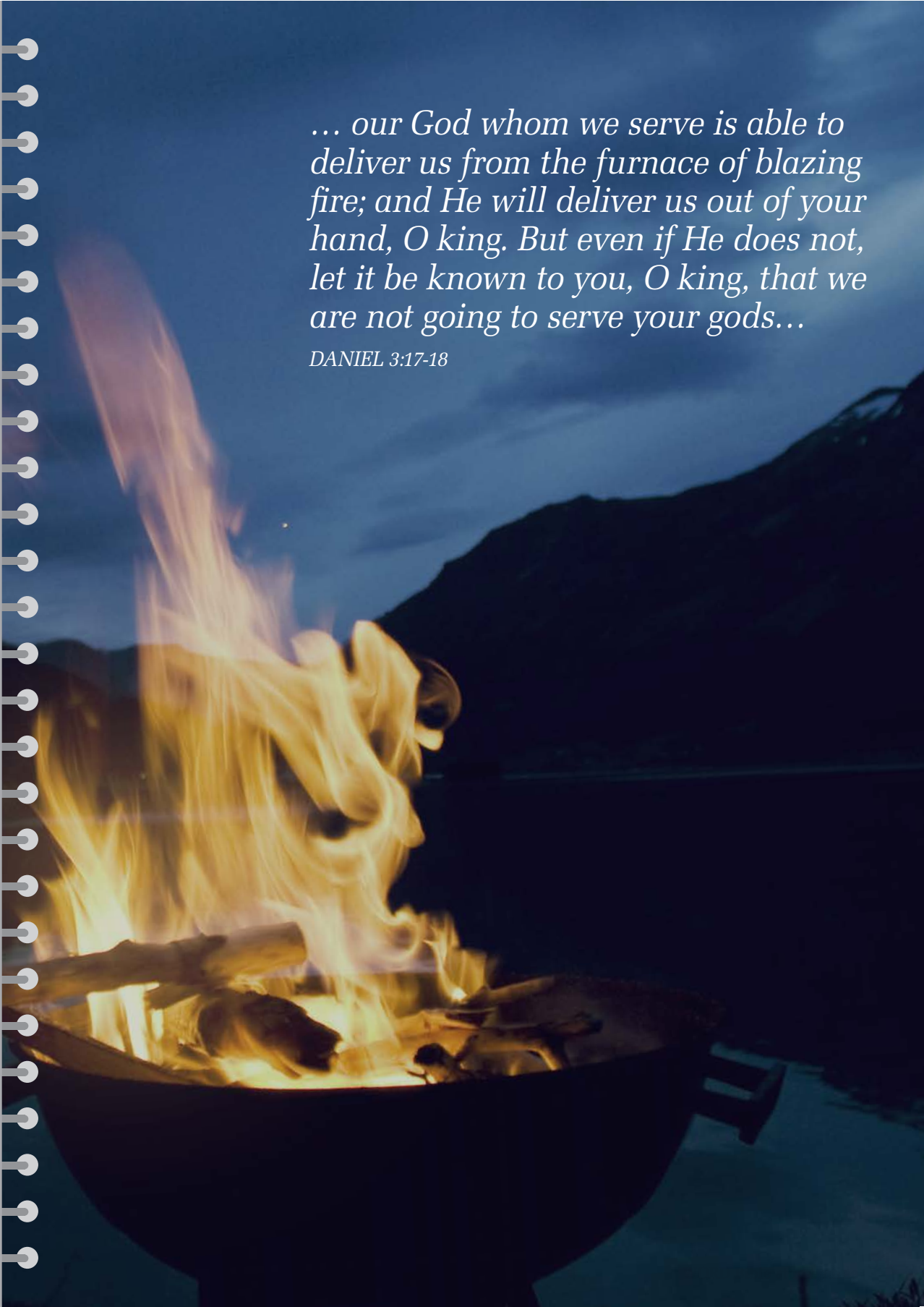
Respond...

Write down 2 or 3 things that came to mind as you read these passages. Include any questions that arise when you think about it closely.

Our Discussion

The story of Daniel

As part of God’s plan for Israel, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar is given victory over the Jewish king Jehoiakim (1:2). As part of their strategy to completely subdue their new captives, the Babylonians sought to retrain key and influential Jewish men and use them to convey the new Babylonian culture to their fellow exiles. The king sought men of the highest standard – he expected them to be ‘strong, healthy, and good-looking young men... well versed in every branch of learning, gifted with knowledge and good judgment, and suited to serve in the royal palace’ (1:4). The youths would be given three years of indoctrination before being released to serve their new king. Renaming was part of the brainwashing process, with all name references to the Jewish God being replaced with references to pagan gods:



... our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods...

