

*All the
stories
of the* **Bible**

as crafted and told by John Walsh

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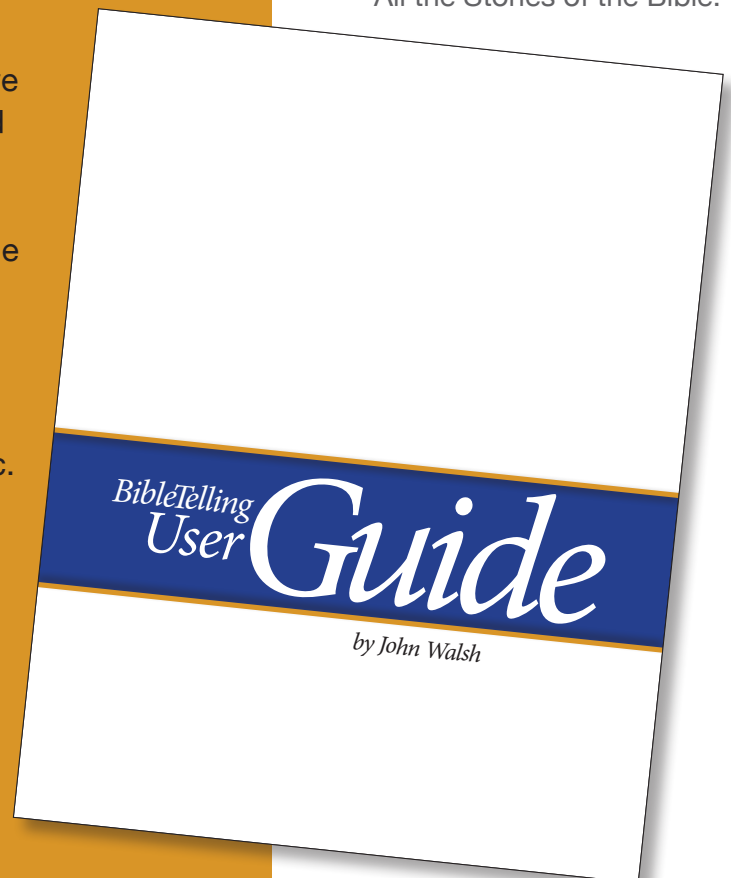
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The BibleTelling User Guide provides principles of learning and using Bible stories.

In addition, it contains ...

- **Overview Stories** - This gives you key stories that cover the entire Bible. It starts with the 10 basic Bible stories. Another 10 have been added to make 20 stories. Another 10 added to make 30 stories, and finally, adding another 10 to make 40 stories
- **Alphabetical Listing** - The author of All the Stories of the Bible has given creative titles to these stories. If you are looking for a specific story, the alphabetical listing may help you find it.
- **Learning the Stories** - These are principles behind BibleTelling. It give basic thoughts on how to learn and use Bible stories.
- **132 Groupings** - Looking for a Bible study series? These groupings contain titles like "Reconciliation Stories," "All the Women of the Bible," "Water Stories," "Comfort," "Determination," "Forgiveness," etc.

The BibleTelling User Guide greatly increases the value of All the Stories of the Bible.



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1 Creation

Beginnings

Genesis 1

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was lifeless, empty, and dark. Then the Spirit of God moved across the vast emptiness. He said, “Let there be light.” Suddenly light shone around the entire sphere of the earth! God looked at the light, and said, “That’s good.”

He then divided the light from the darkness. He looked at the light and said, “I’ll call you day.” Turning to the darkness, He said, “And I’ll call you night.” So, with the day and the night, that was the first day.

On the second day, God looked at the waters and said, “Be divided!”

Immediately, the waters started to separate. Some went up and the rest stayed down. God looked at the waters that were above, and he looked at the waters that were beneath. Then he looked at the space that was in between the two and said, “I’ll call you Sky.”

On the third day, God focused on the waters that were below the sky. He said, “Be gathered together into seas, rivers and lakes. Let dry land appear.” Suddenly land rose up from the waters. Rivers flowed off the land separating the hills and causing valleys. Lakes and seas were everywhere. God looked at the dry land and he looked at the seas and said, “That’s good.”

Then He said to the land, “Bring forth vegetation! Let there be grasses, vegetables, herbs, and trees. All of them will have seeds, so that life may continue on.” Immediately plants started growing across the entire earth. There were grasses, flowers, and vegetables. There were trees of many different kinds. Some would become tall, while other would remain close to the ground. Some of the trees would produce different kinds of fruit. All this vegetation grew from that day forward, and they all had seeds so life could continue on.

On the fourth day, God looked into the heavens and said, “Let there be lights—a greater light to rule over the day, and a lesser light to

dominate the night. They’ll divide the day and the night, and be for signs and seasons, days and years.” Immediately the sun started moving across the sky, giving light and warmth to the earth. The moon and stars filled the night with splendor and brilliance. God looked at the sun, the moon, and the stars and said, “That’s good.”

On the fifth day, God looked at the sky and the waters that were below it. He said, “Bring forth life! Let there be birds in the skies, and fish and sea creatures in the water.”

Immediately sea creatures started moving in the seas, lakes, and rivers. Some were large and others were very small. There were fish of all different sizes, shapes, and colors. Birds appeared in the skies. Some flew high up in the air, while others stayed close to the ground. They had different shapes, colors, and sounds.

God looked at the sea creatures, the fish, and birds. He said, “That’s good.” He blessed them and told them to multiply and fill the seas and skies.”

On the sixth day, God said to the earth, “Bring forth living creatures. Let there be wild animals and others that can be tamed.” Immediately, animals started walking across the earth. Some were huge, and others were very small. God looked at them and said, “That’s good.”

Then God said, “Let’s make people. We’ll make them to be like us. They’ll rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the animals that move across the land.”

So God made a man and a woman and he blessed them and told them to multiply and fill the earth with people. He told them to rule over all he had made. He then gave them fruit, grains, vegetables, and green plants to eat.

Then God looked at all he had made, and he said, “It is all very, very good!”

On the seventh day, God rested from all that he had done. He blessed the seventh day and made it special.

This is how God created the heavens and the earth... and brought forth Life.

2 Adam and Eve

Beginnings

Genesis 2

Imagine the earth when it was new—before the plants had come up. In those days, God hadn't yet allowed it to rain on the earth, but caused a mist to come each day to water the land.

During this time, God took some soil and shaped the first man. He breathed into his nostrils, and Adam was alive.

God planted a garden in a place called Eden. It had every kind of tree, and there was a river that flowed out from the garden.

In the middle, there were two special trees. One was called the Tree of Life and the other was called the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

God told Adam to take care of the garden. He said, "You may eat from every tree except the one in the middle, The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. You're not to eat from that tree. If you eat from it, you will die!"

God said, "It's not good that man is alone. I'll make a helper that's just right for him." He then brought all the animals to Adam and told him to

name them. So Adam named all the animals, and whatever he named them, that was their name.

As he was naming them, he noticed that all the animals came in pairs, male and female. Yet, as he looked around, he noticed that there wasn't a female for him.

God caused a deep sleep to come down over Adam, and he slept deep and long. Then God opened up the flesh in Adam's side and took a rib. Carefully he closed up the flesh. From that rib, God made a woman.

When Adam awoke, God brought the woman to him. Adam said, "This is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh. She'll be called woman, because she was taken out of man." This is the reason why a man leaves his parents and forms a relationship with his wife, and they become one flesh.

Adam named his wife Eve because she would become the mother of all people.

3 The Fall

Beginnings

Genesis 3

God created Adam and Eve and provided all they needed in the Garden of Eden. Like the animals, they had no need of clothes, yet they were not ashamed.

The snake was the most clever of all the animals. One day he said to Eve, “Is it true God won’t let you eat from all the trees in the garden?”

“Oh, we can eat from all the trees. That is, except for the one in the middle. God said that we aren’t to eat that fruit...or even touch it. He says if we do, we’ll die.”

“It’s not true! You won’t die. God told you that because he knows if you eat that fruit, you’ll be like him—knowing good, as well as evil.”

The woman looked at the fruit. It was beautiful and looked delicious. She thought, “If I eat this fruit, it’ll make me wise.” So she took the fruit and ate it. She then gave some to Adam and he ate it as well. Suddenly they realized they were naked. So they sewed some fig leaves together to make coverings for themselves.

As evening approached, they heard God walking in the garden. Suddenly, they realized they were afraid of God, so they hid among the trees.

“Adam, where are you?”

Adam knew he had to answer. He said, “Lord, I heard you walking in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked. So, I hid.”

“Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree from which I told you not to eat?”

“It was the woman you gave me. She gave me

the fruit, and...yes, I ate it.”

God turned to Eve, “Why did you do this?”

“The snake! The snake tricked me into eating it!”

God turned to the snake and said, “Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all the animals. From now on, you’ll move about on your belly. There’ll be hostility between you and the woman, and there’ll be a battle between your offspring and hers. He’ll crush your head, while you’ll only bruise his heel.”

Looking back at the woman God said, “Your pain will be great when you give birth to children, and having babies will be associated with pain. You’ll want to control your husband, but from now on, men will dominate over you.”

God said to Adam, “I made it very clear that you were not to eat from that tree. Because you have disobeyed, the ground is cursed. From now on, you’ll work for your food, and the ground will fight against you. It’ll sprout thorns and weeds. Hard work will mark your life until you return to the soil from which you came.”

God dressed the man and his wife in clothes made out of animal skins. He then sent them out of the garden, where they worked the soil for their food.

God said, “People now know evil as well as good. They’ll try to get to the Tree of Life so they can live forever.” Therefore, God put a heavenly guard outside the garden. From that day on, people were separated from the Tree of Life.

4 Cain and Abel

Beginnings

Genesis 4

Adam and Eve had a son and named him Cain. In time they had another son named Abel.

Abel became a herdsman—working with animals. Cain became a farmer, tilling the soil.

One day, when it was time to bring a sacrifice to the Lord, Cain decided to bring fruits and vegetables, instead of a lamb. Abel also brought an offering, but it was the best lamb from his flock. The Lord was pleased with Abel's offering, but he wasn't happy with Cain's.

Cain became angry when he saw that God didn't accept his sacrifice. He started to pout. God said, "Cain, why are you angry? If you simply do what's right, you'll be accepted and happy. But if you don't, sin is waiting for you. It's crouched by your door, ready to pounce and become your master. Instead, you need to take control of it!"

A few days later, Cain and Abel were talking out in a field. Cain turned and attacked his brother and killed him.

Later that day, God asked Cain, "Where's your brother?"

"I don't know! Am I supposed to watch over him all the time?"

"Oh Cain, what have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood is crying to me from the soil. You've loved this ground, but from now on it's cursed because it contains your brother's blood. Oh, you'll continue to work the field, but it'll no longer respond to you and give you its best. You'll become a restless wanderer."

Cain fell down and cried out. "Oh God, your punishment is too severe! You're taking away my land and your presence! I'll be aimless and separated from everyone else. Eventually they'll hunt me down and kill me."

So God put a mark on Cain and said, "Anyone who kills Cain will suffer for it seven times over!"

With that, Cain went away from the presence of the Lord.

5 The Flood

Beginnings

Genesis 6 – 9:17

After people disobeyed God and went into sin, they became extremely wicked. All of their thoughts and actions were evil. God knew he had to destroy the people he created.

Yet, a man named Noah walked with God. The Lord said to him, “I’m going to destroy the entire earth with a flood because the people are wicked. Therefore, I’m making an agreement with you to preserve life on the earth. Build an ark. I’ll give you the exact dimensions I want you to use. After you’re done, a flood will kill all the people and animals on the earth. You and your family will be saved, as well as the animals you take with you.”

God gave him building instructions, and Noah did exactly as God said. He and his three sons built the ark. When it was done, God said, “Noah, go into the ark with your family. After seven days, water will fall upon the earth and every person and animal will be destroyed except those inside the ark.”

So Noah and his wife, his sons and their wives moved into the ark. Once they were there, animals and birds started coming in pairs, male and female. There were seven pairs of clean animals, seven pairs of birds, and only one pair of all the rest. When they had every kind of animal and bird, God closed the door.

On the seventh day, the waters that were above the sky started falling to the earth. At the same time, the earth erupted, sending fountains of water shooting up from beneath the ground. Waters flowed down the hills and filled the valleys. Eventually it covered the entire earth. All the people and animals were destroyed.

Those same waters lifted Noah’s ark above the destruction. The people, animals, and birds that were in the ark were safe while the whole earth was being destroyed. This deluge of water lasted forty days and covered the entire world.

And then... it stopped.

Noah’s ark floated on the water for 110 days after it stopped raining. There were winds that moved across the earth to dry it off.

Finally, the ark landed on a mountain called Ararat. Noah waited for another four months and then opened the window to see what was on the earth.

He sent out a raven, but it never came back. Next he sent out a dove, which flew around but couldn’t find a place to nest. Soon she returned to the ark and Noah took her in.

After seven days, he sent out the dove again. She came back that night with an olive leaf in her beak. Noah then knew that plants were growing once again. He waited seven more days and sent out the dove again. This time, she didn’t come back.

A month later, Noah removed the hatch from the ark and saw that the earth was dry. God said, “Your family and the animals may leave the ark.”

Once they were out of the ark, Noah built an altar so they could worship God. The Lord smelled the sacrifice and said, “Never again will I destroy the earth with a flood. There will always be planting and harvest, hot and cold, summer and winter, day and night.

“From now on, animals will fear you, yet you are still responsible for them.

“You may now eat animals as well as plants. But you’re not to kill people, because they are made in the image of God.

“You’re to multiply and once again fill the earth with people.”

God said to Noah and his family, “Look into the clouds and see the rainbow. When I look at it and when you look at it, we’ll remember this promise. A flood will never again destroy the entire earth. This is my promise to you.”

6 The World after the Flood

Beginnings

Genesis 9:20 – 11:26

After the Flood, Noah planted a vineyard. In time he drank some of the wine from his harvest and got drunk. He went to his tent and fell asleep on the floor without any clothes on.

His youngest son saw his father lying there, and went and told his brothers what he had seen. His brothers draped a coat between them and walked backwards into the tent, draping the coat over their father.

When Noah woke up, he learned what had happened. So he put a curse on the family of his youngest son, and blessed the families of the other two.

All three sons had large families, with many children and grandchildren. Among all these people was a man named Nimrod. He became the first dictator. He was known for his skill of hunting, and his kingdom was called Babylon.

The people of Babylon realized that their potential was greater if they stayed together. They felt it best not to go throughout the

world like God had said. So they built a tower that went high into the sky—high enough so everyone could see it. They felt this would keep them together.

God looked at the tower and said, “People are disobeying my command. If they stay together, nothing will be impossible for them. Therefore, I’ll have them talk different languages.”

Suddenly the people spoke many different languages. They were confused because they couldn’t understand one another. They didn’t know what was happening to them. Immediately, the work on the tower stopped. They formed groups according to their languages and moved to other parts of the world. The tower became known as the tower of confusion, or the Tower of Babel.

The oldest son of Noah was Shem. One of his descendants was a man named Peleg. His name means division, because at the time of his birth, the earth divided. His great, great, great grandson was Abraham.

7 Call of Abraham

Abraham

Genesis 12

There was a man named Terah who lived in a place called Ur. He had three sons, and one of them was Abram. Now Abram was married to his half-sister Sarai, but they had no children.

Terah took Abram, Sarai, and his grandson Lot (who was an orphan) and moved north to a place called Haran. They stayed there until Terah died.

When Abram was seventy-five years old, the LORD said, “Abram, I want you to leave your family and country and go to a place I have selected for you. I’ll make you into a nation and your name will be great. I’ll bless you, and I’ll also bless everyone else who blesses you. And I’ll curse anyone who curses you. All the families of the earth will be blessed because of you.”

So Abram took his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and left Haran. When they came to a place called Canaan, God said, “I’m giving this land to you and your children.” Abram believed God, even though he didn’t have any children. He knew God would keep his promise. So he built an altar there and worshiped the Lord.

Sometime later, a severe famine hit the land. So Abram took all he had and went to Egypt. He said to Sarai, “The Egyptians will see you’re a beautiful woman. They’ll kill me in order to get you. So tell them you’re my sister.”

He was right. The Egyptians saw that Sarai was beautiful. When Pharaoh found out that she wasn’t married, he took her into his house. He treated Abram well, thinking the man was her brother.

Abram became rich in Egypt. His wealth included sheep, cattle, donkeys, camels, and servants.

God was angry with Pharaoh because he had Sarai in his house. Plagues hit his family, and everyone got seriously sick. Finally, Pharaoh said to Abram, “Why did you do this to me? You said she was your sister. Now I find out she’s your wife! Take her and get out of here!”

So Abram took Sarai and Lot and went back to Canaan. They settled near a place called Bethel. There, he worshiped the Lord.

8 Melchizedek

Abraham

Genesis 13 – 15

Both Abram and Lot were prosperous. Soon their herdsmen started arguing over grazing rights. Abram said, “We shouldn’t be fighting. After all, we’re family. There is plenty of land here. You choose. You go one way and I’ll go the other.”

Lot knew which direction he wanted to go. The Jordan valley had plenty of water, and it reminded him of Egypt. He’d often say to himself, “It’s like the Lord’s garden.” So he chose the entire Jordan Valley. He set up his tent near Sodom, even though the men there were extremely wicked.

Then the Lord said to Abram, “Look to the north and to the south. Look to the east and the west. I’m giving it all to you and your descendants. Get up! Walk over all this land. It’s yours.”

Some time later, an alliance of four city-kingdoms made war with the five cities around Sodom. The alliance won the battle and took all their possessions, food, and many of the people, including Lot.

When Abram heard about this, he took his 318 trained servants and chased after the alliance. He attacked them during the night and totally defeated them. He then took Lot, all the people, and their possessions back to Sodom.

Abram met Melchizedek when he got there. Melchizedek was the king of Salem, but he was also a priest of the Most High God. He said, “Abram is blessed by the Most High God, who created the heaven and earth. Give praise to the Most High God, because it is he who has given you victory over your enemies.”

Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of everything.

The king of Sodom said to Abram. “Give me the people and you keep all the possessions.”

Abram said, “No, I’m not taking any of it. I’m giving it all back to you, except what the servants ate during the campaign. I never want you to say, ‘I made Abram rich.’ ”

With that, Abram and his servants went home. Soon afterwards, the Lord came to him in a vision and said, “I’m your shield and exceeding great reward.”

Abram answered, “Lord, I still don’t have a son, but I have a servant that is like a son to me. Let him inherit your promises to me.”

“No! You’ll have a son, and he’ll be your heir. Abram, look at the stars in the sky. Your descendants will be as hard to count as those stars.” This seemed impossible to Abram, but he believed it, and God was pleased!

9 The God Who Sees Me

Abraham

Genesis 16

After Abram had lived in Canaan for ten years, Sarai became concerned that she hadn't yet had a child like the Lord promised. She said to her husband, "I have a solution to this problem. Go to bed with my slave Hagar. When she delivers a child, it'll be the same as if I had the child."

Abram agreed and did as she said. But as soon as Hagar became pregnant, she started acting like she was better than Sarai.

This made Sarai angry. She said to Abram, "You're the one who has caused all my problems! You got my slave pregnant, and now she thinks she's better than me."

Abram said, "She's your slave. Do whatever you want with her."

So Sarai started beating Hagar and humiliating her in any way she could. Finally, the slave ran away. She came to a spring of water and collapsed next to it.

The Angel of the Lord said to her, "Hagar, where are you going?"

"Oh Lord. I'm running away from Sarai, my mistress."

"No, no, you shouldn't do that. God has heard your crying out in pain. Go back and submit to Sarai, even if she beats you. You'll have a son, and you're to call him Ishmael. He'll be a fighting man, and be at odds with everyone. I'll multiply your descendants so much that you wouldn't be able to count them."

Hagar was amazed and said, "I have seen the God who sees me. So she named the spring, 'The Well of the Living God who Sees Me.'"

She then went back and submitted herself to Sarai. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar gave birth to her son. He named the child Ishmael, which means "God Hears."

10 The Promise of Isaac

Abraham

Genesis 17 – 18:15

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord said to him, “You’ll be the father of many nations and some of your descendants will be kings! Therefore I’m changing your name to Abraham, which means the ‘father of many nations’. I will be with you and I will give this land to you and your descendants. As a sign of these promises, you are to circumcise every male among you.”

Then the Lord said to him, “From now on, your wife will be called Sarah. I will bless her, and she’ll bear you a son.”

Abraham laughed and said, “How is it possible for a man who is a hundred years old and a woman who is ninety years old to have a child? Perhaps Ishmael could inherit all your promises to me.”

God said, “No, Sarah will have a son and you’ll call his name Isaac. I’ll give my promises to him and his descendants, and I’ll be their God. And the whole earth will be blessed because of them.

But I will bless Ishmael as well. I will also make him a great nation. Twelve tribes will come from him.”

Sometime later, Abraham was sitting at the door of his tent. Suddenly he noticed three men standing nearby, and realized that one of them was the Lord. He rushed over to them and said, “Sirs, Please, come sit under this tree. I’ll give

you some water so you can wash your feet. Then you can rest while I prepare a meal. After you have eaten, you may continue on your way.”

They said, “Yes, we’ll stay for a while.”

Abraham rushed into the tent and told Sarah to make some bread for his guests. He then went to the field and selected a choice calf and gave it to his servants so they could use it to prepare a meal. As soon as the food was ready, Abraham served it to his guests and then stood back and watched them eat.

As they ate, the Lord said to Abraham, “Where’s Sarah, your wife?”

“She’s in the tent.”

The Lord said, “I’ll come back in about a year. At that time Sarah will have given birth to a son.”

Sarah was listening to this from inside the tent. She was ninety years old, so she laughed inside herself when she heard that she was going to give birth to a son. She said, “That’s impossible. I’m too old to give birth to a child.”

The Lord asked Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too hard for the Lord? I WILL come back, and she WILL have given birth to a child!”

When Sarah heard this, she ran out and said, “Lord, I didn’t laugh!”

“Ah, but you DID laugh!”

Soon Sarah found that she was expecting a child.

11 Bargaining with God

Abraham

Genesis 18:16-33

Abraham had three guests. One of them was the Lord. He served them a meal under the shade of a tree. Afterwards they got up and started walking toward Sodom. Abraham walked with them for a short distance.

Suddenly the Lord stopped and said to the others, "I'm going to tell Abraham what I'm about to do. After all, he'll become a great and powerful nation. All the nations on earth will be blessed through him. I know he'll teach his children to honor God and do right."

Turning to Abraham, the Lord said, "The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is great. I hear the cries of their victims constantly. I'm going to the city to see it for myself. If I find that it's true, I'll destroy them."

As Abraham and the Lord continued to talk, the other two men left them and walked toward Sodom. Abraham said, "Is it true that you would actually sweep away the righteous along with the wicked? Let's say there're fifty righteous people in the city. Would you actually destroy the place, knowing that you're killing those righteous people right along with the wicked? I don't believe you'd do that. The Judge of all the earth is always just."

The Lord said, "If I find fifty righteous people in Sodom, then for their sakes I won't destroy the city."

Abraham said, "I realize now that I shouldn't

have been so fast to talk to you that way. I'm nothing but dust along the road. But let's say the city lacked just five people to make up the fifty you're looking for. Are you going to destroy the whole city just because they're missing five righteous people?"

The Lord said, "I won't destroy the city if I find forty-five righteous people there."

"Uh, Lord, could we make that forty righteous people?"

"I won't destroy the place if I find forty righteous people there."

"Lord, don't be angry with me for speaking up again. What would you do if you found only thirty righteous people there?"

"I won't destroy the place if I find thirty righteous people there."

"Lord, since I have already been so bold to talk to you about this, could we make that twenty righteous people?"

"I won't destroy the place if I find twenty righteous people there."

"Uh Lord, please don't be angry with me. I promise this is the last time I'll talk to you about this. What would you do if you found only ten righteous people there?"

"I won't destroy the place if I find ten righteous people there."

With that, the conversation was over. The Lord left, and Abraham returned to his tent.

12 Sodom and Gomorrah

Abraham

Genesis 19:1-29

In the early evening, two angels entered Sodom. They found Lot sitting at the city gate. As soon as he saw them, he went and bowed before them. He said, “I’m your humble servant. Please come to my house so I can make you comfortable. I’ll wash your feet and give you a place to spend the night. Then I’ll wake you up early so you can be on your way.”

They said, “No, we’ll just spend the night here in the town square.”

“Oh, no, my lords! You must come with me right now. Please follow me.”

He led them to his house and his family prepared a meal for them. As they were preparing for bed, a mob gathered outside. It was all the men of the city, both young and old. They surrounded the house and yelled, “Lot, give us those men who are in your house. Send them out so we can have sex with them.”

Lot stepped outside and closed the door behind him. He said, “Please, my brothers, don’t do this wickedness. These men are guests in my house. Instead of these men, take my two daughters. They’re virgins. Do what you want with them, but don’t touch these men.”

The mob got angry. “Get out of the way! Who do you think you are – our judge? You’re not even one of us.”

With that, they pushed him aside and started to break down the door. The angels opened the door, grabbed Lot, pulled him inside, and slammed the door. They then caused all the men outside to go blind. The crowd dispersed as they tried to find their way.

The angels turned to Lot. “We’re here to destroy this city! The voices of its victims are yelling into the ears of God. Quick, go get any relatives you have who are living in the city —

sons, daughters, sons-in-law — anyone who belongs to you. Get them and leave this city.

Lot rushed to the home of his future sons-in-law. “Wake up! Come with me! We have to get out of the city! The Lord is about to destroy it.” But they ignored him because they thought he was joking.

Lot had still not left the city in the morning as the sun was coming up. The angels yelled, “Hurry! You and your family get out of here! You’re about to be killed in the judgment.”

Still, they took their time getting ready to leave. With that, the Lord showed compassion on them. The angels physically grabbed Lot, his wife and daughters and rushed them out of the city. Once there, the angels said, “Run for your lives! Don’t look back! Don’t stop until you’re in the mountains.”

Lot said, “Oh Lord, you’ve been merciful to me. But I can’t make it to the mountain. Please, there’s a small town near by. Let me go there.”

The angel said, “Go there and I’ll hold the judgment away from that town. But hurry! I can’t do anything until you’re safe.” The Lord was showing mercy to Lot because of Abraham. Unfortunately, Lot’s wife looked back toward the city as they were running away, so she became a pillar of salt.

The sun was fully up when Lot reached the little town. As soon as he was inside, the Lord brought down fire from heaven and destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, and all the other cities in the valley, except for that one little town.

Abraham went out to the spot where God had talked with him. He looked in the direction of Sodom but all he saw was smoke rising into the sky.

13 Two Daughters

Abraham



Genesis 19:30-38

After the destruction of Sodom, Lot and his two daughters left the little town where they lived because he was afraid of what might happen to them there. They went to the mountains and lived in a cave.

One day, the oldest daughter said to her sister, "Our father is old, and we have no hope of getting a husband and having children. Therefore, it's up to us to preserve our father's line for future generations. I have a plan. Let's get our father drunk until he no longer knows what he's doing. We'll then have sex with him."

The sister agreed, so that night they got their

father drunk. The oldest daughter had sex with him. He didn't know anything that happened.

The next day, the older daughter said to her sister, "Tonight it's your turn. Remember, we're doing this to preserve our father's line." So they got their father drunk, and the younger daughter had sex with him. Again, Lot didn't know anything that happened.

Both daughters became pregnant by their father. The oldest sister gave birth to a son who became the father of the Moabites. The younger sister gave birth to a son who became the father of the Ammonites.

14 She's My Sister

Abraham

Genesis 20

Abraham travelled to an area where Abimelech was king. He told the people there, "Sarah is my sister." So Abimelech sent people to get Sarah and bring her to his household. Once she was there, the Lord prevented the king from having sex with her.

God came to Abimelech in a dream and said, "You're about to die because that woman you brought into your house is married."

The king said, "Lord, I'm innocent! The man told me she was his sister, and she said the same. Lord, you must believe that I did this with a clear conscience. Besides I haven't touched her."

The Lord said, "Yes, I know you're telling the truth. I kept you away from her. Now here's what you're to do. The man is a prophet. Take his wife back to him and ask him to pray for you. If he does, I'll let you live. But be careful. If you don't do this, you and your entire family will die."

Early in the morning, Abimelech called in all of his servants. When he told them what God had said, terror fell on all of the men. Suddenly the women of the household realized they were

unable to bear children.

Abimelech sent for Abraham. When he arrived, the king said to him. "Why did you do this to us? What did I do to you that caused you to treat me this way? My whole kingdom is going through tremendous guilt. Never in the world should anyone treat another person like this! What were you thinking of?"

Abraham said, "My wife and I have the same father. So she really is my sister. We just don't have the same mother. When we came to your land, I didn't know the fear of God was here. I was sure I'd be killed so you could get my wife. So she agreed to show her loyalty to me by telling people that I'm her brother."

Abimelech gave Sarah back to Abraham, along with sheep, cattle, slaves, and a thousand pieces of silver. He said, "You may freely go anywhere in my kingdom. Settle where you want. No one will bother you."

Abraham then prayed for the king. So the Lord healed Abimelech, and allowed all the women to have children once again.

15 God Hears

Abraham

Genesis 21

When Abraham was a hundred years old, Sarah gave birth to a son. They called him Isaac, which means “laughter,” because Sarah said; “God has put laughter in my heart. And all who hear about me giving birth to a child will laugh with me. Who would have thought that I could nurse a baby?”

When Ishmael was a young man, Sarah saw him mocking Isaac. She was furious and said to Abraham, “Send that woman away, as well as her son. I don’t want them to inherit anything that belongs to Isaac.”

Abraham didn’t want to do this because he loved Ishmael. But God told him, “Do what Sarah wants. My promises to you will be passed down through Isaac. And don’t be concerned about Ishmael and his mother. Because he’s your son, I’ll make a nation of him as well.”

So, early the next morning, Abraham gave Hagar bread and water, and sent her and her son away. They wandered into the wilderness, where they stayed until their water was gone. Soon Hagar lost all hope of living. She couldn’t bear to watch her son die, so she left him under a bush and walked a short distance away. She then fell to the ground and sobbed.

Ishmael called out and God heard his voice. The Angel of the Lord said to Hagar, “Don’t be afraid. God has heard your son’s voice. Get up and go to him. He needs your help. Take care of

him because he’ll be the father of a great nation.”

With that, God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water nearby. She rushed over and filled her container with water and took it to her son.

So Ishmael grew and God was with him. He became a great archer and settled in the wilderness. In time, Hagar went to Egypt and got a wife for him.

King Abimelech came to Abraham and said, “We can clearly see that God is with you in everything you do. So let’s make an agreement that there’ll be peace between your people and my people.”

Abraham said, “I agree, but there is a problem we need to talk about. Your people have taken one of my wells.”

The king said, “I didn’t know anything about this. Why didn’t you tell me before now? I’ll take care of it.”

So they made an agreement and Abraham sealed it with giving Abimelech cattle and sheep. But he set aside seven ewe lambs.

Abimelech asked about this. Abraham said, “You are to accept these seven lambs as your way of saying that I own this well.”

The king accepted the seven ewe lambs, and Abraham called the place Beer-sheba, which means, “Well of the Oath.” He planted a tamarisk tree there and worshipped the Lord, the Everlasting God.

16 The Trial of Abraham

Abraham

Genesis 22

When Isaac was a young man, God came to Abraham and said, “Abraham, take Isaac, the son you love so dearly, and go to a place I’ll show you. There, you’re to sacrifice him as a burnt offering.”

So the next morning, Abraham got up early and cut wood for the sacrifice. He saddled a donkey, took two servants, and started on the journey.

Three days later, Abraham saw the place God had selected. He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey. Isaac and I will go and worship the Lord. We’ll come back after the sacrifice.”

He told Isaac to carry the wood. Abraham took the hot coals and the knife. Isaac looked around and asked: “Father, we have the wood and the fire, but where’s the lamb for sacrifice?” Abraham looked at his son and finally said, “God will provide Himself a lamb for the sacrifice.”

When they got to the place God had selected, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on top. Next, he tied up his son and

put him on top of the wood. He then reached for the knife to kill his son.

With that, the angel of the Lord called to him out of heaven. “Abraham, Abraham! Don’t kill your son! Don’t do anything to him! For now I know you fear God, since you were willing to give me your son!”

Abraham looked off to the side and saw a ram with his horns caught in a bush. He took the ram and used him as the sacrifice instead of his son. Abraham named the place “The Lord Will Provide”.

Afterwards, God said to Abraham, “Because you have obeyed me, I’ll bless you and your descendants. I’ll make your descendants as hard to count as the stars. They’ll be as hard to count as the sand on the seashore. On top of that, I’ll make them prominent, even in the cities of their enemies! And the whole earth will be blessed because of them.”

Then Abraham went back to where the servants were waiting, and together they went home.

17 Death of Sarah

Abraham

Genesis 23

Sarah died when she was 127 years old. Their encampment was near Hebron at the time, so Abraham went to the Hittites and said, “We both live in this land together. Please allow me to buy a place where I can bury my dead.”

They said, “You are God’s chosen, and we think of you as a mighty prince. Take the best of our tombs and use it to bury your dead. No one will keep you from using it.”

Abraham got up and bowed down before them. “One of you owns a particular cave at the end of a field. Talk to him and persuade him to sell it to me at full price.”

That man was sitting among them. He immediately stood up and stepped forward. He said, “I am that man, and I can tell you that you’re free to bury your dead there at no charge.”

Abraham answered him, “Please allow me to buy this cave at full price.”

The man said, “Listen, the cave is worth 400 shekels of silver, but what is that between you and me? Bury your dead freely in the cave.”

So Abraham weighed out 400 shekels and paid it to the man in front of everyone. So Abraham buried Sarah in the cave of Hebron, and it became his possession from that day on.

18 Rebekah

Isaac

Genesis 24

When Sarah died, Abraham realized he needed to find a wife for his son Isaac. He said to his servant, "I'm sending you back to my homeland so you can find a wife for my son. Promise me you won't choose a woman from the people around here. Make sure she's from among my relatives."

The servant was concerned. "What if I find a woman, and she's not willing to leave her home and come here? Perhaps I should take Isaac back there to marry her."

"Absolutely not! You're not to take Isaac back to that country! Listen, the Lord will send his angel before you. He'll prepare the way. But if the woman isn't willing to come back with you, then you're released from this assignment."

After a long journey, the servant reached the town where Abraham's relatives lived. He stopped at a well on the outskirts of town and prayed, "Oh God, help me find the right woman for Isaac."

Suddenly he had an idea. "Lord, I'll ask a woman for a drink of water. I'll know she's the right one if she gives me a drink, and then offers to draw water for all ten of these camels!"

Soon a young woman named Rebekah came to the well. She was beautiful ... and virtuous ... and ... she wasn't married.

She filled her jar and started to walk away. The servant stepped forward and asked for a drink of water. She gave him one, and then offered to draw water for all his camels. While she was doing this, the servant asked God to help him know for sure that this was the woman for Isaac.

After Rebekah was done, the servant gave her several pieces of jewelry and asked, "Who's your family, and is there room at your father's house for my men and me to spend the night?"

She told the servant the names of her father and grandfather, and the servant knew they were Abraham's relatives. Rebekah said that there was plenty of room for them to spend the night.

She then left the servant and ran home to tell her family about this conversation. Her brother was Laban, and when he saw the valuable jewelry, he hurried to the well to see who had given her these things. He asked the servant, "Come, we've prepared a place for you and your servants, as well as your camels!"

Once they got to the house, the servant was invited to sit down and eat a meal with them. But he said, "Before we eat this meal, I must tell you my story."

He told them about the assignment Abraham had given him. He then said, "I prayed and asked God to show me the right woman for Isaac. As a sign, I asked that she'd be willing to give me a drink of water and also draw water for all the camels. Rebekah did exactly that. I believe she's the woman God has chosen to be Isaac's wife."

Laban and his father were amazed when they heard this story. They agreed with him and immediately gave their blessing. The next morning they asked Rebekah if she was willing to go with Abraham's servant and marry Isaac. She said she was willing to go. So, they blessed Rebekah and sent her with the servant.

Isaac was in the field when he saw, off in the distance, the servant's caravan of camels. So he started walking toward it. Rebekah saw him coming their way. She asked the servant, "Who is that man?"

"Oh, that is my master, Isaac." So Rebekah covered herself with a veil.

Then the servant told Isaac the whole story. So Isaac took Rebekah to be his wife, and the love between them was great.

19 Selling the Birthright

Isaac

Genesis 25

After Sarah died, Abraham married a woman named Keturah. Together they had six sons. Years later, when Abraham knew he was going to die, he gave gifts to Keturah and her sons, and sent them away to the land of the East. He then gave everything he owned to Isaac.

Abraham died when he was 175 years old. Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the same cave where Sarah was buried.

After twenty years of marriage, Isaac prayed for his wife because she was unable to have children. God answered his prayer and Rebekah became pregnant with twin boys.

Near the end of her term, she felt like there was fighting inside her womb. She was in so much pain that she prayed, "Oh God, what is happening to me?"

The Lord said, "You have two nations inside of you. Two people groups will come from your womb. One will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."

At the time of birth, the oldest baby was red and covered with hair. They named him Esau, which means "hairy."

His brother was born holding on to Esau's heel. They named him Jacob, which

means, "heel." Isaac was sixty years old when the boys were born.

As a man, Esau became skilled as an outdoorsman, which included hunting. Jacob was quiet, and preferred to stay home. Rebekah loved Jacob, but Isaac loved the taste of wild game, so he favored Esau.

One day, Esau came home exhausted from a trip. He found Jacob cooking a pot of stew. He said, "I'm tired and hungry. Give me some of that red stew."

Jacob said, "Let's make a trade — my stew for your birthright."

"That's a deal! My birthright won't do me any good if I die of hunger. Now give me the stew, I want the whole pot."

Jacob said, "No. You must first swear an oath that you're giving me your birthright."

"I swear to you. The birthright is yours."

With that, Jacob gave his brother an entire meal of bread, stew, and drink. Esau ate and drank heartily, and then got up and left.

From then on, it was said of Esau, "He despised his birthright." Also, people referred to him as "Edom," which means "Red." This was because of the value he placed on that red stew.

20 She's My Sister II

Isaac

Genesis 26:1-11

A great famine hit the place where Isaac lived, so he realized he needed to move to another area. The Lord appeared to him and said, "Don't go to Egypt. Stay in this land, even though you're a foreigner here. I'll bless you, and give you all the promises I gave to your father Abraham. Your descendants will be as hard to count as the stars. I'll give them all of this land, and through them all the nations on earth will be blessed."

So Isaac didn't go to Egypt, but instead settled in the land of Abimelech, king of the Philistines. When the men there saw that Rebekah was a beautiful woman, they asked Isaac about her. He immediately became concerned for his life, thinking they would kill him

because of her. So he said, "She's my sister."

When Isaac had been there for a while, the king looked out of his window and saw Isaac hugging and kissing Rebekah. The king sent for him and said, "This woman is your wife! Why did you tell everyone she was your sister?"

Isaac explained how he was afraid he might be killed because of her. The king said, "You've put all of us at risk. One of our men could have easily had sex with her. Then we all would've suffered because of it."

So Abimelech sent out a warning to all his people. "If anyone harms Isaac or his wife, that person will die."

21 The Well Digger

Isaac

Genesis 26:12-33

Isaac was a farmer while he lived among the Philistines. The Lord blessed his harvest so much that he became more and more wealthy. Eventually, his wealth was so great that the Philistines became jealous. They decided to plug up some wells Abraham had dug. In time, Abimelech asked Isaac to leave their country. He said, "You've become too powerful. We feel you're a threat to us."

Isaac moved to another valley, and his servants unplugged some of Abraham's wells. They also dug some new ones. Suddenly they found precious spring water. The herdsmen in that area said, "That water belongs to us." So Isaac's servants went and dug other wells, and again found water. Again, the herdsmen said, "That's our water."

They went to another area and dug some more wells. This time, no one argued about the water they found. Isaac said, "Finally! The Lord

has made room for us. We can now prosper at this spot. He called that place, "Plenty of Room."

Abimelech and a delegation from the Philistines went to Isaac. When he saw them he said, "You sent me away in anger. So why have you come to me now?"

Abimelech said, "It's clear to us that the Lord has been with you all this time. We want a treaty with you. We were good to you when you lived among us. Yes, we sent you away, but it was in peace. Now, let's agree that you'll treat us the same way and won't harm us."

So Isaac prepared a banquet, and they all ate and drank together. The next morning they each gave an oath that they would live in peace with one another.

As Abimelech and his delegation left, servants came and told Isaac about their newest well. They said, "We've found water." So he called the place Beer-sheba, which means "Well of the Oath."

22 Stolen Blessing

Jacob

Genesis 27

As Isaac got older, he became blind, and thought he was going to die soon. So he decided to give the family blessing to Esau. He said, “Go hunt for wild game and prepare it the way I like. After I eat, I’ll give you the family blessing.”

Rebekah overheard this and told Jacob. She said, “Go get two young goats. I’ll prepare them as a meal for your father, and make it the way that will please him. You serve it to him and get the blessing.”

Jacob said, “Esau is a hairy man, and I have smooth skin. If my father touches me, he’ll know that I’m trying to trick him. He’ll give me a curse instead of a blessing!”

Rebekah said, “Let your curse be on me! Go and do as I’ve said.”

So Jacob went and got the two young goats and gave them to his mother. She gave him Esau’s hunting clothes to put on. After she prepared the meal, she covered Jacob’s arms and the back of his neck with goatskins.

Jacob took the food to his father’s tent. He said, “Father.”

Isaac turned his blind eyes toward him. “Yes, son, who are you?”

“I’m Esau. Please, sit up and eat so you can give me the blessing.”

Isaac said, “I’m surprised you’re back so fast!

“Your God was with me and gave me success.”

Isaac said, “Come close to me so I can make sure you’re really Esau.” So Jacob stepped closer and Isaac reached out and touched his arm. It was hairy like Esau’s arm. Isaac then reached around to the back of Jacob’s neck. Once again he found it was hairy.

He said, “Son, I’m confused. Your voice sounds like Jacob, yet your skin feels like Esau. Are you really Esau?”

“Yes, father, I’m Esau.”

“Well ... uh ... please, serve me the meal.”

Jacob served the food to his father. It tasted exactly the way Esau would have prepared it.

Still Isaac was not convinced. So he asked his son to come and give him a kiss. When Jacob leaned over to kiss his father, Isaac smelled the clothes his son was wearing. It had the smell of the outdoors. He said,

*“The smell of my son is like the
smell of a field - blessed by God!
May God give you of heaven’s dew
and earth’s richness:
an abundance of grain and new wine!
May nations serve you
and people bow down to you.
You’ll be the master over your brothers
The sons of your mother
will bow down to you.
May those who curse you be cursed,
and those who bless you be blessed.”*

Soon after Jacob left the tent, Esau came in with the meat he had prepared. “Father, sit up and eat the meal I’ve prepared for you. Then you can give me the blessing.”

Isaac looked up. “Who are you?”

“I’m Esau, your firstborn son! Please, sit up.”

Isaac began to tremble. “Then who brought me a meal of wild game? I gave him the blessing. And... indeed, the blessing is his.

Esau was shocked. He shouted, “Bless me too, my father!”

“Ah, your brother deceived me and took your blessing. I’ve made him your lord. All of his relatives will serve him. I’ve given him everything – all of our grain and new wine. What else can I possibly give you?”

As Esau left his father’s tent, he said, “After my father dies, I’ll kill Jacob!”

Rebekah heard this, and rushed to tell Jacob. “You must leave. Go to my brother’s house! I’ll send for you once Esau gets over his anger. Go quickly. I don’t want to lose both of you in one day!”

She then got Isaac’s permission for Jacob’s trip. Isaac agreed that Jacob should go to Rebekah’s country and find a wife.

23 Jacob's Two Wives

Jacob

Genesis 28 – 29:30

Jacob started his journey to his mother's country. His father had said, "You're not to marry a Canaanite woman. Go back to your mother's family and find a wife there. May God give you the blessings he promised Abraham!"

Jacob traveled all day. That night, he slept on the ground, using a rock for a pillow.

During the night he dreamed he saw a ladder that went up to Heaven. There were angels going up and coming down! He saw the Lord standing above the ladder saying, "I'm the Lord God of Abraham and your father Isaac. I'm giving this land to you and your descendants. All the earth will be blessed because of them! I'm with you and will watch over you as you go. I'll bring you back to this land."

Suddenly Jacob woke up and was afraid. He said, "Oh, ... God is here and I didn't know it! This is the house of God and the doorway to Heaven!"

He took the rock he had used as a pillow and used it to build an altar. He poured oil on it and called the place Bethel, which means "the house of God." He said, "If God watches over me, and provides for me, and brings me back to this land, then he'll be my God, and I'll give him a tenth of all he gives to me."

Jacob traveled on to the home of his mother's brother. His uncle Laban received him with joy.

Now Laban had two daughters. The oldest was Leah, and the youngest was Rachel—who was beautiful.

At the end of a month, Laban said to Jacob, "Work for me and I'll give you wages. What's your price?"

Jacob said, "I'll work for you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel."

Laban agreed and said, "It's a deal!"

So Jacob worked for Laban seven years, and it seemed like a few days because of his great love for Rachel.

At the end of that time, Laban invited people to a wedding feast. At the appropriate time, he brought his daughter and gave her to Jacob. It wasn't until morning that Jacob realized his uncle had given him Leah, the oldest daughter.

He was furious! He went to Laban and said, "Why did you deceive me? You know I love Rachel! I served you seven years for her."

Laban said, "In our country, a younger daughter isn't allowed to marry until the older one is married. But, this is what we can do. Fulfill Leah's bridal week, and then I'll give you Rachel and she can also be your wife. It'll only cost you another seven years of work."

So Jacob agreed, and after seven days, he married Rachel as well.

24 Speckled, Spotted & Streaked

Jacob

Genesis 29:31 – 31:3

Jacob worked for his uncle Laban a total of fourteen years to get his two wives. It was obvious that he loved Rachel more than Leah.

The Lord saw that Leah was unloved, so he kept Rachel from having children. After Leah had four sons, Rachel was so jealous that she yelled at Jacob, “Give me a son or I’ll die!”

He said, “I’m not God. I didn’t make you barren.”

With this, Rachel gave him her maidservant. She said, “Sleep with my servant. She can have children for me.” Jacob agreed and soon the servant started having children.

Suddenly Leah was unable to bear children. So she gave her maidservant to Jacob. Soon, with three women, Jacob had ten sons and one daughter. At that point God allowed Rachel to give birth to a son. She called him Joseph. He was the eleventh son.

At this point, Jacob went to Laban and said, “I want to return to my home. Give me the freedom to take my wives and children and go.”

Laban said, “Oh Jacob, be kind to me and don’t leave. I’ve learned that the Lord has blessed me because of you. I’ll pay you whatever you want.”

Jacob said, “You don’t have to pay me

anything. Instead, allow me to build up my wealth by keeping a part of the flock.”

“I’ll oversee your flocks, but I’ll keep all the goats and sheep that are born speckled, spotted, or streaked. You keep the rest. In this way, you’ll know if I’m stealing from you. Simply check my flocks and see if they all have the right markings on them.”

Laban agreed to these terms. So they separated the flocks according to those markings.

Jacob had a way of making the lambs be born speckled, spotted, and streaked. Using this process, he made sure all the strongest of the flock were his, and all the weakest of the flock were Laban’s. In frustration, Laban changed their agreement ten times in order to gain the advantage. Even so, Jacob became very rich over the years.

One day, he overheard a conversation between his brothers-in-law. They said, “Jacob has built his wealth by taking what really belongs to our father.” He also noticed that Laban’s attitude had changed towards him.

The Lord said to Jacob, “Go back to the land I gave to your fathers, and I’ll be with you.”

25 Leaving Laban

Jacob

Genesis 31:4 – 55

Jacob wanted to have a private conversation with his two wives, so they met out in the field. He said to them, “I worked hard for your father, even though he changed our deal ten times. The Lord protected me, and every time Laban changed our agreement, God changed how the lambs were born. Now your father is angry with me. So the Angel of God has told me to return to the land of my fathers.”

Both women agreed with him. They said, “Do what God has told you to do. Our father sold us to you and then spent the money. You haven’t gotten anything from him that doesn’t already belong to us and our children.”

So without telling Laban, Jacob took all that he had, and started driving his herds toward Canaan. Before they left, Rachel stole her father’s family idol.

Three days later, Laban heard that Jacob had left. He immediately took a group of men and chased after Jacob. It took seven days to catch up with him. The night before, God appeared to Laban and said, “Watch out! Don’t do anything to Jacob, good or bad.”

The next day, Laban met Jacob and said, “Why did you do this to me? You left like a thief in the night, and took my daughters and grandchildren like they were prisoners. If you had told me, I would’ve put on a grand party and sent you off with a flair.”

“Now you’ve disgraced me, and if I wanted to, I could destroy you right here. But last night, the God of your fathers told me not to do anything to you.

“I suppose I can understand your being homesick and wanting to go home. But why did you steal my family idol?”

Jacob said, “I didn’t steal your idol. Look for yourself. Go ahead. Search our tents. If you find it, I’ll kill the person who took it.” He didn’t know that Rachel had taken it.

Laban searched the tents belonging to Jacob, Leah, and the two maidservants. He then went into Rachel’s tent. She was sitting on her camel seat, where she had put the idol. She said, “Father, please forgive me for not standing. I am having my monthly period.” Laban looked throughout her tent and didn’t find his idol.

At this point, Jacob became angry. He said, “You’ve chased me here like I was a criminal. You’ve searched everything I have. Have you found anything that belongs to you? Bring it out and put it in front of your men.

“No, you haven’t found anything! I worked for you for twenty years. I endured the extreme heat in the day, and the frost at night. I worked without much sleep, so you could prosper. I endured these hardships, and you still mistreated me through it all.

“Then you made me bear all the loss for anything that went wrong. I had to pay you if someone stole a sheep. If an animal killed a lamb, suddenly it was my lamb.”

“You changed our agreement ten times. I would be standing here penniless if God hadn’t made things right. Now he’s protecting me from you.”

Laban said, “Everything you have belongs to me. Those are my daughters! Those are my grandsons! Those are my flocks! But what can I do now? Let’s make a firm agreement that can’t be changed. Everyone here will be a witness to it.”

So all the men took stones and piled them in a mound. Jacob and Laban agreed that neither man would ever go to the other side of the mound. Laban said, “These rocks are an agreement between us. You’re not to mistreat my daughters and take any other wives.”

Jacob then made a sacrifice to God and afterwards everyone sat down to a meal. The next morning, Laban kissed his daughters and grandchildren, and blessed them. He then returned to his home.

26 Two Camps

Jacob

Genesis 32 – 33

Jacob and his family were going back to his homeland. Suddenly God's angels met him. With that, he knew he was not alone, so he called the place "Two Camps."

From there he sent messengers to his brother Esau saying, "I'm coming home with all my possessions, and I'm hoping you'll accept me."

The messengers came back and said, "Your brother is coming with four hundred men." This struck fear in Jacob's heart. He immediately divided everything into two camps, saying, "If Esau attacks one camp, the other can escape."

He prayed, "Oh, God of Abraham and Isaac, You told me to come back to my country. You said I'd prosper here. I'm not worthy of the kindness you've shown me. I left this land with only my walking stick. Now I'm two camps."

"Please rescue me from my brother. You said my descendants would be as hard to count as the sand on the seashore."

He then prepared gifts for his brother, which included goats, sheep, camels, cows, and donkeys. He divided them into three groups and sent them ahead. He told his servants, "When Esau comes to the first group, say to him, 'Your slave Jacob is sending these to you. Look, you can see him back there.' " He told the second and third the same things. He was hoping these things would help Esau be more forgiving.

He then spent the night waiting for his brother's arrival in the morning. Since he couldn't sleep, he went off to be by himself.

Suddenly a man appeared and grabbed him. Jacob fought back, and the two of them wrestled all night. At daybreak the stranger saw that Jacob was determined not to lose this fight. So the man struck Jacob's side and dislocated his hip socket.

He said, "I've got to go. It's daybreak."

Jacob said, "I won't let you go until you bless me."

The man said, "What's your name?"

"I'm Jacob!"

The man said, "No, that's no longer your name. You'll be called Israel, which means 'wrestled with God.' You've fought with God, and have lived to tell about it."

Jacob said, "What's your name?"

The man said, "I'm not telling you my name." With that, he blessed Jacob.

Jacob called the place "God's Face." He said, "I've seen God's face and I'm still alive."

Jacob limped back to his camp. Off in the distance he could see Esau and his four hundred men coming. He put each of his families into different groups, and then he went out front. He bowed seven times as he hobbled toward his brother.

Esau ran up to him and gave him a hug. Both men cried. Esau then pointed to the people standing behind Jacob. "Who are these people with you?"

After Esau met Jacob's family, he said, "Why did you put all those animals along the way?"

"Oh, I gave those to you in hopes of winning your forgiveness."

Esau said, "No, no. I have enough. You keep them."

But Jacob insisted. "Please, accept my gifts. It would make me very happy." So Esau agreed.

Then Esau and his men went home that same day. Jacob went to an area near a city called Shechem. There he built an altar and called it "God, the God of Israel."

! *Genesis 34 – 35*

Jacob had eleven sons but only one daughter. Her name was Dinah. One day, she went out to be with some of the young women of that area. While she was there, a prince named Shechem saw her and raped her.

After he was done, he felt affection for her and spoke tenderly to her. He said to his father, “I love this girl and I want you to talk with her father so she can be my wife.”

Jacob heard about his daughter’s rape while his sons were away watching the cattle. Before they returned, Shechem’s father came and talked to Jacob about the possibilities of a wedding.

Dinah’s brothers were furious when they heard about all of this. They felt this was an outrage to the entire family of Israel.

The young man’s father said, “Please think about the good that can come from this. My son loves your daughter. Let them get married. We’ll then give you our daughters to marry, and we’ll become one people.”

Shechem said, “I’ll do whatever you ask if you’ll allow me to marry Dinah.”

Jacob’s sons thought of a plan to get revenge. They said, “We can’t give you our women because your men aren’t circumcised. That would be a disgrace to us. The only way we could agree to your terms is if every man in your city was circumcised. If you agree to this, we’ll give you Dinah and take your daughters as our wives. But if you refuse to do this, we will take Dinah and leave.”

Shechem and his father were happy with these terms. They went back to the city and met with all the men. They explained the agreement and then said, “This is a great deal for us. They have a lot of possessions. In time, it will all be ours. All we have to do is be circumcised.”

All the men agreed and were immediately circumcised. Three days later, they were still in great pain. Two of Dinah’s brothers, Simeon and Levi, went into the city and totally caught the men by surprise. Systemically, they killed them all with swords. They also killed Shechem and his father and took Dinah from their house.

Afterwards, the other brothers went and plundered the city. They looted every house and all the fields. They took the women and children, their possessions, and all the livestock.

Jacob was shocked when he found out about this. He said to Simeon and Levi, “You’ve caused this whole land to turn against us. Once news of this gets out, all the surrounding towns will come at us with a mighty force and totally destroy us.”

They said, “What choice did we have? They can’t treat our sister like a prostitute.”

God said to Jacob, “Hurry! Go to Bethel. Build an altar at the spot I appeared to you when you were running from Esau.”

So Jacob then gave instructions to his family and all the people with him. He said, “Purify your hearts and get rid of all your idols. We’re going to Bethel, and I’m going to build an altar to God. He has always helped me wherever I’ve gone.”

So the people gave him all their false gods and earrings. Jacob hid them under an oak near the town of Shechem.

They then went to Bethel, where Jacob built an altar. God sent a terror over the cities around them, so they were afraid to attack Jacob and his sons. God met with him and gave him all the promises of Abraham.

Afterwards they left Bethel and moved south. Along the way, Rachel died giving birth to her son Benjamin. She was buried near Bethlehem.

28 Sold into Slavery

Joseph

Genesis 37 & 39

Jacob had twelve sons, but his favorite was Joseph. To show his love, Jacob gave Joseph a special coat made with many colors. This made the other sons jealous.

Joseph made things worse by telling his brothers about his unusual dreams. “In one dream, we were binding bundles of grain. My bundle suddenly stood upright, and your bundles bowed down to it!” This made his brothers angry. They couldn’t imagine Joseph ruling over them.

“In another dream, the sun, moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me!” Even his father questioned him on this. “Will your mother and I, as well as your brothers bow down to you?” Still, Jacob kept it in mind.

Some time later, the ten older brothers took the flocks to graze in a distant field. Jacob decided to send Joseph to see how they were doing.

When the brothers saw him coming, they said, “Here comes that ‘dreamer.’ Let’s kill him and throw him into a deep pit. Then we’ll see what happens to his dreams!”

Reuben was the oldest brother and said, “Don’t kill him! Just throw him into a pit.” His plan was to rescue the boy later and send him back to his father. So the brothers agreed, and threw Joseph into a pit.

Reuben went on an errand while the others ate a meal. While they were eating, a group of merchants came by on their way to Egypt. Suddenly one of the brothers, named Judah, had an idea. “Why should we kill Joseph? After all, he’s our brother. Instead, let’s sell him!” So they sold him to the merchants.

Reuben came back later and was shocked to see that the boy was gone. The brothers told him what they had done.

Together they thought of a story to tell their father. They killed a goat and dipped Joseph’s

coat in the blood. When they got home, they showed the coat to their father.

Jacob grabbed it and cried out, “Joseph has been killed by wild animals!” He tore his clothes and started crying for his son. The others tried to comfort him, but he mourned for Joseph from the depths of his heart. He said, “I’ll mourn his death for the rest of my life.”

Once Joseph arrived in Egypt, he was sold to a man named Potiphar. Joseph adjusted to his life as a slave and God prospered everything he did. He grew in his abilities and gained the respect of his master.

Eventually, Potiphar put Joseph in charge of the entire household, including the finances. Potiphar didn’t even know what he owned except for the food that was put in front of him.

One day, Potiphar’s wife asked Joseph to go to bed with her. He refused, telling her that this would be a sin to his master—and to God. But she was a determined woman, and wouldn’t take no for an answer. She pursued him every chance she got, but he always refused her.

One day, she saw an opportunity when her husband wasn’t home. She waited until Joseph came into the house, and then grabbed him. He tried to pull away, but she held onto his coat and wouldn’t let go. Finally he left the coat in her hands and ran away.

This made her furious, so she decided to get revenge. She screamed and the household servants came running. She told them that Joseph had come into her room and tried to pull her into bed. She said, “He ran away when I screamed.” She showed them his coat as proof of what she was saying.

When her husband came home, she told him the same story. He was angry and had Joseph put in prison.

! Genesis 38

Judah was the fourth son of Jacob. There came a time when he left his brothers to live on his own. He married a Canaanite woman, who gave birth to three sons. When the time was right, Judah found a wife for his oldest son. Her name was Tamar.

Unfortunately, the oldest son was evil, and the Lord put him to death. Judah told his second son to have sex with Tamar so his oldest brother would have an heir, and the family name would continue on.

The second son slept with Tamar, but didn't like the idea of producing a child for his brother. So at the last moment during sex, he withdrew so she couldn't get pregnant. This made the Lord angry and he killed the second son.

Judah then told Tamar, "Go back and live as a widow in your father's house. I'll give you my youngest son when he grows up." So she did as she was told.

Years went by and yet Judah didn't give Tamar his youngest son. He was worried that his last son would die like his brothers. Still, she could see that the youngest was now old enough to marry.

About that same time, Judah's wife died. Afterwards, he and his friend traveled to a place to shear sheep. Someone told this to Tamar. She immediately changed her clothes, so she wouldn't look like a widow. She then covered her face with a veil.

She went and sat down next to the road, where her father-in-law would travel that day. He saw her and assumed she was a prostitute because she wore a veil over her face. He didn't know she was his daughter-in-law.

He said to her, "Let me sleep with you."

"What will you give me?"

He said, "When I get to my flock, I'll send you a young goat."

She said, "I'll have sex with you, but you must leave something with me so I can be sure you'll send me the young goat."

"What do you want?"

She said, "I want your walking stick and the ring you keep on the cord around your neck."

He gave these things to her, and then had sex with her, and she became pregnant.

After they were done, she went home, removed her veil, and once again put on her widow's clothes.

Once Judah got to his flock, he asked a friend to take the young goat back to the prostitute. He said, "Be sure to get the things I left with her."

When the friend got there, he couldn't find her. He asked some men who lived in that area, "Where is the prostitute that sits by this road?"

They said, "There has never been a prostitute sitting by this road."

The friend went back and told all of this to Judah. He laughed, "Then let her keep those things I gave her. I tried to fulfill my part of the bargain."

Three months later, someone told Judah, "Your daughter-in-law acted like a prostitute and now she's pregnant."

Judah was furious. He yelled, "Bring her here! We'll burn her."

As they were getting her, she sent a message to her father-in-law. It said, "I can identify the man who got me pregnant. These things belong to him. Do you recognize them?"

As soon as he saw his ring and walking stick, he knew what had happened. He said, "She's a better person than me. I promised to give her my youngest son, but didn't do it." He never went to bed with her again.

She gave birth to twin boys. As they were being born, one child stuck his hand out. The midwife tied a red thread around it, saying, "This is the firstborn."

Suddenly, the hand went back in and the other child was born. So they named that child, Perez, which means, "Break out." Then his brother was born. Because of the bright red thread on his wrist, they named him Zerah, which means "Bright."

30 Joseph's Rise to Power

Joseph

Genesis 40 – 41

Life in prison was hard for Joseph, but God was with him and blessed him. His jailor came to respect him and finally started to use him as an assistant. Eventually Joseph was in charge of the entire prison.

One day, Pharaoh put his chief butler and chief baker in the prison. While they were there, each man had a dream. Joseph asked to hear them.

The butler said, "I saw three branches on a vine. They blossomed and then had grapes. I squeezed the grapes into Pharaoh's cup and served it to him."

"Ah," said Joseph, "the three branches are three days. In three days, Pharaoh will take you out of prison and give you back your old job. Please, remember me, and ask Pharaoh to set me free from this prison. I've done nothing to deserve this."

After hearing this, the baker was eager to tell Joseph his dream. "I had three baskets of Pharaoh's bread on my head. Birds flew up and ate all the bread from out of the baskets."

"Oh," said Joseph, "the three baskets are also three days. In three days, Pharaoh will take you out of prison and cut off your head. He will hang your body on a tree and birds will eat your flesh."

It all happened just as Joseph said! Pharaoh restored the butler to his previous position, and hung the baker on a tree. Unfortunately, the butler soon forgot about Joseph.

Two years later, Pharaoh had two dreams. He woke up after the first one, but went back to sleep. He then had a second dream, but this time he was so troubled he couldn't go back to sleep.

He called for his counselors and told them his two dreams. They couldn't figure out their meanings. Suddenly the chief butler remembered Joseph. He told Pharaoh about the man in prison who interpreted his dream and the baker's dream.

Pharaoh sent guards to bring Joseph to him

immediately. They got him, cleaned him up, and brought him before Pharaoh. He told Joseph about his dreams.

"In the first one, I saw seven fat cows come out of the river and graze along its banks. Suddenly seven skinny cows came up out of the river and ate the fat ones. And yet, they were just as skinny as before."

"In my second dream I saw seven plump heads of grain growing on a stalk. Suddenly, seven dried-up heads of grain sprouted up on a stalk next to it. The thin heads of grain swallowed up the healthy ones. Still, they were as thin and dried up as before."

Joseph said, "God is telling you what he's about to do. The seven good cows and the seven good heads of grain are seven years of great abundance. After that, there'll be seven years of famine. It'll be so severe that the good years will be forgotten."

"Therefore, look for a wise man to put in charge of the land. Have him organize the collection of food during the good years and store it up for the bad years. If you don't do this, the country will be ruined by famine."

Pharaoh said to his officials, "Are we able to find anyone better than Joseph for this job? He has the spirit of God within him."

He turned to Joseph. "The people will submit to your commands. Next to me, you'll be the most powerful man in Egypt."

During the next seven years, Joseph traveled throughout the land, collecting and storing food. Then, just as God had shown him, the seven years of famine started. This famine also affected all the surrounding countries.

When the people of Egypt started to feel the famine, Joseph opened the storehouses and sold them grain. Soon all the countries around Egypt came and bought grain from Joseph.

31 Joseph's Family

Joseph

Genesis 42 – 45

Jacob heard there was grain in Egypt, so he sent his ten oldest sons to go and buy food. He didn't send Benjamin because he was afraid of losing him.

When they arrived in Egypt, they went before the governor of the land. They didn't know it was Joseph. He recognized them, but pretended not to know them. He wanted to test them to see if they had changed.

"Where are you from?" When they answered, he glared at them. "You're spies!"

The brothers were shocked, "No, we're honest men – all the sons of a man who lives in Canaan. One of our brothers stayed at home, and the other one is ... uh ... gone."

Joseph said, "Prove it to me. I'll keep one of you here. The rest of you go home and bring back your younger brother. Then I'll know if you're telling the truth."

He kept Simeon, and sent the others home with sacks of grain. Without them knowing, he had their money put into the grain sacks.

They told Jacob what happened. They said, "We need to take Benjamin back to Egypt in order to get Simeon out of prison."

It was then they discovered the money in their sacks of grain. They were afraid, and Jacob said, "You're not taking Benjamin away from me! Joseph is gone, and now Simeon is gone. Benjamin is all I have left! If I lose him, I'll die with grief!"

In time their grain from Egypt was gone. Jacob told his sons to go back and buy more. Judah reminded him that they couldn't go back unless they took Benjamin with them. He said, "Send him with me. I'll guarantee his safety. Let us go. We need the food!"

Finally Jacob agreed, and the brothers returned to Egypt with Benjamin. They took double the money so they could return the money they found in their sacks.

When Joseph saw them, he told his servant

to take them to his house for the noon meal. The brothers tried to return the money they had found, but the servants said they were not missing any payments.

The next morning, the brothers were sent back to Canaan with their sacks full of grain. Joseph had his servant put a silver cup in the sack belonging to Benjamin. When the men had gone a short way, the servants of Joseph caught up with them and said, "One of you has stolen our master's silver cup!"

The brothers were shocked! "We wouldn't do such a thing. If you find that any of us have it, that person will die and the rest of us will become slaves of your master."

Each of the brothers opened his sack, and they found the cup in the one belonging to Benjamin. The brothers were horrified. They returned to the city with the guards, and fell down in front of Joseph. He asked, "Why have you done this?"

Judah replied, "How can we prove our innocence? All of us will now be your slaves."

"No! Only the guilty one will be my slave. The rest of you can go home to your father."

Judah said, "I promised our father that I'd guarantee Benjamin's safety. So allow me to be your slave instead of him. I can't bear to see my father's grief when the boy doesn't return to him."

When Joseph heard this, he started to cry. He said to his brothers. "I'm Joseph!"

The men were terrified and weren't able to answer him. He said, "Come! Come closer and see! I'm your brother, the one you sold into slavery! God sent me here to save your lives. There are still five years of famine left, and God brought me here to prepare a place for you!"

He then told them to go back and bring their father and their families to Egypt. Pharaoh heard of this and told Joseph, "The best of Egypt will be theirs!"

32 Israel in Egypt

Joseph

Genesis 45:17 – 50:21

Pharaoh told Joseph, “Tell your brothers to go back to Canaan and get your father. They should bring him back here, as well as their families. Have them take wagons from Egypt so their wives and children can travel in comfort. Don’t worry about their belongings, because I will give them the best of Egypt.

When the men got back to Canaan, Jacob was stunned when they told him everything that happened! At first he didn’t believe that Joseph was actually alive. But eventually, he became thrilled as he listened to stories about Joseph and all he had done.

So Jacob’s entire clan started the journey to Egypt. Along the way, he stopped and sacrificed to the Lord. That night God appeared to him in a vision. He said, “I am God, the God of your father. Don’t be afraid to go to Egypt. I will go with you and make you a great nation. In time I will bring them back to this land.”

Finally Jacob, his children, and all their children arrived in Egypt. Pharaoh provided everything they needed because of Joseph. They were given the best land for their families and herds.

Jacob lived for another seventeen years. When he was about to die, he called Joseph to his side. “Your two sons are now mine. Manasseh and Ephraim are my sons as much as Reuben and Simeon are mine. They will have part of my inheritance and be counted as the sons of Israel.”

Joseph brought both sons next to his father to receive the blessing. He put Manasseh next to Jacob’s right hand because he was the oldest. But Jacob reached out and put his right hand on Ephraim.

Joseph tried to correct this by moving his

father’s hand, saying “Father, Manasseh is the oldest and should receive the blessing of your right hand.”

Jacob said, “Son, I know what I’m doing. Yes, Manasseh will be father of a great tribe, but the descendants of Ephraim will have a larger population.

Jacob then called in all his sons and gave each one a blessing. He said Judah would be the kingly tribe, and the promise would go down through his descendants.

Jacob visited with his sons a bit longer and then he died. A large crowd took his body back to Canaan, including his family and many Egyptians. He was buried in the same cave as Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and his wife Leah.

After the death of Jacob, the brothers of Joseph became fearful. They said, “Joseph has been kind to us only because of our father. Now he will remember how we abused him. The time has come for him to get even with us.”

They sent a message to Joseph saying, “Your father asked you to forgive us for the great sin we committed against you. Therefore, please forgive us.”

Joseph broke down and cried when he heard this message. Then his brothers came before him and bowed down and said, “We are your slaves.”

Joseph said, “Don’t be afraid of me. I can’t act in the place of God. It’s true you wanted to hurt me, but God was in control the entire time. He planned it to save the lives of our entire clan. Listen to me and don’t be afraid. I will take care of you and your children.”

Joseph spoke words of comfort to his brothers. He reassured them of his love and care.

33 The Birth of Moses

Moses

Exodus 1 – 2:10

The descendants of Jacob were called Hebrews or Israelites. Over the years, their numbers greatly increased in Egypt.

They were treated well until a new Pharaoh came to power. He didn't remember Joseph or anything he did. This new Pharaoh felt he needed to do something about the Hebrews, since their population was growing, and they were becoming powerful.

His first plan was to enslave the people and force them to make bricks and build cities. Still, the Israelites grew in numbers. So the Egyptians increased their workload and beat them. In spite of this, the Hebrew population continued to grow.

Pharaoh thought of an idea of how to stop this. He told the midwives, "When you help an Israelite woman deliver a child, kill all the baby boys as soon as they are born. Only the baby girls are allowed to live."

The midwives didn't obey Pharaoh. Instead they feared God and allowed the boys to live as well as the girls. They told Pharaoh, "The Hebrew women are much stronger than Egyptian women. They deliver their own children before we get to them." God blessed these women because they refused to kill the children.

The Israelite population continued to increase in number, so Pharaoh issued a new law for the nation. "Every Hebrew boy-child is to be thrown

into the Nile River."

During this time of persecution, a boy was born to one of the Hebrew families. His mother hid him for three months, but it became more difficult with each passing week.

Finally, she realized she needed to do something different. So she made a waterproof basket, put the child inside, and placed it in the Nile River among the reeds near the banks. The boy's sister was Miriam. She hid nearby to see what would happen to her brother.

Soon Pharaoh's daughter came down to the river to take a bath. She saw the basket floating among the reeds and sent her servants to get it. When she opened the basket, the baby started to cry and she felt sorry for it. She said, "This must be one of the Hebrew children."

Miriam came out of her hiding place and spoke up. "Do you want me to go find a Hebrew mother who can nurse this child?"

"Yes. I'd like that. Go get a nursing mother."

So the girl went and got her own mother—the baby's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Nurse this child for me and I'll pay you."

When the boy was old enough, his mother brought him back to Pharaoh's daughter and the boy became her son. She called him Moses (which means "pulled out") saying, "I pulled him out of the water."

34 Finding a Wife

Moses

Exodus 2:11-22

Pharaoh's daughter raised Moses as if he were her own son. When he was grown, he went out to his people and saw how they were being abused as slaves.

Suddenly, he saw an Egyptian beating one of his people. Moses looked around to see if anyone was watching. He then hit the Egyptian and killed him. He quickly hid the body in the sand.

The next day, he went out again, but this time he saw two Hebrews fighting. He stopped them and said, "With all of your problems, why are you fighting each other?"

They pulled back and yelled, "Who made you our leader? You're not our judge! Are you planning to kill us like you killed the Egyptian yesterday?"

Moses was shocked! He now realized his crime wasn't a secret. Soon Pharaoh found out about it and sent men to kill Moses. So he ran away and barely escaped Egypt with his life.

He ended up out in the wilderness, at a place called Midian. Once he got there, he sat down next to a well. Soon seven women came to the well to draw water for their sheep. They were the daughters of Jethro, the priest of Midian.

Suddenly, some shepherds came and started to chase the women away. Moses stepped in and defended them. After the fight, he helped the women draw the water for their sheep.

When they got back home, Jethro was surprised his daughters were back so soon. They said, "An Egyptian protected us from the shepherds, and he even helped draw water for the flock."

"So where is he? What! Did you leave him at the well? Go get him and invite him to come and have a meal with us."

Moses stayed with Jethro and his family, and eventually married one of his daughters, a woman named Zipporah. Together, they had two sons.

35 The Call of Moses

Moses

Exodus 3 – 4:18

After Moses married Zipporah, he became a shepherd for his father-in-law, Jethro. Forty years later, when Moses was 80 years old, he led his flock near a particular mountain.

Suddenly, off in the distance, he saw that a bush was on fire, but it wasn't being consumed. He went closer so he could see it better. When he was near, God called to him from out of the bush. "Moses, Moses."

He stepped back. "Yes, I'm here."

"Don't come any closer. Take off your shoes. You're standing on holy ground."

As Moses took off his sandals, the Lord said, "I'm the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Moses covered his face because he was afraid to look at God.

"My people are suffering in the land of Egypt. It's time to deliver them out of their slavery. I've selected you to lead them back to the land of Canaan. Therefore, go back to Egypt and talk to Pharaoh.

"Oh Lord, not me! I'm not the right one to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. I'm not able to talk to Pharaoh."

God was patient with Moses. "I'll be with you. When you think of this mountain, you'll remember that I sent you. Go to Egypt and bring my people back here to worship."

Moses said, "But if I stand before the people and say, 'the God of your fathers has sent me to you,' they'll say, 'What God? What's his name?' What should I tell them?"

God said, "I Am Who I Am! Tell them 'I AM' sent you to them. I am the God of Abraham. I am

the God of Isaac. I am the God of Jacob.

"The people will listen to you, but Pharaoh won't. Therefore I'll strike him with a hard blow. When I'm done, he'll finally let my people go."

Moses still hesitated. So God said to him, "What's in your hand?"

"Oh... it's a shepherd's staff."

"Throw it on the ground."

He threw it on the ground and it became a poisonous snake! Moses jumped back in fear. Then God said, "Reach out and pick up the snake by the tail." Moses grabbed the tail, and instantly the snake once again became a shepherd's staff.

God said, "Put your hand inside your shirt." Moses did, and when he pulled it out it was covered with leprosy. "Put your hand back in your shirt." He did, and when he pulled it out, the leprosy was gone.

God said, "Show the people these signs and they'll believe you."

"Oh, Lord, I've never been able to talk well. I have a speech problem."

"Moses, who made your mouth? I'm the one who causes a person to be deaf, mute, blind or seeing! Go, and do as I say. I'll help you talk, and teach you what you're to say."

Moses bowed his head. "Lord, I just don't want to go. Please send someone else."

With this, the Lord became angry. "Your brother Aaron is coming to meet you. He speaks fluently. Take him and go to Egypt!"

So Moses went to Jethro and asked permission to return to Egypt.

36 Zipporah

Moses

Exodus 4:18-31 & 18:2

Moses said to Jethro, his father-in-law, "I want to go back to Egypt to see if my family is still alive." Jethro agreed and gave his blessings for the trip.

The Lord said to Moses, "Go back to Egypt. Those who were trying to kill you are now dead."

So Moses made preparation for the journey. He then took his wife and sons and together they left Midian. He made sure he had God's staff with him.

At the same time, God said to Aaron, "Go and meet Moses in the wilderness." So he left Egypt and headed towards Midian.

As Moses traveled, the Lord gave him instructions of what he was to do once he was back in Egypt. God said, "Do all the wonders I've given you, but don't be surprised. Pharaoh won't listen to you! I have hardened his heart, so he won't let the people go willingly.

"Here is my message to him. 'Israel is my firstborn son. You refuse to let my son go and worship me. Therefore, I'll kill your firstborn son.'"

In the evening, Moses and his family made camp for the night. Suddenly the Lord attacked

Moses because his sons weren't circumcised.

Quickly Zipporah jumped up and grabbed a knife. She circumcised her sons and threw their foreskins at the feet of her husband. With that, the Lord let Moses go.

Zipporah looked at all the blood and yelled at Moses, "You're a bridegroom of blood to me!"

The next day, Moses saw Aaron coming toward him. The two brothers greeted one another with joy. Moses told Aaron everything the Lord had said. He told him about the signs God had given him, and what he was to do. Together they went back and gathered the elders of Israel.

Aaron stood before the people and told them what the Lord had said to Moses. He showed them the signs from God.

The people were amazed with what they heard and saw. They believed Moses and Aaron, and bowed down and worshipped God.

Moses realized it was best to send his family back to Midian. There they could be under the protection of Jethro, his father-in-law.

37 Straw for Bricks

Moses

Exodus 5 – 7:13

Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “This is what the Lord God of Israel says. ‘Let my people go into the wilderness for three days so they can worship me.’ ”

The Pharaoh was shocked and said, “Who does the God of the Hebrews think he is—telling me what to do? I don’t know him, and I’m certainly not going to let my slaves go into the wilderness.”

He then focused on Moses and Aaron. “All of your talk about worship is keeping my slaves from doing their work. Stop all this talk and get back to work!”

He then called for his slave drivers. “My slaves are lazy! They have so much time on their hands that they’re talking about going out into the wilderness and worshipping God.

“Well, I’ll fix that. From now on, stop giving them straw for the bricks. Let them go get it themselves. Still, they’re to make just as many bricks as before. That’ll teach them not to stand around and listen to these fools!”

The slave drivers went and told the Israelite foremen what the Pharaoh said. “We’re not going to give you any more straw. You have to get it yourselves. Still you’re to produce just as many bricks as before.”

So the people immediately went throughout Egypt gathering straw. Because of this, they weren’t able to fulfill their allotted quota for making bricks. Therefore the slave drivers beat the foremen. They said, “You aren’t doing your job. You aren’t making enough bricks.”

The foremen went to Pharaoh. “Why are you treating your slaves this way? If we don’t have the straw, we can’t make the same amount of bricks as before.”

Pharaoh yelled at them. “You’re lazy—Lazy, I say! You’ve got time to stand around and say,

‘we want to go worship the Lord.’ So now it’s time to work. Go get your own straw, and I want the same amount of bricks as before.”

Moses was waiting for the foremen when they left Pharaoh. They said to him, “You have made us stink before Pharaoh. You put a sword in his hand, and he’s going to kill us with it.”

Moses went to the Lord and said, “Why did you send me here? You haven’t delivered the people. You’ve only caused them more trouble.”

The Lord said, “Oh Moses. You’re about to see what I’m going to do with Pharaoh. When I’m done, he’ll beg you to take these people away.

“Go tell the people that I am the Lord. I have heard their groaning, and I’m about to take them back to the land I promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

Moses went to the people and gave them this message, but they wouldn’t listen to him. They were defeated and discouraged.

Then the Lord told Moses to go and talk to Pharaoh again. “Tell him to let my people leave this land.”

Moses said, “I’m not any good at this. If the people of Israel won’t listen to me, why would Pharaoh?”

The Lord said, “Moses, I have made you like a god to Pharaoh, and Aaron your prophet. Go and I’ll give you the words to say.”

So Moses and his brother Aaron stood before Pharaoh and asked him to allow the people of Israel to go into the desert and worship. Pharaoh asked for a sign, so Aaron threw his staff on the ground and it became a snake. The court magicians and sorcerers threw their sticks on the ground and they also turned into snakes. Suddenly Aaron’s snake ate the rest of the snakes! Still, Pharaoh wouldn’t listen to them.

38 Pharaoh's Plagues

Moses

Exodus 7 – 9

The Lord told Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh in the morning when he was walking next to the Nile River. Moses said, "Because you refuse to free our people, the waters of Egypt will turn to blood. The fish will die and the water will be undrinkable." Aaron then struck the water with his staff and it turned into blood.

The court magicians also turned some water into blood. Therefore, Pharaoh ignored Moses and Aaron. Soon the water throughout the land turned to blood and was undrinkable. The people had to dig wells to find fresh water.

After seven days, Moses told Pharaoh, "Because of your stubbornness, frogs will infest your land."

So Aaron stretched out his staff, and frogs started coming up out of the rivers and lakes. The magicians also made some frogs appear. Soon there were frogs everywhere. They went to every city street. They got into people's houses and into their food—even into their beds!

Pharaoh said to Moses, "I've changed my mind. Your people can go into the wilderness and worship their God. Ask Him to get rid of the frogs."

Moses asked, "When do you want the frogs to leave?" Pharaoh said, "Tomorrow."

The next day the frogs died, and people gathered them up into big piles. Soon they started to stink! Pharaoh then changed his mind and refused to let the people go.

Next, Aaron struck the ground with his staff and the dust turned into lice. Soon, all the people and animals throughout Egypt were infested with lice. Pharaoh's magicians were unable to do this. They said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God!" Still he wouldn't let the people go.

Next, God sent swarms of flies to cover the land. But there were no flies in the part of Egypt where the Hebrews lived.

Pharaoh agreed to let the people go. Moses said the flies would be gone the next day, but he added, "Take care. Don't change your mind

again!" However, that is exactly what he did. Once the flies were gone, Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let the people go.

God sent a plague upon the livestock, but again it didn't affect the livestock of Israel. Pharaoh became more stubborn, and refused to let the Hebrews go.

Moses took a handful of ashes and tossed it into the air. It became a fine dust that spread through all of Egypt causing boils on all the people and animals. The magicians couldn't stand before Pharaoh because of their boils!

Pharaoh was angry, and refused to listen to Moses. God had told Moses that Pharaoh would act like this.

Moses went to Pharaoh with a special message from God. He said, "Up to this point I've restrained My hand against you. Now, My plagues will be directed toward you and your people. When I'm done, all the nations on earth will know I am the Lord!

"Tomorrow I'll send a hailstorm like you've never seen before! All people and animals are to stay under shelters, or they'll die!"

The next day, fierce hail mixed with fire came down and ruined the crops that were in the fields. Yet, the hail didn't fall in the land where the Israelites lived.

Some of the Egyptians did as Moses told them. They put their animals and slaves under shelters. But others didn't, and their livestock and slaves died in the storm.

Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron. "I know I've sinned. I'm wrong and God is right. Please pray and ask Him to stop this storm. I'll let your people go."

Moses said, "This storm will stop as soon as I leave here." He started to leave, then turned to Pharaoh. "I know you don't fear God."

And it was true. As soon as Pharaoh saw the storm and the hail stop, he stubbornly turned against God and the people of Israel.

39 The Passover

Moses

Exodus 10 – 13

Moses went to Pharaoh and said, “If you don’t let the Israelites go, God will send locusts like you have never seen. They’ll cover the land and eat anything that wasn’t destroyed by the hail.”

Pharaoh’s officials begged him, “Please let them go. Egypt is already destroyed!” So Pharaoh said to Moses, “The men may go and worship.”

Moses said, “When we leave, we’ll take everyone with us—men and women, young and old. We’ll also take our animals with us.”

Pharaoh became angry, “Absolutely not!” He then had them thrown out of his court.

The next day Moses stretched out his staff, and the locusts came. Never had such a swarm of locusts invaded Egypt. They ate every green thing on the land. They were everywhere and even invaded the houses.

Pharaoh quickly called for Moses. He said, “I’m sorry for my sin. Please ask God to take the locusts away.” Moses prayed to God, and a wind carried the locusts into the Red Sea. Not one remained. When they were gone, Pharaoh again turned against God and the Israelites.

God then told Moses to stretch his hand toward the sky. When he did, darkness covered the land of Egypt. It was so thick, the people could feel it, and they couldn’t see anything. It lasted for three days. Still, the Israelites had light in their homes.

Pharaoh called Moses to him and said, “I’ll allow your people to go worship in the desert, but leave your flocks and herds.”

Moses shook his head. “No! We’ll take everyone and everything, including the animals.”

Pharaoh once again became angry. “I’m not letting the people go. Now get out of here and don’t ever come back! Mark my word. If I ever see your face again, you’ll die!”

The Lord told Moses, “I’ll bring one more plague upon the Egyptians, and then Pharaoh will let the people go. He’ll insist that you leave!

“Give my people these instructions. Each family is to select a one-year-old male lamb with no defects. They are to kill it and smear its blood above the door and on the doorposts. The people are to stay inside their houses. They won’t be safe outside of their houses.

“Roast the meat of the lamb and eat it with your coats and sandals on, as if in a hurry. If it’s too much for one family to eat it all, invite another family to share the lamb.

“At midnight I’ll go throughout the land of Egypt and kill the firstborn of every family—from Pharaoh’s house down to the lowest slave. But when I see the blood on your houses, I’ll pass over you and won’t kill your firstborn.”

The Israelites did exactly as God instructed. That night, the Lord moved across the land of Egypt and killed the firstborn of every household. He even killed the firstborn of their livestock. There was loud crying and screaming in the night, because no household escaped this judgment of God. Yet, the Lord passed over the houses of the Israelites when he saw the blood on their doorposts.

Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron, and yelled at them, “Go! Go! Take your people, take your flocks, and go.”

All the Egyptians wanted the people to go because they were afraid that they might all die! They gave them things made of gold and silver. So the people left, while it was still night.

From that day on, the Israelites were to observe the Lord’s Passover every year. It was to be a reminder of what God did for them that night.

40 Crossing the Red Sea

Moses

Exodus 13:17 – 15:21

God led the Israelites out of Egypt by what appeared to be a pillar of fire. The fire became a pillar of cloud during the day. God didn't lead them straight to Canaan along the most direct route, but took them out into the wilderness toward the Red Sea.

He told Moses to have the people camp at a certain location next to the Sea. He said, "I'm going to make Pharaoh stubborn one more time, and he'll chase after you. After that, the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord."

Pharaoh saw that the Hebrews had gone to the Red Sea, and were hemmed in and vulnerable. He said to his servants, "Why did we let our slaves go? They should be here, serving us." So he took his army and chased after them.

The people of Israel saw this and yelled at Moses. "Why have you brought us here to die? If we were still serving the Egyptians, they would let us live. But now, because of you, we're about to die."

Moses told the people, "Don't be afraid! Watch and see what God is about to do. He'll fight your battle for you. Look at the Egyptians! You'll never see them again after today."

God said to Moses, "Lift your shepherd's staff into the air, and point your hand out over the sea. The people of Israel are going to the other side – on dry ground."

Then the pillar of cloud that was in front of the Israelites moved behind them—between them and the Egyptians. It stayed there the rest of the day and into the night.

Moses pointed his hand toward the sea. And when he did, God caused a strong wind to sweep back the waters, so they formed a wall on the right side and on the left. And then the wind blew on the path between the two walls for the rest of that day and into the night—until the ground became dry.

That night, God told Moses and the Israelites to cross over to the other side, using the path between the walls of water. The people moved across the sea throughout the night.

Once they were across, God allowed the Egyptians to chase after them, using the same path. When they were in the middle of the sea, God caused them to be totally confused, and their chariot wheels started to break.

Suddenly, the Egyptian army saw the seriousness of their situation. They shouted, "Run! The Lord is fighting for the Israelites!" They turned and tried to run for safety.

God said to Moses, "Point your hand out over the water." So Moses pointed his hand toward the sea just as the sun was about to come up. Suddenly the walls of water crashed together, covering the entire Egyptian army. Not one of them survived!

The Israelites watched the power of God from the other side of the sea. And as the sun rose that morning, they saw the dead bodies washed up on the shore. Then the people worshiped the Lord with singing. They had seen the power of God and believed in Him, and they believed in His servant Moses.

41 What Is It?

Moses

Exodus 15:22 – 16:36

The people of Israel walked through the Red Sea on dry ground. Then God killed the Egyptian army when they tried to cross. From there, Moses led the people into the wilderness, toward Mount Sinai. They traveled for three days without finding water. They finally came to a pool, but it was undrinkable. The people complained and said, “What are we going to drink?”