DANIEL 3:17-18

- Daniel ('God is my judge') became Belteshazzar ('Bel protect the king')
- Hananiah ('the Lord is gracious') became Shadrach ('command of Aku')
- Mishael ('Who is like the Lord?') became Meshach ('Who is what Aku is?')
- Azariah ('the Lord is my Helper') became Abednego ('Servant of Nego')

Focus on...

The Jewish exile into Bablyon resembles, in many ways, the Christian's sojourn through the world. In the New Testament, Peter refers to us as 'paroikos' and 'parepidemos' – words that are frequently translated as 'sojourners', 'strangers', 'foreigners' or 'aliens' (1 Peter 2:11). His point is that, like Daniel, we are citizens of another nationality (that of Heaven) who are merely passing through a foreign culture. Though we must each day negotiate the trials, temptations and frustrations of the world, we are called to not forget that we have a citizenship beyond this world, and we will all one day pass through this life and into the next.

Discuss...

- In what ways did Daniel refuse to surrender to the beliefs and customs of his Babylonian rulers?
- We live in a world where there are customs and beliefs that are competing with our Christian faith. What are some of the common beliefs and customs of our society? (Keep in mind, some are theistic and some are a-theistic).
- In what ways are we pressured to relinquish our faith to the customs of the world? Is it possible to refuse such surrender, and if so, what might our lives look like?

The story continues...

Daniel refused to defile himself with the food offered by the king (it is likely that it had been first offered to idols, which is rightly an abomination for a Jewish man to eat). God honoured Daniel's trust and allegiance by not only ensuring their good health, but also giving him and his friends an 'unusual aptitude' for learning and wisdom (1:15-17). He received favour in the eyes of Nebuchadnezzar, and was looked to frequently for advice and judgment. Following a

disturbing dream that could not be interpreted by his own magicians and astrologers, the king sought advice from Daniel. Pleased with his ability to interpret the dream, the king gave Daniel a place of authority, honour and wealth in his kingdom.

However such favour wasn't to last, however. Nebuchadnezzar made for himself a gold statue and demanded his entire kingdom to worship his idol. The three Jewish men (Daniel excluded) refused to defer their worship to an idol made from human hands, causing the king to fly into a rage. He immediately ordered them to be thrown into a blazing furnace (a furnace so hot that the would-be executioners were consumed as they launch the men inside).

Focus in...

It would seem that we are all looking for someone, or something, to worship. Without a true understanding of the Living God, the king set up an idol whose worship would give him purpose, worth and security. The theme of the Bible is essentially one of worship – a struggle between true worship of God and the worship of created idols.

It has been said that there are five ways that Christians relate to the idol worship in their surrounding cultures:

1. The first is *accommodation*, where the believer simply relinquishes their faith and adopts the culture of the society.
2. The second is *privatization*, where the Christian keeps their faith private and separate from their public life (often referred to as “Sunday Christians”).
3. The third is *militarization*, where the believer adopts a position of superiority to the society. They become hostile to the centres of power, and either attack them head-on or retreat into a separate subculture.
4. The fourth is *intervention*, where Christians aggressively seek a miraculous move of God. Their focus and attention is strictly evangelism, viewing themselves as recruiters for God during the precious little time they have available.
5. The fifth is *engagement*, where Christians actively seek to work with and through the culture, but in a way that reveals the distinctiveness and values of the Kingdom of God and His gospel. They are happy to be conversant with non-believers about things that are important to all (education, relationships, money, sex, etc.), but remained unmoved in their Godly beliefs. They respect the

power of their society, but do not seek its approval or rewards.

Discuss...

Discuss the five models of engagement.

- What are the pros and cons of each?
- Which ones have you seen in your life or your church?
- What can we learn from the lives of Daniel and his friends when it comes to relating with idol worship in our culture?

The story continues...

Of course, the three friends aren't left to die in the furnace. A miraculous fourth, person is seen to be walking with them in the fire (many say this is another pre-incarnation of Jesus), and the three men step out from the flames without so much as a burnt nose-hair. Nebuchadnezzar praises the God of Israel and releases Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to freedom.

Nebuchadnezzar's sins were to catch up with him though, and in chapter four we see God remove him from his throne. His son Belshazzar ascends as sovereign, but his rebellion against God also leads to his downfall. At one of his elaborate and idolatrous feasts, God informs him of his coming ruin in no uncertain fashion – He causes a body-less hand to write on the wall in front of Belshazzar:

'God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. You have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. Your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and the Persians' (Daniel 5:25-28).

That evening Belshazzar was slain.

Darius assumes the throne and Daniel becomes a faithful servant of a third ruler. The new king's other advisors, however, did not appreciate his faithfulness to God. They plotted against him, and enacted a law forbidding worship of anyone but king Darius. In scenes that almost mirror the earlier events of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, Daniel refuses to adhere and is this time cast into a den of lions. Once again, however, God assumes the role of faithful protector. As the three men walked from the furnace unscathed, so Daniel walked from the lion's den without so much as a bruise.

The story of Daniel's vision of beasts

In chapter 7, we see a flashback to Daniel's service under Belshazzar (chapters 7 and 8 are best read as an interlude between chapters 4 and 5). Here we see an example of the prophetic literature that abounds in the Book of Daniel. We'll take a moment to look briefly at one of these prophecies.

Daniel himself has a terrifying dream. In short, he sees four great beasts coming out of the seas:

1. The first was like a lion, but with the wings of an eagle. It stood on two feet like a human, and it had the mind of a man.
2. The second was like a bear that had three ribs clenched in its teeth. This one was instructed to 'devour much meat.'
3. The third was like a leopard, but with wings. It also had four heads and it was given great dominion.
4. The fourth was the most terrifying. It was extremely strong, with large iron teeth. It trampled and devoured the three previous beasts. It had ten horns, and another little horn also appeared. The little horn had the eyes of a man and was very boastful.

Following the appearance of these great beasts, Daniel sees an unusual figure appear (called the 'Ancient of Days'). He was like pure snow and was seated on a throne of flames. He had multitudes of servants. To this figure another figure was presented (called 'one like a Son of Man'). This last character was given dominion, glory and an everlasting kingdom comprised of people of every nation and language.

Like us, Daniel was both distressed and intrigued by this dream, and he sought help with its interpretation. He hears that each beast represents four kings of the earth, with the last beast being particularly powerful and aggressive. The 'little horn' is a final king who will war against God and His saints, but who will be ultimately destroyed.

Focus in...

There have been many attempts to identify the people and events of Daniel's vision in chapter 7. Your identification will largely be influenced by the methods in which you generally interpret the Bible, and the way that you understand significant key people that feature elsewhere in scripture (for instance, because they view Jesus in a

different way to orthodox Christian teaching, certain break-away groups of Christianity also interpret Daniel 7 in a different way to traditional accounts).

One traditional Christian reading of the chapter holds the following interpretation:

- The first beast is said to represent the empire of Babylon from 626 to 539 BC (the royal palaces of Babylon were guarded by statues of winged lions).
- The second beast is said to represent the empire of Medo-Persia from 550 to 330 BC (with the ribs being the nations it would vanquish).
- The third beast is said to represent the empire of Greece (the leopard represents the speed at which Alexander the Great (356 to 323 BC) was to overcome his rivals).
- The fourth beast is said to represent the Roman Empire, with the ten horns signifying 10 smaller kingdoms that would eventually rise from Europe. The smallest horn is said to represent a specific king or ruler that would emerge from this group of nations.
- The Ancient of Days is said to represent God the Father, and the Son of Man is said to represent God the Son.

Discuss...

Feel free to spend some time discussing the topic of prophecy in the Bible. Is there anything that we are confused or worried by? How can we help and encourage each other?