The Lord said to Moses, “Cut down that small tree and throw it into the water.” Moses threw the tree into the water, and instantly the water was drinkable.

God said, “If you obey me and follow my commandments, you won’t be sick like the Egyptians. I am the Lord who heals you.

From there, the Israelites went and camped at a place that had twelve springs. They stayed there a little over a month, and then left and headed toward Mount Sinai.

As they traveled, they started complaining, “We should’ve died in Egypt. Yes, we were slaves, but at least we had plenty of food to eat. Every night we had a pot of meat and all the bread we wanted. Here we have nothing.”

The Lord said to Moses, “I’m going to rain bread from heaven for the people. But I’ll use this to see if they’ll follow my instructions.”

Moses said to the people, “You’re not complaining against me and Aaron. You’re

complaining against the Lord. Still, He’s heard you. Tonight you’ll have meat, and in the morning you’ll have bread.”

That evening, a flock of quail came and landed in the camp. This provided meat for the people to eat. In the morning, they saw that the ground was covered with heavy dew. When it evaporated, there was something on the ground that looked like frost. The people went and looked at it. They said, “What is it?” They tasted it and it was like a light wafer, sweetened with honey.

Moses said, “God will provide this bread from heaven six days out of every week. For the first five days, you’re to gather only enough for one day. On the sixth day, you may gather enough for two days. In this way, you’ll have food to eat on the Sabbath. It won’t appear on the Sabbath.

Some of the people disobeyed God’s instructions and gathered more than one day’s worth. The next morning it stunk and was full of maggots. This didn’t happen when they gathered more on the sixth day. It was still good to eat on the Sabbath. Some of the people went out to gather bread on the Sabbath, but found that there was none.

The people called the bread manna, which means, “What is it?” God provided manna for them for the entire forty years they were in the wilderness.

42 The Lord, My Banner

Moses

Exodus 17 – 18

As the people of Israel continued to move toward Mount Sinai, they camped at a place that had no water. They once again complained to Moses, “Why did you bring us here to die? At least in Egypt we had water. Is the Lord really with us?”

Moses yelled at the Lord, “What am I to do with these people! I bring them here, and now they’re about to stone me.”

The Lord said to Moses, “Take your staff and stand in front of the people. Have some of the elders with you. I’ll stand in front of the rock. Hit the rock and water will come out so the people can drink.”

Moses did as the Lord commanded and hit the rock. Water gushed out. It was enough for all the people and the livestock.

While they were at that same location, the people of Amalek attacked them. Moses told Joshua to organize the men for battle. Moses then stood on the side of the hill and held his hands in the air. As long as his hands were high in the air, Joshua was victorious. But when his hands came down, the people of Amalek started winning.

Moses’ arms became tired and heavy, so he sat on a stone with Aaron and Hur on each side. They supported his hands, so he could keep them high in the air. The three men stayed there until the sun went down. Joshua was victorious over Amalek. Moses then built a monument and called it “The Lord, My Banner.”

Jethro was the father-in-law of Moses. He had watched over his daughter and her two sons while Moses was in Egypt. He brought them back once the Israelites camped at Mt Sinai.

Moses went out to greet his family. He told Jethro about what the Lord had done for the

people of Israel—how God’s hand was against Pharaoh and the Egyptians. He also shared some of their hardships, and how the Lord delivered them. Jethro then led the people in a sacrifice to God.

The next day, Moses sat down to do his work as a judge for the people. Jethro watched as people came with every dispute they had, great and small. It was up to Moses to decide who was right in each case. This went on all day. As he was judging, Moses was also teaching God’s laws to the people.

That evening Jethro said, “What you’re doing isn’t good. You’re wearing yourself down, as well as the people. You need to realize that this is too big of a job for one man to handle. Here is some advice, and I believe it’s God’s will for you.

“It’s your job to teach the people about the Lord and his commandments. You’re also to represent their needs to God. You must keep yourself free to do this.

“So, select some good men who fear God. Make sure they don’t take bribes. If they do, the people won’t trust them. Place them at different levels over one another. Their full-time job should be judging the people.

“They’re to deal with everyday problems, while bringing the more difficult conflicts to you. The people will be happy with this, but mainly it frees you to do God’s will.”

Moses listened to this advice, and followed it. He chose qualified men, and placed them at different levels of responsibility. These men devoted themselves to their new task. Still, all the difficult cases were brought to Moses.

After all of this was done, Moses said goodbye to his father-in-law, and Jethro went home.

43 The Law

Moses

Exodus 19 – 20 & 24

The Israelites came to Mount Sinai three months after they left Egypt. They set up camp at the base, and Moses went up the mountain to talk with God. The Lord said, “Tell the people, ‘If you obey me and keep my commandments, then you’ll be my treasured possession. You’ll be my holy people among all the nations.’”

When Moses told this to the people, they all agreed and said, “We’ll do everything God says!”

So Moses went back up the mountain and told God that the people agreed to his conditions. Then the Lord said, “I want them to hear me talking to you so they’ll always trust you. Tell them to spend three days cleansing their hearts and washing their clothes. Then I’ll come down on the mountain and talk to them.”

So the people did as they were told. They washed their clothes and dedicated themselves to the Lord. Suddenly, on the third day, the mountain burned with fire. The ground shook, and a cloud covered the entire mountain. There was thunder and lightning, and the people heard what sounded like trumpets that grew louder and louder.

Then God said, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt with a mighty hand!

You’re not to worship other gods.

You’re not to make idols of any kind.

You’re to keep my name holy and not misuse it.

You’re not to work on the seventh day, but instead, keep it holy.

Honor your parents and you’ll live long upon the earth.

You’re not to murder.

You’re not to commit adultery.

You’re not to steal.

You’re not to lie to others or about others.

You’re not to desire to have anything that belongs to someone else.”

The people cried out, “Tell God to stop talking to us. We’ll die if he keeps talking! Let him talk to you, and then you tell us what he said. We’ll listen to you.”

Moses said, “Don’t be afraid. God wants you to stand in awe of him, so you’ll stay away from sin.” Then Moses went up the mountain to talk with God.

God gave him detailed instructions on how the people were to live their lives and how they were to treat one another. God told how to offer sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. He also gave instructions on how to build the Ark of God, so he could live among his people. Finally, God gave Moses two tablets of stone with his laws written by the finger of God.

44 The Golden Calf

Moses

Exodus 32

Moses stayed with God for forty days and forty nights. The people grew restless, and finally they went to Aaron and said, “We don’t know what’s happened to Moses. Make us a god we can see, one that will be with us.”

So they gave Aaron their gold earrings, and he melted them down. He then formed the gold into the shape of a calf. The people were happy with this and said, “This is the god who brought us out of Egypt!” They sacrificed to it and had a feast. Afterwards they celebrated with a wild party.

On the mountain, God said to Moses, “Go down to your people, the ones you brought out of Egypt. They’ve corrupted themselves and turned away from what I told them to do. They’ve made an idol and bowed down to it with sacrifices. Step aside and don’t stop Me. I’ll destroy them and make your descendants into a great nation.”

Moses pleaded with God, “Don’t be so angry with your people, the ones you brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand. If you destroy them now, the Egyptians will laugh and say you brought them here to kill them. Remember your promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. You said their descendants would inherit the land, and become as numerous as the stars in the sky.” So the Lord listened to Moses and didn’t destroy the people.

Moses then went down the mountain with the two stone tablets God had given him. He got angry when he saw the calf and the dancing. He threw the two tablets down and shattered them on the ground. He burned the golden calf in the fire, ground it to powder, put it in water, and made the Israelites drink it.

Then Moses said to Aaron, “Why did you make this golden calf? Look at the people! See how it has caused them to go into deep sin.”

Aaron said, “Please don’t be angry with me. You know how wicked these people are. They said, ‘Make us a god.’ I told them to give me their gold. I threw it into the fire and ... out came this calf!”

Moses then stood at the gate of the camp. He saw how the people were still out of control. He shouted, “Those who are on the Lord’s side, come and stand with me!” The sons of Levi separated themselves from the rest of the people and stood with Moses. The Lord then commanded them to strap on their swords and fight against those who refused to stand with Moses. Three thousand men died that day.

Afterwards, Moses called the people together and said, “You have committed a great sin. I’ll go before the Lord, and maybe I can make an atonement for you.” With that, he went back up the mountain.

45 The Tabernacle

Moses

Exodus 33–40

Because the people of Israel had worshipped the golden calf, Moses went up the mountain and begged the Lord to forgive them. He said, “O Lord, your people have sinned against you. If you will forgive their sins ...” He couldn’t continue, but finally said, “If you can’t forgive them, blot me out of your book.”

The Lord said, “I’m not blotting your name out of my book, but I will blot out the names of the people who sinned against me.” Then God struck the people with a plague and many died.

After that, the Lord told Moses, “Lead your people to the land I promised them. I won’t go with you, but I’ll send my angel to guide you. If I lived among these obstinate people for even a moment, I’d destroy them.”

Moses went down and told the people that God wouldn’t live among them. The people broke down and cried. They grieved that their sin had cost them so much.

Moses went outside the camp and set up a meeting tent so he could talk with the Lord. As the people watched, the cloud of God came down and stood in front of the tent. There, Moses and God talked.

Moses said, “If I’m your friend, and if you’re pleased with me, then live among us. We want you to lead us. If you refuse, then we’ll stay here. Don’t make us leave. Without you among us, we’re no different from anyone else!”

The Lord replied, “You’re my friend, and I’m pleased with you. Therefore, I’ll do as you have asked.”

Then the Lord told Moses to cut out two more stone tablets and bring them up the mountain. Once there, the Lord said, “This is my agreement with you and your people. I’ll force the people out of Canaan with great miracles,

but you must obey my commandments.”

Moses stayed on the mountain and wrote down all the laws and commandments of God. He also wrote the Ten Commandments on the two tablets of stone. He was there for forty days and forty nights, and didn’t eat bread or drink water.

Afterwards, he went back to the people with God’s commands. He didn’t realize his face was glowing because of all the time he had spent with the Lord. This made the Israelites afraid, so Moses wore a veil when he talked to the people. He told them all the commandments the Lord had given him.

He said, “It’s time to build the Tabernacle, God’s dwelling place. Therefore, those who are willing to give an offering to the Lord are to bring gold, silver, bronze, special yarn, fine linen, animal skins, woods, oils, spices, stones, and gems. We need skilled craftsman who will dedicate themselves to build the Tabernacle, the tent that will surround it, and the furniture inside.”

The next day, people started bringing the things needed to build the Tabernacle. Skilled craftsmen came to do the work. Day after day, the people brought their gifts until finally Moses sent out word, “Stop bringing offerings. There is more than enough!”

The people were careful to build the tabernacle exactly as God had told Moses. It was finished exactly two years after they left Egypt—to the very day. Moses inspected the work and found they had done just as the Lord had commanded, so he blessed them.

Then a cloud came and hovered over the tent. As the people watched, the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. So from that day on, in all of their travels, the Lord was with them.

46 Unholy Fire

Moses

Leviticus 10:1-7 & Numbers 9 – 11:3

God gave exact instructions to the people of Israel for how they were to worship him. Aaron, the brother of Moses, was chosen to be the high priest, and his sons were to serve with him. When Aaron would eventually die, they would replace him as high priest.

The congregation gathered at the Tabernacle for the ordination of these men. Moses anointed them with oil and made sacrifices to the Lord. He told Aaron and his sons that their ordination would last for seven days, and they were not to leave the Tabernacle until it was over.

Aaron's oldest two sons were Nadab and Abihu. During this time of ordination, they decided on their own to burn incense before the Lord. But they hadn't yet been told how to do that. So they didn't know they were to use live coals from the altar. Since they didn't know that, they put coals from a common fire into their censers.

As soon as they came into the presence of the Lord, fire blazed out and killed both men.

Everyone was shocked, but nothing could be said. Moses had some men take the bodies out of the camp. He told Aaron and his other sons that they had to continue with the ordination since they had already been

anointed with oil before the Lord.

This meant that they couldn't properly mourn their loss. So the rest of Israel mourned the death of the two men, while their father and brothers continued at the Tabernacle.

On the second anniversary of leaving Egypt, the people of Israel celebrated Passover. They were still at Mount Sinai.

A cloud hovered over the Tabernacle during the day, and it looked like fire at night. God had told them that as long as the cloud hovered there, they were to stay where they were. But if the cloud lifted, they knew it was time to continue their travels.

One month later, after celebrating Passover, it was time for them to move toward the land of Canaan. As the people watched, the cloud lifted and they set out from the mountain of God. They traveled toward the place where they were to enter the land of Canaan.

Within a short time, the people started complaining openly about their hardships. This made the Lord angry and he sent a fire among them, especially around the edges of the camp. Many people died. So the others ran to Moses for help. He prayed for them and the fire stopped. They named that place "Burning."

47 Graves of the Craving

Moses

Numbers 11:4-35

As the people of Israel traveled toward Canaan, they started complaining about the food. They said, “All we have to eat is this manna. We miss the meat and the fish and the vegetables we had in Egypt.” The grumbling spread from family to family, until Moses could hear it from every tent.

In frustration he prayed, “Lord, what have I done to deserve this heartache? Why have you done this to me? I didn’t give birth to these people, so why do I have to nurse them? I can’t take it any more! If this is what you want for me, then kill me right now.”

The Lord said to Moses, “Choose seventy leaders from the people and bring them to me. I will take some of the Spirit that is on you, and put it on them. They’ll help you bear the burden of the people.”

He also said, “Tell the people to prepare themselves. Tomorrow they’ll have meat to eat. They keep craving, longing for Egypt, so they’ll eat meat until they’re totally sick of it.”

Moses went and told the people this, and then he called the seventy leaders to come before the Lord. When they arrived, only 68 men were there. Two of them were still back in the camp.

The Lord took some of the Spirit that was

on Moses and put it on the seventy men—all of them. Immediately, the men started prophesying, even the two who were still in the camp.

Joshua said to Moses, “Tell those two men to stop!”

Moses said, “Oh, Joshua, don’t be jealous for me. I wish that God’s Spirit would fall on all his people.”

The next day, the Lord sent a wind that blew quail in from the sea. They dropped down to about three feet off the ground, and covered an area in all directions as far as a man could walk in a day.

People went out and caught them. They worked all day and into the night. The person who gathered the smallest amount of quail, still gathered thirty-three bushels full. Every family was able to get a large amount of meat for their family.

Still, God was angry with them because they longed for Egypt and wouldn’t trust his care for them. So, as the people were eating the meat—while it was still between their teeth—God struck them with a plague. Many died at that place and were buried there. So the people called it, “Graves of the Craving.”

48 Spitting in Her Face

Moses

Numbers 12

Miriam was the sister of Moses and Aaron. One day, she and Moses' wife had a disagreement. Because of this, Miriam and Aaron started criticizing Moses, calling his wife an Arabian woman—a Cushite!

They said, "Moses isn't the only one that God speaks through. He also speaks through us."

The Lord heard this complaint and knew that Moses was a quiet and humble man. Suddenly God said, "Moses, Aaron, Miriam—Come to the Tent of Meetings!"

Once they were there, the cloud of God came down and stood like a pillar before them. He said, "Aaron and Miriam, step forward."

Once they did, the Lord said, "When I talk to you or one of the prophets within the camp, I speak in dreams and visions. But that's not the way I talk to Moses. He and I come together as family members and talk openly. We look at one

another and speak in plain language. How dare you talk against my servant Moses!"

With that, God then turned away from them in anger and left. Aaron looked at Miriam and saw that her skin was white with leprosy. He cried out to Moses. "Please, my lord, don't punish us for our foolish talking. Please don't let your sister be like a baby who is born dead—whose flesh is rotting away."

Moses cried out to God, "Oh, my Lord! Please heal my sister."

God said, "I'll heal her. Still, if her father spit in her face, she would live in disgrace for seven days. So she is to stay outside of the camp for seven days."

So Miriam was taken outside the camp and she stayed there for seven days. The people of Israel remained at that location until Miriam was allowed back in the camp. They then moved to the place where they were to enter into the land of Canaan.

49 Twelve Spies

Moses

Numbers 13 – 14

When the Israelites arrived at the border of Canaan, God said to Moses, “Send twelve men to search out the land.” So Moses selected one man from each tribe of Israel. He told them to go into the land and bring back information about the people and their cities. He also told them to bring back some of the fruit that was growing in the land.

The men stayed in Canaan for forty days. When they came back, two of them were carrying a large cluster of grapes on a pole between them.

When the men gave their report, ten of the men said, “It’s true, the land is great and flows with milk and honey. But, the people are big and powerful and live in cities with high walls.”

The other two men were Caleb and Joshua. They gave a different report. They said, “We must go up and take this land. We can do it!”

The other ten yelled, “No, we can’t attack these people! They are stronger than we are. We felt like grasshoppers next to them!”

The Israelites were afraid when they heard this report. They turned against Moses and said, “Did God bring us here to be killed? We could’ve died in Egypt! The men of this land will kill us and make slaves of our wives and children. We’re going to select a new leader and go back to Egypt.”

Joshua and Caleb ran out in front of the people and tore their clothes. They cried out, “This land is very good, and the Lord is about to give it to us! Don’t rebel against him because you’re afraid. The Lord is with us. We’ll swallow up these people!”

The people of Israel attacked Joshua and Caleb, but suddenly the glory of the Lord

appeared at the Tabernacle. God said to Moses, “How long will these people refuse to believe in me? They saw the wonders I did in Egypt. They saw the many miracles I did among them. Yet they still test me.

“Therefore these people won’t see the land I promised their fathers. I’m sending them back into the wilderness, and they’ll stay there for forty years until they’re all dead. Everyone who is twenty years old or older will not see the land, except for my servants Caleb and Joshua. They’ll go into Canaan because they followed me without hesitation. Since these people worried about their children, I’ll take their children into the land of Canaan, and give it to them.”

Moses told the Israelites what the Lord had said, and they broke down and cried. The ten men who brought back a bad report were suddenly stuck by a plague and died. Early the next morning the people said, “We now realize we’ve sinned. We’ll go into the land as the Lord commanded.”

Moses said, “No! The Lord is sending you back into the wilderness. Don’t disobey him again. If you go into the land, you’ll be defeated because God is not going with you.”

Nevertheless, they went into Canaan against God’s will. And just like Moses said, they were defeated in battle. Many were killed and the rest came back in disgrace.

So the people of Israel turned back into the wilderness where they remained for the next forty years. All of the adults who came out of Egypt would die there. Still, the Lord was with them and met their needs. Their clothes and shoes didn’t get old, and God provided their daily food.

50 Korah's Rebellion

Moses

Numbers 16 – 17

As Israel went back into the wilderness, four men decided to set things straight concerning Moses and Aaron. The leader was Korah, from the tribe of Levi. They formed a group of two hundred fifty prominent men and went to Moses. They said, "You've taken your authority too far. We're a holy nation. The Lord is with all of us. Things don't have to always go through you."

Moses said to Korah, "I know what this is about. The Levites have been chosen to do the Lord's service. Now you want the priesthood as well. God has chosen the family of Aaron, so you are in rebellion against God. Tomorrow, all of us will stand before the Lord holding censers filled with fire and incense. The Lord will choose who he wants to lead the people."

Two of the organizers said, "We're not coming! You've brought us back into the wilderness to die. Now you're telling us what to do like a king. So, we won't be there!"

This made Moses angry. He said to the Lord, "I've never mistreated these people. I haven't taken anything from them. Yet, they hate me."

The next day, Moses, Aaron, and all two hundred fifty men stood before the Lord with their censers filled with fire and incense. The entire congregation was there to watch.

The glory of the Lord appeared, and God said to Moses and Aaron, "Step out of the way. I'm going to destroy the entire congregation."

Moses fell down and begged, "Oh, God, don't punish everyone for what a few people have done."

God said, "Tell the people to move away from the tents of the men who refused to come to this meeting." So everyone moved away from those tents. The two men came out and stood next to the door of their tents, along with their wives, children, and babies. Korah went and stood with them.

Moses spoke to the congregation. "If these men grow old and die a natural death, then you'll know that the Lord didn't send me to do these things. But if something unusual happens to them, you'll know they were speaking

against God."

Suddenly, the earth opened, and these men and their families fell into the hole. The ground closed up around them as if the earth swallowed them. People screamed and ran thinking they might be swallowed as well. Then fire came and killed all two hundred fifty men who were holding censers with incense.

The Lord said to Moses, "Collect all two hundred fifty censers from among the men's ashes. Hammer them into plating and use it to overlay the altar. This will remind the people that the priesthood is only for Aaron and his descendants."

Even with all of this, the people were still talking about the priesthood the next day. A crowd gathered around Moses and Aaron to talk about the people who died. They said, "You killed God's people."

Moses turned and saw that God's anger was hot against the crowd. He said to Aaron, "Quick, go get a censer and fill it with incense and fire. Run among the people and make atonement for their sins. God's anger is flowing out, and he's striking them with a plague." As Aaron did this, he saw that the plague had started. He made atonement for the people, standing between the dead and those who were alive. The plague stopped, but 14,700 died that day.

To solve the issue of the priesthood, the Lord said to Moses, "Have each tribe bring a walking stick. Put Aaron's name on Levi's walking stick. Place them in the Tabernacle. I'll make one of them sprout. This will make the people stop complaining about you!"

Moses followed the Lord's instructions. The next day, not only had Aaron's walking stick sprouted, it formed buds, blossomed, and produced almonds! The people saw this and were amazed. From that day, they didn't even want to go near the Tabernacle, in case they would die. Aaron's staff was put back into the Tabernacle for safekeeping.

51 Speak to the Rock

Moses

Numbers 20 – 21

The Israelites travelled to a place where there was no water. The people went to Moses and said, “We wish we would have died with our brothers under God’s hand. You brought us here with many promises, but we don’t see any farms, fig trees, or vineyards. On top of that, there’s no water for us or our livestock.”

The Lord said to Moses, “Gather the people together and stand in front of them with your staff. Speak to the rock, and it will give you water. There will be enough for the people and their livestock.”

So Moses stood in front of the people. He said, “You’re a bunch of rebels. Do I have to provide you water from this rock?” With that, he hit the rock two times with his staff. Water came gushing out, and everyone had enough.

But the Lord wasn’t pleased with Moses and Aaron. He said, “You didn’t trust my power. These people saw you disrespect my command. Therefore, you won’t take these people into the land I promised them.”

As the people of Israel moved on, they came to the border of Edom. Moses sent a message to their king asking permission to pass through their land. He assured the king that they wouldn’t disturb anything, and they would pay for any water they drank.

The king refused to let them pass through the land. He even sent his army to their borders and threatened war if the Israelites crossed into their land. So Moses turned away.

Shortly after that, the Lord said to Moses,

“Aaron is about to die. Therefore take the high priest’s garments off of him and put them on Eleazar, his son.”

Moses did this, and Aaron died soon afterwards. The people of Israel mourned his death for thirty days.

As the Israelites moved around Edom, the people started to complain again. They said, “We didn’t have to come here to die. We could’ve done that in Egypt. We have no water, and we hate this awful food!”

So the Lord sent poisonous snakes into the camp. People were bitten, and many died. They rushed to Moses and said, “We’ve sinned! We shouldn’t have spoken against you and the Lord. Please talk to God and ask him to take away these snakes.” So Moses prayed for the people.

The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake out of bronze and put it on a pole. People will be healed from their snake bites if they look at the bronze snake.”

As the people of Israel traveled they came to the border of the Amorites. They sent a message to the king asking if they could travel through his land. They assured him that they would not take anything and would do no harm.

The king of the Amorites refused. Instead, he took his army and attacked Israel. So the people of Israel fought them and totally defeated them. They took over all their cities and lived in them. They controlled all the land right up to the Ammonite border.

52 Balaam's Donkey

Moses

Numbers 22:1-35

The Israelites camped in the valley of Moab, next to the Jordan River across from Jericho.

The king of Moab was a man named Balak. He was terrified when he saw the great mass of people in his valley. He had heard what they'd done to other kings. He said to the Midianites, "These people are more powerful than us. I'm afraid they'll totally destroy us."

Together, the two nations decided to send for Balaam, a prophet who lived in the East, next to the Euphrates River. They sent gifts with a message, "Come quickly. A huge mass of people has come out of Egypt, and they're now in our valley. They're stronger than us, so we want you to curse them so we can defeat them and send them away. We know you're a prophet, and whoever you curse is cursed, and whoever you bless is blessed."

Balaam said, "Stay the night. In the morning I'll tell you what God told me to do."

During the night, God said to Balaam, "Who are these men staying with you?"

"They're from the king of Moab. He says there is a large mass of people come out of Egypt, and he wants me to go and curse them."

The Lord said, "No, you're not to go with them. You're not to curse those people, because they're blessed."

The next morning, Balaam told the delegation, "Go back to your king. The Lord won't let me go with you."

The delegation went back and gave Balak this message. The king then sent a delegation of more important people. Through them he said, "Don't let anything stop you from coming to me. If you'll curse these people, I'll make you a rich man."

Balaam said, "If the king filled my house with gold, I can only say what the Lord tells me to say. Still, stay the night. I'll see if the Lord says something different."

That night, the Lord said to Balaam, "Since these men have come to you a second time, you

may go with them. But, be careful. Only say what I tell you to say." So the next morning, Balaam saddled his donkey, took his two servants, and started on his journey to Moab.

As he traveled along, the Angel of the Lord stood in his path with a sword in his hand. The donkey looked up and saw the angel, so she turned and went into a field. Balaam beat her until she got back on the path.

The angel went down the path and stood at a place where there was a wall on both sides. The donkey looked up and saw the angel with his sword drawn. She pushed up against the wall, trapping Balaam's foot. He beat her again.

The angel went down the path, but this time he stood in a place where there was no room on either side. The donkey looked up and saw the angel, so she lay down under Balaam.

Balaam flew into a rage. He took a stick and started beating his donkey. With that, God allowed the donkey to talk. She said, "Why have you beaten me three times?"

Balaam yelled at her. "Because you've made me look like a fool. If this was a sword instead of a stick, I'd kill you right here on the spot."

The donkey said, "Haven't I served you ever since you were born? Have I ever done this before?"

Balaam said, "No, you never have."

Suddenly, his eyes were opened and he saw the Angel of the Lord standing in the path with his sword drawn. Balaam bowed down before him.

The angel said, "You have beaten your donkey three times. Yet, if it hadn't been for her, I would have killed you and let her live."

Balaam said, "If you don't want me to go to Moab, I'll turn around and go home."

The angel said, "No, you may go. But be careful. Only say the words I give you to say." And with that, Balaam went on to Moab.

53 Balaam's Prophecy

Moses

Numbers 22:36 – 25:18 & 31:7-16

When Balaam arrived in Moab, King Balak said, "What took you so long? I said I'd make you a rich man. Didn't you believe me?"

Balaam said, "I'm here now, but understand. I can only say what God tells me to say."

So Balak took Balaam onto a high cliff overlooking the entire camp of Israel. Balaam had the king build altars to the Lord, and they sacrificed to Him. Balaam told the king to stay there while he went higher up the mountain to see what God wanted him to say. God gave him a message. So he went back to where King Balak and the elders of Moab were waiting.

Balaam looked out over the people and said, "King Balak sent for me. He said, 'Come and curse Jacob. Come and denounce Israel.' But how can I curse those who God doesn't curse. How can I denounce those who God doesn't denounce? I stand on these cliffs and look out over these people. There is no other nation like them. Oh, that I had a privilege of dying like these righteous people die."

King Balak was shocked. "I brought you here to curse these people—not to bless them!"

Balaam said, "I made it clear. I can only say what God tells me to say."

Balak said, "Come with me to a different spot. From there you will only see part of the people. Maybe you'll be able to curse them." They went to the second spot, and again they built altars and sacrificed to the Lord.

Balaam told the king, "Stay here while I go talk to God." The Lord met with Balaam and gave him words to say. He went back and said, "Oh, King Balak, listen carefully to what I am about to say. God isn't like people. He doesn't change his mind. He told me to bless the people because the Lord lives among them. He's their king, and they're happy about that. He brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand. So there isn't a curse for them. They'll be known for the great things God has done for them."

The king said, "If you can't curse them, at

least stop giving them a blessing." Again the king took Balaam to a place where he could see the people. He said, "Try one more time and see if there is a curse for these people."

Balaam once again had an altar built and they sacrificed to the Lord. But he didn't go up the mountain. As he looked across the valley, the Spirit of God came upon him. "Oh, the tents of Israel are beautiful. They're like a garden that has been planted by God. Whoever blesses these people will be blessed. Whoever curses these people will be cursed."

Balak was furious. "I've brought you here to curse these people. Now go home! The Lord has robbed you of the riches I was going to give you."

Balaam said, "I have one more message. Someone is coming. I can't see who it is. He is like a heavenly star. He'll be the King of Israel. He'll have victory over all of his enemies."

With that, Balaam left, and King Balak went back to his place. Later, Balaam went to the king and said, "I can't curse these people, but you can cause God to curse them." And he gave him a plan.

Shortly after that, the women of Moab went down to the camp of Israel. They had sex with the men, and then invited them to a festival for their idols. The men went, and soon they were worshipping the idols.

God was furious! He sent a plague and 24,000 people died. One of the Israelites brought a Midianite woman to his family tent. They walked right past Moses and the elders of Israel. The son of the high priest took a spear and went into the tent. He thrust the spear through them both, killing them on the spot.

With that, God stopped the plague. The Lord then told Moses, "Take your army. Go, kill the Moabites and the Midianites because of what they have done." The Israeli army went out and defeated both nations. Among the dead was the body of Balaam because of the advice he had given Balak.

54 The Death of Moses

Moses

Numbers 27:12-23 &

Deuteronomy 30 – 34

The Lord said to Moses, “Go up this mountain. There I’ll show you the land I’m giving Israel. You can’t go in with them because of your sin of hitting the rock. But I’ll let you see the land, and after that you’ll die.

Moses said, “Lord, select a man to lead these people—someone who can stand before them and make decisions that will be good for them. If you don’t, they’ll be like sheep without a shepherd.”

God said, “Joshua has the spirit of wisdom in him. Have him stand in front of Eleazar the priest while the entire congregation is watching. Make sure everyone can hear you give him the authority to lead the nation. Tell the people to obey him like they’ve obeyed you. Tell Joshua he should get advice from Eleazar.”

So Moses did as the Lord commanded. He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar and all the people. Moses then laid his hands on Joshua and commissioned him to lead the nation.

He then said to the people, “I have a command for you. It’s well within your ability to obey. If you do, you’ll have life and prosperity. Not obeying it will bring heartaches and death.

“The command is simply this. Love the Lord your God, and do what He says. If you do, He’ll

bless you as you go into the land. If you don’t, He’ll take everything you love away from you.”

“I’m asking heaven and earth to be a witness to what I’m saying. I set before you life and death, blessing and a curse. Therefore choose life. Love the Lord your God. Obey him and be faithful to him, because he is your life.”

Then Moses said to Joshua, “Be strong and courageous. The Lord will be with you and will go before you. Don’t be afraid or discouraged.”

After saying this, Moses went up the mountain, which was across from Jericho. There, God showed him the land of Israel. He was able to see it all, from the north to the south, from the east to the west. The Lord said, “This is the land I promised to give Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I’ve allowed you see it, but you can’t cross over into it.”

So Moses, the servant of the Lord, died, and the Lord buried him in the land of Moab. He was 120 years old when he died. Yet his eyesight was still good, and he was physically fit.

The people cried for thirty days after the death of Moses. There has never been another prophet in Israel like Moses. Yet, God promised the people that some day, a Great Prophet would come who would be like Moses.

Joshua 1 – 3:6

The Lord said to Joshua, “Moses my servant is dead. Now you will lead the people into the land I’ve promised them. I’ll be with you just like I was with Moses.

“So, be strong and full of courage. Obey the instructions I gave Moses. Don’t turn away from them in any way. If you follow those instructions, I’ll be with you in everything you do.”

With that, Joshua started organizing the people for their campaign into Canaan. He started by sending two men across the river to spy on the land. They entered the city of Jericho and stayed at the house of a prostitute named Rahab.

The king of Jericho found out that they were in the city, so he sent a message to Rahab. “Bring out those men who are staying in your house. They’re spies from the people of Israel.”

The men were on her roof, where she had hidden them under bundles of flax. She told the king, “Yes, they were here, but I didn’t know where they came from. Just before dark, they left before the city gates were closed. They didn’t tell me which way they were going, but you should be able to catch them if you hurry.” So the king sent men to chase after them.

Rahab said to the spies, “Everyone here is afraid of you because we know God has given you this land! We heard how the Lord opened up the Red Sea when you left Egypt. Your God is the God of heaven above and the earth below. He’s done great things for you.

“I protected you! Now swear by your God that you’ll show kindness to my family. Spare our lives!”

So the spies said, “We’ll spare you when the Lord gives us your city, but only if you don’t tell the king about us. Tie this scarlet cord in your window. Your family will be safe if they’re in your house. If any one leaves the house, we’re not responsible for what happens to them.”

Rahab’s house was on the city wall, so she put a rope out of her window and helped the men escape. They hid in the hills until the men of Jericho stopped looking for them.

Once it was safe, they went back across the river. They told Joshua everything that had happened. They said, “It’s true! God has given us the land. The people are afraid of us.”

So Joshua led the people toward the Jordan River, where they stayed for three days. On the third day, the leaders of Israel went throughout the camp and told the people, “Break camp tomorrow morning. Then watch the priests. They’re going to pick up the ark of God and move toward the Jordan River. Follow them, because you haven’t gone this way before.

“Tomorrow, the Lord will do amazing things for you. You’ll know that God lives with you and plans to drive out your enemies from before you.”

Joshua told them to select twelve men, one from each tribe, and send them to him. Then he told the priests what they were to do the next day.

56 Crossing Jordan

Joshua

Joshua 3 – 5:12

In the morning, God said to Joshua, “Today, I will exalt you in the eyes of the people—so they’ll know I’m with you just like I was with Moses.”

Joshua told the priests, “Take the Ark of God, and go to the Jordan River.” So the priests carried the Ark of God to the river, which was at flood stage. When they came to the water’s edge, they kept going until the water covered their feet.

Suddenly the river stopped! A wall of water formed ten miles upstream. The rest of it flowed down to the sea. Seeing this, the priests walked to the middle of the riverbed and stood on dry ground. Then the people started moving across the river.

Joshua then said to the twelve men Israel had selected, “Each of you pick up a large stone from where the priests are standing. Put it on your shoulders and take it to the other side of the river.” Joshua then took another twelve stones and built a monument in the middle of the river, next to where the priests were standing.

The people looked at Joshua, and he was exalted in their eyes. They knew God was with him just like he had been with Moses.

When they had all crossed the river, Joshua said to the priests, “Come up from the middle of

the riverbed.” As soon as the priests were on the banks of the river, the waters crashed down the riverbed and returned to its flooded condition, as it had been before.

Joshua took the people to a place called Gilgal, where they set up camp. Then he had them build a memorial with the twelve stones. He said, “In the future, children will see this monument and ask, ‘why are these stones here?’ Their parents will tell them about this day, when God stopped the Jordan River so his people could cross over on dry ground. All the nations of the earth will know that the hand of God, the Lord of all the earth, is powerful.”

The people of Canaan heard how God stopped the Jordan River so the people of Israel could cross over on dry ground. Terror spread throughout the cities of the land.

Joshua told all the men of Israel they had to be circumcised. This hadn’t been done for the entire 40 years the people had been in the wilderness.

Soon after this, the people celebrated Passover. The very next day, the manna stopped appearing and it never came back. From that day on, the people were to eat the food from the land of Canaan.

57 Jericho

Joshua

Joshua 5:13-6:27

While the people were still at Gilgal, Joshua looked toward Jericho and saw a man standing nearby with a sword in his hand. Joshua walked toward him and asked, “Are you for us, or for our enemies?”

The man said, “I am captain of the Lord’s army. I’ve just arrived.”

Joshua fell down and worshiped. The captain said, “Take off your shoes because you’re on holy ground.”

The Lord said to Joshua, “I’ve given you Jericho, its king, and its army.” He then gave exact orders on how Jericho was to be conquered.

When the day arrived, Joshua arranged the people. He had part of the army take the lead. Behind them, he put seven priests who were to blow ram’s-horn trumpets. The Ark of God was behind them. The rest of the army followed the Ark. Joshua told the people, “Don’t say one word as you march around the city.”

As they marched around the city, the priests blew the trumpets, but the people were silent. Once they had circled the city, they returned to their camp and spent the night.

They did the same thing the second day and the third. They repeated this march around the city for six days.

Early on the seventh day, Joshua told the people to follow the same procedure, except on this day they were to circle the city seven times. He said, “After we have marched around the city seven times, I will tell you to shout. The Lord

will then give you the city. All the people and animals in the city are to die, except Rahab and her family.

“You’re to burn everything, except the gold, silver, and things made of bronze and iron. These are to be set aside for the Lord. Be careful! Don’t take anything that is set aside for the Lord, or you will be set aside for destruction.”

So that day the people marched quietly around the city seven times while the priests blew the trumpets. After the seventh time, everyone stopped.

Suddenly the priests blew the trumpets one more time and Joshua yelled, “Shout!” The people shouted, and the walls of the city fell down in front of them. The army of Israel marched straight into the city and destroyed it. The two spies that Rahab had protected immediately went to her house. They brought her and her family out of the city alive. Everyone else in the city was killed and everything was burned, except the gold, silver, and things made of bronze and iron.

Joshua then proclaimed a curse on the city of Jericho. He said, “Any man who rebuilds this city will lose both his firstborn son and his youngest son.”

So the Lord was with Joshua and his fame spread throughout the land.

Rahab and her family were put in a safe place outside of the camp of Israel. Eventually she married an Israelite from the tribe of Judah. In time, they had a son named Boaz.

Before conquering Jericho, Joshua had made it clear to the people, "Be careful! Don't take anything that is set aside for the Lord, or you will be set aside for destruction."

One of the soldiers that went into Jericho that day was a man named Achan. There he saw a bag of silver coins, a bar of gold, and a beautiful coat from Babylon. He took them and hid them inside his tent. This angered the Lord.

After the victory at Jericho, Joshua sent scouts to spy out a city called Ai. They came back and said, "There are only a few people at Ai. We won't need to send our full force there, possibly only two or three thousand men."

So Joshua sent 3,000 men to conquer Ai. To their surprise, the men of the city won the battle! They killed thirty-six Israelites and chased away the rest of them.

The people were horrified at this defeat. Joshua tore his clothes. He and the elders fell down before the Ark of God with their faces to the ground. They put dust on their heads and stayed there all day.

Joshua said, "Oh Lord! Why did you bring us across the river? The Canaanites will hear about this defeat. They'll surround us and wipe us off the earth. Then what will happen to your great name?"

The Lord said, "Get off the ground and stand up! Israel lost today because there's sin in the camp. They disobeyed my command and took what was to be set apart. As long as you have those things, you'll lose every battle because I'll no longer be with you."

The next morning, Joshua had all of Israel stand before him. Each tribe passed in front of him. The Lord selected the tribe of Judah. All the clans of Judah passed in front of him. The Lord selected one of them. All the families of that clan passed in front of him. The Lord selected one of them. From that family, Achan was selected.

Joshua said to him, "Son, what have you done. Don't hide anything from me."

Achan broke down and said, "It's true. I sinned against the Lord. I saw a bag of silver coins, a bar of gold, and a beautiful coat from Babylon. I wanted them, so I took them and hid them in my tent."

Joshua sent men to Achan's tent to get the things he took. He then spread them out before the Lord and all of Israel.

The people then gathered everything that belonged to Achan; his sons and daughters, his livestock, his tent, and the things he took from Jericho. They stoned them until they were dead, and then burnt their bodies. They put a pile of stones on top of their ashes.

The Lord was no longer angry with his people. So he said to Joshua, "Take your entire army and attack Ai. I've given them to you. Once you conquer them, the people may keep whatever they find there."

Joshua sent a group of men out at night. He said, "Go behind the city and hide." He gave them exact instructions of what to do.

The next morning, he sent a troop to fight Ai. The men of the city saw them coming and went out to fight them. In the heat of battle, Israel started to run away, as they had done before. The men of Ai chased after them, leaving the city unprotected.

Once the men were away from the city, the Israelite soldiers came out of hiding and went into Ai and set it on fire. The men of Ai turned and saw their city on fire. They realized they were now between two parts of the Israelite army. They tried to escape, but couldn't. All of them were killed in the battle.

The people were allowed to keep everything they found in the city, including the livestock. Then they destroyed the city.

After all of this, the people sacrificed to the Lord. Afterwards, Joshua read the entire Law to all the people, including the men, the women and the children.

59 Sun Standing Still

Joshua

Joshua 9 – 10

The news of the destruction of Jericho and Ai spread throughout Canaan. Most of the cities formed alliances in order to protect themselves from Israel. But one city decided to do something different.

A group of men from the city of Gibeon dressed up in old clothes and worn-out sandals. They put old sacks on their donkeys, packed stale dry bread, and carried old wineskins.

They went to Joshua and said, “We live far away, but we heard what the Lord your God has done for you. Our elders sent us on this long journey. They said, ‘Go and make a treaty with them.’ Look, we took our bread right out of the oven. It is now dry and stale. The journey was so long that our clothes and sandals have become worn and old.”

The men of Israel looked at their provisions, but didn’t seek guidance from the Lord. So Joshua made a treaty with them. The elders of Israel vowed that the two nations would be allies.

Three days after the treaty, Israel found out that the Gibeonites lived in Canaan, close by. Joshua sent for them and said, “Why did you deceive us?”

They said, “We heard God gave you all of this land. He told Moses to kill everyone who lives here. We feared for our lives, so we deceived you. Now you can do whatever seems right to you. We will accept it.”

Joshua said, “You’ll live because of our promise to you. We can’t touch you, but from

now on, you’re our slaves. You’ll cut wood and carry water for us and you’ll serve the House of the Lord.”

The other kings of the land heard that the people of Gibeon had made peace with Israel. They joined together and marched against their city. The men of Gibeon sent word to Joshua saying, “We’re your slaves. Come quickly and help us!”

So Joshua marched his army through the night and surprised those fighting against Gibeon. They tried to fight back, but the Israelite army was too strong for them. The Lord also sent large hailstones on them, and more people were killed by hail than by the sword.

Joshua needed more time, so he looked up and said, “Sun, stand still over Gibeon!” The Lord heard his command and honored it. The sun stopped moving across the sky. Never in the past, nor since, has there been a day like that.

Five kings ran and hid in a cave, but someone told Joshua. He said, “Roll a stone across the entrance of the cave.” He then stationed men to guard it. Once Israel had sealed their victory, Joshua brought the kings out of the cave. He told his commanders to put their feet on the necks of the kings. He said, “Be strong and courageous. The Lord will do this to all your enemies.” He then executed the five kings.

Joshua led his army from city to city, and the Lord gave him victory wherever he went.

60 Joshua's Farewell

Joshua

Joshua 14, 23, & 24

After Joshua cleared many of the nations out of Canaan, the land was divided among the various tribes. Caleb went to Joshua and said, "I was forty years old when you and I spied out this land. We brought back an honest report, but our brothers put fear in the hearts of the people. You remember, Moses promised that we would inherit the land we saw that day.

"I am now eighty-five years old, but I'm as strong today as I was forty-five years ago. I still go into battle and do my daily chores. Now give me these hills. The Canaanites still live there, but I'll drive them out."

So Joshua gave him the region around Hebron. Caleb organized his people and drove the Canaanites out of each city. When he came to one city, he said, "Whoever conquers this city may marry my daughter."

A man took the challenge and conquered it. So Caleb sent for his daughter. As soon as she arrived, she said to her future husband, "Ask my father for that field. It has a natural spring of water."

She got off her donkey and faced her father. He said, "What do you want?"

"You gave us this city, now give us the spring of water as well." So he gave her what she wanted.

Years later, Joshua knew he was about to die, so he called the people of Israel to come to him. When they were gathered he said, "You have seen all that the Lord has done for you. You have land where your families can live because he fought for you.

"Be strong and continue to obey the Law of Moses. Don't turn away from it. Don't start worshiping the gods of the people who still live

in this land. Instead, remain true to the Lord your God. If you don't, he will take you off this land."

Joshua then reviewed the entire history of Israel. He finished by saying, "God sent hornets ahead of you and drove out the people who lived on this land. He gave you fields you didn't buy, houses you didn't build, and vineyards you didn't plant.