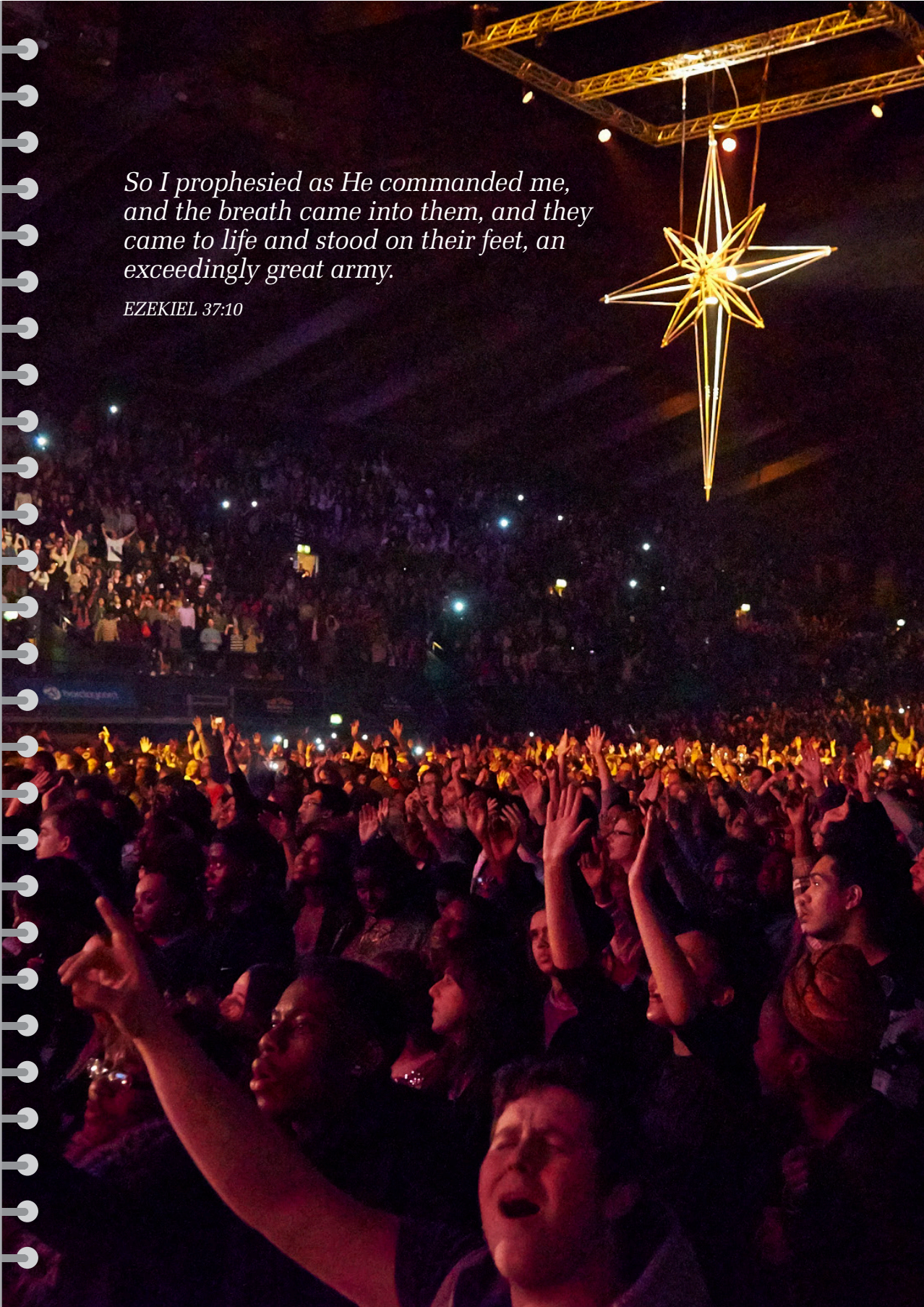
The story of Ezekiel

In his own special and unique way, Ezekiel confirmed to Judah that it was their sin that had led them into captivity. He ruthlessly condemned the nation, citing that their rebellion against God had been ongoing since the Exodus (Ezekiel 16), and still continued to the day.

But despite the fact that he preached from the very heart of Babylonian captivity, he offered encouragement that there was still hope of national restoration and freedom for God's people. As with the Exodus, this rescue would not be because they deserved it, rather it would be because of God's faithfulness to His commitments and promises. The restoration would include a Davidic-like shepherd to lead them (34:23), a new 'heart of flesh' to enable them to be joyfully obedient (36:26), a reunited nation (37:17-22) and a new covenant of peace (37:26-28). The future Israel would finally be under one leader

*So I prophesied as He commanded me,
and the breath came into them, and they
came to life and stood on their feet, an
exceedingly great army.*

EZEKIEL 37:10



as a purified nation, and would finally fulfill the hope expressed in Exodus 6:7 – that Yahweh will be their God and they will be His people (Ezekiel 37:27).

Focus in...

The ‘Valley of the Dry Bones’ (Ezekiel 37:1-14) is a breathtaking picture of God’s ability to revive and restore. In it, God gives Ezekiel a vision of an arid basin, scattered with bleached, lifeless bones. The Lord asked Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?”, to which Ezekiel replied, “Oh Lord God, only You know” (always an excellent response to God when you’re faced with an impossible question...). God declares that the bones will indeed live – He will breathe life into them, wrap their frames with flesh and skin and cause them to come alive again as a great and mighty army. As Ezekiel utters those same words, the valley floor begins to shake with movement.

The story of Ezekiel’s is centred on God’s restoration of Israel (let’s not forget that). But it has important significance for us as well. Through it, we learn that God is an avid restorer of life. He is able to take things that are dead – you, me, our cities and our nations – and breathe life into them, restoring their beauty and strength.

Discuss...

- What does Ezekiel’s vision of bones tell us about the state of humanity?
- What was necessary for the bones to live?
- What parts of our lives are “dead” and need the breath of life in them (we’re not just talking about dead hopes and dreams, but areas of selfishness and sin that have still not received God’s gift of life and freedom)?
- The dry bones stood and became an ‘exceedingly great army.’ What does this metaphor tell us about God’s church?

Reflect...

- What is ‘profitable’ for us from today’s readings?
- What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected? How do you outwork what you have learnt?
- What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.



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Week Six

Topic: The Post-Exilic Writing

My Preparation

The Babylonians had sacked Jerusalem, appointed a vassal king (a ruler under the authority of Babylon), and taken a large proportion of the Jewish population into captivity. During this Babylonian captivity, there were a number of calls from Jewish rebels to start an insurgency, but both Ezekiel and Daniel pleaded with the population to remain at peace with their captors. However, a number of rebellions did occur, and each time they were met with strong Babylonian retribution. Freedom was finally achieved, but not via the means of revolt. In 538 BC Cyrus the Great (ruler of Persia) captured Babylon, and he permitted the Jewish exiles to begin their return home.

The books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther cover the historical events immediately following the return from exile. Like the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, they are largely historical writings. The Book of Ezra has an unstated author, but we understand it to have been Ezra himself, writing between approximately 457 to 444 BC. He was part of a smaller group of exiles returning about 70 years after the first release, and assumes the role of teaching this generation of resettling Israelites God's law, offering them a fresh start after the disobedience of their ancestors. The Book of Nehemiah follows Ezra, and it includes events up to 445 BC.

As the king's cupbearer (1:11), Nehemiah is gravely concerned that the Jewish people have not rebuilt the city walls that were destroyed in the siege of 586 BC – despite having been resettled in Jerusalem for almost 100 years. His book covers the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls and provides many important leadership points for us today.

The Book of Esther is a fascinating drama, and in many ways reminds us of stories found in Ruth. The book covers events around 445 BC, and could reasonably be slotted in between the events of Ezra chapter 6 and 7. In it, Xerxes (or Ahasuerus), the king of Persia, dethrones his wife and begins a nationwide search for a new queen. A young Jewish orphan girl by the name of Esther is ultimately chosen, and she ascends the throne of Persia. The story's villain is Haman, one of the king's insiders, who plots to destroy all of the Jews. Through a series of twists and turns, the new queen Esther is able to see her people saved from the planned slaughter.

Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi are known as the Post-Exile Prophets. In a way similar to Joel, Micah, Habakkuk and friends prior to the Exile, their role was to convey the prophetic message of God to the returning Jewish families and leaders. Each would combine both a present-day message (regarding God’s expectations upon them as a covenant people) and a future message – looking forward to a time when God’s promise to Abraham would come to complete fulfillment.

Read and Respond...

The following verses represent the general crux of each book. Read them from your Bible and summarise the text here.

Ezra 7 (Ezra’s journey from Babylon to Jerusalem)

Nehemiah 1-2 (Nehemiah’s grief at the unrestored walls of the city)

Esther – all of it (it’s such a good story, and only 10 chapters long).

From the prophetic passages, think about the message that they might be trying to convey. Each one has been picked to represent a major theme of the book. Also include any questions that arise when you think about it closely.

Haggai 1

Zechariah 9:9-17

Malachi 1

Our Discussion

The story of Ezra

The Jews' return from captivity in Babylon seems like a second Exodus, and in many ways it was patterned by God to resemble Israel's first redemption. Many parallels between the two stories are apparent: the (re)building of the temple and city walls, the (re)institution of the law, the challenge of local enemies and the temptation to intermarry non-Jews, which carried with it the potential to be led into idolatry and pagan worship.

The return came in three waves. First, Zerubbabel led a group in 538 BC (chapters 1-6) and began the rebuilding of the temple (sometimes called the “Second Temple” or “Zerubbabel’s Temple”). In chapter 3, we see that Zerubbabel restored the ordinances of the sacrificial altar during the first year of their return, and began rebuilding the temple in their second year. It was a stop-start affair, with local gentile groups opposing the work and complaining to the Persian king that a revolt was taking place. The people finally got written approval from the king, and the temple was completed and dedicated. The Levitical priesthood was restored to the service of God in the Temple (6:13-18). Secondly, Ezra led a group of returning exiles in 458 BC (chapters 7-10). Because of the Lord’s blessing upon Ezra, he received incredible favour from the Persian king. The remarkable permission and authority given to Ezra from a gentile king (7:12-26) is a sign of God’s sovereign rule over even the most powerful earthly king and His intent to keep the covenants that He has made with man.

Focus in...