"Choose today who you're going to worship. You can serve the idols your fathers bowed down to. You can worship the gods of the people who live in this land. Or you can worship and serve the Lord who brought you here with his mighty hand. As for me and my family, we'll serve the Lord."

The people said, "We won't worship the gods of this land. We'll remain true to the Lord our God. We've seen his mighty works, so we too will serve the Lord."

Joshua said, "I don't believe you. You'll turn your back on the Lord, so he'll have to destroy you. How could you do that after he's been so good to you?"

The people shouted, "No! We'll worship and serve the Lord."

Joshua said, "You're witnesses to what you've said. These stones are also witnesses to what you've said. Get rid of all the stupid idols and fully trust in the Lord your God."

Soon afterwards, Joshua died at 110 years old. The people worshiped the Lord throughout the time he led them in the land. They also served the Lord throughout the lifetime of the elders who served with Joshua.

But then another generation grew up that didn't know the Lord. They hadn't seen what he had done.

61 Job's Three Friends

Job

Book of Job

Job was a great man of high integrity who feared God and stayed away from evil. He had seven sons and three daughters. He was a rich man with many servants. His livestock included a large number of sheep, camels, oxen, and donkeys.

One day, Satan went to the Lord when all of the angels were there. The Lord said, "So, where have you been?"

"Oh, walking here and there around the earth."

The Lord said, "Have you noticed my servant Job? There is no one else on earth like him. He has high integrity and stays away from evil."

Satan said, "Well, of course he does. He's found that being righteous is a good deal. You protect him and everything he owns. You bless him and give him whatever he wants. But try taking away all his possessions. Then watch what happens. He'll curse you to your face."

The Lord said, "We'll see. I give you permission to take everything he owns, but you can't touch him personally."

Soon afterwards, a servant ran up to Job and said, "Some thugs came and took all your oxen and donkeys. They tried to kill all the servants, and only I escaped. I immediately came to tell you what happened."

While he was still talking, another servant ran up and said, "A huge storm blew in. Lightning struck and killed all your sheep and servants. Only I lived through it, so I ran here to tell you what happened."

While he was still talking, another servant ran up. "An army came and took all your camels and killed the servants. I escaped and came to tell you what happened."

While he was still talking, another servant ran up. "Your sons and daughters were eating together, when suddenly a tornado hit the house and they all died. I'm the only one to live through it. So I came here to tell you what happened."

Job fell down with grief. He tore his clothes and shaved his head. He then bowed his head

and said, "I came into this world naked. I'll leave this life naked. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Praise the name of the Lord!" In spite of all that happened, Job didn't sin or blame God.

Once again, Satan went to the Lord when all of the angels were there. The Lord said, "So, where have you been?"

"Oh, walking here and there around the earth."

The Lord said, "Have you noticed my servant Job? There is no one else on earth like him. He has high integrity and stays away from evil, even after I permitted you, without any reason, to destroy all he had."

"Oh, but you didn't allow me to touch his skin. A man will do anything to save his life. Hit his flesh and bones, and he will curse you to your face."

The Lord said, "We'll see. I give you permission to strike him, but you can't take his life."

Soon afterwards, Job was covered with boils, from head to toe. He sat down in ashes and took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself. His wife said, "How can you go through all this and still keep your integrity? Curse God and die!"

He said, "You're talking foolishness! I'm willing to accept whatever God gives me, good or bad." And so, with all of this, Job didn't sin or blame God.

Three friends of Job heard about what had happened, and went to visit him. They couldn't believe their eyes when they saw him sitting there. They yelled and threw dust in their hair. All three sat down next to Job and didn't say anything for seven days.

Finally Job cried out, "I wish I'd never been born!"

His friends then tried to help him understand what was happening to him. One friend explained that righteous people don't suffer like this, only sinners do. Job agreed with him, but he didn't know of anything he had done to deserve this.

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His second friend was a bit more bold. He said, “Job, you’re a hypocrite! You need to confess your sin, and then God will be merciful.”

Job again held to his innocence. He said, “I remember seeing the righteous suffering, while evildoers were prospering.”

His third friend was the most bold of all. He said, “Job, you’re a liar! You’re a sinful man and deserve God’s judgment.” Now Job became passionate about his innocence.

A young man came along with a different perspective. He wanted to encourage Job. He said “God meant this suffering to be educational. Yes, the Lord is trying to correct your sin, but he’s also restoring you to righteousness.”

Suddenly, God talked to Job. He said, “My

ways are far above what you can understand. My purpose for suffering is an individual matter for each person. Job, listen. I always know what is going on with you, and I’m always with you. I simply want you to come to the end of yourself and totally trust in me.”

The Lord then turned to Job’s friends. “I’m angry with you. All of your advice is false. Only Job spoke the truth.” God told them to make a burnt sacrifice and ask Job to pray for them.

God then restored to Job double of all that he had before. He got twice as many sheep and camels. He got twice as many oxen, and donkeys. God also gave him seven more sons and three more daughters.

Job lived to be an old man. He died at the age of 140 after living a full life.

! Judges 2 – 3

After Joshua died, the people continued to serve God. But eventually, another generation grew up that didn't know the Lord, and they started worshipping Baal.

The Lord was angry with his people, so he allowed a foreign king to come and rule over them for eight years.

The people finally begged God for help, and he had mercy on them. He sent them Othniel to be their judge. The Spirit of the Lord was on him, and he was able to go into battle and kill the foreign king. God delivered his people and they lived in peace for forty years.

After Othniel died, the people of Israel once again made the Lord angry with all of their sin. This time God gave them to Eglon, the king of Moab who was extremely fat. He enlisted the help of other nations, and together they defeated Israel. Moab ruled over the people for eighteen years.

Once again they begged the Lord to have mercy and help them. This time God sent a judge named Ehud, who was left-handed.

When it was time for the people of Israel to send money to king Eglon, Ehud decided to take it to him. He made a double-edged sword that was only eighteen inches long. He strapped it under his clothes on his right side. He took several men with him and presented the money to the king.

After making their presentation to the king, they turned to leave. Ehud then told his men to

go on without him, and he returned to the court. He said, "King Eglon, I have a secret message for you."

The king was pleased so he sent his guards away and took Ehud up the stairs to an enclosed porch where it was cool. There, he sat on his throne.

Ehud said, "The message I am bringing you is from the Lord." The king stood up, and Ehud reached his left hand into his clothes and pulled the sword from his right side. He plunged it into Eglon's stomach. The king's fat closed around it, so Ehud wasn't able to pull it out. As the king fell to the ground, his stomach split open and his insides spilled out.

Ehud went out the door and locked it behind him. When the servants came, they saw that the door was locked, so they assumed that the king had locked it so he could use the toilet.

They waited until they finally realized something was wrong. They found a key and opened the door and found their master dead on the floor.

This delay gave Ehud time to escape. He crossed over the Jordan River and sounded the alarm. The Israelites came ready to fight. He said, "Follow me! The Lord has given us the Moabites."

With Ehud in the lead, they attacked the Moabites, killing over 10,000 warriors. Because of that battle, the Moabites had to serve Israel, and the people lived in peace for eighty years.

63 Deborah and Barak

Judges

Judges 4 – 5

After Ehud died, Israel once again sinned against God. So the Lord sold them to a Canaanite king. This king ruled over them for twenty years. He was harsh and cruel. His army had 900 iron chariots, and his commander's name was Sisera.

The person who judged Israel at the time was a prophet named Deborah. When the people had problems among themselves, they went to a place called the "Palm Tree of Deborah." She would sit there and hear their complaints and then settle their disagreements.

One day she called for a man named Barak and said to him, "The Lord has a message for you. He says, 'Take 10,000 men and go to Mount Tabor. I'll cause Sisera to come to you with his chariots and his army. He'll come to fight you, but I'll give him to you.' "

Barak said to Deborah, "I'll go and do as the Lord says, but only if you go with me. If you don't go, I won't go."

She said, "I'll go with you, but if I do, you won't get the credit for killing Sisera. The Lord will give that honor to a woman." Barak agreed, so Deborah went with him.

Barak gathered 10,000 men and went up Mount Tabor. Sisera heard about this, so he took his 900 chariots and his army and headed toward Mount Tabor. Deborah said to Barak, "Now's the time! Take your men and attack Sisera."

So Barak moved his men down the mountain

and attacked the Canaanite army. The Lord was with him, and caused Sisera's men to be confused. They turned and ran. When Sisera saw this, he left his chariot and tried to escape on foot. Barak chased the army until every man was killed.

Sisera ran until he came to the tent of Jael. Her husband was in alliance with the Canaanite king. She saw Sisera coming, so she went out and said, "Come in here, and you'll be safe."

He went in and she hid him under a rug. He said, "Please, give me water to drink." She gave him milk, and he sat up and drank it. He said, "Stand at the door of the tent. If anyone asks if there is a man in here, tell them 'No.' "

She then covered him again, and since he was exhausted, he fell into a deep sleep.

Jael went and got a tent peg and a hammer. She quietly knelt down next to Sisera and put the tent peg on the temple of his head. Then with solid blows, she nailed it through his head and into the ground.

Soon Barak came by her tent in search of Sisera. She went out and said, "Come and I'll show you the man you're looking for." Barak went into her tent and saw Sisera lying dead on the floor with a tent peg through his temple.

Israel continued to fight the Canaanite king until they were victorious. Then they lived in peace for forty years.

64 Gideon's Fleece

Judges

Judges 6

For seven years, the Midianites came into Israel like a swarm of locusts. They moved across the land, taking everything off it—all the crops and farm animals. They left nothing for the Israelites to eat. The people became desperate and had to find places to hide in mountain caves.

A man named Gideon was also hiding from the Midianites. He had to thresh his wheat in a wine vat instead of an open threshing floor. The Angel of the Lord came and sat under an oak tree nearby. He said, "The Lord is with you, oh mighty warrior."

Gideon said, "Oh my Lord! If God is with us, why is he allowing all these bad things to happen to us? Where are all the wonderful miracles our fathers told us about? God is no longer fighting for us."

The Angel said, "I'm sending you to deliver Israel from the Midianites."

Gideon was shocked. "Lord, how can I deliver Israel? I'm a nobody."

The Lord said, "Yes, but I'll be with you, and you'll have victory."

Gideon said, "Lord, I need a sign that you're really talking to me. Please, stay here while I prepare a sacrifice."

The Lord said. "I stay here until you return."

Gideon rushed off and prepared a sacrifice for him. When it was ready, he put it on a rock. The Angel of the Lord reached over and touched the sacrifice with the tip of his staff. Fire came up from the rock and burnt it up. And then the Lord vanished.

Gideon yelled, "Lord God! I'm about to die! I've seen the Angel of the Lord face to face!"

The Lord said, "Don't be afraid. You're not going to die. Do what I say. Your father has an altar of Baal. Tear it down and build an altar to God. Then offer a burnt offering to the Lord."

Gideon obeyed, but he did it at night. He was afraid of his family and the men who lived in his city.

In the morning, people found Baal's altar torn down. They saw the altar to the Lord built in its place, and the ashes of the burnt offering on top of it. Soon they learned Gideon had done this.

The men of the city went to his father's house and said, "Give us your son! We'll kill him because he tore down Baal's altar."

Gideon's father said to them, "Show me the man who is defending Baal. He'll be dead by morning! If Baal is really a god, let him defend himself."

Once again the Midianites came into Israel and camped in a valley. The Spirit of the Lord filled Gideon, and he sent out messages for people to come, ready to fight.

Then Gideon prayed, "Lord, give me a sign." He then put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor and said to God, "I'll know you'll deliver us if the morning dew is only on the fleece, and all the ground is dry."

He got up early in the morning and found that the fleece was soaking wet, but the ground was dry.

Gideon said, "Lord, don't be angry with me. Allow me one more test. This time let the fleece remain dry, and the dew be all over the ground." In the morning, the fleece was dry, and dew was all over the ground.

65 Three Hundred Men

Judges

Judges 7 – 8

Gideon gathered a troop of 32,000 men. He took them and camped south of the Midianites. The Lord said to Gideon, “You have too many men with you. If I give the Midianites to you now, Israel will say, ‘We won this victory by our own power.’ Tell them, ‘If you’re afraid, go home.’ ”

Gideon said this to the people, and 22,000 people left, leaving 10,000 men.

The Lord said to Gideon, “There are still too many men. Take them down to the water. Watch carefully. Notice those who use their hands to bring the water to their mouth. Separate them from those who kneel down and drink like a dog.”

There were 300 men who drank, using their hands. The Lord said, “I’ll give you victory over the Midianites using these 300 men. Send the rest of them home.” So Gideon sent them home.

Those who were left made camp above where the Midianites were in the valley. The people of Midian were like a swarm of locusts, and their camels were like the sand by the sea.

That night the Lord said to Gideon, “Sneak into the Midianite camp. If you’re afraid, take your servant with you. Listen to what the soldiers say.” So Gideon took his servant and went into the Midianite camp.

He heard a man telling a friend about a dream. He said, “I saw a loaf of bread rolling into our camp. It struck a tent and totally destroyed it.”

His friend answered: “I know what it means. That loaf of bread is the sword of Gideon the Israelite. God has handed the entire Midianite

camp over to him.”

Gideon returned to Israel’s camp and said, “Get up, for the Lord has given the Midianites to you.” He divided the 300 men into three companies of 100. He gave each man a trumpet and a jar with a torch inside it.

He said, “Watch me and follow my lead. When we’re all at the edge of their camp, our group will blow our trumpets. You’re to do the same. Everyone shout, ‘The sword of the Lord and Gideon!’ ”

Then he placed them on three sides of the camp. When they were all in place, Gideon’s group blew their trumpets and broke the jars. The other two groups did the same. They held their torches in their left hands, their trumpets in their right hands, and shouted, “The sword of the Lord and Gideon!”

This totally shocked the Midianite army! They panicked and started to run, yelling as they ran. Gideon’s men blew their 300 trumpets. With this, the Midianite soldiers drew their swords and started killing one another.

Gideon then sent for the rest of the men of Israel. Together they ran after the Midianites as they tried to leave Israel. God gave a great victory that day over Midian, and they were no longer a threat to Israel.

After the battle, the people wanted to make Gideon their king, but he refused. He simply went back to live at his house. Then Israel was at peace for forty years.

66 King of the Trees

Judges

Judges 9

Gideon and his many wives produced seventy sons. He also had a son by a concubine in the town of Shechem. His name was Abimelech.

After the death of Gideon, Abimelech went to his uncles in Shechem. He said, “Talk to the officials of the city and say, ‘Do you want the seventy sons of Gideon to rule over you? Instead of them, select me. I’m a son of Gideon, but I’m also your blood relative.’ ”

The men of Shechem agreed to make him king of Israel. They gave him seventy silver coins from the Temple of Baal.

With this, he hired a gang of thugs as his private army. The first thing they did was to kill the seventy sons of Gideon. But they missed one—the youngest—a man named Jotham.

The men of Shechem had a celebration to honor Abimelech. Suddenly they heard yelling off in the distance. It was Jotham. “Listen to me! The trees decided to have a king. They went to the olive tree and said, ‘Be our king.’ The olive tree said, ‘I don’t have time for such foolishness. I produce precious oil that honors God and man.’

“So they went to the fig tree and said, ‘Be our king.’ The fig tree said, ‘I don’t have time for such foolishness. I produce sweet fruit that’s enjoyed by everyone.’

“They went to the grapevine and said, ‘Be our king.’ The grapevine said, ‘I don’t have time for such foolishness. I produce wine that brings happiness to people.’

“Finally the trees went to the thorn bush. They said, ‘Be our king.’ The thorn bush said, ‘Yes, I’ll be your king. But from now on, you’re under my shade of protection. If any of you rebel, fire will come from my thorns and burn you to ashes.’

“My father risked his life for you. And how did you reward him? You killed his sons! Now you’ve made the son of a slave girl your king.

“If this is right, I wish you well. But if it’s wrong, I ask that fire come from Abimelech and burn you up.” He then ran for his life because he knew his half-brother would try to hunt him down.

Abimelech ruled over Israel for three years. Then God put a bad spirit between him and the men of Shechem. This was to bring justice for what they did to the sons of Gideon.

The men started a rebellion against the king they had set up. At one point, they threw a big party and got drunk. They started cursing Abimelech and bragging about how they were going to overthrow him.

The mayor of the city became angry at this talk and sent for Abimelech. The mayor agreed to help his army ambush the men of Shechem.

That night, Abimelech put his men in hiding outside of the city so he could attack in the morning. At sunrise, one of the men of Shechem stood at the gate with the mayor. Suddenly he saw some movement. He said, “Look! What is that? Is it men coming to attack us?”

The mayor said, “No. That’s only shadows from the mountain.”

A few moments later, the man saw several units of men coming at the city. He ran back into the city and yelled, “We’re under attack!”

The battle lasted several days. Finally the city was captured and the people escaped to a tower. Abimelech and his men put tree branches around the tower and burned it down. Over 1,000 men and women died there that day. Jotham’s curse on the men of Shechem had come true.

Abimelech completely destroyed the city and tore it down. He spread salt over it so nothing could grow there.

When that was done, he and his men went to destroy another rebellious city. Again the people escaped to a tower. Abimelech and his men went and got wood so they could set it on fire. As they were putting it in place, a woman looked down and saw Abimelech directly beneath her. So she dropped a piece of a millstone down on his head.

Abimelech called for one of his soldiers. “Quick, kill me with your sword! I don’t want to be known as the man who was killed by a woman!

67 Jephthah's Vow

Judges

Judges 10:6 – 11:40

Jephthah's mother was a prostitute, but his father was a prominent man in Israel. Jephthah was raised in his father's house, but when his half-brothers were old enough they said, "Get out! You're not a son of our mother, and you're not going to inherit anything from our father."

So Jephthah left the area. He became a great warrior and organized a gang of thugs.

During this time, the people of Israel once again rebelled against the Lord and started worshiping other gods. God allowed the Ammonites to conquer them. The Ammonites were extremely cruel, and Israel suffered under their cruelty for eighteen years.

The people cried out to the Lord and said, "Deliver us!"

The Lord said, "No! I won't do it. I've delivered you over and over. I won't do it again. Go call on your idols to deliver you."

So the Israelites got rid of their false gods and started worshiping the Lord. They said, "Do what you want with us. We know we've sinned. But please, get us out of this mess!" With that, God once again had mercy on them.

The Ammonites moved into the land to fight against Israel. The Israelites went out to meet them, but they didn't have a leader. They sent for Jephthah and said to him, "Come and lead our troops into battle against the Ammonites."

He sent a message back saying, "You're the same people who kicked me out! Now you're coming to me for help?"

They said, "It's true. We did that, but if you'll come and give us victory, you'll be our leader.

Listen, the Lord is our witness. We will do as we've said."

So the Spirit of God came upon Jephthah, and he led the people into battle. He made a vow before the Lord and said, "Oh God, if you'll give me victory over the Ammonites, when I go home I'll give you the first thing that comes out of my house. I'll sacrifice it to you as a burnt offering."

The Lord gave Jephthah victory. He totally turned the Ammonite army away and even destroyed twenty of their cities.

Jephthah only had one child, a daughter. When he went home, she came dancing out to him. She was so proud of his victory. When Jephthah saw her, he ripped his clothes and fell down. He cried, "Oh my daughter! What have I done! I've made a vow to God, and I can't take it back."

She said, "Father, you must keep your word to the Lord. He kept his part of the bargain by giving you a great victory. Now you must keep yours. I just ask one thing. Since I'll never marry, allow me to go to the hills with my friends for two months. Together, we'll mourn the fact that I'll never marry."

Her father agreed, so she and her girlfriends went to the hills. For two months, they mourned the fact that she'd never be intimate with a man and have the joy of nursing children.

She then went back home, and Jephthah fulfilled his vow. After that, it became a custom in Israel. Every year, young women went out and spent four days remembering the daughter of Jephthah.

68 The Birth of Samson

Judges

Judges 13

There was a man from the tribe of Dan whose wife couldn't have children. This was during the time when the Philistines had taken control of Israel. The angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said, "Soon you'll become pregnant. The child you'll be carrying is going to have the vow of a Nazirite from the time he's born. So be careful. Don't drink alcohol or eat anything that is against the Law of Moses. And never cut your son's hair. He will save Israel from the Philistines."

The woman didn't realize she was talking to the angel of the Lord. She ran to her husband and said, "A man of God came and told me that you and I are going to have a baby. He told me not to drink any alcohol or eat anything that is against the Law of Moses. I'm not to cut his hair because our son is going to keep the Nazirite vow from birth."

Her husband immediately prayed and asked God if he would once again send the man of God to them. He wanted more instruction on exactly what they were to do when the child was born.

Later, the woman was sitting in the field, suddenly the angel of the Lord appeared to her again. She quickly ran and got her husband. She said, "That same man of God is out in the field."

The husband ran to meet him. He said, "Are

you the man who talked to my wife?"

"Yes, I am."

The angel then gave him the same instructions he had given the woman. The man said, "Please stay here as we prepare a meal for you."

The angel said, "I'll stay, but I won't eat a meal with you. Instead, present a burnt offering to God."

The man and his wife still didn't know they were talking to the angel of the Lord. The man said, "What's your name? We want to honor you when all you say comes true."

The angel said, "I'm not going to tell you my name. It is too wonderful for you."

So the man prepared a burnt offering and sacrificed it on a rock. The flames rose up into the sky. Suddenly, as the man and his wife watched, the angel of the Lord went up into the flames.

The couple immediately fell to the ground. The man said, "We're going to die! We've seen God!!"

The woman said, "I don't think we're going to die. He accepted our burnt offering. Besides he said we were going to have a baby."

The woman followed the instructions she was given, and at the appointed time, she gave birth to a baby boy. They named him Samson.

69 Strong and Sweet

Judges

Judges 14

When Samson was a young man, he saw a particular Philistine woman. He went to his parents and said, "Arrange a marriage between me and that woman."

They were shocked. "The Philistines are pagan. You need to find a woman from the people of Israel."

"No. She is the one I want. Go make the arrangements." His parents didn't know that the Lord wanted this to happen in order to cause an offense against the Philistines.

Samson and his father went to make the final arrangements. Along the way, Samson stepped off the path by himself. Suddenly a young lion attacked him. The Spirit of God filled Samson and he grabbed the lion and ripped him apart as if it were a small animal. Afterwards, he went back to his parents but didn't tell them about the lion. They continued their trip and together finalized the wedding plans.

When the big day came, Samson and his parents went back along the same route. When they got to a place where he killed the lion, Samson once again stepped aside without his parents.

He found the dead lion and was amazed to see that honeybees had made a hive in it. He reached in and grabbed some honey and ate it. He then took some to his parents, but didn't tell them where he had gotten it.

Thirty young Philistine men came to the wedding party, which lasted seven days. Samson said, "I have a riddle. If you can figure it out

during these seven days, I'll give you thirty changes of clothes, including undergarments. But if you can't figure it out, you must give me thirty changes of clothes, including undergarments."

They said, "We agree. Tell us the riddle."

He said, "From the eater, came something to eat. From the strong came something sweet."

For three days the young men worked on the riddle. On the fourth day, they went to Samson's wife and said, "You brought us here to rob us. We won't stand for it. You're his wife. Get the answer to his riddle, or we will burn down everything that belongs to your father."

So she went to Samson and asked him for its meaning. He said, "I'm not going to tell you. I haven't even told my parents."

She started to cry. "You don't love me." She kept crying and begging until he couldn't stand it anymore. On the last day of the feast, he told her the meaning of the riddle. She immediately ran and told the men.

That night, just before the time was up, the men said to Samson, "What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?"

He immediately knew what they had done. He said, "You wouldn't have been able to plow that field without my young cow."

He went to a Philistine town nearby and God gave him the power to kill thirty men. He took their clothes and gave them to the wedding guests. He was so angry that he went back to his father's house without his wife.

70 Three Hundred Foxes and a Jawbone

Judges

Judges 15

Samson's father-in-law gave his daughter to a man who attended the wedding party. He figured Samson didn't want her any more since he went home without her.

Later, Samson went back to visit his wife with a gift. His father-in-law said, "What do you want?"

"I've come to visit my wife in her room."

The man said, "Oh, you can't do that. I thought you hated my daughter, so I gave her to another man. But don't worry. I have a younger daughter. You can have her. Everyone knows that she's more beautiful than her sister."

Samson became angry and said, "I'm going to hurt some Philistines—a lot of them—and I'm going to enjoy it."

He caught 300 foxes and put them in pairs, and tied a torch to the tails of each pair. He then lit the torches as he set the foxes loose in different Philistine fields.

The foxes ran, burning everything they came across. This not only destroyed standing grain, but also piles of grain that had already been harvested. They even destroyed vineyards and olive groves. The Philistines found out that it was Samson who did this. They blamed his father-in-law because he had made Samson angry by giving away his wife.

They took him and his daughter and burned them to death. This made Samson even more furious. He found each man who had a part in this and tore him apart, limb-by-limb. Many people died. Once he was done, he left Philistia, and went back and hid in a cave in Israel.

The Philistines invaded Israel with an army.

The Israelites said, "Why are you attacking us?"

"You're protecting Samson. He must be punished for what he's done."

3,000 Israelites went to the cave where Samson was hiding. They said, "We're taking you back to the Philistines. They have ruled over us in peace, but now you've stirred them up."

He said, "I'll go with you if you swear you won't kill me."

They said, "We won't kill you, but we will tie you up." They tied him with two new ropes and led him away. Once the Philistines had him, they shouted with joy.

Instantly the Spirit of the Lord filled him and he tore the ropes off his hands. He grabbed the jawbone of a donkey and ran into the Philistine crowd, killing 1,000 of them.

After his victory, he threw away the jawbone. He looked up and shouted, "Lord, you gave me victory. I've killed 1,000 men. Now, are you going to let me die of thirst?"

Suddenly a rock cracked open and water gushed out. Samson drank until he was refreshed.

He was a judge over Israel for 20 years, even though the Philistines still ruled over the land.

One time, he went to a Philistine city to sleep with a prostitute. Once they heard he was in their city, they closed the gates so they could capture him at sunrise.

Around midnight, Samson got up to go home. When he got to the gate, he pulled it out of the ground and carried it away. He took it to the top of an Israeli hill and left it there, still closed and locked.

71 Samson & Delilah

Judges

Judges 16

In time, Samson fell in love with a woman named Delilah. When the Philistines found out about this, a group of their leaders met with her. They said, “Each of us will pay you 1,100 pieces of silver if you can find out the secret of his strength. Once we know that, we’ll be able to kill him.”

So she asked Samson, “How can someone tie you up in a way that makes you powerless?”

“Oh,” he said, “I’ll be like any other man if someone ties me up with seven brand new bowstrings.”

The Philistines gave her seven fresh bowstrings, and hid some guards in her room. She tied Samson up with the bowstrings, and then shouted, “Samson, the Philistines are here!” He jumped up and snapped the bowstrings as if they were pieces of yarn touched by a fire.

Delilah said, “You lied to me! Why would you make fun of me like that? Please tell me how you can be tied up.”

He said, “The key is new ropes, but only ones that haven’t been used for anything else. If I’m tied up with new ropes, I’ll be like other people.”

So she took some new ropes and tied him up. Guards were still in their hiding place. She yelled, “Samson, quick! The Philistines are here!” He jumped up and snapped the ropes like they were pieces of threads.

She said, “I’m nothing but a joke to you. Why do you keep lying to me? Now tell me how you can be tied up.”

He said, “It’s my hair. If you weave my seven braids with the web of a loom, I’ll be as weak as any other man.”

So she waited until he was asleep and carefully wove his seven braids into the loom. Then she yelled, “Samson! The Philistines are here.” He woke up and pulled his hair away from the loom.

Delilah said, “How can you say you love me when you don’t trust me? Three times now you’ve laughed at me by telling me a lie. Why can’t you trust me with the secret of your strength?”

She kept this up day after day. She begged and nagged him until she wore him down. Finally, he told her the truth. He said, “I’m what our people call a Nazirite. I’ve been one since birth. My hair has never been cut, and that’s the secret of my strength. If someone shaves my head, I’ll be like any other man.”

Delilah realized that he had finally told her the truth. She sent for the Philistine rulers. “Come. I finally got the truth out of him. Be sure to bring my money with you.” So they came with her money.

That night, he fell asleep with his head on her lap. A man came out of hiding and cut off his seven braids. As he did, Samson’s strength left him. Then she yelled, “Samson, the Philistines are here!”

He jumped up to defend himself, but he didn’t know the Lord wasn’t with him.

The Philistines grabbed him and he couldn’t break loose. They held him down on the ground and poked out his eyes. They then took him to prison, where he was forced to push a grain millstone.

While he was in prison, Samson’s hair started to grow back. In time, the Philistines gathered to worship in the temple of their god. They ate and drank until they were drunk. Someone yelled, “Go get Samson. That’ll give us a good laugh.”

The place was packed as a boy led Samson into the temple. He said to the boy, “Take me to the supporting pillars.”

Samson called out to God. “Oh Lord God. Give me strength just one more time. Allow me to pay back the Philistines for taking my eyes. I’ll die with them.”

He then grabbed the two supporting pillars and pushed on them with all he had. They gave way and the temple fell on the Philistines, including all their leaders. More people died in Samson’s death, then he had killed in all of his life. He had been a judge in Israel for 20 years.

72 Grandson of Moses

Judges

Judges 17 – 18

During the time of the Judges, a man named Micah stole 1,100 pieces of silver from his mother. Then he found out that she had put a curse on whoever took it. So he gave it back.

She said, “Oh, son. I didn’t know it was you. I was going to give it to you anyway. But he refused to keep it. So she took some of it and made an idol for her son to put in his home. With the rest, Micah made some special clothes for worship, and provisions for a priest.

A young man named Jonathan was a Levite from Bethlehem. He left home looking for a place to settle down. He stayed the night in Micah’s house and the two of them became friends. Finally Micah said, “Stay here and I’ll make you the priest for my idol. I’ll give you everything you need—clothes, meals, a place to stay—and I’ll even give you a salary.” Jonathan agreed, and soon he became like one of the family.

At that same time, the tribe of Dan was looking for a permanent place for their people. In all of the years since Joshua, they hadn’t found a place of their own. They decided to send out five soldiers as spies.

The spies camped near Micah’s house, and Jonathan went out to visit with them. They said, “You have a Bethlehem accent. What are you doing here?”

He told them about his job and how well Micah treated him. When they found out that he was a Levite and a priest, they said, “Please, ask God if we’ll be successful.”

He said, “Don’t worry about a thing. The Lord is with you.”

The men left and continued their search. Finally they found a wonderful place, where the people were peaceable and unprotected. The spies went back to their tribe and said, “We’ve found a place for us to live! It’s a good land and the people will be easy to conquer.”

So the people of Dan sent 600 men to conquer

the city. When they got to Micah’s house, the five spies said to the others, “The man who owns that house has an idol, clothes for worship, and even a priest. We could use those things in our new city.”

So the 600 men went to Micah’s house. Jonathan came out to greet them. While he stood there, the five spies went into the house and took the idol and all the stuff that went along with it.

Jonathan said, “What are you doing?”

They said, “Shut up and listen carefully. You have a choice. You can stay here and be a priest for one man, or you can come with us and be a priest for a whole tribe. You can tell us what God wants us to do.”

Jonathan thought this sounded like a good opportunity, so he agreed to go with them. He even helped them take all the things of worship from Micah’s home.

When Micah found out what happened, he organized some men and chased after the Danites. As soon as he saw them, he yelled at them. Immediately they stopped, turned, and faced the men following them. They yelled back, “Why are you following us?”

Micah said, “How can you say that? You took my god and my priest. I have nothing left.”

The men from Dan said, “Stop yelling at us or we’ll take something else from you. We’ll take your life and kill your family.”

Micah saw there was nothing he could do. So he turned and went home.

The Danites continued on their military campaign. They attacked the peaceable people and killed them all. They burned down their city and built a new one. They called it Dan, and it became their permanent home.

Jonathan and his descendants were priests for the Danites for hundreds of years. They helped them worship that idol until the Assyrians took them into captivity. Jonathan was the grandson of Moses.

73 Prelude to War

Judges

! Judges 19

Once, during the time of the judges, civil war broke out throughout the nation of Israel. All the tribes united against the tribe of Benjamin and almost eliminated them. It all started with a woman leaving a man.

A certain Levite got a woman to become his concubine. One day she left him and went back to the home of her parents. After four months, the man decided to go and be nice to her in hopes that she would return to his house.

When he got there, her father welcomed him into his home. The two men became friends, so the Levite stayed for three days.

He got up early on the fourth day to go home. The girl's father said, "Have a good breakfast before you leave. It will help you have a better day as you travel."

So they ate together and enjoyed their friendship. Time went by and finally it was late in the afternoon. The father said, "It's too late to leave now. Wait until morning when you can have an early start."

The Levite stayed the night, and in the morning the girl's father said, "Have a good breakfast before you leave. It will help you have a better day as you travel." Again, they ate and talked until late afternoon. The father said, "It's too late to leave now. Wait until morning when you can have an early start."

This time, the man was determined to leave. He set out with his concubine, but didn't get far before they realized they needed to spend the night somewhere.

They traveled on to a city controlled by the tribe of Benjamin. They stood around hoping

someone would invite them into their home. At first, no one responded, but finally an old man saw them and invited them into his house.

They were enjoying each other's company that evening, when suddenly a gang of men surrounded the old man's house. They beat on the door and said, "Send out that man who is staying with you. We want to have sex with him."

The old man yelled back, "This man is a guest in my house. I won't let you abuse him. I'll send out my virgin daughter and the man's concubine. Do what you want with them, but you can't have the man."

The men outside wouldn't listen. They became more violent and insisted on having sex with the man. Finally the Levite grabbed his concubine and pushed her out the door.

The gang of men took turns raping her for the rest of the night. Early in the morning, they let her go. She crawled back to the house and collapsed outside the door.

The Levite woke up and got ready to continue his trip. He saw his concubine at the door. "Get up. It's time to go." She didn't move, so he put her on his donkey and went home.

When they got there, he realized she was dead. He cut her body into twelve pieces, and then sent them to every area of Israel. When the people saw this, they said, "Nothing like this has ever happened in the nation of Israel."

It became the topic of discussion in every town. Finally the people knew they had to take action against the tribe of Benjamin.

Continued in the next story

74 Brides for Benjamin

Judges

! Judges 20 – 21

Continued from the previous story

The entire nation of Israel prepared for civil war. All the tribes united against the tribe of Benjamin. They declared that no city was exempt from this war. Any that violated this would be destroyed. They also swore an oath that no man would give his daughter to marry a Benjaminite.

Both sides gathered massive armies. The commanders of Israel went to Bethel and sought God's leadership. In the morning, the war started. By the end of the day, the Benjaminites had killed many Israelites and had won the battle.

The commanders of Israel went before the Lord in anguish. They said, "Should we continue this battle against our brothers?"

The Lord said, "Fight them."

The next day, the Benjaminites once again killed many Israelites and won the battle. This time, the entire army went before the Lord at Bethel. They made sacrifices and cried out in anguish. They said, "Should we go up against Benjamin again, or should we stop?"

The Lord said, "Go and fight them. I'll give you victory tomorrow."

The Israelite army prepared to fight in the morning, but this time they hid some of their men behind the city. The Benjaminites came out to fight, and once again it seem like they were winning. The Israelites pulled back and the Benjaminites ran after them. They shouted, "We always win every battle!"

Soon the city was unprotected. Those in hiding entered the city and totally destroyed it, killing everyone. When the army of Israel saw the smoke coming from the city, they turned and charged back into battle. The army of Benjamin also saw the smoke and knew they'd been tricked.

The Lord fought against Benjamin, and soon they were terrified and tried to run, but Israel had them surrounded. The only ones to survive were 600 men who hid in a fortress. Everyone else in the tribe was killed, and their cities destroyed.

Once it was over, the people of Israel realized

what they had done. They went to Bethel and sat before the Lord. They sobbed and mourned. "Oh Lord God. What have we done? Now we're missing one of our twelve tribes."

They stayed before the Lord all day and made sacrifices. They said, "What can we do? We only have 600 men from Benjamin and all their women are dead." They knew it was important that the tribe repopulate.

They couldn't give them their daughters because of the oath they had taken. Suddenly they got an idea. "Was there a city that didn't come to battle as they were commanded?"

One city had disobeyed the order to fight. So the army of Israel went and killed everyone there. The only exception was virgin women. When the battle was over, they had 400 virgins from that city.

Israel made peace with the 600 men in the fortress, and gave them the 400 women to be their wives. They still needed 200 women.

Then they had another idea. They said to the Benjaminites, "Shiloh has an annual festival. At one point, young women come dancing out of the city. Hide in the vineyard next to the road. When the time is right, each of you jump out and grab a wife for yourself. Take them back to your own land. Don't worry about their fathers and brothers. They'll complain to us, but we'll explain the situation."

So the Benjaminites hid in the vineyard next to the road. They waited until the young women came dancing out of Shiloh. At the right moment, they jumped up and grabbed wives for themselves.

The fathers and brothers of the women complained, but the men of Israel said, "Be kind and let them keep your daughters. They need wives, and we don't have enough to give them. Don't worry about the curse because you didn't actually give them your daughters. They took them!"

The men of Benjamin went back to their cities and rebuilt them. They settled down with their new wives and raised families. Once again, all was peaceful in the land.

75 Naomi & Ruth

Judges

Ruth 1-2

During the time of the judges, a man decided to leave his home in Bethlehem. He took this wife Naomi and their two sons and went to the country of Moab.

Things did not go well there. They lived in Moab for ten years. During that time, the man died, the two sons married Moabite women, and then the sons died. Naomi was left alone with her two daughters-in-law.

She decided to go back to Bethlehem. So the three women prepared for the trip and left. Along the way, Naomi turned to her daughters-in-law and said, "Go back to your homes. May the Lord bless you, as you have been a blessing to me. I pray the Lord will give each of you a good husband and many children." She then kissed them good-bye.

All three women cried, and both daughters-in-law insisted they wanted to stay with Naomi. She said, "No, you need to go home. I have no more sons to give you. Even if I got pregnant tonight, would you wait for my baby to grow up so you could marry him? No, it's better that you go home. Life with me is going to be bitter." With that, one daughter-in-law kissed Naomi and went home.

The second daughter-in-law was Ruth. She said, "I won't leave you! Don't make me go back. I'm going with you. Wherever you live, that's where I'll live. Your people will be my people. Your God is now my God. The place where you die is where I'll die and be buried. Only death will separate you and me."

Naomi saw she couldn't argue with Ruth. So they both went back to Bethlehem.

When they got there, the whole town was excited that Naomi had come back home. She said to them, "Don't call me Naomi any more. That means 'pleasant,' and life is no longer pleasant. Call me Mara, which means 'bitter.' The Lord has made my life bitter."

So Naomi and Ruth established their home

in Bethlehem. Life was hard because the two women were poor.

Fortunately, it was harvest time. Poor people were allowed to go into the fields and pick up any grain that was dropped during harvest. So Ruth went to the fields to gather food for the two of them. She went to a field owned by a man named Boaz.

Later in the morning, Boaz came to his field. He saw Ruth and said to the foreman, "Who is that young woman?"

"Oh, she is the Moabite who came here with Naomi. She's a hard worker."

Boaz went to Ruth and said, "Don't go to any other field. Stay here and work alongside my servant girls. Watch them and go wherever they go. The men won't hurt you. I've already told them to stay away from you. In fact, go drink from their water when you're thirsty."

Ruth bowed her head and thanked Boaz. She said, "Why are you so kind to a foreigner?"

He said, "We've all heard how well you've treated Naomi. You left your parents and country to come here and care for her. May the Lord richly bless you!"

He then went back and told his men to leave extra grain in her path. Also, they were to provide her food when they stopped to eat.

That evening, Ruth went back home with all she had gathered. She even had leftovers from her meal. Naomi was amazed when she saw all of this. Ruth told her about the kindness of Boaz, the owner of the field.

Naomi responded when she heard the name Boaz. She said, "The Lord bless him! Oh Ruth, he's a close relative of our family. Stay in his field, just as he has said. You'll be safe there."

So Ruth continued to work with the servant girls of Boaz. She gathered grain throughout the barley harvest and the wheat harvest.

Continued in the next story

Ruth 3-4

Continued from the previous story

At the end of harvest, Naomi said to Ruth, “I am going to make sure you’re cared for. Here’s what you’re to do. Take a bath and put on some perfume. Dress in your best clothes. Boaz and his men will be working late tonight at the threshing floor. When they’re done, they’ll eat and drink, and then sleep on the threshing floor to protect the grain.

“Go there, but don’t let the men see you. Watch carefully and note where Boaz lies down. Once everyone is asleep, uncover his feet, and lie down next to them. When he wakes up, he’ll explain what you’re to do.”

So Ruth went to where the men were working and hid in the shadows. She watched carefully until she saw Boaz and the others lie down on the threshing floor. Their heads were towards the grain with their feet pointing out. Once they were asleep, she quietly uncovered the feet of Boaz, and lay down.

During the night, Boaz realized there was a woman lying at his feet. He said, “Who are you?”

She said, “I’m Ruth. Spread your protection over me, because you’re my closest relative.”

He said, “The Lord bless you! You didn’t come to our village looking for a husband, rich or poor. Instead you proved yourself to be a woman of integrity.

“Still, there is a next-of-kin who is closer than I. In the morning I’ll talk to him and give him an opportunity to redeem you. If he doesn’t, I will. For now, it’s not safe to go home in the night. I’ll send you there in the morning.”

She lay at his feet until morning, and then got up while it was still dark. Boaz gave her grain to take to Naomi.

Ruth told her mother-in-law everything that happened. Naomi said, “Now you’re to wait. Boaz won’t rest until this matter is settled.”

That day, Boaz arranged a meeting with the next-of-kin and the elders of the city. He said, “Naomi has come back from Moab and is selling her husband’s land. You’re the closest relative. Buy it in the presence of these elders. And if you don’t, I’ll buy it.”

The man was quick to answer. “I’ll buy it!”

Boaz went on to explain, “Well, when you buy it, you must also marry Ruth, the Moabite woman. This will keep the family name with the property.”

The man said, “I can’t marry this woman. It would ruin my own family name. You have my permission to buy the property.” With that, the man took off one of his sandals and handed it to Boaz. That made the deal legally binding.

Boaz held the sandal out toward the elders. “You are witnesses that I just bought the property that belonged to Naomi’s husband and sons. And because of that, Ruth will become my wife.”

People had gathered around and were watching all of this. The elders said, “Yes, we’ve seen the whole thing. May the Lord bless you, and may the Lord bless this woman who will become your wife.”

So Boaz took Ruth as his wife, and in the course of time, she gave birth to a son named Obed. He had a son named Jesse, who became the father of a shepherd boy named David. He became the great king of Israel!

77 The Call of Samuel

Judges

I Samuel 1 – 3

Hannah couldn't have children. This tormented her so much that she went to the Tabernacle and begged God for a child. She said, "Oh Lord, if you'll give me a son, I'll give him back to you and he'll serve you for the rest of his life."

Eli, the high priest, noticed that Hannah was moving her mouth but she wasn't saying anything. He thought she was drunk. "Woman, put away your wine!"

"Oh sir! I'm not drunk. I'm praying to God."

"Oh, well ... uh ... go your way. The Lord will answer your prayer."

Sure enough, the Lord answered her prayer. In less than a year, she gave birth to a baby boy and named him "Samuel," which means "God heard me."

When the boy was old enough, his mother took him back to the Tabernacle and presented him to Eli. She said, "I prayed for a child, and the Lord answered me. Now I'll give my son to the Lord, and he'll serve Him for the rest of his life."

Every year Hannah came to visit and brought new clothes for Samuel. The priest prayed that God would give Hannah more children. After that she had three sons and two daughters.

Eli gave Samuel work to do in the Tabernacle. As he grew physically, he also grew in favor with the Lord and with people.

Eli's sons were just the opposite. They were wicked and didn't honor God in any way. Many of their sins were committed in the house of the Lord. Eli talked to them about this, but did nothing about it.

One night, while Samuel was sleeping, the Lord called out, "Samuel, Samuel."

He woke up and ran to where Eli was sleeping. He said, "Yes, I'm here!"

Eli woke up and looked at the boy. "I didn't call you, Samuel. Go back to your bed."

Samuel went back and lay down. As he

was going to sleep, the Lord called him again. "Samuel, Samuel."

This time he knew he wasn't dreaming. He got up and ran to Eli. "Here I am!"

Eli once again said, "Son, I didn't call you. Now, go back to sleep." So Samuel went back and lay down.

Once again, the Lord called to him, "Samuel, Samuel."

At this point in his life, Samuel didn't know God, and the Lord hadn't talked to him. So, the boy did the only thing he knew to do. For the third time, he ran to Eli. "I'm here because you called me."

This time, Eli realized what was happening. He knew the Lord was calling Samuel, so he said, "Go back and lie down. If you hear someone calling you again, say, 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

Samuel went back to his bed and lay down. The Lord called him once again, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Quietly Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

God said, "I'm not pleased with how Eli allows his sons to do evil in my house. I'm going to judge him and his sons."

Samuel lay back in his bed. In the morning, Eli called him, "Samuel, what did the Lord say to you?"

The boy was afraid to tell him the message from God. Eli said, "Son, don't hide it from me." So Samuel told him everything.

Eli said, "He's Lord! Let Him do what is good in His eyes."

The Lord was with Samuel from that day on, and God continued to reveal His words to him. Samuel obeyed the Lord, and everything he said came true. All of Israel recognized that he was a prophet of the Lord.

78 The Ark Captured

Judges

I Samuel 4

God was not pleased with Eli. The high priest knew his two sons were sinning in the sanctuary of the Lord. They didn't even try to hide it. Still Eli hadn't stopped them. God told him that his family would be judged. The Lord said, "I will do something that will cause people to shudder when they hear about it."

When Eli was 98 years old, the Philistines made war with Israel. The army went out to defend their nation, but they lost the battle and 4,000 men were killed.

The elders of Israel were confused. "Why did the Lord allow this to happen?" Suddenly one of them had an idea. "Let's go get the Ark of the Lord! We'll take it with us into battle, and it will give us victory." So they sent for the Ark of God, and the sons of Eli brought it to the camp. When the Israelites saw it, they shouted for joy. The shout was so loud that it seemed like the ground shook.

The Philistines heard the shout and thought it was a war cry. They sent spies to see what was going on and found that the Ark of God had been brought into the camp. The Philistines panicked. They said, "Their gods are now in their camp. We're doomed! These are magnificent gods. They're the ones that slaughtered the Egyptians with plagues."

The Philistine leaders stood before the troops. "Be strong and act like men! You are mighty Philistines, not weak Hebrews. Now is the time to fight like you've never fought before. If you don't, you'll be their slaves."

So the Philistines fought as if they had

everything to lose. Israel was crushed—their soldiers slaughtered. 30,000 men were killed, including Eli's two sons. The Philistines then captured the Ark of God and took it to their own camp.

Back in Israel, Eli was sitting on a chair beside the road waiting for a report from the battle. He was concerned about the Ark of God. A man ran from the battle to tell everyone what happened. The entire city started crying out in pain. Eli was blind and had difficulty hearing. He heard the noise, but couldn't hear what was said. "What's going on?"

The man got close to the old priest and said, "Our men were slaughtered today. Your two sons were killed, and the Ark of God was captured." When Eli heard about the Ark of God, he fell backwards off the chair. He was a heavy man, so the fall broke his neck and he died.

Eli's daughter-in-law was due to give birth to a child. She heard about the Ark of God and her husband's death. She then heard that her father-in-law was also dead. Suddenly she went into labor and gave birth to a son. Those helping her said, "You now have something to be happy about. You've given birth to a son!"

At first she didn't respond, and then she finally said, "The glory has departed from Israel because the Ark of God has been captured." Just before she died, she named the boy Ichabod, which means, "The glory has departed."

Continued in the next story

79 Ark of God Returned

Judges

I Samuel 5 – 6

Continued from the previous story

After the Philistines captured the Ark of God, they put it in the temple of their god. The next morning, they found their idol face down in front of the Ark. They set the idol back up, but the next morning it was on the ground again. This time, the head and hands were broken off.

Suddenly the city was overrun with mice, and the people had large tumors covering their bodies. The men said, “This is being caused by the Ark of Israel’s God.” So they moved it to another city.

Immediately, God’s judgment hit that city. They were overrun with mice and the people developed large painful tumors. This caused the people to panic. The men sent the Ark of God to yet another city, but the people there yelled at them. “You’re trying to kill us! We don’t want that Ark in our city!”

They moved the Ark from city to city for seven months. Fear and death followed it wherever it went. Finally the Philistines asked their priests, “How can we send the Ark of the Lord back to Israel?”

They said, “If you send the Ark back to Israel, you must send a guilt offering with it. Then God will remove his hand of judgment, and you’ll be healed. Make five gold images of your tumors and five gold images of the mice that are destroying the land. Give glory to the God of Israel, and he will stop crushing you. But if you become stubborn, you’ll be like Pharaoh when these people left Egypt. He’ll send more plagues upon you until you send the Ark back to Israel.

“Here’s what to do. Prepare a new cart and place the Ark of God on it. Put the gold objects

in a box beside it. Select two milk cows that have never been in a yoke, and hitch them to the cart. Take the calves away from the cows and put them in a pen nearby. Then stand back and see what the cows do. If they ignore their calves and go up the road toward Israel, you’ll know it was the Lord who tormented us for seven months. But, if the cows go toward their calves, we’ll know that all of this was just something that happened by chance. It wasn’t God’s judgment.”

The men did exactly as they were instructed. They got two milk cows and separated them from their calves. They hitched the cows to a cart, even though they had never been in a yoke before. They put the Ark on a new cart, along with the five gold images of their tumors and the mice.

When all was ready, they stood back and watched. The cows went straight up the road toward Israel. They stayed on that road with their heads down, lowing as they went. The Philistine rulers walked behind them all the way to the territory of Israel.

The people of Israel were harvesting wheat when they saw the Ark coming toward them. They shouted for joy. As they watched, the cows pulled the cart to a field near a large rock and stopped. The people of Israel put the Ark on the rock. They then used the wood from the cart to offer the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. When the Philistine rulers saw this, they returned to their country.

There were 70 men from a nearby town who were curious about what was in the Ark of God, so they opened it and looked inside. All 70 men died by the hand of God. This struck fear into the people, but it was the beginning of the nation of Israel turning their hearts back to God.

I Samuel 7 – 8

The people of Israel slowly turned back to God. This was a process that took twenty years. Finally Samuel said, “If it’s true you want to serve God, get rid of all your idols. Dedicate yourself to the Lord and serve him only. Do this, and he’ll give you victory over the Philistines.”

The people did what Samuel said and got rid of their idols. So he told them to come together for a dedication service. He said, “Come, and I’ll pray for you.” The people came together and dedicated themselves to God. From then on, Samuel was their judge.

The Philistines heard that the Israelites had gathered in one place. They thought this was an act of war, so they marched into the land and prepared to attack Israel. The people were afraid when they saw the massive Philistine army.

Samuel said, “Don’t look at your enemy. Instead, focus on God and pray to him. The Lord will save us from the Philistines.” He then presented a sacrifice to God, and asked for help.

The Lord answered Samuel’s prayer. Suddenly loud thunder was heard throughout the Philistine camp. They became confused and started to run. The men of Israel chased after them and killed many of them.

Samuel set up a large stone as a monument of what happened that day. He called it Ebenezer, which means “Rock of Help.” He said, “The Lord has helped us up to this point.”

The Lord fought against the Philistines as long as Samuel lived. Every year the prophet went on a circuit so he could better judge the people. The rest of the time, he judged them

from his hometown.

When he was old, he appointed his sons to become judges. Unfortunately, they didn’t have his integrity. They accepted bribes and judged accordingly.

The people went to Samuel and said, “Your sons are not just. Therefore, we want to be like all the other nations and have a king. Select one for us before you die.”

Samuel was shocked. He couldn’t understand why they would want such a thing. He prayed to God, but the Lord said, “Don’t be offended. They haven’t rejected you. They’ve rejected me. Do what they say, but first tell them what it will be like to have a king.”

Samuel stood before the people and described in detail how a king would abuse them and take advantage of them. He said, “A king will take your sons away from you and they’ll work for him instead of you. They’ll serve in his military, or work for him personally. He’ll take your daughters and put them to work. He’ll take your best fields, vineyards, and orchards. He’ll tax you so he can live in luxury. You’ll become his servants, and you’ll work to fulfill his every whim. When that happens, you’ll complain to the Lord, but he won’t help you.”

The people refused to take this warning. They insisted, “We still want a king! He’ll judge us and fight our battles for us.”

The Lord said, “Do as they ask. Give them a king.”

So Samuel told them to go home, and he would find them a king.

81 Saul Made King

King Saul

I Samuel 9 – 10

Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin. He was tall and handsome and stood head and shoulders above everyone else. One day, his father asked him to go find their lost donkeys, so he took some servants and went looking for them. After a long search, they were about to give up and go home. Then one of the servants pointed to a nearby town and said, “There’s a man of God in that town. Let’s go ask him if he can tell us where the donkeys are.”

They went into the town and saw a man coming toward them. They didn’t know it was Samuel. The night before, God had told him that Saul would come the next day. The Lord said, “He’ll be the king who will rule over Israel.”

Saul said to Samuel, “Do you know where the prophet lives?”

“I’m the prophet. Come with me to a sacrifice. Afterwards we’ll have a meal together and I’ll tell you many things. Oh, concerning those donkeys you’re looking for; they’ve been found. You have more important things to worry about. The future of Israel is in your hands.”

Saul was shocked. He said, “The future of Israel can’t be in my hands. I’m from the smallest tribe in Israel. And even in that tribe, our family is not important.”

Samuel took Saul to a banquet with thirty important people and gave him the place of honor. The chef brought a special meal to Saul and said, “This meal has been set aside, waiting for this day. Now I’m serving it to you.”

Saul and his servants went to Samuel’s house to spend the night. He was given a place on the flat roof, where it was cool. In the morning the prophet said to Saul, “Send your servants home. I want you to stay a little longer. I’ll tell you about a message I have from God.”

After Saul’s servants left, Samuel took some oil and anointed Saul. He said, “God has anointed you prince over his people.”

The prophet then told Saul what would happen to him over the next few days, the places he would go and the people he would meet. He said, “When all of these things happen, the Spirit of God will come on you. You’ll be transformed and become a completely new person. At that point, you’ll know what to do because God will be with you.”

Everything happened just as Samuel had said. So a day was appointed when Samuel was to present the new king to all the tribes of Israel. When the exact moment arrived, Samuel looked around, but couldn’t find Saul. He asked God, “Where is he?”

The Lord said, “Look over there. He’s hiding among the baggage.”

Samuel sent some men to bring Saul before the people. Then Samuel turned to the others and shouted, “Here is the man who will be your king and fight your battles and rule over you.”

The people shouted, “Long live the king!” From that day on, the Lord was with Saul and enabled him to perform all the duties of a king.

82 Peace for an Eye

King Saul

I Samuel 11

Saul went back to his hometown after he was made king and the ceremony was over. God moved several fighting men to go with him. Others laughed at the thought of him being their king. They showed their disgust by refusing to give him a gift. Saul ignored this and went back to work on the family farm.

At that same time, the Ammonite army went to fight against a city in Israel. The leaders of the city said to the Ammonite king, “We’re willing to surrender to you. What are your terms?”

The king said, “Here are my terms. I’m going to use you to insult all of Israel. I’ll do this by gouging out the right eye of everyone who lives in your city.”

The leaders of the city sent back a message. “Give us seven days to consider your demands. We’ll use that time to see if anyone in Israel is able to help us. If not, we’ll submit to your terms.”

The city leaders sent messengers to all of Israel. When the news of this came to Saul’s town, the people began to moan and cry. Saul came in to town with his oxen after finishing a day’s work in the field. He looked around and said, “Why is everyone crying?”

They told him the terms of the Ammonite king. Anger burned within Saul when he heard these words, and the Spirit of God took control of his spirit. He turned and killed his own oxen. He cut them into pieces and sent them throughout

Israel with this message. “Look at this piece of meat. This is what your ox will look like if you don’t come immediately and fight. Every man is to march behind Saul and Samuel. There are no exceptions.”

As soon as people heard this message, the fear of the Lord filled them. 330,000 men united to follow Saul into battle.

He sent a message to the city that was under the threat of the Ammonites. “We’re bringing an army to defend you. We’ll be there before midmorning.”

The people of the city were overjoyed. They sent a message to the Ammonite king and said, “We’ll come out to you tomorrow. You can then do whatever you want with us.”

Before sunrise, Saul’s army attacked the Ammonite camp. The Israelites kept killing Ammonites all morning and into the afternoon. Only a few escaped.

After this great victory, the people said to Samuel, “Who are those men who were disgusted about Saul being our king? Give us their names and we’ll kill them.”

Saul spoke up, “No! Don’t kill them! Today is a special day. Today, the Lord delivered Israel.”

Samuel said, “I have a better idea. Let’s unite together and once again make Saul our king.” So the people united together and rejoiced as they made Saul their king.

83 Failing the Test

King Saul

I Samuel 13

When Saul became king of Israel, the people had to go to the Philistines to buy iron farm tools. When these tools became dull, the people had to go back to the Philistines to have them sharpened since they weren't allowed to have blacksmiths. But the Philistines wouldn't sell weapons of war to the people of Israel. The only ones to have modern swords and spears were Saul and his son Jonathan.

As king, Saul organized an army of 3,000 men. He personally oversaw 2,000 of them, and gave 1,000 to his son. Jonathan took his men and attacked a Philistine outpost. Saul knew that this was an act of war, so he quickly tried to build his forces in preparation.

The Philistines reacted to this attack with force. They marched into Israel with 3,000 chariots, 6,000 horsemen, and a massive number of troops.

The men of Israel were terrified when they saw this huge army come into their land. Most of the men in Saul's army ran for their lives. They hid wherever they could. They hid in caves, among rocks, and down in wells. Some even left the country. Others actually joined the Philistine army!

Samuel told the king not to go into battle until they had sacrificed to the Lord. He told Saul to go to a particular place and wait for him. The king went to that place, but Samuel wasn't there. He waited three day—four days. Still Samuel didn't come. He waited five day—six days.

Samuel didn't come.

Saul watched as his men continue to desert the army. Finally, on the seventh day, he felt he couldn't wait any longer. He got the things needed for the burnt sacrifice, and offered it up.

Just as he finished, Samuel arrived. Saul went out to greet him. The prophet said, "What have you done?"

Saul said, "The Philistines are about to attack, and my army is leaving me. I didn't know if I would have the Lord's help. I waited for you, but you didn't come. I had no other choice, so I decided to act on my own. I offered the burnt offering to the Lord."

Samuel said, "Oh, you have acted like a fool! Didn't you realize this was a test? You failed it! If you had trusted God, the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. Now your kingdom won't last long. The Lord has already found a man after his own heart. He'll become king and God will establish his kingdom for ever."

Samuel then turned and left the king. Saul counted his men and found he only had 600 soldiers. The Philistines had camped on the top of a cliff so they could control the important pass that was below. So Saul took his small army and camped on top of the cliffs on the opposite side of the pass.

Continued in the next story

84 Jonathan's Victory

King Saul

I Samuel 14

Continued from the previous story

Jonathan looked at the Philistines' camp on the other side of the pass. He said to his armor bearer, "Let's go over there and kill a few Philistines. The Lord just might help us. He's not limited by how many of us there are."

The man said, "If you go, I'll go with you."

Jonathan said, "Here's my plan. We'll go across to the rear of the Philistine camp. We'll let them see us at the bottom of their cliffs. If they tell us to stop, we'll come back here. But if they tell us to come up, we'll consider that a sign from God. We'll know that the Lord will give us victory."

They decided not to tell the king where they were going. When they got to the cliffs, the Philistines saw them. They said, "Look, the Hebrews are coming out of their hiding places!" They yelled down to Jonathan. "Come on up, and we'll teach you a lesson!"

Jonathan laughed, "Follow me. The Lord has given them to us." The two men climbed up the cliffs and killed twenty Philistines.

News quickly spread through the rest of the Philistine camp. This caused panic. They said, "The Israelites have attacked us from behind." Suddenly the earth shook, and their panic turned to terror. They ran in every direction.

Men in Saul's camp saw this and told the king. He looked around. "Call the roll and find out who's missing." They found that Jonathan and his armor bearer were gone.

As Saul assembled his troops, the panic in the Philistine camp intensified. When Saul's army marched into battle, he found that the Philistines were fighting each other.

The Israelites that had joined the Philistines now rallied around Saul. Those who hid among rocks and caves came out and joined the battle.

Saul wanted his men to completely focus on winning the battle, so he shouted, "I put a curse on anyone who eats food before we win this victory." His men obeyed, but soon they became hungry and tired.

Jonathan didn't know what his father had said. He found some honey in the forest and ate it. Others immediately told him about the king's order. He said, "The king shouldn't have said that. Look at me. I ate some honey, now I'm ready to fight again. Our men should eat all of this food that the Philistines have left behind. Then they would fight harder."

Saul finally realized his army was famished! He had a meal prepared and allowed his men to eat. The king then wanted to go back into battle, but suddenly realized something was wrong. He called everyone together and said, "Something is wrong, and I'm going to find out who's behind it. Once I know who it is, he'll be put to death, even if he's my own son."

He then drew lots, and it fell on Jonathan. The king asked him, "What did you do?"

"I ate some honey. If I'm to die for that, then I'm ready to die."

Saul said to his son, "I took an oath, therefore you must die."

The people shouted, "Jonathan won't die! God used him to give us victory today. As the Lord God lives, not one hair of his head will fall to the ground."

So the people saved Jonathan's life. With that, the battle was over and the Philistines returned to their own territory.

85 Saul's Disobedience

King Saul

I Samuel 15

One day Samuel went to Saul with instructions from God. "The Amalekites attacked my people when I brought them out of Egypt. Therefore, go to battle with them and destroy everything. Kill all the people and all of their livestock. Don't leave anything alive."

So Saul took his army and attacked the Amalekites. He defeated them, but didn't kill everything. Saul's men kept the best of the livestock for themselves. They also captured king Agag and didn't kill him.

The Lord said to Samuel, "I regret that I made Saul king over Israel. He doesn't follow me and he doesn't do as I say."

Samuel grieved in his spirit, and prayed all night. The next morning, he went and found Saul. As the prophet walked up, the king said, "The Lord bless you. I've done what God asked me to do."

Samuel looked at him. "Then why do I hear the sounds of sheep and cattle?"

"Oh, the men saved the best livestock so we could sacrifice them to the Lord. But we destroyed the rest."

Samuel said, "Stop talking! I'll tell you what God thinks of what you've done. When you were humble, God made you the leader over his people. He then gave you a job to do. He said, 'Go kill this extremely sinful people. Don't let any person or animal live.' Why did you make him angry by not doing what he said?"

Saul said, "I did obey him. I killed everyone except Agag, their king. And then I killed all the animals except these few. We kept the best for a sacrifice."

Samuel said, "Do you think the Lord wants sacrifice more than obedience? No! To obey is better than a sacrifice. Rebellion is like the sin of witchcraft. Stubbornness is as bad as worshipping idols. You rejected God's command. Therefore, he's rejected you as king over Israel."

Saul said, "I've sinned! I can now see clearly that I ignored the Lord's command and didn't listen to you. I was afraid of the people, and obeyed them rather than God. Please forgive my sin. Come. Let's worship the Lord together."

Samuel turned away, "No, I won't go with you. You rejected the Lord. Now he's rejecting you as king."

Saul grabbed Samuel's robe and it tore as he turned away. Samuel stopped and looked at the rip. He said, "The Lord has ripped the kingdom of Israel away from you today. He's given it to your neighbor, who's better than you. God isn't like men. He won't change his mind."

Saul yelled, "I've sinned! All I ask is that you honor me in front of the people. Come, worship with me."

So Samuel went with him and allowed him to bow down before the Lord. The prophet then said, "Bring me Agag, king of the Amalekites."

Agag came before Samuel, not knowing what to expect. Samuel took a sword and said, "You've made many women childless. Now your mother will be childless." The prophet then killed Agag and cut him into pieces.

Then Samuel returned to his home. He never again visited Saul as long as he lived. Still, he grieved over him constantly.

86 The Anointing of David

David

I Samuel 16

Samuel couldn't stop thinking about how God rejected Saul as king over Israel. The Lord said to Samuel, "Stop brooding about Saul! Take some anointing oil and go to the home of Jesse at Bethlehem. I've selected one of his sons to become king."

Samuel said, "Lord, King Saul will kill me if he finds out."

The Lord said, "Take a calf to Bethlehem and say you're coming to sacrifice to the Lord. Invite Jesse and his sons to join you. I'll show you which one to anoint."

So Samuel went to Bethlehem and invited Jesse and his sons to join him in sacrificing to the Lord. When they came, Samuel was immediately impressed with Jesse's oldest son. "Ah," he thought, "this is the one the Lord will choose."

God said, "Samuel, don't look at outward appearance. It doesn't matter how tall a man is or how strong. I see things you can't see. He's not the one."

Jesse then introduced his second son to Samuel. Again, he wasn't the Lord's choice. Jesse introduced seven of his sons to the prophet. As he met each of them, the Lord said, "He's not the one."

Finally, Samuel said to Jesse, "Don't you have any other children?"

"Oh, well yes. I do have one more—my youngest. He's out watching the sheep."

"Send for him. I'll not eat with you until I see him."

As soon as David walked into the room, Samuel could see that he was a striking young man—healthy and handsome. The Lord said, "This is the one. Get up and anoint him." So Samuel anointed him with oil. After that the Spirit of God departed from King Saul and came upon David in a mighty way.

From that day on, King Saul was tormented with depression. His servants had an idea. They said, "Allow us to find a man skilled at playing the harp. Then his music will cheer you when you become depressed."

When Saul agreed, one of the servants said, "I've heard of a young man who is very skilled at the harp. He's a son of Jesse from Bethlehem. In addition to being good on the harp, he's a good fighter and has the ability to talk in front of people. He's also a man who walks with God."

Saul sent for David and was immediately impressed with him. David was made Saul's armor bearer, but he also played the harp every time the king went into deep depression. The sound of his harp soothed the king's spirit and brought him peace.

I Samuel 17

The Philistines once again invaded Israel. Both armies faced one another across a ravine. Suddenly a large Philistine stepped forward. His name was Goliath, and he was 9 feet, 9 inches tall.

He yelled, “Why are you preparing for battle? Let two of us settle this. Send someone out and we’ll fight. If your man kills me, we’ll be your slaves. But if I kill your man, you’ll be our slaves. Come on, send someone out and let’s fight.”

No one accepted his challenge, so he came out and yelled at Israel every morning and evening. This went on for forty days. Saul offered a reward to anyone who could defeat this giant. He said, “I’ll make him wealthy and he can marry my daughter.”

While this was happening, Jesse said to David, “Go visit your brothers and take them some food. Bring back word of how the battle is going.”

So David got up early and went to the battle site. He saw the men lined up in battle formations. He gave the food to the quartermaster and ran to see what was going on.

Suddenly, Goliath started shouting his challenge. “Come on. Send someone out here and let’s fight—man to man. Winner takes all.” Everyone backed away.

David was shocked. He said, “Who does this ungodly Philistine think he is? He’s defying the armies of the living God.”

David’s oldest brother got angry. “Why are you here? Go back to your sheep. War is for men.”

David answered him. “I didn’t do anything wrong. I just asked a question.” He turned and asked the question again. “Who does this ungodly Philistine think he is?”

Saul heard about David’s question and sent for him. David said, “Don’t worry about this Philistine. I’ll fight him.”

The king said, “He’s a warrior—a seasoned fighter. You’re young, with no experience.”

David said, “I watch my father’s sheep. Every time a bear or a lion has come and tried to take a lamb, I grabbed the beast and killed it. The Lord

was always with me and gave me victory. This ungodly Philistine is just another lion or bear. The Lord will give him to me.”

Saul said, “Go, and the Lord be with you.”

He then gave David his suit of armor, but he couldn’t walk because it was too heavy. He said, “I can’t wear these. They’ll hold me back.”

David got his shepherd’s staff and a sling. He went down to the brook and selected five smooth rocks and put them in his shepherd’s bag. Then he started walking toward the giant.

Goliath saw David coming. He yelled, “Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks? Come, and I will give your flesh to the birds.”

David yelled back, “You come to me with a sword and a spear, but I come to you in the name of the Lord. You’ve insulted him. Therefore I’m going to cut off your head and give your body to the birds. This battle is the Lord’s, and he has given you to me.”

Goliath started walking toward David, but David ran toward the giant. He reached into his shepherd’s bag and put a rock into his sling. With deadly accuracy, the rock hit Goliath and sank into his forehead. He fell to the ground face forward. David ran up, pulled out Goliath’s sword, and cut off the giant’s head.

Both armies were shocked when they saw this. The Philistines turned and ran. The Israelites shouted a victory cry and chased after them. Many Philistines died that day.

Saul asked Abner, his general, “Who is that young man?”

“I don’t know.”

Saul sent for David. He came and stood before the king with the giant’s head still in his hands. Saul said, “Who are you? Who is your father?”

David said, “I am the son of Jesse of Bethlehem.”

Saul didn’t let David go back home, but made him a commander in the army. David was successful in everything Saul had him do.

88 David Earns a Wife

David

I Samuel 18

After the death of Goliath, Saul's son, Jonathan, became a close friend to David. The love between these two men was great. Jonathan gave David everything he needed to fight on the battlefield, and also what he needed for working in the king's court.

David was successful as a commander in the army. All the people admired him, and his men became loyal to him. One day when Saul and his army came in from battle, the women from the various cities greeted them with dancing and singing. Their song was, "Saul has killed thousands. David has killed tens of thousands."

This made Saul furious! He said, "Listen to them. They give him more credit than me. What will they do next? Give him the kingdom?" From that day on, Saul became more and more jealous of David.

The next day, God allowed an evil spirit to take control of Saul. He started to act crazy. It was still David's job to go play his harp when the king was in one of these moods. As David played, Saul said to himself, "I'll end this right now. I'll pin him to the wall." When the time was just right, he grabbed a spear and threw it at David. David dodged it just in time, and kept playing the harp. Saul waited, and once again when the time was just right, he grabbed another spear and threw it at David. Again David dodged it just in time.

With that, Saul realized that the Spirit of the

Lord had left him and was now with David. The king's anger turned to fear.

He put David in charge of 1,000 soldiers and sent him out to battle. David was successful in every campaign he led. This increased the love that the people had for him, but it made Saul even more afraid of him.

One of the king's daughters, named Michal, loved David. When Saul found out about this, he got an idea. He thought of a plan where the Philistines would kill David. The king had his servants go to David and say, "The king likes you so much that he's willing for you to become his son-in-law."

When David heard this, he said, "I am not a rich man. I can't offer the king anything for his daughter."

"Oh, the king doesn't want you to pay him money. All he wants is for you to get revenge on his enemies. He wants you to kill 100 Philistines, and bring back proof that they're dead."

David was pleased by these terms. So he and his men went out and killed 200 Philistines and took Saul proof that they were dead. Saul had no choice but to give his daughter Michal to David.

Even more now, Saul considered David to be his enemy. Still, the Lord gave David victory every time he went out to battle. He was more successful than all of the other military officers and his name became more and more famous.

89 Protecting David

David

I Samuel 19

Saul wanted David dead. So he told his servants and Jonathan to find him and kill him. Jonathan rushed and told David, “Go and hide. I’ll talk to my father and see if I can reason with him. I’ll let you know if I’m successful.”

Jonathan talked to his father and told him that David was a loyal servant and would do nothing to harm the king. Saul listened to his son and promised to let David live. So David went back into the king’s courts and served him. War once again broke out with the Philistines and David led the army to victory against them.

Once again the Lord allowed an evil spirit to enter the king. As David played the harp, Saul grabbed a spear and threw it at him. He jumped out of the way and ran from the room.

Saul called his guards and told them to go to David’s house in the morning and kill him. Michal heard about this and warned her husband. “You must leave tonight. They’ll be here in the morning to kill you.”

He went out the window and she helped lower him down to the ground. She placed an image in his bed and put goat hair on top of it. She then covered it with a blanket. In the morning, she told the guards, “He’s sick in bed.”

They went and told the king. He said, “Go!

Bring me the bed with David in it, and I’ll kill him myself.”

When they went to the bed, they found the image with the goat hair. Saul yelled at Michal. “How could you lie to me and let my enemy get away?”

She said, “He forced me to do it. He said he would kill me if I didn’t.”

David went to Samuel and told him everything that had happened. Saul found out that David was with Samuel, so he sent guards to go get him. When they got there, they saw Samuel sitting with some prophets. Suddenly the guards sat down and started prophesying.

Saul heard about this, so he sent more guards. The same thing happened to them. They sat down and started prophesying. So Saul sent a third set of guards, and again they sat down and started prophesying.

Finally Saul went himself. When he got close to where they were, the Spirit of God came on him and he started prophesying as he walked along. When he entered the house, the king took off his clothes as he was prophesying. He then collapsed and lay naked the rest of that day, and all night.

90 Three Arrows

David

I Samuel 20

David said, “Jonathan, why is your father trying to kill me? What have I done?”

He said, “The king doesn’t want to kill you. I would know about it if he did. He doesn’t hide anything from me.”

David said, “As sure as there is a God, and as sure as you’re alive, your father wants to kill me. He doesn’t tell you because he knows we’re best friends.”

Jonathan said, “What do you want me to do? Name it and I’ll do it.”

David said, “Tomorrow, I’m scheduled to go to a three-day banquet with the king. If he notices that I’m not there, tell him you gave me permission to go to Bethlehem for an annual sacrifice. Tell him it was important that I be there because it involves my entire clan.

“If your father accepts that answer, then we’ll know all is well and he doesn’t hate me. But if he gets angry, then it will be clear to both of us that he wants to kill me.

“Jonathan, if you find out that he has good reason to hate me, then come ... and kill me yourself.”

Jonathan said, “I’ll go and find out exactly what my father thinks about you. If you’re right and he wants to kill you, I’ll send you away in peace. But remember, we made a vow to each other before the Lord. If I die and God blesses you, take care of my family. Love my household as if they’re your own.

“Here’s my plan. Hide next to the big rock in the field. I’ll find out what my father thinks about you. Then I’ll come here and shoot three arrows toward the rock. I’ll send my servant to get them. As he goes, I’ll yell something to him. If I say, ‘They are on this side of the rock.’ That’s your sign that all is well and you can come back.

“But if I yell, ‘They’re on the other side of the rock,’ That’s your sign that you need to run for your life because my father is trying to kill you.”

During the first day of the banquet, Saul noticed that David was not in his place, but he didn’t say anything. On the second day, Saul said to Jonathan, “Where is that son of Jesse? He’s missed both days so far.”

“Oh, I gave him permission to go to Bethlehem. His family is having a big annual sacrifice, and his brothers insisted that he be there.”

Saul yelled at his son. “You son of a prostitute! I know what you’re doing. You’re taking his side. Don’t you realize he’s going to take away your kingdom? You’re a shame to our family. Now go get him and bring him here so I can kill him.”

Jonathan yelled back. “What has he done? Why do you want to kill him?”

Saul grabbed a spear and threw it at his son. Jonathan got up from the table and left. He didn’t eat for a whole day because he was ashamed of his father.

In the morning, he went to the field with his servant. He shot three arrows out beyond the rock. As the servant ran out to get them, Jonathan yelled, “There on the other side of that rock. You need to hurry. Go as fast as you can.”

The servant found the arrows and brought them back. Jonathan then told him to take the equipment and go back to the city.

After he left, David came out of hiding. The two men hugged and cried. Jonathan said, “You’re right. My father is determined to kill you. Go. But remember our pledge to one another, and between your children and my children.” With that, David left, and Jonathan went back to the city.

91 Running from Saul

David

I Samuel 21 – 22

David escaped from Saul with only a few men to help him. They went to Ahimelech, the priest who was in charge of the Ark of God. The priest said, “Why are you here?”

“The king sent me on a special mission. He told me not to tell anyone about where I’m going. I left so fast that we don’t have anything to eat. Please give us some bread.”

Ahimelech said, “The only bread we have is the old showbread taken from the holy place. Only priests are allowed to eat it.”

This was old bread they took from the altar when they put new bread there. The priest said, “I suppose you can have the old bread, but only if your men have kept themselves clean before the Lord.”

David said, “We’re all on a mission for the king, so of course we’ve all kept ourselves holy before the Lord.”

So Ahimelech gave them the old bread. David noticed that Doeg, the Edomite, saw this whole thing. He was the chief shepherd for Saul.

David said to Ahimelech, “I left so fast that I forgot to bring my weapons. Do you have a spear or sword that I could use?”

“The only sword I have is the one you took from Goliath. You can have that one back. It’s all I have.”

David took the sword and continued his escape from Saul. He went to Gath, a city of the Philistines. There, he would be out of Saul’s reach. But people told the king of the Philistines, “This is David, the one they sing about: ‘Saul has killed his thousands, but David has killed his tens of thousands.’ ”

When David heard this, he immediately

pretended like he was insane. People of that day didn’t hurt those who were insane because they were afraid there might be an evil spirit in them. David fell down and started clawing on the doorpost. He let drool flow into his beard. When the king saw this, he said, “This man is crazy. Get him out of here!”

David left Gath and hid in a cave. His brothers brought him all their relatives so they’d be safe from Saul. David took his parents to Moab and left them in the protection of the king there.

Soon men started arriving to join David. These were men who were in some kind of trouble or overwhelmed with debt. Finally there were 400 men who rallied around David, and he became their leader.

Meanwhile, Doeg, the Edomite, went to Saul and said, “I saw Ahimelech give David food and the sword of Goliath.”

Saul sent for Ahimelech and all 85 priests that were with him. “Why did you help this son of Jesse? You know he wants to kill me.”

Ahimelech said, “I thought he was your faithful servant. After all, he’s your son-in-law. I didn’t know there was trouble between you.”

Saul turned to his guards. “Kill these men, all of them. They’re on David’s side.”

The guards were shocked. They didn’t move because they weren’t about to kill the priest of the Lord.

Saul then turned to Doeg, the Edomite. “Kill all of these men and everything they own.” So, Doeg killed all of the priests, their wives, their children, and even their livestock. Only one son of Ahimelech was able to escape. He ran and told David all that happened.

92 Corner of Saul's Robe

David

I Samuel 24

Saul started chasing David from place to place. At one point, they came to a large rock formation. David and his men were on one side, and Saul's army was on the other. If Saul had gone a little farther, he would've seen David and been able to get him.

Just then a messenger went to Saul and said, "Hurry! You need to come back. The Philistines have invaded our land!" So Saul had to retreat in order to save the nation from the Philistines. After that, that rock formation was called "Rock of Escape."

David moved his men to the canyons of En-gedi. After Saul was done fighting the Philistines, he heard that David was at En-gedi. He selected 3,000 of his best soldiers and took them toward En-gedi.

Along the way, Saul stopped, and went into a cave to relieve himself. He didn't know David and his army were in the back of that cave. His men were thrilled that the Lord had given Saul to David. They whispered, "Kill him!"

Instead, David quietly got close and cut off the corner of Saul's robe. Instantly, he felt guilty for doing this. He said to his men, "Hear what I'm saying. God anointed Saul to be king over Israel. Even my little finger won't hurt him." He held his men back so Saul could leave the cave peacefully.

As the king was walking away, David came

out and yelled, "My lord the king!" Saul stopped and looked back. David was standing there. He said, "Who are you listening to? Who told you I wanted to hurt you? Look at the corner of your robe. It's missing because I'm holding it in my hand. God gave your life to me when you came into this cave. My men told me to kill you, but I didn't because you're my king. You're the Lord's anointed, and I would never hurt you.

"Listen to what I'm saying. I haven't sinned against you. Still you're trying to kill me. I'm asking the Lord to judge between us, and I know he will make things right. But I will never hurt you."

When Saul heard this, he broke down and cried. He said, "Oh my son David, you're more righteous than I. You have only returned good for all the bad I've done to you. How is it that the Lord gave me to you, and you didn't kill me? Who's heard of such a thing?

"Now I know it's true. You'll be king over Israel. Oh David my son, swear to me by the Lord. When you're king, don't kill my descendants. Don't eliminate my father's name from our tribe."

So David made that vow to Saul. The king then took his men and returned back home. David went back into hiding.

About that same time, the prophet Samuel died, and everyone in Israel mourned his death.

David and his men lived in the same area as a rich herdsman named Nabal, a descendant of Caleb. He was known to be mean and harsh, but he had a beautiful wife who was much more practical in how she dealt with others. Her name was Abigail.

Having David's army in the area was a great advantage to Nabal because foreign raiders didn't come and steal from his herds. Still, Nabal didn't invite David and his men to his annual sheep-shearing feast. So David sent 10 young men with a message. "Peace to you and yours. I respect you as my own father. Your shepherds will tell you that we have protected your flocks over the entire time we have lived in this area. Instead of us coming to your feast, please send some food and provisions with these young men."

Nabal said, "I don't know David. I'm definitely not his father. Slaves are always running away from their masters. Tell him to go back to where he came from. I'm not going to take food away from my servants and give it to strangers."

The young men went back and told David everything that was said. David said to his men, "Put on your swords. I protected this man's goods, and he repays me with insults. Not one man in his camp will be alive in the morning."

Meanwhile, one of Nabal's servants went and told Abigail what was said and done. He said, "David's men were 'a wall' to us while we were out in the fields. They protected us night and day. We didn't lose one animal during this time. Yet, your husband insulted them and refused to help them. You must think of something because your husband has offended an army that can kill all of us."

Without telling her husband, Abigail gathered provisions for David's men. She got 200 loaves of

bread, 2 wine skins, 5 butchered sheep, a bushel of roasted grain, 100 clusters of raisins, and 200 cakes of pressed figs. She put all of these things on some donkeys and headed down the road.

As she rounded a corner, she saw David's men coming toward her. She got off the donkey and ran to him. She knelt down with her face to the ground and said, "It's my fault your men were mistreated. I would have treated them well if I had known they were coming. Forgive my husband. His name means 'fool,' and that's how he acts. Please accept these gifts of food."

"It's the Lord who's kept you from getting revenge today. He has always fought your battles for you, and he always will. When he makes you king, you'll want a clear conscience about this day."

David said, "It was God who sent you here today. Your wisdom has kept me from shedding blood and taking revenge on a man who offended me. If you hadn't come, every male in your camp would have died." He then accepted Abigail's gifts.

She went back home to find Nabal feasting like a king. She didn't tell him what happened. He got drunk and fell asleep.

In the morning, she waited until he was sober, and then told him what she did the day before. He immediately had a heart attack and lay in a coma for 10 days. Then the Lord killed him.

David heard about his death and said, "Praise the Lord! God kept me from doing evil, and he punished Nabal for the evil that he did."

David then sent a message to Abigail asking if she would become his wife. She agreed and went to him.

Meanwhile, Saul gave his daughter Michal to become the wife of another.

94 Sparing God's Anointed

David

I Samuel 26 – 27

Saul once again took 3,000 of his best warriors and went after David. That night they set up camp beside the road. David heard where they were, so he went there during the night.

Saul was asleep in the middle of the camp with his men circled around him. Next to him was Abner, the commander of the army. The Lord caused a deep sleep to come over all of them.

David took one of his men and walked right up to where Saul and Abner were sleeping. The man with David said, "Today God gave you your enemy. Say the word and I'll thrust him through with this spear and pin him to the ground."

David said, "No. God anointed him king of Israel. Only God can take that away. He has appointed a time for Saul to die, and we will accept that. I'll never touch a man anointed by God."

David took the king's water jug and the spear that was stuck in the ground next to Saul's head. They left the camp without anyone waking up.

When they were at a safe distance on the top of the next hill, David yelled at Saul's camp. "Abner, listen to me."

Abner woke up and then yelled back. "How dare you wake up the king. Who are you?"

David said, "Abner, you're the best soldier in Israel. Yet, you failed to protect the king, God's anointed. Men came into the camp while you were sleeping. Look around. Where is the king's spear and water jug? You should be executed."

Saul yelled back, "My son David, is that your

voice I hear?"

"Yes, my king. It's my voice. What have I done to cause you to hunt me down like a criminal? Whoever turned you against me should be cursed. They're making me leave the land that is blessed of God."

Saul said, "Oh, my son David. Once again you had a chance to kill me and you didn't. It's now clear to me that I've sinned. I've been a fool. Come back to me. I won't hurt you."

David said, "Yes, it's true. The Lord gave you to me, but I knew that I wasn't to touch His anointed king. May God value my life and spare me, just like I value your life. I want him to see that I'm righteous and loyal. Send a young man over here to get your spear."

Saul said, "My son, you are blessed of God. You will do great things for the Lord." With that, King Saul went back home.

David said to his men, "Eventually Saul will find me, and when he does he'll kill me. I must go to a place that is out of his reach. What better place than with the king of the Philistines?"

So David took his 600 men to Gath. All of them took their families with them. David said to the king, "Please give me a small town nearby. I don't deserve to live in the same town with so great a king." So he gave David the town of Ziklag. David and his men stayed there for a year and four months. The king of the Philistines learned to trust David as one of his own countrymen.

95 Staying by the Stuff

David

I Samuel 29 – 30

As the Philistines started making plans to invade Israel, their king said to David, “You’ll march with me. I want you and your men to be my personal bodyguards.”

David said, “Good, now you’ll be able to see what my men and I can do.”

All the military units went to a place where they could present themselves in review as they prepared for war. The Philistine commanders were shocked when they saw David and his men. They said to the king, “You can’t bring those Hebrews to fight with us!”

He said, “David defected from Israel, and has been faithful to me ever since. I have no reason to doubt his loyalty.”

The commanders got mad. “Send him away! He’s the one they sing about. ‘Saul has killed his thousands; David his tens of thousands.’ He might suddenly turn on us in the middle of a battle. That would be a good way for him to regain Saul’s favor.”

The king went to David. “You’re an honorable man, and I personally want you by my side in battle. But the commanders don’t trust you. Therefore I have to send you back to Ziklag.”

David said, “What have I done to deserve this? I’ve been faithful to you from the first day I came here.”

The king said, “I know you have, but my hands are tied. You must leave in the morning.”

So David and his men left. When they got back to Ziklag, they found that foreign raiders had come and burnt down the town. They hadn’t killed anyone, but simply took all the people with them. This included all the wives, sons, and daughters of David and his men.

The men cried until they could cry no more. Some of the men wanted to stone David, but God

stood by him. He prayed to the Lord, “Should I chase after these raiders? Will I catch them?”

The Lord said, “Go after them. You’ll catch them and get everything back that was taken from you.”

So David took his 600 men and went after the invaders. At one point, they stopped because 200 of his men were too exhausted to go farther. So the 400 left their supplies with the 200 and continued on.

They came upon a slave who had belonged to the raiders, but had been left behind because he had gotten sick. He hadn’t eaten anything for three days. David’s men gave him food and water and helped revive him.

David said, “Will you lead us to the raiders?”

He said, “I’ll lead you to them if you swear you won’t kill me, and you won’t give me back to them.” David agreed.

The slave led David’s men directly to the raiders. They were celebrating how much plunder they had gotten from the Philistines and the Israelites. Without warning, David’s men attacked and quickly killed most of them. Only a few got away. David’s men got everything back they had lost, plus all the plunder the raiders had taken from other cities.

When they got back to the 200 men, some of the 400 said, “They didn’t go with us into battle. So they only get their wives and children back. They don’t get any of the extra plunder we took.”

David said, “No! That’s wrong. God gave us a great victory today. We’ll share equally with those who stayed back with our supplies.” So that became the law of Israel from that day on.

David and his men went back to Ziklag. He then sent some of the plunder back to various cities in Israel.

96 Witch of Endor

David

I Samuel 28

The Philistines started their massive invasion of Israel. They entered the land and set up camp. Saul gathered his army and made preparations for war. His body shook with fear when he saw how large the Philistine army was.

He asked the Lord for guidance, but God didn't talk to him. All was silent. There wasn't a dream, or a priest, or a prophet that gave him a message from the Lord.

He wanted to talk to Samuel, but he was dead and Saul had removed everyone who claimed to be able to speak to the dead. Still he desperately wanted to talk to Samuel. He said to his servants, "Find a woman who can talk to the spirits of those who have died. I need to find out what's going to happen."

They said, "There is a woman at Endor. She says she can talk to the dead."