Almost 1000 years had passed since Moses had delivered God’s law to the Israelites, and it was now necessary to reclaim its position of honour in the lives of the people (it might be helpful to think of Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah as post-exilic equivalents of Moses). But although Ezra was a very capable scribe and teacher (7:6), he was not just someone who wanted to be in the limelight for his skills – he was committed to seeing God’s Word outworked in his own life first. We read in 7:10 that Ezra ‘set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.’ The pattern of Ezra’s life was exemplary. His life was one of ‘seek... do... teach...’ He studied God’s Word firstly in order to live a life of obedience. From his own life of submission to God, he was then able to teach others.

Discuss...

Ezra was committed to teaching the Word of God to a new generation – a generation that was raised surrounded by a culture that did not acknowledge God as the Sovereign Lord.

- In what ways does this parallel with our lives now?
- Why is it important to teach each new generation of Christians the story of God? What should we be mindful of when we are doing this?

- What can we learn from Ezra’s pattern of learning and teaching? Do we ever get it in a different order (say, teach before do?).
- What are the implications of following his pattern? What are the implications of doing it another way?

Ezra was committed to teaching the new generation of followers – a generation who were raised in a society that didn’t acknowledge God as Sovereign Lord – God’s Word. In what ways does this parallel with our lives now? Why is it important to teach each new generation of Christians the gospel of God? What should we be mindful of when we are doing this?

The story of Nehemiah

The Book of Nehemiah is essentially “Ezra Part 2” (the two were originally one piece of writing, and the Jewish Bible still maintains them as one unit). The events begin in 446 BC and then systematically trace the activities of Nehemiah, the governor of Jerusalem at the time of the third wave of returnees. The Persian Empire was still the dominant force in the Near Eastern world and still oversaw the goings-on in its vassal states, including Jerusalem. For any subservient city to attempt to rebuild its walls was seen as a threat to the central administration, and would usually be met with fierce reprisal. The ruling king would have to trust the local leader impeccably – and thus God raised up Nehemiah as the king’s cupbearer and closest confidant.

Like Joseph and Daniel, Nehemiah was a Jewish man who had attained a place of significant status under a foreign ruler, and God planned to use his influence to see the Jerusalem city walls rebuilt despite the complications and challenges faced by the Persian rule of the city. His fervent obedience to God is frequently referenced throughout the book, and the spiritual revival experienced by the people of Israel was the fruit of the spiritual commitment of its leaders – Ezra and the leading priests had devoted themselves to prayer and the study of His Word. This book details the personal thoughts, motives and disappointments of Nehemiah as he and the “strong hand of God” (1:10) work to restore Jerusalem’s walls – a symbol of the city’s vitality and strength.

Focus in...

Nehemiah’s prayer (1:5-11) is one of Scripture’s most moving confessions and intercessions before God. Upon hearing that his

*...Jerusalem is desolate and its
gates burned by fire. Come, let
us rebuild the wall...*

Nehemiah 2:17b



people were suffering in the ruins, Nehemiah didn't swing into political action, nor did he recklessly abandon his post and turn to the bottle.

He mourned (1:4). And he prayed (1:5-11).

He acknowledged that God is the ruler of Heaven (1:5), but at the same time knew that their desperate situation was not God's fault (1:5). Rather, he accepted their situation was a consequence of their disobedience and rebellion (1:7). Nevertheless, Nehemiah affirmed that the people of Israel belonged to God and that He had chosen to make His Name known through them (1:10). His concluding wish was to be successful so that God's purposes could be realized through him (1:11).

Discuss...

Through this passage, what can we learn about:

- Responding to bad news
- Prayer and how we should converse with God
- The kind of prayer that gets God's attention
- What role we have to play in seeing God's purposes fulfilled

The story of the Book of Esther

As Ruth was a beautiful narrative interlude slotted into the time of the judges, so the Book of Esther is a delightful intermission in the post-exilic era. The author remains unknown, but their detailed knowledge of both Persian history and Hebrew customs suggests that it was either Ezra or Nehemiah, or perhaps a man called Mordecai (we'll meet him soon). Interestingly, the Book of Esther never mentions the word 'God' and is never referenced by any of the New Testament writers. Nevertheless, it is held in deep regard by both Jewish and Christian believers, with the festival of 'Purim' – one of only two annual Jewish festivals not first mentioned in the Mosaic legislation – arising out of the festivities of Esther 9 and 10.

In many ways it parallels the story of the Exodus, with a Jewish citizen ascending the rungs of a foreign monarchy and thus preserving the widespread death of the Jewish people. Esther is young Jewish girl being raised by her uncle, Mordecai, under the Persian ruler Ahasuerus (2:5-7). The king had dishonourably dethroned his wife (she refused to let him "show her beauty" to the people – see 1:11-12) and was conducting a nationwide search for a new bride. Esther

was brought to the king's palace, and she quickly caught the eye of the monarch. Throughout this time, Esther kept her Jewish heritage a secret, and before long plans were made to make Esther the queen (2:17).