That night Saul put on a disguise, took two servants, and went to the woman's house. He said to her, "I want you to bring up a spirit for me."

She said, "Are you setting a trap for me? You know King Saul will kill anyone who does that."

He said, "Listen to me carefully. As sure as God lives, you'll not suffer for doing this."

She said, "Who do you want me to bring up from the dead?"

"Bring back Samuel. I want to talk to him."

Suddenly the woman saw Samuel. She screamed and then she turned and yelled at the king. "You tricked me! You're King Saul!"

He said, "Don't worry about that. Now tell me, what do you see?"

"I see a spirit coming up from the ground."

"What does he look like?"

"It's an old man wearing a robe."

Saul knew it was Samuel so he fell down with his face to the ground. The prophet said, "Why are you disturbing me? What do you want?"

"Oh, I'm in trouble and I don't know what to do. God won't talk to me, and the Philistines have invaded the land with a massive army. So I called on you. Please tell me what to do."

Samuel said, "The Lord is now your enemy, so why do you think I'd help you? I've already told you what he was going to do. Well, he's finally doing it. He's ripping the kingship out of your hands and giving it to your neighbor David. You didn't obey God. You refused to do what he told you to do. Therefore, tomorrow you and your sons will join me. Israel will be handed over to the Philistines."

Saul was terrified when he heard this and stayed on the ground. He was weak because he hadn't eaten anything for over a day. The woman said, "I'll make some food. You need to regain your strength before you leave."

At first the king refused, but his servants agreed with the woman. Finally he got up and sat on the bed while she prepared the meal. She killed a fatted calf, cooked it, and baked some bread. Saul and his servants ate the meal, and then left into the night.

97 Death of Saul & Jonathan

David

I Samuel 31 & I Chronicles 10

The war between the Philistines and Israel was fierce. Many Israelites died and the others ran from the battlefield. Three of Saul's sons were killed, including Jonathan.

An arrow hit Saul and he knew he was about to die. He turned to the man who carried his armor. "Pull out your sword and kill me. If these pagans find me alive, they'll torture me until I'm dead."

The armor-bearer refused to kill his king, so Saul fell on his own sword and died. When his armor-bearer saw this, he fell on his sword and died.

A man came along who was a soldier for Israel, but from another country. He saw that Saul was dead, so he took the king's crown off his head so he could take it to David.

When the people who lived in that area saw the total destruction of Saul's army, they left their cities and ran for their lives. The Philistines entered those cities and took them over.

The next day, they went back into the field to plunder the dead bodies. That was when they found Saul and his sons. They cut off Saul's head and hung his body from a city wall. They then hung the bodies of his sons next to him. They sent his armor back to their country and put it in the temple of their gods. News of Saul's death spread throughout their country.

Back when Saul became king, his first act was to rescue a city being threatened by the Ammonites. They had said they were going to gouge out the right eye of everyone in the city. When that city heard about Saul's body hanging from a wall, they traveled all night to get to it. They took it down from the wall, as well as the bodies of his sons. Once they buried them, they fasted for seven days.

The man with Saul's crown went to Ziklag to tell David about the death of King Saul and his sons. David said, "How do you know that Saul and Jonathan are dead?"

A man said, "I was walking through the battlefield when the king saw me. He yelled, 'Come over here and kill me with your sword. These ungodly dogs will be here in a few minutes. If they find me alive, they'll torture me.' So I did as I was told. I took my sword and killed him. I then brought his crown to you."

David ripped his clothes and cried out in pain. He and his men mourned the death of Saul and Jonathan. David then said to the man who came with the news. "You've admitted that you killed the Lord's anointed." He turned to one of his men. "Pull out your sword and kill this man."

David continued to mourn the death of King Saul and Jonathan.

II Samuel 2 & I Chronicles 2:16, 12:22

While David lived in the Philistine town of Ziklag, men from all the tribes of Israel kept coming to join his forces. They came day after day until he had a great army. After Saul's death, David asked the Lord if he should go back to a town in Judah. The Lord said, "Go to Hebron."

So David and his men took their families and moved to all the towns around Hebron. The men of Judah went to David and made him king of their tribe.

All the other tribes followed the leadership of Abner, the commander of Saul's army. He took Ish-bosheth, a son of King Saul, and made him king over all of Israel except Judah.

This caused a war between these two sides. Abner led his men out to face David's army led by Joab, the son of David's sister. The two armies met on opposite sides of a pool. Abner yelled over to Joab. "Let's each send out 12 men to fight for us." So each side sent 12 men out to battle. All 24 men were skilled at battle, so each man killed his opponent. All 24 men died.

With that, both sides went into battle and Joab was victorious. After the fierce fighting, Abner and his men ran away. One of the brothers of Joab ran after Abner. The young man was an extremely fast runner, but he wasn't as skilled in fighting as Abner.

Abner saw Joab's brother gaining on him. He yelled back, "Go after one of my soldiers

who is more like you. Fight it out and see what happens."

But the young man didn't listen to this advice. He kept gaining on Abner. Again he warned him. "Don't make me do this. After killing you, I'd never be able to face your brother again."

Still, the young man refused to listen and continued on. When he was right behind Abner, the skilled warrior turned and thrust his spear through the stomach of the young man. He fell to the ground and died.

The army of Joab continued to chase after the men of Abner. By sunset, reinforcements came and joined Abner's men. He yelled to Joab. "Let's end this battle. If we keep fighting, it'll only increase the bitterness. Tell your men to stop running after their brothers."

Joab yelled back, "You're right! We would have fought all night if you hadn't said something. So he blew the ram's horn and his men stopped. Both armies marched back to their cities, and Joab buried his brother in their family tomb in Bethlehem.

The war continued between Judah and Israel. The people of Judah followed David as their king, and Ish-bosheth was king over all the other tribes. It was a long, bitter struggle. David's rule became stronger and stronger, and the rule of Ish-bosheth became weaker.

99 David Made King

David

II Samuel 3 – 4 & I Chronicles 11:1-3

The kingdom of Ish-bosheth continued to grow weaker. Still, Abner's influence grew stronger. One day the king said to him, "Why did you sleep with my father's concubine?"

Abner got angry and said, "How dare you! My loyalty to your father is the only thing that has kept me from handing you over to David. Now you're accusing me of sinning with this woman. That's it! I'm going to establish David as king over all of Israel." Ish-bosheth was speechless.

Abner sent a message to David. "I'm ready to give you the kingdom of Israel. Let's work out the agreements."

David said, "One thing has to happen first before I'll work out any agreement with you. If you come, you must bring my wife Michal, Saul's daughter. Don't come without her."

Guards went and got Michal, and took her away from her new husband. As they walked down the road, the husband followed behind them, crying as he walked. Finally Abner turned and yelled, "Go home!" So the man turned and went home.

Abner got the elders of Israel to agree that David was king of Israel. He then went and told David. Together they had a banquet to celebrate the news.

Abner then said, "I'll go and make the final arrangements for your coronation. Then you'll be king over the whole nation." So David sent him away in peace.

Joab had been away while all of this was happening. He returned just after Abner had left. He went to David and said, "Why did you let Abner escape? Don't you realize that all of this is just a trick to entrap you?"

Then, without the king knowing it, Joab sent a message to Abner. "Please, come back to Hebron." When Abner got back, Joab asked him to step aside so they could have a private conversation. Once they did, Joab stabbed Abner in the stomach. He fell to the ground and died.

David was devastated when he heard about what had happened. He put a curse on Joab and his descendants. The king knew that Joab had killed Abner to revenge his brother's death. Still, he made him and his men rip their clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourn Abner.

David then walked behind the funeral procession, and cried openly at the gravesite. He wouldn't eat anything for the rest of the day. He said to his soldiers, "A great leader of Israel has died today."

All of Israel took note of what David did, and they were convinced that he had nothing to do with Abner's death.

Two men went into the house of Ish-bosheth and killed him while he was in bed taking an afternoon nap. They cut off his head and took it to King David saying, "Your enemy is dead."

David said, "When I was in Ziklag, a man came and told me he was merciful to King Saul by killing him before the Philistines could torture him. He thought he was bringing me good news, but I had him put to death. Now you come and tell me you killed the king of Israel while he was sleeping in his bed." David had both men killed. He then had their hands and feet cut off and their bodies were hung near the pool of Hebron.

All the tribes of Israel met in Hebron and made David their king. He was 30 years old.

100 David's Mighty Men

David

II Samuel 5, 23:13-23 & I Chronicles 11

David had developed a group of 30 men that were the core of his fighting force. Joab's brother led the group because of his bravery.

All 30 of these fighting men were proven warriors with skill and courage. But the mightiest of them were an inspiration to the entire army—they were called “the Three”. One of the Three personally killed 800 soldiers in a battle. Another stood firm when the rest of the army retreated. While they fell back, he turned and attacked the Philistines by himself. He fought so hard and so long that his hand stuck to his sword. The others finally came back, but only to plunder the dead bodies around him.

Before David became king, there was a time when he and his men were in hiding. He became thirsty and said, “Oh, I long for the water from the well in Bethlehem!” At that time, Bethlehem was in the hands of the Philistines.

The Three heard David longing for that water. They slipped out of the camp and went to Bethlehem. They crept into the city and got water from the well. They were then able to get safely back out of the Philistine area.

When they brought the water to David, he was shocked at what they had done. He said, “I won't drink this water! This is precious like the blood of the men who risked their lives to get it.” He stood before the Lord and poured it out as an offering to God.

All of David's men remained loyal to him after he became king. God was with him and established his kingdom over Israel.

Jerusalem was a walled city on Mount Zion controlled by the Jebusites. David said to his men, “Whoever is able to conquer this city will become the commander of my army.” Joab conquered it by getting inside the walls through the water tunnels. So he became the commander of the army.

David renamed the town, “The City of David,” and from that time on it was the center of his government.

When the Philistines heard about him becoming king of Israel, they decided to fight against him. David asked the Lord, “Should I go fight them?”

The Lord said, “Go. I will give them to you.” So David went and defeated them.

Later, they invaded Israel again. So he asked the Lord, “Should I go fight them?”

The Lord said, “Go, but this time circle around behind them. Put your camp in a grove of trees. Wait until you hear the sound of marching in the top of the trees. Then you'll know that I have marched ahead of you.

David did exactly what the Lord told him to do. He defeated the Philistines and totally ran them out of the land.

101 Moving the Ark

David

II Samuel 6 & I Chronicles 13, 15 – 17

The Ark of God had been ignored during Saul's reign as king. So David decided to bring it to his new capital. He sent a message throughout Israel inviting them to come join him for this great event.

The people agreed that this was the right thing to do. Unfortunately, they didn't follow God's instructions on how the Ark was to be moved. Instead they put it on a new cart and pulled it with a team of oxen.

As the cart moved toward Jerusalem, the king and the people walked along celebrating. They sang songs, and played instruments.

Suddenly one of the oxen stumbled and shook the cart. A man named Uzzah reached out to steady the Ark. The moment he touched it, God struck him and he fell to the ground and died.

David was shocked and confused. He didn't know why God had done this. He needed time to think about what to do, so he put the Ark of God in a nearby home. It stayed there for three months. During that time, the Lord blessed the family that lived there.

David heard how God was blessing the family, so he once again decided to bring the Ark to

Jerusalem. This time he told the Levites to purify themselves and follow the instructions Moses gave on how the Ark of God was to be carried.

The people of Israel were excited as it entered Jerusalem. They made sacrifices to the Lord, shouted for joy, and blew trumpets. David took off his outer coat and danced with all of his might. Everyone rejoiced together.

Michal looked out of the window and was shocked to see her husband leaping around in front of the Ark. She thought it was disgusting.

David placed the Ark in a special tent he had prepared for it. Sacrifices and burnt offerings were made to the Lord. David then blessed the people, and gave them food to eat.

Michal confronted her husband when he went home. She said, "What you did was shameful. You took off your royal coat and jumped around like a fool in front of common slave girls."

David said, "I humbled myself before the Lord. And yes, I'll do it again. Those common people you talked about will honor me for the rest of their lives."

Michal lived her entire life without ever having children.

102 Building an Empire

David

II Samuel 7 – 9 & I Chronicles 17 – 18

David established his kingdom and defended it from the nations around him. Finally there was peace in Israel. He then started thinking about building a Temple for the Lord. One day he said to the prophet of God, “I live in a beautiful palace, while the Ark of God remains in a tent!”

The prophet agreed, “Go ahead and build the Temple. God will be pleased.”

That night God spoke to the prophet and gave him a message for David. The Lord said, “You were following sheep when I made you king of Israel. I’ve been with you all these years, and I’ve given you victory over your enemies. Now I’ll establish your name among the greatest men who’ll ever live. Your royal family line will last forever.

“Still, I won’t allow you to build my house. I’ve made you a man of war and many have died because of you. Your son will be a man of peace, and he will build my house. I’ll be a father to him and establish his kingdom.”

King David was content when he heard this message, and humbled himself before the Lord. From that day he started looking at the nations around him. He invaded the Philistines and took back the cities and lands they had taken from Israel. He then turned to the Moabites and Edomites and brought them into submission to Israel.

He turned his armies north and defeated nation after nation. Jerusalem became prosperous as gold, silver, bronze, and horses were brought to the city. David set up garrisons in all of these countries to maintain control over

them. He used their men to build up his army. His name became feared and honored throughout that part of the world.

David dedicated to the Lord all that he gained. He brought justice to the people, and taught them righteousness.

One day David asked his servants, “Are there any members of Saul’s family still alive? I want to show them kindness just like Jonathan showed kindness to me.”

A servant named Ziba spoke up and told him about Mephibosheth, who was Jonathan’s son. He was five years old when his nurse heard about the death of Saul and Jonathan. She panicked and ran with the boy on her shoulders. He fell to the ground and his feet were hurt. Ever since, he had been lame in both feet.

David sent for him. He came in and bowed down on the ground. He said, “I am your servant.”

David said, “Don’t be afraid. I’m returning to you the kindness that your father gave to me. I’m giving you all the fields that belonged to Saul. Also, from now on, you’ll eat at my table.”

Mephibosheth once again bowed down and said, “I’m nothing but a dead dog. Why should you care about me?”

The king said to Ziba, “You and your sons are to work the lands that I have just given to Mephibosheth. You’re now his servants.”

So Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem and ate at the king’s table. He became like one of David’s sons.

II Samuel 10 & I Chronicles 19 – 20

In all of David's conquest, he didn't attack the Ammonites because the king had been kind to him when he was running from Saul. One day, the king of the Ammonites died and his son ruled in his place.

David sent a group of men with a message of comfort to the new king. When the men got there, the Ammonite leaders said to their king, "These men aren't here to show David's concern for you. They aren't here to show respect for your father. They're spying on us. They're scouting out our city to see where we're weak."

So the new king took the men and shaved off half of each man's beard. He then cut off their robes, exposing the lower half of their bodies. The men went back to Israel deeply humiliated.

David heard about this great insult and sent word to his men. "Stay in Jericho until your beards grow back. Then return to us."

The Ammonites finally realized what they had done. They had made David extremely angry. So they started building up their army. They even hired 33,000 soldiers from other countries.

David sent Joab and his army to fight against

the Ammonites. When they were in place, the Ammonite army moved to a position where they were on one side of the Israelites, with the foreign soldiers on the other. Joab realized he was in between the two, with front lines on both sides. Therefore he split the army. He selected his best troops to fight with him and attack the foreign soldiers. Everyone else was to fight the Ammonites under the command of his brother.

Joab said to his brother, "Both of us will be ready to help the other if there's a need. Be brave and fight hard. We must protect our people and the cities of God. May the Lord's will be done."

The battle was decisive. Joab and his elite troops hit the foreign armies so hard that they turned and ran. When the Ammonites saw this, they retreated back into their walled cities. With this, Joab took his army back to Jerusalem.

The foreign army reorganized and came back to fight again. This time, David went with his men and totally defeated them, killing over 40,000 men. Those who escaped went back to their country and never returned again. David waited until spring to finish defeating the Ammonites.

II Samuel 11

When it was spring, it was time to once again attack the Ammonites. Normally David would go with his men, but he decided to stay home.

After taking a nap one afternoon, he walked along the sundeck that was on the roof of the palace. From there, he saw a beautiful woman taking a bath. He sent for a servant and asked, "Who is that woman?"

"Oh, her name is Bathsheba. She is the wife of Uriah, one of your 30 fighting men."

David sent for her, so she came to the palace. He slept with her that night. In time she realized she was expecting a baby, and she knew it was from the night she spent with the king. She sent word to David that she was pregnant.

He decided he had to hide what he had done. So he immediately sent a message to Joab. "Send Uriah to me."

The soldier arrived and the king asked him, "How is the battle going? Is Joab well?" After Uriah gave a report, the king told him he could go home to his wife before going back to the battle. He even sent a gift for the couple.

Uriah left the king, but didn't go home. He slept the night at the door of the palace with all of the king's servants. In the morning, the king called him in and asked, "Why didn't you go home?"

"No, I wouldn't do that. The Ark of God is on the field of battle. The army of Israel sleeps in tents. Joab and his officers are on the field. I can't go to my house and live in ease. I can't eat and drink with my wife while they are sacrificing for our nation."

David said, "Stay here one more day, and then I'll send you back to the battle."

The king then asked Uriah to eat and drink with him. During the course of the evening, David got him drunk. Still, he didn't go home, but slept on a cot at the palace doors.

The next morning David wrote a letter to his commander. "Put Uriah in the front where the fighting is the most fierce. At an assigned moment, have your men fall back, leaving him to die."

The king gave the sealed letter to Uriah, and told him to take it to Joab. He went back to the battle and gave the letter to his commander. Joab obeyed the order and put Uriah at the exact place that was the most dangerous. At the assigned moment, everyone else fell back and Uriah was killed. Bathsheba heard that her husband died in battle, and she mourned his death.

Joab continued his battle against the Ammonite capital city. Finally he broke through and captured their water supply. He sent word to David. "Come quickly! Lead the army into the city and capture it so you'll get the glory."

David went and led the army to victory over the Ammonite cities. He had the Ammonite people totally tear down their walls and all of their buildings. He took everything of value, and put the people to work making bricks.

David then went back to Jerusalem. Once Bathsheba's time of mourning was over, he made her his wife. Soon afterwards, she gave birth to their son. Only God knew about their sin, and he was not pleased.

105 Nathan's Story

David

II Samuel 12 & Psalm 51

Only God knew about David's sin with Bathsheba. He sent the prophet Nathan, who stood before the king and told this story: "There were two men who lived in the same city. One was rich. He had a large herd of cattle and a large flock of sheep. The other was poor. He only had one small lamb, but she was like a daughter to him. The lamb grew up with his children as a pet. She ate from their bowls, drank from their cups, and even slept with them at night.

The rich man had a friend come to visit from a far off city. When it came time for a meal, the rich man didn't want to use one of his own sheep. Instead he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for his guest."

David became angry. He stood up and shouted, "That's disgusting! How could he be so heartless? He deserves to die. He'll give the poor man four lambs for what he's done."

Nathan pointed at David and said, "You are the man! The Lord says, 'I made you king over Israel and gave you all you have. I would've given you more if you had asked for it. So why have you despised me and done this evil? You killed Uriah with an Ammonite sword, and took his wife. Because of this, the sword will never leave your house. You did all of this in secret, but I'll judge you openly.' "

David broke down before Nathan. "I have sinned against the Lord."

Later, he wrote this prayer:

"Oh God, have mercy upon me.

Hold me tight within your love.

In your compassion, remove my rebellion.

Wash my guilt, and remove

the stain of my sin.

I know I'm rebellious.

My sin haunts me day and night.

You're the one I fought against.

This evil is against you.

You're right to be angry and throw me away.

I've been this way all my life.

But I know you want to teach me.

Go deep inside of me and put wisdom there.

Use harsh cleansers until
everything is absolutely clean.

Replace my depression with joy.

Remove my sin and give me
a clean new heart.

Give me a determined spirit,
and restore the joy of my salvation.

If you do these things, I'll teach others about
your ways."

Nathan went to David and said, "The Lord has heard your prayer and has taken away your sin. You'll not die, but the child will die because of how you treated the Lord."

Suddenly, the child became sick. David begged God to spare him. The king wouldn't eat, but spent day and night on the ground pleading with God. His servants tried to get him to eat, but he refused.

On the seventh day, the child died. The servants were afraid to tell David. They had watched him agonize while the child was still alive. They thought he would do something desperate when he found out the child was dead.

He saw them whispering to one another. He said, "Is the child dead?"

"Yes, he is dead."

So David got up off the ground, took a bath, and put on clean clothes. He worshipped in the house of the Lord and then sent for something to eat.

The servants were amazed. He explained it to them. "While the child was still alive, I pleaded with the Lord in case he would be gracious and let the child live. But now that he's dead, there's nothing I can do. He can't come back to me, but I can go to him."

Later, Bathsheba gave birth to another son, and David named him Solomon. The Lord loved Solomon, and said he would be the next king of Israel.

 *II Samuel 13*

Amnon was David's oldest son—and his favorite. Amnon had everything he wanted, except one thing. He wanted his half-sister Tamar. She was beautiful and a virgin. He thought about her all the time. He literally got sick wishing he could go to bed with her.

He had a cousin who was known to be crafty. Once he heard how Amnon felt, he came up with a plan. He said, "Lay in your bed as if you're sick. When the king asks about you, tell him you want Tamar to come make some bread in your room. Tell him you want her to feed it to you."

Amnon followed this plan, so the king asked Tamar to go help her brother with some food. While she was there, Amnon sent all the servants out of the room. As she handed him some food, he grabbed her and said, "Get in bed with me!"

She begged him, "No, please. Stop this. This is a horrible sin. You're putting me to shame. Ask the king and he'll give me to you. He'll give you anything."

But Amnon wouldn't listen. He pulled her into bed and raped her. As soon as he was done, he no longer wanted her. In fact, he hated her. He said, "Get out of here!"

She yelled, "No! Don't throw me away. What you've done is wrong, but sending me away is worse."

He shouted for his servant. "Take this woman out of here and lock the door behind her."

After Tamar was put out, she tore her clothes, the ones that showed she was a virgin. She put ashes on her head and cried as she walked along.

Her brother was Absalom. As soon as he

heard what happened, he vowed to kill Amnon. But he knew it had to be planned out carefully. So, he had his sister move into his house. He told her, "For now, try to put it out of your mind. Don't say anything about it."

From that day on, Tamar was sad and moody, and Absalom totally stopped speaking to Amnon. The king was furious when he heard about the rape. Still he didn't do anything about it.

Two years later, Absalom held a sheep shearing party and invited all of David's sons. He made sure Amnon would be there. Absalom provided a large banquet for the occasion. Everyone had plenty to eat and drink.

Absalom told the servants to watch Amnon carefully. He said, "Wait until he's had plenty to drink, then kill him. Don't be afraid. You won't get into trouble. You're simply following my orders."

They did exactly as they were told. When the time was right, they killed Amnon. The other sons ran for their lives.

News of this quickly got back to the king. He was told Absalom had killed all of the king's sons. David ripped his clothes and fell to the ground. Finally someone told him that it wasn't true. Only Amnon had died. They said, "Absalom has been planning this since his sister was raped."

Finally, the other sons of David came down the road and went before the king. Everyone cried together.

Absalom ran to a neighboring country to hide from his father. David grieved for Amnon for three years.

107 Absalom's Return

David

II Samuel 14

After three years, David finally stopped mourning for Amnon. Then he started to miss his son Absalom. Still, he wouldn't ask him to return from hiding.

Joab noticed this, so he hired a woman who was good at acting. He told her to go to the king, and he gave her the words she should say. She went before David dressed in clothes of mourning. She bowed before him and said, "Help me, my king."

David said, "Tell me your problem."

"I only had two sons after my husband died. Recently they got into a fight and no one stopped them. Soon, one killed the other one. Now my family says I'm to give them the only son I have left. They say he must die because he's a murderer. My king, this would remove my husband's name from the earth."

David said, "You can go home. I'll take care of this for you. If anyone says this isn't right, bring them to me."

She said, "Oh, please swear by God that my son won't be killed for what he did."

David said, "I swear it by the Lord who lives. Your son won't die for this."

She said, "May I ask you one more question?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"I knew you'd give me a right judgment because the wisdom of God is in you. You clearly see what is good and what is evil. That's why this judgment was good.

"So, why don't you follow your own judgments? You're wronging the nation of God by not bringing back your son. We're all going

to die someday, but God is the God of life. He wants us to be reconciled to one another."

David said, "You asked me a question, now I have one for you. Listen to me carefully. You must tell me the truth. Did Joab send you here to talk to me?"

She said, "My lord the king has the wisdom of an angel of the Lord. No one can get anything around him. Yes, your servant Joab told me what to say, but it's only because he loves you and wants what's best for you."

The king called for Joab and said, "Go and bring Absalom back in peace, but I don't want to see him." So Joab went and brought Absalom back to Jerusalem. He was allowed to live in his own house.

Two years went by and he still wasn't allowed to see the king. Finally he decided to ask Joab to arrange a meeting between him and his father. He sent for Joab, but he didn't come. He sent for him a second time, but he still didn't come. Finally Absalom sent his servants to set a fire to Joab's barley field.

Joab went and yelled at Absalom. "Why did you set fire to my field?"

"I had to get your attention. Now tell me. Why did you bring me back to Jerusalem? I was better off where I was. Go to the king and arrange a meeting between the two of us. I want to see him even if he kills me."

So Joab arranged a time when the king and his son could meet. Absalom went before his father and bowed down with his face to the ground. David got up and went and kissed his son.

108 Absalom's Revolt

David

II Samuel 15 – 17:23

Absalom was a handsome man with beautiful thick hair. He was also ambitious and wanted to be king. To impress people, he rode in a chariot with 50 men running ahead of him.

In the morning, he stood by the road that went to the city gate. He honored anyone who bowed down to him. If he saw someone going to see the king about a problem, he asked, "What city are you from?" If they were from one of the northern tribes, he'd say, "I understand your problem. It's too bad the king won't listen to you. If I were king, I'd make sure you were heard."

Soon, the northern tribes of Israel became loyal to Absalom. When the time was right, he sent messengers to them saying, "Listen for the ram's horn. When you hear it, shout, 'Absalom is king!'"

The conspiracy spread quickly. More and more people started supporting Absalom. He left the city and enlisted the help of Ahithophel, one of David's advisors. Both David and Absalom knew that Ahithophel's wisdom was a gift from the Lord.

David didn't hear about this until it was too late. By then he knew his life was in danger, so he and his servants quickly left the city. He took off his shoes, covered his head, and openly cried as he walked up the Mount of Olives. People came and cried along the path.

Once he arrived on top of the Mount, he saw Hushai, one of his friends and advisors. David said to him, "Don't come with me. Go tell Absalom that you'll serve him just like you served me. Advise my son against Ahithophel's counsel if you can."

They then set up a way Hushai could send David information about Absalom's plans. Hushai returned to Jerusalem just as Absalom and a large crowd were entering the city. Ahithophel was at his side. Hushai bowed before Absalom and said, "Long live the king!"

Absalom said, "Why didn't you go with your friend?"

Hushai said, "I'll serve the one the Lord and the people have chosen. I'll serve you just as I served your father."

As David was leaving, he passed by the

home of a man named Shimei. He was from the family of Saul. Shimei started throwing stones at David and yelling, "You deserve this, you filthy murderer! God is judging you for what you did to King Saul. Go hide in a hole, where you belong."

A soldier pulled out his sword and said, "This filthy dog is dead! I'm going to cut off his head!"

David turned to him, "Why would you do that? It was the Lord who said to him, 'Shimei, go curse David!' Why would we fight God at a time like this? Maybe the Lord will see what I'm going through and have pity on me."

So David and his men continued down the road with Shimei on a ridge above them. He kept yelling curses and throwing stones and dirt at David.

Once Absalom was in the palace, Ahithophel said, "Allow me to take 12,000 men and chase after David tonight. I'll attack him while he's weak and tired. This will cause his people to panic and they'll scatter. I'll only kill the king, and bring all the others back to you. We'll have peace when people see that you've only killed the king and allowed everyone else to live."

This proposal seemed good to Absalom, but he said, "Send for Hushai. I want to hear his advice."

When Hushai heard this plan, he said, "Oh no! Don't do that. You know your father and his men. They're warriors. Right now they're like a wild bear, robbed of her cubs. Your father knows how to fight. He's probably hiding in one of the caves, waiting for your men to come out. If you act now, some of your men will get killed. Once the people hear that, they'll say that David is slaughtering your forces. Everyone will believe it because they know your father is a skilled warrior.

"Here's what you should do. Gather a great army from all over Israel. Personally lead them into battle. Attack David wherever you find him. With a massive army, you can make sure he doesn't escape. If any city hides him, totally destroy that city and don't leave one stone on top of another."

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109 Absalom's Defeat

David

II Samuel 17:24 – 19:8

Continued from the previous page

The Lord caused Absalom to ignore Ahithophel's advice, even though it was better. So Absalom said, "We'll follow the advice of Hushai."

When Ahithophel heard this, he knew that David would win the war. So he went to his hometown, set his affairs in order, and hung himself.

Because of Hushai advice, David was prepared for war by the time Absalom had gathered a large army and chased after him. People of that area had given him supplies and Joab had organized the army.

David laid out a plan of action to fight the army of Absalom. He said to his men, "I'll lead you into battle."

They said, "No! Stay in the city. If one of us dies, no one will care. Half of us could die, and no one would even notice. But you're worth 10,000 soldiers. Stay in the city."

So the king stood beside the gate while his troops marched out. He said to Joab, loud enough so everyone could hear, "For my sake, be merciful with my son, Absalom."

David's army marched into battle and defeated the army of Israel. It turned into a slaughter, with over 20,000 men dead.

Absalom was riding away from the battle on a mule. Suddenly his hair got caught in the branches of a large tree. It pulled him off the mule, and he was left hanging in midair. Some of David's men saw him hanging there, and went and told Joab.

He said, "What? You saw him hanging there, and you didn't kill him? I would've paid you ten pieces of silver if you had killed him!"

They said, "We wouldn't kill the king's son even if you gave us 1,000 pieces of silver. We

heard what he said. He wants us to spare his son. If we had killed him, the king would find out about it ... and you'd let us take the blame."

Joab said, "I'm wasting my time talking to you!" He took three spears and went to where Absalom was hanging. He and several of his guards surrounded Absalom and killed him.

Joab then blew the ram's horn, and his troops stopped chasing the army of Israel. Absalom was taken down from the tree and thrown into a large pit. With that, all the men of Israel went home.

A young man said to Joab, "I'll run and tell the king how the Lord has given him victory."

Joab said, "No, I'll send someone else." So he then sent another runner.

The young man begged Joab to let him run as well. Finally he was given permission to go. The young man ran, but he was faster than the other runner and got to the king first.

David was sitting just inside the gate, waiting for news of the battle. A watchman on the wall called down and told him a runner was coming.

As the young man got close, the watchman called down to David that another runner was coming. The young man bowed before the king and said, "The battle went well. You've won! The Lord has given you victory."

David said, "What about Absalom? Is he alive?"

"I don't know. I heard a lot of noise, but I didn't know what that was about."

"Stand over there and wait."

The second runner came up and said, "I have good news. God has given you victory today."

David said, "What about Absalom? Is he alive?"

The runner said, "May all of your enemies end up like him."

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110 David's Kingdom Restored

David

II Samuel 19

Continued from the previous page

The king was cut to the heart when he heard of Absalom's death. He went up to the gate chamber and cried out in anguish. "My son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you, Absalom, my son, my son!"

News of this got back to the army. Suddenly their joy of victory turned to sadness. It was as if they had lost the battle.

Joab went to David. "Your men risked their lives for you. They not only saved your life, but they saved the lives of your family. Now they're ashamed of what they have done. They think you wanted them to die instead of your son.

"Get up right now. Go out and encourage your men. If you don't, they'll all leave you and your troubles will be worse then ever."

So David got up and went to sit at the gate. Soon all of his men came and sat with him.

After Absalom was killed and his army defeated, his men ran from the battlefield and went back to their homes. At that point the people of Israel started remembering all the good things David had done for them through the years. Together they issued a call to David, asking him to once again be their king.

The tribe of Judah wasn't represented in this call, so David sent them a message. "Why aren't you asking me to come back? After all, I'm one of you."

They immediately sent him a message,

"Come back and be our king." They then rushed to the Jordan River and escorted him and his family across.

As soon as David crossed the river, Shimei ran up and fell down before him. He said, "I know I sinned against you when you left Jerusalem. Please don't hold that against me. As you can see, I'm the first one to welcome you back."

Joab's brother stepped forward and said, "Let me kill him. You're the Lord's anointed, and he disgraced you."

David said, "Put away your sword. Today is a special day. I'm once again king. No one will be killed in Israel today." He then turned to the man before him. "Shimei, you'll not die for what you did."

Immediately, there was an argument between the tribes of Israel. The other tribes said to Judah, "Why didn't you include us when you brought the king across the river?"

Judah said, "We're his relatives."

The others said, "He's king over all of Israel, not just Judah. So he's ten times more our king than yours." This once again divided the nation and the fighting between the tribes became intense.

A man named Sheba stepped forward and blew a ram's horn. He said, "David isn't king over Israel. Let Judah have him. Let's go home."

With that, the people of Israel left. Only the tribe of Judah took David to Jerusalem.

111 Wise Woman of Abel

David

II Samuel 20 & I Chronicles 2:16-17

David removed Joab from his command of the army. He replaced him with Amasa, who was also his nephew. He said to Amasa, "Gather my troops in three days so you can hunt down Sheba."

Amasa started gathering an army, but it took him too long. He wasn't back in three days. David said to Joab's brother, "We must act fast if we're to defeat Sheba. If we give him time, he'll be a bigger danger than Absalom ever was. Go after him immediately."

Joab joined his brother, and together they quickly organized an army. They then left Jerusalem to capture Sheba.

Along the way, Amasa finally caught up with them. Joab walked over to him, "Amasa, my cousin. How are you?" He then reached up with his right hand as if to draw Amasa closer and greet him with a kiss. Amasa didn't see the knife in Joab's left hand.

Joab stabbed Amasa in the stomach. He fell to the ground, dying but not yet dead. Joab turned and left to continue his search for Sheba. A soldier stood next to Amasa and shouted, "Follow Joab if you're loyal to king David."

As the army followed Joab, they kept slowing down as they passed Amasa, who was groaning in extreme pain. Some even stopped to look at him. Finally a soldier pulled Amasa off to the side of the road and threw a blanket over him. Then the army moved along quickly.

They chased Sheba all around the country. He

finally took his men to a city called Abel. Joab's troops lay siege on the city and built a ramp against its walls. The purpose was to tear down the walls and destroy the city.

As they were working, a woman yelled out to them. She was known around that area as woman of wisdom. She said, "Go get Joab so I can talk to him."

Joab came to that part of the wall and yelled, "What do you want?"

She yelled back, "Are you Joab?"

"Yes, what do you want?"

She said, "People say, 'Go to Abel to get the best advice.' That's because we know how to solve problems. So why would you want to destroy a valuable resource like Abel? Our city is like a mother to Israel."

He said, "We're not here to destroy your city. We're chasing Sheba, who has rebelled against David, our king. If you give us this man, we'll leave your city alone."

The woman said, "I'll hold you to that. We'll throw Sheba's head out to you."

The woman went and talked to the city officials. They trusted her wisdom, so they caught Sheba, cut off his head, and threw it out to Joab.

Once Joab saw it, he blew the ram's horn, and his army went home. Joab went back to Jerusalem, where he was once again made commander of David's army.

112 Ethnic Cleansing

David

❗ II Samuel 21

A famine hit the land of Israel. At first, David thought it was a natural event until it lasted for three years. He then realized the famine was from God. So he asked the Lord about it. God said, “It is because of what Saul did to the Gibeonites.”

The Tabernacle of God was at Gibeon. The Ark of God was in Jerusalem, but the Tabernacle was set up in Gibeon. So there were two places of worship.

The Gibeonites made an agreement with Israel in the days of Joshua. Saul decided to ignore those agreements and eliminate the Gibeonite population. He tried to totally annihilate their existence.

David went to them and said, “Our people have wronged you. How can we once again be reconciled with you?”

They said, “Money can’t pay for killing our brothers and sisters. And we don’t have the power to strike back at Israel. Still, our complaint isn’t toward Israel. It’s only toward the man who tried to exterminate us from the earth.”

David said, “So, what can we do for you?”

They said, “Give us seven of Saul’s descendants. We will hang them in his hometown, near where the people worship the Lord.”

David agreed. He selected two of Saul’s sons and five of his grandsons. He spared Mephibosheth because of his promise to Jonathan.

The Gibeonites killed the seven men and hung their bodies on a hill near where people went to worship. They were to hang there from April, which was the beginning of harvest, until October, which was the beginning of the rainy season.

Saul’s wife went to the site where her sons and grandsons were hanging. She stayed there day and night to protect the bodies from the birds during the day and the wild animals during the night.

When the allotted time was over, David went to the city where Saul and Jonathan were buried and got their bones. He then buried them in their family tomb, along with the seven men. After all of this was done, God once again heard David’s prayers concerning the land.

Years later, the Philistines once again declared war on Israel. David went with his men to fight a battle. He suddenly became exhausted during the fight. A relative of Goliath saw this as his opportunity to kill David. The Philistine was a huge man of great strength. He moved in to make the kill. One of David’s men stopped the giant and killed him.

David was taken off the battlefield, and his men took an oath. They said, “You are never to fight with us again. You’re the Lamp of Israel, and you’re not to put it out on the battlefield.” So David never went out to war again.

113 Numbering the People

David

II Samuel 24 & I Chronicles 21

King David called for Joab and said, “Go throughout the land and number all the people.” He did this to see how big of an army he could build.

Joab knew this wasn’t God’s will for David. He said, “Don’t disobey the Lord. God will give you as many people as you need for any situation.” But David insisted, so Joab used his army to go to every part of Israel and count the people. When they were finished, he told David there were over 1,300,000 men who were able to go to war if needed.

After David heard this report, he knew the Lord wasn’t pleased that he had done this. He prayed, “Oh God, I’ve acted foolishly and sinned against you. Forgive my sin.”

The Lord sent a prophet to give David a message. “You’re to choose one of three punishments for this sin:

- a famine that will devastate the land three years,
- an invading army to whom you’ll lose battle after battle for three months,
- or an epidemic that will sweep across the land for three days.”

David said, “All three of these terrify me! Still, I choose to suffer under the hand of God, rather than at the hands of men. I know the Lord is merciful.”

So God sent the angel of the Lord, who swept across the land with a severe epidemic. 70,000 men died! The angel then focused on Jerusalem. As death came upon the city, God said, “Stop! It’s enough!”

The angel immediately stopped. He was over a threshing floor owned by a Jebusite named Ornan. It was the exact place where Abraham

had offered his son to the Lord.

David looked up and saw the angel holding a sword stretched out over the city. Ornan also saw the angel so he ran and hid.

David fell down with his face to the ground. “Oh Lord, I’m the one who sinned! Not these people. They’re like sheep. What have they done? Punish me and my family.”

The prophet walked up to David with a message from God. “Build an altar to the Lord on that threshing floor.” David immediately walked toward it. When Ornan saw this, he ran to the king and bowed down.

David said, “Sell me your threshing floor, so I can build an altar to the Lord. Then he will hold back the plague from the people. I’ll pay you full price for it.”

Ornan said, “Oh King, I’ll give it to you. Please take it and build your altar. Use my oxen for the burnt offering, and use my wood for the fire. I give it all. I trust the Lord will hear you.”

David said, “No my friend, I’ll buy it all at full price. I won’t sacrifice to the Lord using that which costs me nothing.” So David bought the threshing floor, the oxen, and the wood. He then built the altar and sacrificed to the Lord.

God heard David’s prayer and sent fire from heaven to burn up the offering. He then commanded the angel, “Put away your sword!” With that, the epidemic was over.

From that day on, David used that altar whenever he sacrificed to God. He said, “This is the house of the Lord.”

Then he organized people and bought materials that were needed for building the Temple. Years later, Solomon built the Temple of the Lord at that very place.

114 Transfer of Power

David

I Kings 1

When David became old and frail, he was always cold. Covering him with blankets didn't help. Finally they decided to provide him with a nurse that would sleep with him. They found a beautiful virgin and she was his constant nurse. She slept with him, but they didn't have sex.

Adonijah was the fourth son of David, a younger brother of Absalom. He was just as handsome as his brother. David never disciplined Adonijah, or even corrected him.

Since David was old and bedridden, Adonijah said, "I'll be the next king." He hired 50 bodyguards to run before him as he rode through the streets in a chariot. He asked Joab to help him, and also enlisted the help of the high priest. Others refused to help, including Nathan the prophet.

Adonijah hosted a banquet and invited those who supported him. He also invited his brothers, David's servants, and officials of Judah. But he didn't invite those who opposed him, and he didn't invite Solomon.

Bathsheba was Solomon's mother. Nathan went and told her what was happening. He said, "The king doesn't know what Adonijah is doing. If we don't stop this, you and your son will die." He then told her exactly how they should tell the king.

She went to David's bedroom, where his nurse was serving him. Bathsheba said, "My lord, you said Solomon would be king after you. But now Adonijah has made himself king without you knowing it. All of Israel is looking to you to tell them exactly who should be king. If you die without telling them, Solomon and I will be killed as criminals."

At that exact moment, Nathan came in and

said, "My lord king, did you make Adonijah king? Today he's having a banquet with the officials of Israel. They're eating and drinking and saying 'Long live the King.' Many of us weren't invited. I'm surprised you authorized this without letting me know."

David said to Bathsheba, "As sure as the Lord lives, your son Solomon will be king after me. It will happen today."

He then gave an assignment to certain priests, officials, and the prophet Nathan. "Have Solomon ride on my personal mule to the place where you'll anoint him king. Afterwards, blow the rams horns and shout 'Long live King Solomon!' Then have him sit on my throne. Tell everyone he's the one I've selected to be king after me."

The men followed David's instructions. As soon as Solomon was pronounced king, the people flowed into the streets shouting, playing flutes, and celebrating.

The people at Adonijah's banquet heard the noise and wondered what was happening. Men rushed in and told them. "King David has made Solomon king of Israel! Right now he's sitting on the royal throne."

Everyone quickly left the banquet and went home. Adonijah was terrified of what Solomon would do to him. He went to the Tabernacle and grabbed the horns of the altar. He sent a message to Solomon saying "I'm your slave. Please promise me you'll not kill me."

Solomon sent a message back. "I won't kill you if you act like a man of character. But if not, I'll have you killed." So Adonijah went and bowed down before Solomon and gave him honor as the new king.

115 Death of David & Joab

David

I Kings 2

Before David died, he gave Solomon instructions on how he should rule as king. He said, "To be successful, you must be strong and brave, and always walk in the ways of God's commandments.

"Kill Joab when the time is right. He murdered two commanders of Israel—Abner, Saul's commander, and Amasa, his cousin. He didn't kill them on the battlefield. Both of these men trusted him because it was a time of peace. Don't let him grow old peacefully.

"Remember that Shimei cursed me when I was running from Absalom. He begged for mercy and I said he could live. It's up to you to punish him. Deal with him according to your wisdom."

Soon after that, David died and they buried him in Jerusalem. He had been king for forty years.

Later, Adonijah went to Bathsheba and said, "You know that all of Israel expected me to become king. I accept Solomon as king, because it's God's will for Israel. I just have one request."

"What is it?"

"The king won't refuse anything if you ask for it. So please, go and ask if I can have David's nurse as my wife."

So Bathsheba went to Solomon. He stood and greeted her and called for a throne to be set at his right hand.

She sat down and said, "I have one little request. Please don't turn me down."

"Mother, ask and I'll give it to you."

She said, "Please let Adonijah have David's nurse as a wife."

Solomon was shocked. He said, "This is the same as asking if he could be made king. This

request will cost Adonijah his life. He'll be dead before this day ends." Solomon then gave the order, and Adonijah was killed.

The high priest had supported Adonijah, so the king took his job away from him. He was the last priest from the line of Eli. This fulfilled the prophecy given about him.

Joab knew that his time had come, so he went to the Tabernacle and grabbed the horns of the altar. Solomon heard about this and told a guard, "Go kill him."

The guard went and told Joab, "Come out here."

He said, "No, I'll die here."

The guard went back and told the king. Solomon said, "Do as he asked. Kill him there! He deserves to die for murdering two good men who were better than himself." So Joab was killed at the altar and buried near his home.

Solomon then called for Shimei. The king said, "Build a house in Jerusalem and live there. You're not to leave this city for the rest of your life. If you leave, you'll die. So, your life is in your hands."

Shimei said, "This is fair. I'll do as you have said."

He lived in Jerusalem for three years. One day, two of his slaves ran away, so Shimei went after them and brought them back.

Solomon had him brought in. "You ignored the command I gave you. Now you'll pay for what you did to my father. You cursed him, yet his kingdom will last forever." With that, Shimei was killed.

So Solomon established himself as King of Israel.

I Kings 3 – 4 & II Chronicles 1

Solomon loved the Lord and tried to follow the example of his father David. One day, he went to Gibeon and sacrificed 1,000 burnt offerings upon the altar. That night God appeared to him in a dream. “What do you want me to give you?”

Without hesitation, he said, “Lord, my father was a great king, but I feel like a child who doesn’t know anything. Give me the wisdom and understanding to rule over your people.”

The Lord was pleased with Solomon’s answer. “You’ve asked for wisdom instead of long life, riches, or peace. Therefore I’ll give you wisdom. It will exceed what any one has had, or ever will have. I’ll also give you great riches and honor. And I’ll give you long life, but only if you follow me like David did.”

Soon after this promise, two prostitutes went to the judgment hall and stood before the king. One said, “This woman and I live in the same house. Each of us gave birth to a son. While we were sleeping, she accidentally rolled over on her son and killed him. So in the night, she took my child and put her dead son in his place. I awoke in the morning to nurse my son, but the child was dead. I then realized it wasn’t my son at all, but hers. She has my child.”

The other woman said, “No, the living child is

mine and the dead one is hers!” The two began arguing in front of the king.

Solomon turned to a guard and said, “Come here with a sword.” Pointing to the child he said, “Cut the boy in two pieces and give each mother half of him.”

One woman cried out, “No! Don’t kill my son! She can have him! Please let him live.”

The other woman said, “Yes, cut him in half, so we both will have a part.”

The king turned to the guard, “Give the boy to the first woman. She’s the mother because her heart cries out for the child.” The people of Israel marveled at his wisdom.

Solomon ruled over all the nations from the Euphrates River in the north, to Egypt in the south. That whole region was at peace as long as he lived. There were so many people in Israel that they were like the sand on the seashore. Everyone was at peace and lived without fear of war.

Solomon gained knowledge about many subjects. He had understanding about plants, birds, and animals. His wisdom was greater than that of anyone else in the world. Kings from around the world would send people to listen to him and learn from him.

117 Building the Temple

Solomon

I Kings 5 – 9 & II Chronicles 2 – 7

Solomon knew it was his responsibility to build the Temple of the Lord. Therefore, he gathered a large work force and provided them all the materials they needed. He got cedar from King Hiram of Lebanon, who had been a friend of David, his father.

The entire construction took seven years to complete. During that time, there wasn't the sound of tools at the Temple site because everything was assembled elsewhere. The inside walls were totally covered with cedar. The walls of the most Holy Place were covered with pure gold. All of the vessels, furnishings, and tools for worship were also made of gold. He also made a place for Gentiles who wanted to come to the Temple and pray.

Once the Temple was done, King Solomon assembled the leaders from all the tribes of Israel. The priests went and got the Ark of God. The only things in it at that time were the two tablets of stone that Moses had put there. As the priests carefully carried the Ark toward the Temple, sacrifices were made all along the way. Finally they arrived, and the Ark of God was put in the Most Holy Place.

Suddenly, the glory of the Lord filled the Temple like a cloud. It was so thick the priests

had to stop what they were doing.

The king gave thanks to God. He then turned to face the people and gave them a blessing and a prayer of dedication. Finally, he stood before the altar of the Lord and prayed. He asked God to hear his people when they confessed their sins and asked for forgiveness. He also asked God to hear Gentiles who prayed at the Temple.

Together, the entire nation of Israel sacrificed to God and dedicated the Temple to the Lord. This celebration lasted for fourteen days. Once it was over, the people returned to their homes with their hearts full of happiness.

God then met with Solomon a second time. He said, "I have heard your prayer and have set this house apart for myself. If you walk with me as your father did, I'll establish your kingdom forever. But if you or your descendants disobey my commandments and start worshiping other gods, I'll depart from this house, and it will become a disgrace. I'll then take the people of Israel off from this land."

For the next thirteen years, Solomon built a house for himself. After that, he built several cities. He established a great work force for all of his construction projects. There was no other king in the entire world like Solomon.

118 Queen of Sheba

Solomon

I Kings 10 – 11:25 & II Chronicles 9

The queen of Sheba heard about the great wisdom of King Solomon. She couldn't believe it was true. So she decided to go and test him with a list of hard questions. She organized a large band of servants to travel with her and selected presents to present to the king. She arrived in Jerusalem with a great caravan of camels loaded with gold, jewels, and spices.

She met with the king and asked him her list of questions. He was able to answer every single question. None of them was too difficult for him to explain to her. She was amazed to see the palace he had built, the variety of food at every meal, the way his servants were dressed, and the burnt offerings he made at the Temple. She said, "Everything I heard about you is true, but I couldn't believe it until I saw it with my own eyes. Now I find that I wasn't told half of what is true about you. May your God continue to bless you as you carry out justice and righteousness."

She gave him a half a ton of gold, and more spices than had ever come to Jerusalem. Solomon also gave her many gifts before she and her servants returned home.

Every year, Solomon received 25 tons of gold in addition to normal trade. Because of this, he covered many things with gold—ornaments, drinking cups, dishes, and his throne. He didn't use silver because he didn't think it was valuable.

Solomon crafted 200 large shields, each made

with 15 pounds of hammered gold. He also made 300 smaller shields with 4 pounds of gold in each one. No other king in the world was as rich and wise as Solomon.

He accumulated a large herd of horses for his military. These were imported from many countries around that part of the world.

Unfortunately, Solomon also accumulated many women, which was a direct violation of God's law. He had 700 wives, all daughters of kings. Each one worshiped the gods of her country. He also had 300 concubines.

When Solomon got old, these women convinced him to build a shrine for each of their gods. Eventually, every hill around Jerusalem had a shrine on it, honoring their many gods. Solomon started burning incense at these places and offering sacrifices. Finally he departed from worshiping the Lord and joined his wives in worshiping their gods. Wickedness filled his heart.

God was angry with Solomon because he departed from following the ways of David. The Lord said, "I'm going to tear your kingdom in two, and give one part to a servant of yours. But I won't do this in your lifetime because of my promise to David. Your son will lose most of your kingdom."

Then God allowed the enemies of Solomon to organize against him, so there was no longer peace in the land. Finally, Solomon died. He had been king of Israel for forty years.

119 The Kingdom Divided

Early Kings

I Kings 11:26 – 12:24 ☞

II Chronicles 10 – 11:4

When Solomon was alive, he promoted one of his servants, named Jeroboam. He had a unique ability of getting things done.

One day Jeroboam met a prophet, who was wearing a new coat. The prophet said, “Here is a message from God.”

He then took off the coat and ripped it into twelve pieces. He handed Jeroboam ten of them and gave him this message from the Lord: “Solomon left me and turned to worshipping idols. Therefore, I’m going to rip the kingdom out of his hands. You’ll rule over the northern ten tribes of Israel. I’m not taking all the tribes away because of David and Jerusalem. Therefore Solomon’s son will rule over Judah.

“Follow me and obey my commandments. If you do, I’ll be with you. I’ll establish your kingdom, and you’ll have a lasting dynasty just like I gave David.”

Solomon found out about this prophecy and tried to kill Jeroboam. But he ran away and hid in Egypt until Solomon died.

One of Solomon’s sons was Rehoboam, whose mother was an Ammonite woman. After his father died, he went to Shechem so the northern tribes of Israel could crown him king.

Before the elders of Israel met with him they sent for Jeroboam. Once he arrived, they said to Rehoboam, “Your father put a yoke on us that was harsh. Promise us that you’ll lighten our load and lower our taxes. If you do, we’ll gladly serve you.”

Rehoboam said, “Give me three days to think about this.”

After Jeroboam and the elders of Israel

left, Rehoboam asked advice from the older counselors in his father’s court. They said, “Serve these people with all your heart. Be kind to them, and they’ll serve you for the rest of your life.”

Rehoboam then asked for advice from his younger counselors, the ones he grew up with. They said, “Tell those rebels, ‘My father was easy on you compared to me. My little finger will be heavier than my father’s leg. He hit you with whips. I’m going to hit you with scorpions.’ ”

Rehoboam listened to this advice and rejected the counsel of the older men. He said to the leaders of Israel, “My father was easy on you compared to me. He hit you with whips. I’m going to hit you with scorpions.” That was exactly what the Lord wanted him to say.

When Jeroboam and the people of Israel heard this, they said, “We want nothing to do with the house of David! We’re not from Judah.”

So the people of Israel went home and Rehoboam returned to Jerusalem. He sent one of his officials to restore order among the northern tribes. The people stoned him until he was dead.

The ten tribes broke away from Judah and called themselves Israel. They asked Jeroboam to be their king.

Rehoboam gathered an army from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. They prepared to invade Israel and force them back under Rehoboam’s control.

Just then a man of God came to them with a message from the Lord. “Don’t go fight your brothers. Go home. I’m the one that caused them to rebel against you.” Everyone listened to the Lord, and went home.

120 Jeroboam's Sin

Early Kings

1 Kings 12:25 – 13:10 & 13:33-34

Jeroboam chose the city of Shechem to be the capital of Israel. He built it up and put his palace there.

He realized his people had a natural tendency to be loyal to the family of David. He said to his advisors, "The people keep going to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple. Eventually, they'll decide their true loyalty is to the king from the line of David. They'll kill me and reunite with Judah."

To solve this problem, he made two golden calves. He put one in the south at Bethel and the other in the north at Dan. He said to the people, "It's too hard to travel to Jerusalem several times a year. Here's your god who brought you out of Egypt."

Jeroboam built shrines to these idols and appointed priests for them. The priests weren't from the tribe of Levi but were just anyone who wanted to be a priest. He then made annual celebrations at the same times as the ones in Jerusalem.

When he took the golden calf to Dan, people lined up behind it as it went along. Once they got there, Jeroboam made sacrifices to this new idol. He then went south to Bethel to sacrifice on the altar he had built there.

A young man of God from Judah walked up to Jeroboam as he was standing by the altar. The prophet yelled, "Altar, altar! Hear what the Lord God says to you. 'A king will be born in Judah named Josiah. On this altar he'll sacrifice the

priests who burn incense on it.' "

The young prophet then turned to the people, "The Lord gave me a sign that these things will happen. This altar will rip apart and the ashes will spill to the ground."

King Jeroboam got angry and pointed at the prophet. "Grab that man!" As soon as he said those words, the hand he had stretched out froze in position and he couldn't pull it back. Suddenly the altar ripped apart and the ashes spilled to the ground.

Seeing this, the king begged the man of God. "Please pray to the Lord and ask him to restore my hand back to me."

So the man of God prayed and Jeroboam's hand returned to the way it was before. The king said, "Come with me to the palace and eat something. Then I'll give you a gift."

The young prophet said, "I wouldn't go with you even if you gave me half of everything you own. The Lord said that I'm not to eat or drink anything while I'm here. And I'm to go back to Judah a different way from how I came." With that, he walked away.

Even with this warning, Jeroboam didn't repent of what he was doing. He continued to promote the worship of the two calves and appoint priests for them. Because of this sin, his kingdom didn't continue after his death, and he had no descendants.

121 The Old Prophet

Early Kings

I Kings 13:11-32

There was an old prophet living at Bethel. His sons told him about the young man of God from Judah, and what he had done at Jeroboam's altar. The old prophet said, "Which way did he go?"

He then told his sons to saddle his donkey. He rode down the road until he found the man of God sitting under an oak tree.

"Are you the man of God from Judah?"

"Yes, I am"

The old prophet said, "Come home with me and I'll serve you a meal."

"No, I can't go with you. The Lord told me not to eat or drink anything while I'm here."

The old man said, "Yes I know. I'm a prophet too, just like you. The Lord sent an angel to me who told me to come get you and provide you food and water. So, come to my house."

This was a lie, but the man of God went with him and ate bread in his house and drank water. While they were sitting at the table, the Lord spoke through the old prophet, saying, "You've rebelled against my command. I told you not to eat or drink anything at this place. Because you disobeyed me, you'll die and you won't be buried in your family's grave."

After the two men were done eating, the old prophet saddled the young man's donkey. He left, and along the way a lion jumped on the man of God and killed him. His body fell to the ground, but the donkey didn't run away. He simply stood by the body of the young prophet. The lion stood on the other side.

Some travelers saw this and told the people in the town about it. When the old prophet heard it, he said, "I know who that is. It's the man of God who disobeyed the Lord."

He told his sons to once again saddle a donkey for him. He went and found the body. The lion was still standing next to it, as well as the donkey. Yet, the lion hadn't eaten the corpse nor attacked the donkey.

The old prophet put the body of the man of God on the donkey that was standing there. He took it back home and buried it in his own grave. He mourned the young man's death saying, "Oh my brother."

He then told his sons. "When I die, bury me where this man of God is buried. Put my bones beside his bones. He spoke God's words against these idols and Israel's sin. Everything he said will come true."

122 Rehoboam & Jeroboam

Early Kings

I Kings 14 & II Chronicles 12

One of the sons of Jeroboam became sick. The king said to his wife, “When I was a servant of Solomon, a prophet told me that I’d become king of the northern ten tribes of Israel. He lives in Shiloh. Take him gifts of food and ask him what will happen to our son. Put on a disguise, so he won’t know you’re my wife.”

The prophet was now old and blind. The Lord said to him, “Jeroboam’s wife is coming wearing a disguise. She’s going to ask you about their son who is sick.” Then the Lord told him what to say.

Soon the prophet heard the woman’s footsteps. He said, “Come in, wife of Jeroboam. Why are you wearing a disguise? Listen, God has a message for your husband, a horrible message!”

The Lord says, “I selected you when you were an average man. I tore part of the kingdom away from the family of David and gave it to you. But look what you’ve done. You haven’t followed me. You haven’t kept my commandments. Instead, you’ve insulted me with two golden calves, and you’ve become more wicked than anyone else.

“So, listen to what I’m going to do to you. All of the males in your family will die a horrible death. The family name of Jeroboam won’t continue after you’re gone. Dogs will eat those who die in the city, and birds will eat those who die in the country.

“There will be only one exception to this. Your son who is now sick is a good man, the only one in your family. He will die a normal death. But he’ll die as soon as you get home. You’ll bury him, and all of Israel will mourn his death. But he’ll be the only

one in your family that will be buried.

“All of this will happen because of what Jeroboam did to Israel. His sin will force me to hit Israel so hard that their roots will be ripped up from this soil. They’ll be carried away and scattered among the nations.”

Jeroboam’s wife went home, and her son died as soon as she walked into their house. He was buried and all of Israel mourned his death.

Jeroboam ruled for 22 years, and then died. His son became king after him. He followed the example of his father but only ruled for two years. He was killed and the entire family of Jeroboam was destroyed. It all happened just like the prophet said.

While Jeroboam ruled Israel in the north, Rehoboam ruled Judah in the south. He also made the Lord angry by leading the people in ways that were evil. Judah became as wicked as all the surrounding nations.

During the fifth year of Rehoboam’s reign, Egypt came and plundered Jerusalem. They took all the gold from the Temple and the royal palace. They took the gold shields Solomon had made.

After they left, Rehoboam replaced the shields with ones made of bronze. Whenever the king left the palace and went to the Temple, guards walked along with him, carrying the bronze shields.

There was war between Judah and Israel as long as Rehoboam and Jeroboam lived. Rehoboam died after ruling Judah for 17 years, and his son became king after him.

123 Abijah & Asa

Early Kings

I Kings 15 & II Chronicles 13 – 16

Jeroboam was still king of Israel when Rehoboam died. After his death, Abijah became king of Judah. Soon afterward, Jeroboam and the army of Israel invaded Judah.

When the two armies faced one another, Israel's army was twice as big. Still, Abijah stood on a hill and yelled over at the army of Israel. He said, "Men of Israel, you have left the family of David to serve a servant of Solomon. On top of that, you have left the God of Israel to worship Jeroboam's two golden calves. And your priests are not from the tribe of Levi."

He went on and on, preaching to the men. He didn't realize that while he was doing this, Jeroboam was sending half of his men around to the back of Abijah's army. Suddenly the army of Judah realized they were surrounded. They cried out to the Lord and the priests blew the trumpets. God fought against Israel and they ran from the battlefield. Many of their soldiers died that day.

Jeroboam never recovered from this massive defeat, and he died soon afterwards. Abijah became stronger because he trusted the Lord.

After Abijah died, his son Asa became king of Judah. He ruled for 41 years. The Lord gave him 10 years of peace because he returned the nation to the ways of David. He destroyed the idols Solomon had set up. He told the people of Judah to seek the Lord God.

Suddenly a vast army from Ethiopia invaded from the south. The army of Judah was greatly outnumbered. Asa prayed, "Oh Lord, only you can help us now!"

So the Lord helped him defeat the Ethiopian army. Many of them were killed as they tried to run away. When it was all done, their army was crushed before the Lord. The men of Judah collected all the possessions from the bodies that were lying on the battlefield. They also got all of their sheep and camels.

As Asa and his men went back to Jerusalem, a prophet met him and challenged him to continue his walk with God. So the king

decided to start destroying the idols from all the other cities of Judah. He even removed his grandmother from being Queen Mother because of her loyalty to an idol.

People from the northern kingdom of Israel moved to Judah in large numbers because they worshiped the Lord. On a certain day, everyone met together and vowed to always serve God. Asa then took silver and gold and put it in the Temple treasury. So the Lord gave Judah peace from all their enemies.

Unfortunately Asa came to a turning point in his life. The new king of Israel declared war on Judah and invaded the land. He took control of a key city.

Instead of trusting the Lord, Asa thought of another way he could get the advantage over Israel. He took the gold and silver out of the Temple and sent it to Ben-hadad, the king of Syria that was north of Israel. He sent a message saying, "I'm sending you gold and silver so you will break your treaty with Israel, and establish a treaty between our two nations."

Ben-hadad took the gold and silver and made a treaty with Asa. He then invaded Israel and captured several of their cities. Quickly the army of Israel left Judah so they could defend themselves against Syria.

It seemed like Asa's plan had worked. But then, a prophet went to king Asa and said, "You should have asked the Lord to fight for you—not Syria! Don't you remember what God did with the massive army of Ethiopia? The Lord is looking for those who will trust Him. You were foolish in doing this. Therefore, you will be at war until you die."

Asa was angry with the prophet and called for a guard. "Put this man in prison!" After that, he became cruel toward his own people. Suddenly he developed a disease in his feet, which got worse and worse. Still, he didn't seek the Lord's help, even when the disease became life threatening. Instead, he trusted the doctors to help him. Finally he died after two years of great pain.

124 Elijah & the Widow

Elijah

I Kings 17

Israel had many wicked kings. They all followed the example of Jeroboam.

While Asa was still king of Judah, Ahab became king of Israel. He was extremely evil, more than any of the kings that were before him. He married a woman named Jezebel, who worshiped Baal. Through her influence, Ahab built a temple of Baal in the capital city of Samaria.

The prophet Elijah stood before the king and said, "I have a message from God. There will be no dew or rain until I say so!"

The Lord said to Elijah, "Leave here and go to a certain brook. It will provide you water, and I have already told the ravens to bring you food."

So Elijah went and lived next to that brook. And just as the Lord said, the ravens brought him bread and meat every morning and every evening. But in time, the brook dried up because there hadn't been any rain.

The Lord said, "Go to a Gentile town called Zarephath. I have selected a widow to provide for you there." When Elijah entered the village, he saw a woman gathering wood. He said to her, "Please bring me a little water." As she went to get it, he said, "And also bring me some bread."

She turned and looked at him. "I don't have any bread. All I have is a handful of flour in the jar, and a bit of oil in the jug. I was gathering these sticks so I could make it into bread for my son and myself. We were going to eat it and then die."

The prophet said, "Don't be afraid to do what I say. Go and make your bread, but when it's done, give some to me first. The Lord God of Israel has said, 'The jar will always have flour, and the jug will always have oil until the day

God sends rain.' "

Again, she looked at him, and then went and did as he asked. She made the bread, and gave some to him first. Sure enough, from that day on, the jar always had some flour, and the jug of oil never ran dry.

She prepared a place for the prophet in the upper room of her house. It had a bed, a table, and a chair.

Some time later, the woman's son got sick. Soon his illness was severe, and finally he died. The woman went to Elijah and said, "Man of God, why did you come in to my house? Was it to expose my guilt, so you could kill my son?"

Elijah said, "Give me your son." He took the boy to the upper room where he was staying. He laid him on the bed and then prayed, "Oh Lord God, why did you bring me into this woman's home, and then kill her son?"

He then stretched out over the boy and prayed, "Oh Lord my God, please bring life back into this boy!"

He stretched out over the boy a second time. "Oh Lord my God, please bring life back into this boy!"

He stretched out over the boy a third time. "Oh Lord my God, please bring life back into this boy!"

Suddenly the boy started breathing. Elijah took him back down into the house, and gave him to his mother. He said, "Here is your son. He's alive."

The woman fell down before the prophet and said, "Now I know you are a man of God, and his word is in your mouth!"

125 Elijah on Mount Carmel

Elijah

I Kings 18

The famine in Israel was severe and lasted for three years. Finally the Lord said to Elijah, “Go tell King Ahab that I am going to send rain to the land.”

The person in charge of Ahab’s courts was a man named Obadiah. He was faithful to God, and even hid 100 prophets of the LORD when Jezebel was trying to hunt them down.

He and the king went out to find grass for the palace livestock. They went different directions so they could search more land.

As Obadiah went along, Elijah suddenly walked up to him. Obadiah immediately fell to the ground and said, “Oh, my lord Elijah.”

The prophet said, “Go tell the king that I’m here.”

Obadiah was shocked. He said, “What have I done that you want me killed? The king has looked for you all across the nation, and even in other countries. As soon as I tell him that you’re here, the Lord will carry you off to some other place. Then Ahab will kill me when he comes and finds that you’re not here. Please don’t do this to me.”

The prophet said, “Don’t worry. As the Lord lives, I’ll meet with Ahab today.”

So Obadiah went and told Ahab. As soon as the king saw Elijah, he said, “So, there is the man who’s destroyed Israel.”

Elijah said, “No, it’s not me, but you who has destroyed Israel. You’ve turned your back on the Lord and are serving Baal. Tell Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. Bring the prophets of Baal and Asherah, the ones who eat at Jezebel’s table.”

So Ahab told the Israelites to gather at Mount Carmel, along with the prophets. Once everyone was there, Elijah said to the people, “How long will you go back and forth? If the Lord is God, follow Him. If Baal is God, follow him.” The people didn’t say anything, but just looked at the prophet.

He said, “I stand here as only one prophet of the Lord, but look, there are 450 prophets of

Baal. Give us two bulls. They’ll take one, prepare it for sacrifice, and put it on top of the wood. But they won’t put fire on the wood. I’ll do the same. They will call on the name of their god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The God who lights the fire, He is God.”

The people said, “Yes. That sounds fair.”

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal. “You go first.”

So they prepared the bull, and called on the name of Baal. They prayed all morning until noon. They danced around the altar, but nothing happened.

Elijah started mocking them. “Maybe you should shout louder! Your god might be sleeping, and you need to wake him up! Maybe he’s gone to the toilet.” They shouted loudly, and cut themselves, until blood gushed out. They kept this up all afternoon, but nothing happened.

Finally Elijah built an altar with twelve stones, one for each tribe of Israel. He dug a trench around the altar, and put the wood on it. He then placed the bull on top of the wood.

He said to the people, “Go get some water and pour it on the sacrifice.” Once they had done this, he told them to do it again. After they had done it a second time, he told them to do it a third time. Once they were done, the altar was totally wet, and the trench was full of water.

Elijah then walked up to the altar and prayed. “Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Let everyone know that you are God, and I’m your servant. Answer me so these people will turn back to you!”

Suddenly, fire fell down from heaven and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, and the twelve stones. It even licked up the water that was in the trench. The people fell down and shouted, “The Lord, he is God! The Lord, he is God!”

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Elijah ordered, “Grab the prophets of Baal! Don’t let any of them escape.” The people grabbed the prophets of Baal, and Elijah killed all of them.

He turned to Ahab and said, “Eat something. There’s a rainstorm coming.”

He then went up to the top of the mountain to pray. He said to his servant, “Look toward the sea. What do you see?”

The servant said, “I don’t see anything.”

Seven times Elijah told him to go and look. Finally the seventh time, his servant told him, “I see a small cloud, about the size of a man’s hand, coming from the sea.”

Elijah said, “Quick, go tell Ahab, ‘Rush home as fast as you can so the rain doesn’t stop you.’ ” Ahab got in his chariot and rushed toward home.

In a short time, the sky grew dark and the wind started to blow. Suddenly there was a downpour of rain. The power of God came over Elijah, and he ran faster than Ahab’s chariot, and arrived in Jezreel before him.

126 Elijah on Mount Horeb

Elijah

I Kings 19

Ahab told Jezebel what Elijah had done on Mount Carmel. He told her how all the prophets of Baal had been killed. Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah. She said, "I am going to kill you! Mark my word. You'll be dead before tomorrow night."

This struck fear in the heart of Elijah. He ran away to save his life. He left Israel and went to the southern part of Judah. He left his servant there and went on into the wilderness. He walked for another day and finally stopped and sat under a juniper tree.

He cried, "What have I done! I'm no better than my fathers. Lord, take my life" Then he lay down and fell asleep.

After he'd slept a while, an angel touched him. "Get up and eat." Elijah woke up and saw a jug of water and some bread baking over hot coals. He ate the bread and drank the water and fell back to sleep.

Later, the angel of the Lord awoke him again and said, "Get up and eat. You have a long trip ahead of you."

Elijah woke up and once again found bread and water. So he got up, ate the bread and drank water. He then walked 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb, the mountain of God, also called Mt. Sinai. Once there, he entered a cave and spent the night.

In the morning the Lord said to him, "Elijah, what are you doing here?"

He said, "Lord, I've worked for you with all my heart. But Israel has forgotten their agreement with you. They've torn down your altars. They killed your prophets. I'm the last one, and they're trying to kill me."

The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain." Suddenly, a powerful wind hit the mountains and shattered rocks. But the Lord wasn't in the wind.

Then there was an earthquake. But the Lord wasn't in the earthquake.

After that, there was a blast of fire. But the Lord wasn't in the fire.

Then Elijah heard a soft whisper. He wrapped his mantle around his face and went out of the cave and stood at the entrance.

The voice said to him, "Elijah, what are you doing here?"

"Lord, I've worked for you with all my heart. But Israel has forgotten their agreement with you. They've torn down your altars, and killed your prophets. I'm the last one, and they're trying to kill me."

The Lord said, "Oh Elijah, go back home. I have 7,000 men in Israel who haven't bowed to Baal." He then gave the prophet detailed instructions of what he was to do, which included anointing Elisha to replace him and selecting a new king for Israel.

Elijah went back to Israel where he found Elisha plowing a field. The prophet walked up to him and threw his mantle over him and walked on. Elisha left the oxen and ran to catch up with the prophet. He said, "Please, let me say goodbye to my father and mother. Then I'll follow you."

Elijah turned and said, "You may go back, but don't forget the calling that is now yours."

With that, Elisha took the wooden yoke and plow and built a fire. He killed the oxen and made a meal for his family. When they were done eating, he left them and followed Elijah.

127 The Wounded Prophet

Elijah

I Kings 20

The king of Syria invaded Israel and marched his army against Samaria. He sent a message to King Ahab saying, "Give me your silver and gold. I also want your wives and sons."

Ahab sent a message back. "I'll give it all to you. I even give myself to you."

The king of Syria sent another message. "There's one more thing. Tomorrow, I'm sending people to search your palace and all the best houses. They'll take everything of value."

Ahab told this to the leaders of Israel. They said, "Don't do it. We'll fight him."

Ahab sent this message to the king of Syria, and he became angry. He said, "I'll totally destroy Samaria! When I'm done, it'll only be a trash heap." With that, he got drunk with some other kings who were with him.

As Ahab made preparations for battle, a prophet went to him and said, "The army of Syria is much bigger than yours, but the Lord is going to help you defeat them. You are to personally lead your men into battle so you'll see firsthand that the Lord is in control."

The king of Syria was still drunk when he heard that Ahab was marching his army out of Samaria. He told his soldiers "Take the men of Israel alive. I want them as slaves."

The army of Israel hit the Syrians so hard that they ran from the battlefield. It was a crushing defeat for the Syrian army. Even their king just barely escaped.

The prophet walked up to Ahab and said, "Get ready. They're coming back next spring."

The officials of Syria met with their king and said, "Their god is the god of the mountains. You were defeated because you fought them in the hills. You'll win if you fight them on flat land."

So in the spring, he once again invaded Israel. Ahab's army was like a small flock of goats next to a vast army.

The prophet said to Ahab. "They think the

Lord is a god of the hills, and has no power on flat land. Therefore you'll defeat them, and then you'll know that the Lord—he is in control."

The battle started and the Syrian army suffered a massive defeat. 100,000 of their men died. They rushed back to their city, but suddenly a wall fell and killed another 27,000.

The king of Syria ran and hid in a closet. Finally his officials decided to humble themselves and go ask Ahab to have mercy on their king. Ahab said, "Oh, is my brother still alive? Bring him here." The two kings met together and worked out an agreement.

When the prophet heard about this, he turned to a friend and said, "God wants you to hit me."

The friend was shocked. He said, "I'm not going to hit you."

The prophet said, "You disobeyed the Lord. Therefore a lion will kill you." It happened just as he said. Soon after the friend left, a lion jumped on him and killed him.

The prophet said to another man, "God wants you to hit me." So the man beat him up. The prophet then covered his wounds with bandages and stood by the road.

Soon Ahab came by, but didn't know who this man was. The prophet yelled, "Your Majesty. During the battle, I was paid to guard a prisoner. I was told I'd be killed if he got away. Oh, I got distracted and the prisoner escaped."

The king said, "You fool! You'll get exactly what you said you'd get."

The prophet then pulled off his bandages and Ahab saw who he was. He said, "The Lord told you to kill the king of Syria, and you didn't do it. So now you'll die in his place! And your people will die instead of his people."

Ahab left the prophet and went back to Samaria, but he was no longer happy about his victory. Instead he became angry and depressed.

128 Naboth's Vineyard

Elijah

I Kings 21

In the town of Jezreel, a man named Naboth owned a vineyard next to the palace of King Ahab. The king told Naboth he wanted to buy the vineyard and make it into a vegetable garden. He said, "I'll pay you full value in silver or, if you prefer, I'll give you a better vineyard someplace else."

Naboth said, "No. I couldn't sell this vineyard. It has been owned by our family for several hundred years."

At first, this made the king angry. He went home and refused to eat anything. Finally he became depressed and went and lay in his bed facing the wall.

Jezebel, the king's wife, asked him what was wrong. He said, "I asked Naboth to sell me his vineyard and he told me no! I even offered him a better vineyard in exchange for his."

Jezebel said, "Oh, is that all? Well, come have something to eat, and don't worry about Naboth's vineyard. I'll get it for you."

She wrote a letter to the town officials. It said, "Go get Naboth and have him stand before you. Bring in two liars that will swear he cursed God and the king. Then take him out and stone him until he's dead." She signed Ahab's name to the letter and sealed it with the official seal.

The city leaders did exactly as they were told. They got Naboth and condemned him to death. After the stoning, they sent a message back to

Jezebel saying, "Naboth is dead."

She went to her husband and said, "You now own the vineyard you wanted. Go and enjoy it because Naboth is dead." When the king heard this good news, he went to see his vineyard.

At that same moment, the Lord said to Elijah, "King Ahab just stole Naboth's vineyard. Go tell him this. 'You murdered Naboth and the dogs licked his blood from the ground. Dogs will lick your blood at that exact spot.'"

Elijah went and found Ahab at Naboth's vineyard. When the king saw the prophet coming, he said, "Well, look at this. My enemy has found me."

"Yes, I found you. And you have found every way possible to do the things God hates. Now it's time for judgment. Your punishment will be just like King Jeroboam. You'll have no descendants. First, dogs will eat the body of your wife Jezebel. After that, your entire family will be eliminated from the earth. Dogs will eat all your relatives that die in the city. Birds will eat those who die in the country."

This struck Ahab in the heart. He ripped his clothes in sorrow. He fasted and wore sackcloth day and night. Finally, the Lord said to Elijah, "Ahab is truly sorry for what he did. Therefore, I won't destroy his family until after he's dead. All that I said will happen when his son is king."

129 Jehoshaphat & Ahab

Elijah

I Kings 22 & II Chronicles 17 – 18

After Asa died, his son Jehoshaphat became king of Judah. The Lord was with him, and he followed the example of King David.

The first thing he did was make the nation more secure. He also set up an educational program so people could understand God's Laws. The Lord made the surrounding nations fear Jehoshaphat, so they didn't want to go to war with him.

The king decided to build an alliance with the kingdom of Israel. So he arranged a marriage between his son and the daughter of King Ahab.

Jehoshaphat then went to Samaria to make the alliance stronger. Ahab said to him, "I'm going to fight a battle. Come with me and we'll do it together."

Jehoshaphat said, "I'm willing to go if it's God's will, so let's ask a prophet."

Ahab sent for his 400 prophets. He said, "Should we go into this battle?"

They said, "Yes! Go fight because God will give you victory."

King Jehoshaphat said, "I want to hear from a prophet of the Lord. Don't you have one in Israel?"

Ahab said, "Well yes. We have one. But I hate to call him because he only says bad things about me. He's always talking about judgment."

Jehoshaphat said, "Still, I want to hear from him."

So Ahab said to his guards, "Go get Micaiah and bring him here."

As the guards brought the prophet in, they told him, "Everyone else is saying good things about the king's plans. So go along with them."

He said, "As there is a God in heaven, I'll say what the Lord tells me to say."

When King Ahab saw Micaiah, he said, "Tell me. Should I lead my army into this battle, or should I stay home?"

Micaiah said, "Oh, you should definitely go. You'll be successful."

Ahab glared at him, "I've told you over and over. Always tell me the truth. What does the Lord really say about this battle?"

Micaiah said, "I see Israel scattered like sheep without a shepherd. Their master is dead."

Ahab turned to Jehoshaphat. "See I told you. He only says bad things about me."

Micaiah said, "Hear the Word of the Lord. I saw God sitting among his angels. He said, 'How shall I get King Ahab to go to this battle?' The angels had various ideas. Then one spirit said, 'I can make him go. I'll become a lying spirit in the mouth of his prophets. He'll believe them and go into the battle.' So, that's what he did. Listen, the Lord wants you at that battle."

One of Ahab's prophets walked over and slapped Micaiah. Ahab yelled at his guards, "Put this man in prison. Give him nothing but bread and water until I come back from battle."

Micaiah yelled at the crowd, "Everyone listen and remember. I'm not a prophet of God if the king returns from this battle."

Both kings went to the battlefield. Once they were there, Ahab said to Jehoshaphat, "You can wear your royal robes, but I'll disguise myself as a common soldier."

The battle was fierce. The opposing army was focused on killing Ahab, but they couldn't find him. At one point, they thought King Jehoshaphat was Ahab. But once they realized they were mistaken, they turned away from him.

Finally a man shot an arrow into the air without aiming. It hit Ahab at a joint in his armor. He yelled, "Take me off of the battlefield. I'm wounded."

Ahab watched the battle propped up in his chariot. He died as the sun set in the west.

They took his body back to Samaria and buried him. Someone washed his chariot beside a pool. Dogs licked up his blood just as the Lord had said.

130 Jehoshaphat's Victory

Elijah

II Chronicles 19 – 20

Jehoshaphat was 35 years old when he became king of Judah. He ruled for 25 years. He set up an educational system, established justice in the land, and reformed the legal system.

Things were going well in Judah, until suddenly the nations of Moab, Ammon, and Edom decided to unite together and fight against Jehoshaphat. A massive army moved from the east side of the Dead Sea to En-gedi, on the west side.

Jehoshaphat was afraid, so he sought the Lord's help. He sent out a proclamation saying that everyone was to fast and seek God's favor. The people responded, and many went to Jerusalem to be with their king and pray with him. A huge crowd went to the Temple and stood before the Lord. Men brought their wives and children, so entire families prayed together and sought God's help.

Jehoshaphat stood before all the people and prayed to God. He said, "Oh Lord, you're the God of heaven. You're the one who gave this land to your friend Abraham. You control all power and might. You said we're to trust you when we're in trouble. Look! The Moabites and Ammonites have gathered a massive army and have come to destroy us. We have no power to fight against them. We don't know what else to do but look to you."

Suddenly the Spirit of God came upon a prophet. He said, "Hear what God says to you. 'Don't be afraid of this vast multitude. This isn't your battle, but mine. Tomorrow, go against them. You'll see them coming, but you don't have to fight them. Get in position, but stand still and see the salvation of the Lord. Don't be afraid, I am with you.' "

Jehoshaphat bowed down and put his face to the ground. All the people did the same and worshiped the Lord. Suddenly, the Levites stood up and started praising the Lord God with a loud voice.

In the morning, the men got up early and went out to face their enemies. Jehoshaphat told them, "Believe in the Lord and you'll be successful." He then appointed people to sing for the Lord. They went out in front of the army singing, "Give thanks to the Lord. His faithful love endures forever."

As the people shouted and praised the Lord, suddenly their enemy became confused. The Ammonites and the Moabites turned on those from Edom and totally annihilated them. They then turned on one another and kept killing until every man was dead. When the army of Judah arrived on the battlefield, there was nothing but corpses lying on the ground. No one had escaped.

Jehoshaphat told his people to gather up anything of value from the dead bodies. They found that their enemies had carried a large amount of valuables onto the battlefield. There was so much that the people gathered for three days. Finally they couldn't carry any more.

They met on the fourth day, just to praise God. Then they returned to Jerusalem with Jehoshaphat at the lead. Everyone gathered at the Temple to once again praise the Lord with great rejoicing!

All the nations around Judah heard about the great victory God had given his people. They were all terrified of the Lord, and none of them attacked Jehoshaphat as long as he lived. So there was peace in the land, and all was quiet.

131 Captain of 50

Elijah

II Kings 1

After Ahab died, his son Ahaziah became king of Israel. A short time later, he broke through a wooden rail and fell to the ground from the second floor of his house. He was seriously injured, so he said to his servants. "Go ask the god Baal-zebub if I'll recover from this."

Elijah stopped the servants along the road and said, "There is a God in Israel. So why are you taking this question to Baal-zebub? Here is the Lord's answer for the king. You won't get up from your sickbed. Instead, you're going to die."

The servants went back and gave King Ahaziah this message. The king said, "What did the man look like who told you this?"

"He was a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist."

"Oh, I know who he is. That's Elijah."

So King Ahaziah sent 50 soldiers to go get Elijah. When they got to where he was staying, the prophet was sitting at the top of an embankment. The captain of the men yelled up at him. "Man of God, come down! I have orders to take you to the king."

Elijah said, "If I'm a man of God, fire will come out of the sky and kill you and your 50 men." Suddenly a fireball fell from the sky and killed the captain and his men.

So the king sent another 50 soldiers to get

Elijah. When they got to where he was staying, the prophet was still sitting at the top of the embankment. The captain of the men yelled up at him. "Man of God, come down! I have orders to take you to the king."

Elijah said, "If I'm a man of God, fire will come out of the sky and kill you and your 50 men." Another fireball fell from the sky and killed the captain and his men.

Once again, the king sent 50 soldiers to go get Elijah. When they got to where he was staying, the captain of the men fell on his knees in front of Elijah. He said, "Man of God, please show compassion on us. Spare my life and the lives of these 50 servants of yours."

The angel of the Lord said to Elijah, "Go with them. You'll be safe." So he got up and went with them.

When he saw King Ahaziah, he said, "This is a message from the Lord. 'You could have asked me anything you wanted and I would have answered. But no! You sent your messengers to Baal-zebub. Therefore, you'll not get up from your sickbed. Instead, you'll die.'"

It happened just like Elijah said. King Ahaziah died. He didn't have children, so his brother Joram became king of Israel.

132 Elijah in the Whirlwind

Elijah

II Kings 2

The time came for the Lord to take Elijah to heaven. So the old prophet said to Elisha, “Stay here. The Lord is sending me to Bethel.”

Elisha said, “As sure as the Lord lives, I won’t leave you.” So they went to Bethel.

There was a group of prophets at Bethel. They said to Elisha, “Do you know the Lord is going to take your master away from you today?”

“Yes, I know. Now be quiet.”

Elijah said, “Elisha, stay here. The Lord is sending me to Jericho.”

Elisha said, “As sure as the Lord lives, I won’t leave you.” So they went to Jericho.

The prophets at Jericho said to Elisha, “Do you know the Lord is going to take your master away from you today?”

“Yes, I know. Now be quiet.”

Elijah said to him, “Stay here. The Lord is sending me to the Jordan River.”

Elisha said, “As sure as the Lord lives, I won’t leave you.” So they went on together.

When they got to the Jordan, Elijah rolled up his cloak, and struck the water. Immediately, the waters parted and the two men walked across the river on dry ground. Fifty prophets watched from a distance.

Once the two men were on the other side, Elijah said to Elisha, “What do you want me to do for you before I’m taken away?”

Elisha didn’t hesitate. “Please, I want a double portion of your spirit.”

Elijah was shocked. He said, “What? Your request is difficult. But, you’ll have it if you see me being taken from you. If not, you won’t get it.”

As they continued on, suddenly a chariot of fire with horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them. Then Elijah was taken up into heaven in the whirlwind ... and was gone.

Elisha saw it all. He ripped his clothes and yelled, “My father, my father, the chariots and horsemen of Israel!”

He then saw Elijah’s cloak, which fell when the prophet went up into the air. Elisha walked over and picked it up. He turned and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan River. He lifted the cloak high in the air, and then struck the water. He said, “Where’s the Lord God of Elijah?!” The waters parted, and he walked across on dry ground.

The fifty prophets saw all of this. They said, “The spirit of Elijah lives in Elisha.” From that day on, they honored him as their new leader.

When he got back to Jericho, the people of the city said to him, “Jericho is a good place to live, but the spring is bad. It even keeps our crops from growing.

He said, “Put some salt in a new bowl and bring it to me.”

They brought it to him and he went to the spring. He threw the salt into the water and said, “The Lord has made this water pure. You can now grow crops and no one will starve.”

He left Jericho to return to Bethel. Along the way, some boys started making fun of him. They said, “Get out of here, baldy!”

The prophet turned and put a curse on them. Immediately, two bears ran out of the woods and killed 42 of the boys and ripped them apart.

133 Ditches of Water

Elisha

II Kings 3

For many years, Moab was controlled by Israel and paid them high taxes. When Ahab died, the king of Moab refused to pay Israel any more taxes.

Ahab's son, King Joram organized his army and prepared to march against Moab. He sent a message to Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. "Please join me in our campaign against the king of Moab. He has rebelled against me."

Jehoshaphat agreed and the two armies marched south of the Dead Sea and into Edom. The Edomite army joined them. So all three continued their march toward Moab.

Soon they realized there wasn't enough water in that desert for all their men and animals. Joram said, "I think the Lord has led us here so we could all be captured by the Moabites."

Jehoshaphat said, "Do we have a prophet of God with us?"

One of the officers said, "Yes, Elisha is here."

The three kings went to him. When he saw Joram, he said, "Why are you coming to me. Why don't you talk to one of your idols?"

Joram said, "Please, I think the Lord your God has led us here so we would be captured by the Moabites."

Elisha said, "If it was just you, I wouldn't give you the time of day. But I have great respect for King Jehoshaphat, so send someone with a harp."

As the harp played, the Lord gave Elisha a message for Joram. "Dig ditches in this dry riverbed. You won't see a storm, but this riverbed will fill up with plenty of water. There will be enough for you and your animals. This is an easy thing for the Lord to do. He will also help you defeat the Moabite army, and you'll be able to capture their cities."

The next morning, the water suddenly started flowing, so much so that it flooded the land. The Moabite army got up early and looked in the direction of the three kings. The sun was shining on the water and made it look red. They shouted, "Look at all that blood. The armies of the three kings have turned and killed one another. Come! Let's go collect the spoils from their camps."