Tensions rise at the king's gate when Mordacai, a faithful Jew and descendant of Saul (as a Benjamite - 2:5) refused to pay homage to Haman, the king's chief leader and descendant of Agag (3:1). To see why this caused such animosity between the two, we must go back almost one thousand years to when the Jews were leaving Egypt. Following their attack on the Jewish clan (Exodus 17:8-16), God declared a curse upon the Amalekites (who were of the line of Esau). Saul received orders to kill Agag their king, but disobeyed (1 Samuel 15:11, 26), leaving Samuel to complete the task in quite a gruesome manner (1 Samuel 15:32, 33). Thus there had been an open hostility between the line of Saul and the line of Agag ever since. When Haman learned of Mordecai's resistance, he sought vengeance on the entire Jewish population, and plotted to have them destroyed (Esther 3:6).

Focus in...

Haman had underhandedly caused the king to allow him to dispose of the Jewish people (3:8-11), and wrote a decree instructing the death of all Jews throughout the provinces (3:13). The edict, understandably, caused great panic amongst the Jews (4:3). Mordecai's appeal for Esther to intercede to the king has become one of the more cherished lines of the post-exilic history:

“Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14)

Mordecai saw the hand of God in bringing Esther to power in the Persian royalty and prompted her to make the most of her opportunity. Nevertheless, he recognized that the fate of his people didn't ultimately rest in her hands – God was still very much in control. In essence, he was telling her that God's purpose would be achieved now or in the future, so she may as well offer to be part of its fulfillment or risk being washed away.

Discuss...

- Ultimately, what is God's plan for His church and the people of the earth?

- In what ways can we use our opportunities to help God's purposes? In what ways do we stand in the way of seeing them realized in our lifetime?
- What can we learn from Mordecai's insights?

The story finishes well...

Esther agrees to bring the matter to the king's attention, despite considerable risk to herself (even the queen required a personal summons from the king to enter his throne room, so to do so without permission placed you at risk of death). The story unravels tightly, as Esther seeks to have the king reverse the decree that aimed to kill her people. Peculiarities in Persian laws meant that even the king couldn't reverse a law that had been enacted, so an alternate plan had to be made to avoid the pending tyranny. Firstly, Ahasuerus has Haman hanged (7:10) on the very gallows that Haman had prepared for Mordecai. Secondly, Ahasuerus commanded the Jewish people to take every precaution to defend themselves from the coming assault, and granted them the right to kill any attackers (8:11). Even the king's princes and governors came to the defence of the Jews (9:3)!

The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther resemble another part of the chess game between God and Satan, with each player moving real kings, queens and nobles into place in order to gain an advantage. When Satan moved Haman into place, it's as though he is announcing 'Check' on the Redeemer's line promised in Genesis 3:15. God then matches his move by moving Mordecai and Esther into a block, once again securing His line until the time comes to announce His complete and final 'Checkmate', four hundred years later at Calgary.

The story of Haggai

In 538 BC Cyrus, the Persian ruler, had graciously allowed the exiled Jews to return to their homeland (cf. Ezra 1:1-4). On their return, they had begun to rebuild their lives as anyone would – restoring their homes, sowing their fields and resuming employment. Yet something isn't "clicking" for the people – they are free, but something still isn't quite right (read 1:6).

It's now 520 BC, and the prophet Haggai is led by God to show the people why things have not fully returned to normal (including an ongoing drought, see 1:10-11). They've left the temple – God's dwelling place and manifest presence with His people – in ruins (remember, it had been razed by Nebuchadnezzar when he invaded). For Haggai,

rebuilding the temple would both incite the people to reorder their spiritual lives and invite God to fully return His presence in their midst. Fortunately, the people responded to Haggai's words with reverence (1:12) and return to the work of the temple, rebuilding it in four years.

The story of Zechariah

Two months after Haggai began his ministry, Zechariah joins him in encouraging the people to rebuild the temple. Yet his writing is far more than a historical record of the work; it is a prophetic piece detailing the future of the Israelite people and the One who would eventually inhabit the temple they were building. It is filled with the type of visions, prophecies, signs and angelic visitors that remind us of the Book of Daniel. Indeed, it is likely to be the most messianic, apocalyptic and eschatological book of the Old Testament (perhaps God was finishing well, knowing that He was about to withdraw into silence for four hundred years?).

In chapters 1-6, Zechariah has eight visions. These visions were given to comfort and encourage the people. From chapter 8, Zechariah's message becomes very eschatological (concerning the very end times). He gives remarkably accurate prophecies of the coming Messiah riding on a donkey (9:9) and having His body pierced (12:10). His final passages – declaring the glories that await Israel in the very end days, the coming final judgment and the establishment of the Kingdom of God – match the Book of Revelation in their intensity and force. Finally, Zechariah declares, the Lord will be 'king over all the earth... and His name the only one' (14:9).

The story of Malachi

Malachi, whose name simply means 'the Lord's messenger', writes the Old Testament's last piece. Prophesying some hundred years after the return from exile (dating this book at roughly 450 BC), Malachi speaks to a nation that has many of the external features of a reformed people: the temple had been completed for fifty years, their idolatry had been mostly purged during the Exile and the priests had resumed their functions regarding sacrifices. Yet their religious routine had led to hard-heartedness towards God's great love for them and systematic corruption within the ranks of the leaders.

Malachi delivers his message in the form of a dispute, employing a question-and-answer method. The Lord's statements were frequently met by cynical questions from the people (see examples at 1:2, 7). He indicted the people on at least six counts of willful sin: repudiating God's love (1:2-5); refusing God His due honour (1:6-2:9); rejecting God's faithfulness (2:10-16); redefining God's righteousness (2:17-3:5); robbing God's riches (3:6-12) and reviling God's grace (3:13-15). The people were unrepentant.

It has now been two millennia of Old Testament history since Abraham received God's glorious covenant, yet none of the celebrated promises had been realized in full. The long-anticipated Messiah had not arrived and did not appear to be in sight, and there was no all-conquering king of David's throne. In a sense, Malachi was offering God's final verdict on the people, before drawing this period of history to a close.

Focus in...

Theologians often describe the 'immutability' of God, which is the attribute of His character that designates Him to be unchanging in His character, will and covenant promises – His purposes are unchanging, His faithfulness is unchanging, His knowledge is unchanging and His strength is unchanging.

Malachi gives perfect expression to this trait in 3:6, when he proclaims, "For I, the Lord, do not change...." In a way, God was showing a frustration at Israel's contempt of Him. For roughly two millennia, He had maintained a basic approach of 'I am your God: remember Me and prosper; rebuke Me and fail.' The Lord's unchanging character was evident throughout all of their dealings with Him, but it was strongly contrasted with Israel's fluctuating gratitude and wavering devotion.

God's immutability is a particularly blessed part of His character, and Malachi's reminder to Israel is pertinent to us also.

Discuss...

- Why is God's immutability such a blessed part of His character? Think about the story of the Old Testament – what constants can you see in God and His actions?

Reflect...

- What is 'profitable' for us from today's readings?

- What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected?
How do you outwork what you have learnt?
- What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.

Please feel free to use this page for your notes

Wrapping it up

No official declaration marked the end of the prophetic period in the Old Testament. The history of Israel up to this point had been remarkable: the calling of Abraham, the raising of Moses, the courage of Joshua, the passion of David, the splendor of Solomon, the integrity of Daniel, the tenacity and doggedness of the prophets – they all signified that God’s hand was actively involved in directing the history of this otherwise insignificant people group on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

Yet for the people of Israel, the gradual realization came that they had not witnessed a reputable leader from God in a long, long time. Looking back it is clear that this marked the beginning of the four hundred years of silence, where God raised up no great prophet or leader. They had only the condemning words of Malachi ringing in their ears, and the almost inconceivable hope of the coming of the longed-for Messiah.

My Appendix

In ten words or less...

Describe these people. Include a Bible reference for where you can find them.

David _____

Solomon _____

Nebuchadnezzar _____

Isaiah _____

Daniel _____

Esther _____

Anyone else from your reading who caught your eye:

In ten words or less...

Describe what happened on these dates:

c. 971 to 931 BC _____

c. 966 to 959 BC _____

c. 931 BC _____

725 to 722 BC _____

605 BC _____

597 BC _____

586 BC _____

539 BC _____

537 BC _____

c. 536 to 444 BC _____

c. 533 BC _____

c. 445 BC _____

c. 450 BC _____

In ten words or less...

Describe these books (in your own words). Write a full verse from the book that you think captures the essence of the writing.

1+2 Samuel _____

1+2 Kings _____

1+2 Chronicles _____

Ezra _____

Nehemiah _____

Esther _____

Job _____

The Psalms _____

The Proverbs _____

Ecclesiastes _____

Song of Solomon _____

Isaiah _____

Jeremiah _____

Lamentations _____

Ezekiel _____

Daniel _____

Hosea _____

Joel _____

Amos _____

Obadiah _____

Jonah _____

Micah _____

Nahum _____

Habakkuk _____

Zephaniah _____

Haggai _____

Zechariah _____

Malachi _____





30

he said:

It is finished:

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