When they got to Israel's camp, the Israelite army attacked them. They chased them back into Moab, and started taking city after city. Finally there was only one left that hadn't been defeated.

Israel surrounded it. The king of Moab tried to escape by taking 700 of his key soldiers and breaking through the front lines. The plan failed, so he grabbed his oldest son and sacrificed him as an offering on the city wall. The sight of this was so horrible that the Moabite soldiers went into a frenzy of rage. Seeing this, the three armies withdrew and went home.

134 Oil, Stew, Bread, and Ax

Elisha

II Kings 4:1-7, 4:38-44 & 6:1-7

Elisha was in charge of the school of the prophets. There are several miracles associated with that group of young men:

One of the prophets died. His wife came to Elisha and said, "You know my husband followed the Lord and honored him. When he died, he owed a man some money. Now that man is coming to collect. He is going to take my two sons and sell them as slaves."

The prophet said, "Let me think. Surely I can help you. Tell me, do you have anything in your house that is valuable?"

She said, "No, I don't have anything of value in the house. Well, I do have a small jar of oil."

Elisha said, "Go to all of your neighbors and borrow as many containers as they have. Don't stop with just a few. Once you have them, go into your house with your sons and close the door. Pour oil into all those containers. Each time one is full, set it aside and fill the next one."

She and her sons went to every house and borrowed as many jars as they could. They took them into their house and closed the door. She then started pouring the oil into each jar. Her sons kept bringing her the empty ones. When they were all full, she turned and said, "Son, bring me another container."

He said, "Mother, there are no more." With that, the oil stopped.

She ran and told the man of God what had happened. He said, "Go and sell the oil. Pay your debt and live on what is left over."

At another time, there was a famine so severe that there was very little to eat. When Elisha returned from a trip, the prophets gathered around to listen to him teach. He said to a servant, "Fix a large pot of stew for these men."

One of the young men went into the forest to get some herbs for the stew. He found a

vine of wild gourds and didn't know they were poisonous. He gathered as many as he could carry, cut them up, and put them in the stew.

Once it was ready, some men tasted it and realized what had happened. They yelled, "Man of God. Watch out. There is death in the pot. Don't eat it."

Elisha said, "Bring me some flour." They gave him the flour and he threw it in the pot.

He then said, "Come, eat." Everyone ate, and there was nothing wrong with the stew.

Once a man came to Elisha with 20 small loaves of barley bread. It was the first bread from the harvest. The man of God said, "Serve this to the prophets so they can enjoy it."

"Sir, there are 100 men, and we only have 20 loaves of bread. There isn't enough for everyone."

Elisha said, "Give it to them. The Lord says there will be enough, and we'll have some left over."

So the bread was served to the men, and it was just like the Lord promised. There was enough for everyone, with some left over.

There came a time when the prophets realized their facilities were too small for them. Elisha gave them permission to go to the Jordan River and cut some logs for a new building. He even agreed to go with them.

One of the men borrowed an iron ax and was using it to cut down a tree. Suddenly the ax head fell off and went into the water. The man yelled, "Master! I borrowed that ax and now it's ruined."

Elisha said, "Where did it fall into the water?"

The man pointed to the spot. Elisha then cut a stick and threw it in the water at the spot the man showed him. The ax head floated to the surface. The man got it and fixed the ax.

135 Shunammite Woman

Elisha

II Kings 4:8-37

Elisha traveled to a town called Shunem. A prominent woman provided a meal for him. She then gave him an invitation to eat at their home whenever he was in their town.

Some time later, the woman said to her husband, “The man who comes here is a holy man. Let’s make a small room for him upstairs. We’ll provide a bed, table, chair, and a lamp. He can stay there whenever he comes to our city.” They prepared the room, and Elisha used it whenever he was in Shunem.

One day, the prophet stopped at the home and went up to his room. He said to Gehazi his servant, “The Shunammite woman has done all of this for us. Go ask her what I can do for her. Possibly she would like me to speak to the king for her, or a commander of the army.

Gehazi went and talked to her, but she said that her family provided for all her needs. Elisha then asked his servant, “Do you have any ideas of what we can do for her?”

“Well, she doesn’t have a son, and her husband is old.”

Elisha said, “Tell her to come and stand in the doorway.”

The woman went up the stairs and stood in the doorway of the prophet’s room. He said to her, “This time next year, you’ll have a son.”

She begged him. “Oh man of God, don’t tell me that unless it’s true.”

A year later, she gave birth to a baby boy, just as Elisha had promised. The child grew and in time was old enough to help his father with the harvest.

One day out in the field, he complained of a severe headache. His father told a servant to take the boy to his mother. The servant took him there and she held her son on her lap. Still, he died around noon. She took him up to Elisha’s room and laid him on the prophet’s bed.

She then sent a message to her husband. “Please send me a donkey and a servant. I need to hurry and go see the man of God. I’ll come back as fast as I can.”

The husband agreed and sent her a donkey and a servant. She said to the servant, “Take me to the man of God at Mount Carmel. Don’t slow down unless I tell you.”

Elisha saw her coming from a distance, but the Lord didn’t tell him why she was coming. He sent Gehazi to ask why, but she wouldn’t tell him.

When she got to the prophet, she ran up, fell down, and grabbed his feet. Gehazi started to pull her away, but the prophet said, “Don’t! She’s deeply troubled and God still hasn’t told me why.”

The woman looked up and yelled, “I told you not to tell me I’d have a son unless it was true!”

The prophet turned to Gehazi. “Run back to her house. Don’t talk to anyone along the way. Take this staff and place it on the boy’s face.”

Gehazi took the staff and left. Elisha then told the woman that she and her servant could go home. She said, “Listen to me carefully. As sure as God is alive, and as sure as you’re alive, I’m not leaving you until my son is alive.” So Elisha went with them to her house.

Gehazi got there first and placed the staff on the boy’s face. Nothing happened. When Elisha arrived, he went into the room alone and locked the door. He prayed to the Lord, and then went over and stretched out over the boy’s body with his eyes over the boy’s eyes, his mouth over the boy’s mouth, and his hands over the boy’s hands. Soon the boy’s flesh became warm once again, but he didn’t start breathing.

The prophet got up and paced back and forth. Then he once again stretched out over the boy’s body. Suddenly the boy sneezed ... and then he sneezed again ... and then he sneezed again. He sneezed a total of seven times. After that, the boy opened his eyes and looked at the prophet.

Elisha got up and called for Gehazi. “Go and get the Shunammite woman.”

When she came into the room, the prophet said, “Pick up your son.” Without saying a word, she knelt at the feet of the man of God. She then picked up her son and left.

136 Naaman

Elisha

II Kings 5:1-14

Naaman was the commander of the Syrian army. He was a brave warrior and led his men to win many victories. His king considered him a great man. During one of their wars with Israel, he captured a young girl and brought her back to be a servant for his wife.

In time, Naaman realized he had leprosy, a crippling disease of the skin. The young slave girl said, “I wish my master could go to Israel. They have a prophet who’s able to heal people, even those with leprosy.”

Naaman told this to the king. Immediately, the king made preparations to send Naaman to the king of Israel. He sent gifts of gold, silver, and fine clothes along with a letter saying, “I’m sending my servant Naaman so you can cure him of leprosy.”

The king of Israel was shocked when he read the letter. He ripped his clothes and yelled, “Who does he think I am? I’m not God. I can’t cure people of leprosy! He’s trying to start a war with me.”

Elisha heard about this and sent a message to the king. “Why are you ripping your clothes?

Send the man to me so he’ll know there’s a prophet in Israel.”

So Naaman and his men rode to the prophet’s house and stood outside. Elisha sent his servant Gehazi out with this message. “Go down to the Jordan River and wash seven times. After you’re done, you’ll be healed of leprosy.”

Naaman couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He became furious and stormed away. He said, “A true prophet would come out and stand in front of me. He’d pray to the Lord and wave his hand over my skin. If I thought washing in a river would help, I’d bathe in one of the beautiful rivers of Syria—not a dirty river like the Jordan.”

His servants said to him, “My father, if the prophet had asked you to do something hard, you would’ve done it. But he told you to do something easy—wash and be clean.”

So Naaman went to the Jordan River and dipped into it seven times. Suddenly his skin was healed just as the prophet said it would be. In fact, it was like the skin of a young boy.

Continued in the next story

II Kings 5:15-27

Continued from the previous story

After Naaman was healed at the Jordan River, he and his men went back to the prophet's house and stood before him. Naaman said, "Today I've learned, and now know, that there's no god on earth except the God of Israel. Please accept my humble gift."

Elisha said, "As sure as God lives, I won't take a gift from you." Naaman insisted, but the prophet still refused.

Then the commander said, "Please let me have as much dirt as two mules can carry. I'll no longer worship any other god. Instead, I'll kneel on this dirt from Israel and worship the Lord God."

He then asked for something else. "When my king goes into the temple of his god, I'm required to go with him because I'm his commander. While I'm there, I have to kneel down in front of the idol. I ask that the Lord will forgive me for doing this."

Elisha said, "Go home in peace, and don't worry about that situation."

Shortly after Naaman left, Gehazi started thinking. "My master let this Syrian off too easy. He should've paid something. I'll go catch up with him and ask for a gift for myself."

So Gehazi went after the Syrian commander.

Soon, Naaman saw him coming and stopped his chariot. He got off and greeted the servant. "Is everything all right?"

Gehazi said, "Oh yes, everything is fine. My master just found out that he's having two young guests staying with us tonight. They're from the school of the prophets. He was wondering if you would like to help with the expenses—possibly 75 pounds of silver and a couple of sets of clothes."

"Certainly! Here, I'll give you 150 pounds of silver in two bags, as well as two sets of clothes." The commander gave all of this to a couple of his men so they could carry it back for the servant.

Gehazi had the men take the silver and clothes to his own house. Once everything was put away, he sent the men away. He then went and stood next to his master.

Elisha said, Gehazi, where did you go?"

"I didn't go anywhere."

Elisha said, "Oh my dear friend. My spirit was there when Naaman stopped his chariot and stepped down to greet you. It wasn't your place to accept money, clothes, olive trees, vineyards, animals, or slaves. Therefore, Naaman's leprosy is now attaching itself to your skin."

With that, Gehazi turned and left the house. He looked down at his arms, and they were already white with leprosy.

138 Blind Soldiers

Elisha

II Kings 6:8-23

The king of Syria invaded the land of Israel. He brought in his military leaders and told them his plans—where he was going to set up camp and how he was going to attack the Israelites. As soon as he spoke the words, Elisha went and told the king of Israel exactly what the Syrians were planning. The army of Israel made preparations and won the battle.

This happened several times until the king of Syria finally realized that the Israelites always knew exactly what he was planning. He said to his commanders, “Which one of you is a spy for Israel?”

One of them said. “My lord, we’re all loyal to you. It’s Elisha, the prophet. He is the one telling his king about your plans. He knows what you say, even when you’re in your bedroom.”

“Where does this prophet live?”

“He lives in Dothan, my lord.”

So the king sent a large army with horses and chariots to Dothan. They arrived at night and surrounded the city.

Elisha’s servant got up early and stepped outside. Suddenly he saw this massive army. Running back inside, he yelled, “The Syrian army has surrounded the city. What are we going to do?”

Elisha was surprised. “Why are you afraid? Our army is much bigger than theirs.”

Then he prayed, “Lord, open this man’s eyes so he can see.” So the Lord opened his eyes. He looked out and saw that the mountain was covered with horses and chariots of fire. All of them were for Elisha.

At that point, the Syrians started moving in on the city. The prophet prayed, “Lord, please make all these men blind.” Suddenly the Lord struck them with blindness.

The prophet walked up to them and said, “Somehow you’ve gotten on the wrong road. You’re at the wrong city. I’ll guide you and take you to the right place.”

He then led them to Samaria, the capital of Israel. Once they were inside the gate, he prayed, “Lord, open the eyes of these men so they can see.” The men looked around and realized they were in Samaria.

The king of Israel saw this and said to Elisha, “Should I kill them? ”

“No. You can’t kill these men. You didn’t capture them in battle. They’re your guests. Give them food and drink, and let them go back to their master.”

So the king prepared a great feast for his guests. When everyone had had enough to eat and drink, they went back to the king of Syria. It was a long time before Syria invaded Israel again.

139 Four Lepers & the Syrian Camp

Elisha

II Kings 6:24 – 7:20

The king of Syria once again invaded Israel. His army surrounded Samaria and set up camp just outside the city walls. They cut off all supplies going into the city. Eventually there was no food, and the people started to starve. It was so bad that a donkey's head sold for two pounds of silver, and a small bowl of dove's droppings sold for two ounces of silver.

A woman saw the king walking along the top of the city wall. She asked him to help her. He said, "I don't know if I can. What's your problem?"

She said, "My friend won't keep her promise. We agreed we'd eat our two sons, mine on the first day and hers on the second. So, we boiled and ate my son, but now she has hidden her son."

When the king heard this, he ripped his clothes. He said, "I'll get Elisha for this if it's the last thing I do." He sent a guard to cut off the prophet's head.

Elisha was sitting in his house with several elders of Israel. He said, "Our murdering king has sent a guard to cut off my head. The king is right behind him."

Just then the king walked in. He yelled at the prophet. "You said all this trouble is from God. So why should I serve him if he acts like this?"

Elisha said, "I have a message from God. He said this disaster is almost over. Tomorrow at this time, people will buy a sack of fine flour for a few coins. They'll buy a large sack of barley for the same price."

The king's chief adviser said, "Impossible! We couldn't have that much food around here even if God opened up the windows of heaven."

The man of God said, "You'll see it with your own eyes, but you won't eat any of it."

During the night, the Syrian army heard a loud noise like a large army marching toward them. The noise got louder and sounded like the army had many horses and chariots.

The Syrian soldiers thought Israel had hired

other nations to come and help them. They yelled, "Let's get out of here!" They got up and ran away, leaving everything behind.

Before light the next morning, four lepers were sitting just outside of the city gates. One said to the others, "Why are we just sitting here slowly dying of hunger?"

Another one said, "Well, it's no better in the city. If we go in there, we'll still die of hunger."

"Well that's true, but we can't stay here. Let's go into the Syrian camp. If they kill us—well, we're about to die anyway. But maybe they'll have pity on us and give us food."

So, the four men got up and walked toward the camp, not knowing it was empty. They went into the first tent and found food, gold, silver, and expensive clothes. The first thing they did was eat the food. They then took the other things away and hid them. They came back and hid what they found in the next tent.

Finally they said, "What we're doing isn't right. People are dying of hunger on the other side of the wall. God will punish us if we don't go tell them about this."

So they went to the city gate and yelled to the gatekeeper, telling him exactly what they found. When the king heard about this, he thought it was a trap. He said, "The Syrian army is hiding out of sight, waiting for us to come out of the city."

So he sent a few soldiers to scout out the land. The men found the route the Syrians had taken. It was full of clothes and equipment the army had thrown away so they could run faster.

The soldiers went back and told the king what they had found. With that, people flooded out of the city to raid the Syrian camp. The price of food immediately dropped.

The king gave his chief adviser the job of crowd control at the gate. Soon, he was trampled to death. All of this fulfilled what the prophet had said.

140 Elisha Crying

Elisha

II Kings 8:1-15

Elisha went to the Shunammite woman and said, “Take your family and leave Israel as soon as you can. A famine will hit the land and last for seven years.”

She did as the man of God said. Her family left Israel and moved to the land of the Philistines and stayed there seven years. When she came back to Israel, she went to the king to ask that their family house and land be returned to her.

When she arrived, she found that the king was listening to Gehazi, who was talking about some of the great things Elisha had done. It happened that the servant was telling about the time the prophet brought the dead boy back to life.

Just then, the Shunammite woman walked in. Gehazi said, “My lord. This is the woman I was talking about. It was her son that was raised from the dead.”

The king asked her to tell the story from her viewpoint. After she told the story, he said to a court official, “Make sure this woman gets everything back that belongs to her. Also, give her whatever money was made from her fields while she was away.”

Some time later, Elisha went to the capital of Syria. The Syrian king was sick. When he heard that Elisha was in town, he sent his servant Hazael

to the prophet. “Take some gifts to the man of God and ask him if I’ll recover from this illness.”

Hazael took 40 camel-loads of all kinds of goods as a gift. He said to the prophet, “The king of Syria wants to know if he’ll recover from his illness.”

Elisha said, “Go tell him that he’ll recover from his illness. But that’s not true. The Lord has told me that he’ll die.”

Then Elisha stared at Hazael. He stared so long that Hazael became embarrassed. Then the prophet broke down and cried. Hazael said, “Man of God, why are you crying?”

“Oh, because of the horrible things you’ll do to the people of Israel. You’ll burn down their cities and kill their young men. You’ll crush the heads of babies and rip open pregnant women.”

Hazael said, “How can I do these terrible things? I’m only a servant.”

“Oh, the Lord has shown me that you are going to be the king of Syria.”

Hazael left the prophet and went back to his master. The king asked, “What did Elisha say?”

“He said you’d recover from your illness.”

The next day, Hazael dipped a heavy cloth into water, and used it to suffocate the king. After he died, Hazael took his place as king of Syria.

141 Jehu becomes King

Elisha

II Kings 9:1-29

Elisha selected one of the young prophets. He said to him, "Take this bottle of oil and go to Jehu. He'll be with his friends, so ask to see him alone. Anoint him king of Israel. Once you're done, open the door and run away."

The young prophet found Jehu visiting with the other commanders of the army. The young man said to him, "I have a message for you."

The two of them went into the house. The young prophet poured oil on Jehu's head and said, "Here is the message from the Lord. 'I anoint you king over Israel. You're to kill the entire household of Ahab. Every male in his family is to die. Jezebel will be eaten by the dogs.' " With that, the young man opened the door and ran away.

Jehu went back to his friends. They said, "What did that crazy prophet want?"

"Oh, you know how they are. He went on and on about nothing."

They said, "You're not telling the truth. What did he say?"

"Oh well, he did say one interesting thing. He said, 'I anoint you king of Israel.' "

The others jumped up and spread their coats down before him. They blew a ram's horn and shouted "Jehu is king!" Immediately they started planning how they were going to overthrow Joram, king of Israel. He was the son of Ahab and Jezebel.

Joram was at his palace at Jezreel. His nephew, who was the king of Judah, had come to visit him. Jehu gathered his men and went to Jezreel.

The watchman saw him and his men coming and said to the king, "There's a band of soldiers coming this way."

Joram said, "Send a rider out to them to see if

they're coming in peace."

A man rode out to Jehu and said, "The king wants to know if you're coming in peace."

"He knows nothing about peace. Get behind my men."

The watchman said to the king, "The rider got there but isn't coming back. He's now riding behind the others."

So the king sent another rider out. He rode up to Jehu and said, "The king wants to know if you're coming in peace."

"He knows nothing about peace. Get behind my men."

The watchman said to the king, "The second rider has also joined them. My lord, I know who's coming. It's like a wild man is driving the lead chariot. That's how Jehu drives a chariot."

Joram said, "Go get our chariots!" Both kings rode out to meet the soldiers, each in his own chariot. Joram yelled, "Jehu, do you come in peace?"

He yelled back, "How can there be peace when Jezebel practices witchcraft and makes everyone worship idols?"

Joram turned his chariot around and yelled to his nephew. "Run! It's a trap."

Jehu shot an arrow and killed Joram, hitting him between his shoulder blades. The commander shouted, "Take his body and throw it in the field that was stolen from Naboth."

He then chased after the young king of Judah, because he was the grandson of Ahab. Once he was in range, Jehu shot the king with an arrow.

So, in one day, Jehu killed both the king of Israel and the king of Judah.

Continued in the next story

❗ *II Kings 9:30 – 10:36*

Continued from the previous story

After Jehu killed the two kings, he went back to Jezreel to find Jezebel. She knew he was coming, so she put on makeup, brushed her hair, and sat next to her second floor window.

When he arrived, she called down to him, “Why are you here—to keep killing people who are better than you?”

He looked up at her, and then yelled, “Is anyone up there that’s on my side?” Some men who worked for the queen looked down from the window. Jehu yelled, “Throw her out of the window!”

They picked up Jezebel and threw her out of the window. She fell to the ground, splattering blood on the wall. Jehu drove his chariot over her several times. He then went inside to get something to eat.

After the meal, he said, “Well, I guess we should bury her. After all, she is a queen.”

He sent some men out to take care of this, but they could only find her skull, her feet, and the palms of her hands. They told Jehu, and he said, “God spoke through Elijah when he said, ‘Dogs will eat Jezebel at Naboth’s field, and she will be fertilizer.’ ”

Jehu then sent a message to the elders in Samaria. “Your city walls are strong, and you have plenty of horses, chariots and weapons. The 70 sons of Ahab live under your protection. Therefore, select one to be your king, and prepare for battle.”

The elders were terrified when they got this letter. They sent him a message saying,

“We don’t want to make any of these sons of Ahab our king. We’re your servants and will do whatever you say.”

He sent a message back to them. “If that’s true, put the heads of those 70 sons in baskets and send them to me.” So the 70 sons of Ahab were killed, and their heads were sent to Jehu. He then made sure no other relative of Ahab was still alive.

Once all of this was done, Jehu made an announcement in Samaria. He said, “Ahab served Baal a little, but I’m totally dedicated to him. Therefore I’m having a great sacrifice to Baal. All the true worshipers of Baal are to be there. I’ll kill anyone who misses this meeting.”

This announcement was made all across Israel. Baal worshipers came from every part of the nation. They filled up the temple of Baal. No one was missing. Jehu said, “Look around and see if there are any servants of the Lord with us. If you see one, throw him out immediately. Only servants of Baal are welcome here.”

Once this was done, the people started making their burnt offerings. Jehu went outside and said to his men. “Go in and kill everyone. If anyone escapes, you’ll give your life for his.”

So the men went in and killed everyone. They then tore down the temple of Baal and made it into a large toilet.

The Lord said, “You have followed my instructions with enthusiasm. Therefore, your sons will be king of Israel for four generations.” So Jehu reigned over Israel for 28 years.

143 Athaliah

Elisha

II Kings 8:16-29, 9:14-29, 11:1-21

II Chronicles 21 – 23

Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, wanted to establish a good relationship with the kingdom of Israel. To do that, he had his oldest son marry Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab, king of Israel. Unfortunately, Athaliah influenced her husband to follow the sinful ways of Israel.

As soon as Jehoshaphat died, his son became king and put idols all around Judah, and built a temple to Baal in Jerusalem. He killed his six brothers to make sure they wouldn't take the kingdom away from him.

Elisha sent him a message. "You've caused the people to worship idols, and now you've killed your brothers. They were all better men than you. Therefore, all of your sons will be killed, and you'll die a slow agonizing death."

Immediately, Judah started losing battles. The king developed a severe stomach illness. All of his sons were killed except the youngest. The king's illness caused him extreme pain for two years. When he finally died, no one mourned his death.

His youngest son became king, and he followed the direction of his mother Athaliah. He went to visit his uncle, the king of Israel. While he was there, Jehu killed both of them.

When she heard that her son was dead, Athaliah decided to become king, even though she was a woman. Still, she knew the people of Judah always selected their kings from the descendants of David. That meant the people could kill her and make one of her grandchildren king. Therefore, she decided to kill them. She called for the guard and told him to go to the palace and kill them all.

Athaliah's daughter heard this and rushed to the palace. She worshiped the Lord and was married to Jehoiada, the high priest. At the palace, she took the baby Joash and his nurse and left—just before the guards got there. She hid the child in the Temple of the Lord.

Meanwhile the guards killed all the other royal descendants of David.

Athaliah was confident she had killed them all. So, she became king of Judah and ruled the nation for six years.

Jehoiada hid Joash in the Temple until he was seven years old. Finally the priest knew it was time to act. He organized a meeting with trusted military leaders and the heads of various family groups. He asked them, "What would you do if you had a descendant of King David."

"We would make him king!"

Jehoiada then brought Joash before them and said, "Here is your next king."

Together, they set a date to bring him out before the people. They organized the military, Temple activities, and crowd control. On the big day, the people of Judah went to the Temple.

Joash was brought out and put in the place reserved for the king. Jehoiada anointed him with oil and placed a crown on his head. The trumpets blew, the choir sang, and the people shouted, "Long live the king!!"

Athaliah heard all the shouting, so she went out to see what was going on. People were running through the streets, celebrating, and talking about the king. She walked into the Temple and saw Joash in the place reserved for the king, and he had a crown on his head. She ripped her clothes and screamed, "Treason! Treason!"

Jehoiada pointed at her and said, "Take that woman out, because it is not right to kill someone in the Temple."

So they dragged Athaliah out of the Temple, and killed her at the horse corral. The people went through the city and tore down everything that had to do with Baal. The high priest once again set up the worship of the Lord in the Temple. Everyone rejoiced because Athaliah's reign of terror was over.

Joash was seven years old when he became king of Judah. Jehoiada, the high priest, taught the king and helped him live a godly life. As long as Jehoiada lived, Joash followed the ways of the Lord.

When the king was older, he decided to make repairs on the Temple of the Lord. Athaliah had taken every thing of value out of it to use in the worship of Baal.

Joash assigned priests and Levites to go throughout the nation and collect money for Temple repairs and annual upkeep. Many years earlier, Moses had provided for this by imposing a tax.

They started collecting the money, but the repairs didn't start. The king finally realized the money was being used for administration costs and for other things the priests thought important."

It was clear that the priests and Levites were the wrong people to oversee the Temple repair. Joash decided on a different method. He told men to make a large box and put it at the Temple gate. He then announced that people were to bring their money for the Temple and put it in the box.

The people of Judah liked this, so they brought their offerings and put them in the box. When it got full, the money was given to the men making the repairs. This gave them the ability to keep at their work and not slow down. They were men of integrity, so the king didn't require them to give an accounting of the money and how it was spent.

The offerings kept coming in even after the work was done. So the extra money was used for making various tools of worship. The people of Judah became faithful at coming to the Temple and worshipping God.

All of this was done while Jehoiada was still alive. He died when he was 130 years old, having lived a good life. He had served his king, his God, and the people of Judah.

After his death, Joash listened to various leaders of Judah who wanted a different direction for the nation. He allowed them to make changes, and soon the people stopped going to the Temple to worship God. Instead they turned to idols and sex goddesses.

The Lord sent prophets to preach against this. The son of Jehoiada was now a priest. God had him stand before the people and say, "If you leave the Lord, he'll leave you."

The people rejected this message and wanted to kill the priest. Finally Joash ordered him to be stoned, even though he was the son of Jehoiada, who had been a faithful friend and advisor.

Soon afterwards, God allowed a small Syrian army to conquer the superior army of Judah and take Jerusalem. Many of the Jewish leaders were killed, the king was badly wounded, and the Syrians took everything of value. After they left, several men went into the king's bedroom and killed him.

Joash had been king for 40 years. The people didn't bury him in the tombs of the kings because of what he had done to the son of Jehoiada.

145 Death of Elisha

Elisha

II Kings 13

After Jehu died, his son became king of Israel. Unfortunately he wasn't a good king. Still, there was one time he desperately needed God's help, and the Lord helped him.

After he died, his son Jehoash became king. During his reign, Elisha became sick and was about to die. The king knelt down beside the prophet's bed and cried. He said, "My father, my father, the chariots and horsemen of Israel!"

Elisha said to him, "Go get your bow and some arrows."

The king went and got them. When he came back, the prophet said, "Grab the bow." So the king grabbed the bow. The man of God then put his hand on top of Jehoash's hand and said, "Now, open the window."

The king opened the window. Elisha said, "Shoot an arrow out the window." So Jehoash

shot an arrow out the window.

Elisha said, "That was the Lord's arrow of victory. You'll have victory over Syria. Now grab a handful of arrows and hit them on the ground."

Jehoash grabbed some arrows and hit the ground three times and stopped. The prophet yelled at him. "Why did you only hit the ground three times? You should've hit it five or six times. Then you would have totally defeated Syria and brought an end to them. Now you'll only defeat them three times."

Elisha died and was buried in a tomb. The following spring, some Israelites were conducting a funeral. Suddenly they saw some men coming, and realized they were Moabite raiders. The men from Israel threw the body into Elisha's tomb and ran away. As soon as the body touched Elisha's bones, the dead man came to life and stood up.

146 Jonah & the Fish

Later Kings

Jonah 1 – 2

The Lord said to Jonah the prophet, “Leave right now and go to Nineveh. You’re to tell them I’m going to judge them because of their wickedness.”

Jonah knew that God was merciful and would forgive Nineveh if they repented. He didn’t want that, so he ran away from God’s will and went to the seaport town called Joppa. He bought a ticket and got on a ship going to Tarshish. He wanted to get far away from God’s will so there would be no possibility of Nineveh’s repenting.

Once the ship was out to sea, God sent a violent storm to hit it. The sailors were terrified because the storm was about to destroy their boat and drown them. They threw their cargo overboard to lighten the load. When that didn’t help, they prayed to their various gods. While all of this was going on, Jonah was fast asleep down in the hold of the boat.

The captain woke him up and said, “How can you sleep? We’re about to die. Get up and pray to your god.”

Eventually the sailors figured out that this storm was directed at only one person on the ship. They cast lots to see who it was. The results showed that Jonah was the reason for their troubles. They said, “Who are you, and what have you done?”

He said, “I serve the Lord God, who made the sea and the dry ground. But I’m running

away from him.”

Suddenly the storm got worse! The men screamed at Jonah, “What should we do to you to calm the storm?”

Jonah yelled back, “God only wants one thing, and the storm won’t stop until He gets it. You’re to grab me and throw me overboard.”

The men didn’t want to kill an innocent man, so they worked even harder to fight against the storm and get to land. Finally they realized they couldn’t fight God. They cried out to the Lord and asked him for mercy for what they were about to do. They then grabbed Jonah and threw him overboard.

Immediately, the storm stopped! The men were shocked at the power of God. They fell to the deck and worshiped the Lord and vowed to serve only him.

God had a large fish waiting for Jonah as he went into the water. The fish immediately swallowed him, and he stayed in the fish’s stomach for three days.

Jonah prayed and acknowledged that it was God who put him in the fish. He finally said, “I’ll give you what you want. I’ll thank you for your will, and do what you want me to do.”

With that, the Lord spoke to the fish. It went to land and vomited Jonah onto the shore.

Continued in the next story

147 Jonah & the Vine

Later Kings

Jonah 3 – 4

Continued from the previous story

Once again, God said to Jonah, “Leave right now and go to Nineveh. You’re to tell them I’m going to judge them because of their wickedness.” This time, Jonah immediately got up and went to Nineveh.

The city of Nineveh was extremely large. It took three days to walk from one side to the other. So Jonah started his walk across the city. He shouted, “God is going to destroy this city in 40 days!”

The people of the city heard him preach and believed that what he said was true. They passed a law that said everyone was to fast—no exceptions. Everyone was to go without food, and they were to wear burlap sacks. They prayed and asked God to be merciful to them.

The king stepped down from his throne and laid aside his royal robes. He put on burlap sacks and sat on a pile of ashes. He sent out another law that said, “No one is to taste any food or water. That includes animals as well. Everyone is to wear burlap sacks, and stop any evil they are doing. Maybe God will change his mind and allow us to live.”

The Lord saw all they were doing. He knew they had turned away from their wickedness, so he stopped the judgment that was about to kill them and destroy their city.

Jonah was furious when he heard about this. He said, “I told you this would happen! I knew you were a merciful God. I knew you were quick to forgive. That’s exactly why I didn’t want to

come here. That’s why I ran away. Kill me right now. I don’t want to live.”

The Lord said, “Do you think it’s right to be so angry about this?”

Jonah didn’t answer, but went to the east side of the city. He made a small shelter so he could sit and see exactly what God was going to do with the city.

While he was sitting there, God caused a vine to grow up next to him. The vine had large leaves, which provided shade from the hot sun. Jonah was pleased with the plant, and enjoyed the shade it provided.

The next morning, God caused a worm to attack the vine and kill it. As the sun got hot, the plant withered. Then God caused a hot east wind to blow on Jonah. As the day went by, the sun and the wind got hotter and hotter, and there was no vine to protect him. Jonah cried, “I don’t want to live anymore. I want to die!”

God said to him, “Is it right to be angry about the vine?”

“Yes, it’s right for me to be angry. I’m so mad I want to die.”

The Lord said, “You’re angry about a simple vine. You didn’t plant it. You didn’t water it. It came up one day and died the next.

“Shouldn’t I also care for the people of this city? If for no other reason, there are over 120,000 children living here, not to mention all the animals.”

148 The Thistle and the Cedar

Later Kings

II Kings 14:1-22, II Chronicles 25

After Joash died, Amaziah became king of Judah. He started off as a good king, and followed the Lord for many years.

Eventually, he decided to attack Edom and bring them under his control. He organized an army of 300,000 soldiers. He then hired another 100,000 soldiers from Israel and paid them four tons of silver.

A man of God came with a message. "Don't use soldiers from Israel. If you do, God will make sure you lose the battle."

The king said, "But what about the money I already paid them?"

The prophet said, "Don't worry about that money. God is able to give you much more than that."

So the king told the soldiers of Israel to go home. They became angry. Along the way they raided several cities of Judah and killed over 3,000 people.

While this was going on, the army of Judah marched south toward Edom. They won the battle and regained control over them. Unfortunately, Amaziah brought the gods of Edom back to Judah. He set them up and started worshiping them.

The Lord became angry and sent a prophet to speak to the king. "Why would you worship gods that weren't able to protect their own people from your army?"

Before he could say any more, Amaziah

said, "Stop talking! You're not one of my counselors. Leave or I'll have you killed."

The prophet said, "Because you won't listen to God's message, he is going to punish you."

So the Lord put in Amaziah's heart the desire to go to war against Israel. The king sent a message to king Jehoash saying, "Come out and face me in battle."

Jehoash sent a story back to Amaziah. He said, "A thistle sent a message to the cedar tree. He said, 'I want to arrange a marriage between my son and your daughter.' Suddenly an animal accidentally stepped on the thistle and crushed it."

"Don't be like the thistle. You had a good victory with Edom. Enjoy it, but don't let pride lift you up. Stay home, because if you come after me, Judah will fall."

God made sure Amaziah didn't listen to this. The two armies went into battle and Judah was totally defeated. Their army ran from the battlefield.

Jehoash captured Amaziah and then took Jerusalem. Israel broke down 600 feet of the wall of Jerusalem. They took all the gold and silver from the Temple and the king's palace.

Jehoash left Amaziah in Jerusalem and went back to Samaria. A group of men tried to kill Amaziah, but he escaped to another city. They hunted him down, and killed him there.

II Kings 15, II Chronicles 26 – 27

When Amaziah died, the people made his son, Uzziah, king. He was 16 years old and served as king for 52 years. God gave him great success because he followed the Lord and wanted to please him.

Uzziah did many wonderful works. He defeated the enemies of Judah and was known far and wide as a powerful king. He restored Jerusalem and strengthened the other cities of Judah. He loved the soil, so he excelled in farm activities. He provided for his army so that every man was well equipped for battle. He invented the catapult, so he could throw large stones from the walls of Jerusalem.

One day, king Uzziah was feeling proud of his accomplishments and his dedication to God. He decided to go into the Temple and burn the incense himself, instead of letting the priest do it. The high priest suddenly realized what he was about to do. He got 80 other priests and went in the Temple so they could stop the king from doing this.

He said, “Uzziah, this is wrong! God made it clear that only a descendant of Aaron is allowed to offer incense to the Lord. Please, leave right now! You’re not honoring God in this.”

Uzziah became angry as he stood next to the altar with the censer in his hand. He couldn’t believe all the priests were so bold as to confront him on this. Suddenly leprosy appeared on his forehead. All of the priests saw it and rushed him out of the Temple. He willingly went with them because he knew the Lord was punishing him.

Uzziah had leprosy for the rest of his life. He had to stay away from other people, so he lived in isolation. Because of the leprosy, he wasn’t allowed to go into the Temple. He couldn’t even go into his own palace. His son Jotham lived there and ruled the people in the king’s stead.

Jotham became king after his father died. He followed the example of his father’s early years. He continued to build up the kingdom of Judah. He did what was right and became a powerful king.

II Kings 16, II Chronicles 28

Ahaz was 20 years old when he became king of Judah. Unlike his father and grandfather, he didn't follow the Lord. He started the worship of Baal in Jerusalem, and even began to practice the ritual of child sacrifice. Syria marched on Jerusalem and took people away as captives. Ahaz sent gold and silver to the king of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. He said, "I'll be your loyal servant if you rescue us from Syria."

So Assyria attacked Syria and totally destroyed their nation and sent most of their people into exile.

Ahaz went to Syria to meet with the king of Nineveh. While he was there, he saw a special altar he liked, and sent plans back to Jerusalem so his craftsmen could build one like it.

It was done by the time the king got back to Jerusalem. So he took many of the things from inside the Temple and started to use them with his new altar. He then closed the doors of the Temple so no one could go inside to worship.

The Lord became angry and allowed the king of Israel to defeat Judah. Their army marched on Jerusalem and killed 120,000 men, including some of Ahaz's sons. The army took a massive amount of Judah's wealth back to Israel. They also took 200,000 women and children, to be used as slaves.

A prophet of the Lord met the army as they came into Samaria. He said, "The Lord gave Israel

victory over Judah because he was angry with them. But God is not pleased with you because you went too far. You slaughtered their people and took their women and children as slaves.

"Take them back to Judah now! If you don't, the Lord will strike you in anger, just as he did Judah."

This made the people of Israel afraid. Their leaders said to the army, "Don't bring those people here! We don't want to make God more angry with us than he already is."

So the people of Israel used the spoils of Judah to provide for their captives. They gave them clothes and attended to their medical needs. They gave everyone food and drink.

Once the captives were cared for, they took them to Jericho, and even provided donkeys for those who were weak. Once the captives were safely in the care of their own people, the Israelites went back to Samaria.

Ahaz's troubles continued on. All the nations around him attacked Jerusalem and took whatever they wanted. He once again asked Assyria for help, but they refused.

Ahaz still didn't turn to the Lord. Instead, he kept trying to find another god who would help him. Finally he died and his son Hezekiah became king.

Hezekiah would become one of the greatest kings of Judah.

151 Gomer

Later Kings

Hosea 1 – 3

God said to Hosea the prophet, “Go find a prostitute and marry her.”

So, Hosea went to where prostitutes lived and chose one named Gomer. She agreed to be his wife. But after the wedding, she continued seeing her many lovers.

Soon Gomer was expecting a child from one of these men. She gave birth to a son, and God said to Hosea, “Accept this child as your own.”

So Hosea accepted the child and named him “Jezreel.” He preached to the people of Israel and said, “God chose you and made you his own. But you are unfaithful and run after other gods. Now he says to you, ‘Remember Jezreel and what Jehu did there. In the same way I will judge you and you will cease to be a nation in the Valley of Jezreel.’ ”

Gomer had another child from one of her lovers. This time, it was a girl. Hosea was told to accept her, so he named her, “No Mercy.”

After No Mercy was weaned, Gomer went out to her lovers. She gave birth to another son. God said, “Accept this child in your home, but call him ‘Not Mine.’ ”

Hosea preached to the people of Israel, “You have gone far away from God. You don’t know who you belong to, and God says, ‘You’re not mine.’ ”

“But the day will come when that will change! God will proudly say, ‘You are my people, and I am your God.’ ”

“Jezreel will say to his brother, ‘You have a new name. Instead of Not Mine, it is You Are My Own.’ He will say to his sister, ‘Instead of No Mercy, your name is now Abundant Mercy.’ ”

Gomer got tired of living with Hosea and her children. She ran off with one of her lovers. It was then she found out he was a slave trader, and he made her a slave.

She longed to be back with her husband. “Oh, to be home again! Hosea gave me so much, but I turned my back on him.” She knew it was impossible to regain what she had lost.

God said to Hosea, “Go to the slave market, and buy your wife from among the slaves.”

The prophet took his money and went to the slave market. He saw all the slaves standing naked before everyone. Among them was Gomer. Hosea walked up and paid the required price. He then took off his coat and used it to cover his wife. Together they went back to his house.

He said, “I chose you and married you. Now I have bought you. You will never again leave me and go out to your lovers.” Hosea loved her and tenderly cared for her.

He said to Israel, “You have left your God and sold yourself to idols. They have treated you with contempt and abused you, leaving you naked and abandoned. But the day will come when God will buy you back and show you Abundant Mercy, and say, ‘You Are My Own’ ”.

II Kings 17

Israel had been a separate kingdom from Judah for many years. Their first king set up two golden calves for worship. None of their kings destroyed the calves, and none of them followed the Lord. Some of the greatest prophets who ever lived were sent to Israel. Still, the people refused to turn to God.

So, after many warnings, God finally allowed them to be conquered. They were taken off the land and made to live in other cities.

It started with the king of Assyria attacking the kingdom of Israel and taking control of it. The people were required to pay heavy taxes. Suddenly the king of Egypt said he would help Israel get free of their bondage to Assyria. The people believed this and stopped paying the taxes.

The armies of Assyria invaded Israel, captured their king, and put him in prison. They then encircled Samaria and kept anyone from going in or out. This lasted for three years, until finally Samaria surrendered.

The Assyrians were cruel. They used the people of Israel as a warning to other nations not to rebel

against their authority. Those who survived were taken off the land and sent into exile.

Other people were brought in to live on the land of Israel. They settled in the cities and called their new nation Samaria.

The new people knew nothing about the Lord, so they continued worshiping the idols they brought with them. God sent lions among them, and many people were killed.

An advisor to the king of Assyria said, "The Samaritans don't know the God of the land. He sent lions to kill them because they don't know how to worship him correctly."

So the king said, "Select a few priests from the people of Israel and send them back to Samaria. Have them teach the people how to worship the God of the land."

A few priests were selected and sent back. They taught the Samaritans about the Lord and how to worship him. The people started worshiping God, but they also kept their old idols. They mixed the two together. This continued for many years to come.

153 Hezekiah

Later Kings

II Kings 18:1-12, II Chronicles 29 – 31

Hezekiah became king when he was 25 years old. He followed the Lord more than any king since David.

The first thing he did was to open the Temple his father had closed. He said to the priests and Levites, “We all know God has turned against us because of our sin. We’re almost like the kingdom of Israel and nearly beyond hope. But I’m making an agreement with the Lord so possibly he’ll turn his anger away from us. I need your help because you’re chosen by God to stand in his presence and serve him.”

The priests and Levites rallied around their king. The first thing they did was purify themselves before the Lord. They then went into the Temple and started cleaning it up. They took out things that were defiled and cleaned everything else.

After that, King Hezekiah and the city officials went and sacrificed to the Lord. They then made preparations so all the people of Jerusalem could come and worship God. The priests and Levites were put in place. Musical Levites got their instruments ready. Choirs prepared to sing the songs of David.

The people came and sacrificed to God. They sang to the Lord while trumpets blew. Everyone rejoiced, and bowed down and worshiped. So many burnt offerings were brought that the priests couldn’t do it all. The Levites had to help them until the work was done.

When it was time for Passover, Hezekiah sent a message throughout all of Judah and Israel. He invited everyone to come and celebrate Passover together in Jerusalem.

The messengers went to every city throughout the entire area. God moved the hearts of the people of Judah, and they came to

celebrate Passover with their king.

Most of the people of Israel had been taken to other countries, but there were still a few in the land. They were amazed when Hezekiah invited them to come back and worship the Lord in Jerusalem. Some laughed at the messengers, but others humbled themselves and made the trip to Jerusalem.

An extremely large crowd met together. The first thing the king had them do was walk throughout the city and tear down all the pagan altars. He also had them destroy the bronze snake that Moses had made, because people were burning incense to it.

They then offered the Passover lambs before the Lord. Many of the people from Israel weren’t considered clean before God. Unfortunately, there wasn’t enough time to go through that procedure. King Hezekiah prayed and asked the Lord to make an exception for them since they were coming to seek the Lord. God heard his prayer and purified the people so they could eat the Passover.

This celebration lasted for seven days. Then the entire crowd decided to extend it for another seven days. Everyone rejoiced together, whether they were from Judah or from Israel. Even Samaritans rejoiced with them. Such a festival hadn’t been seen in Jerusalem since the days of David and Solomon.

After it was all over, the people went home. The first thing they did was to tear down all altars of false gods and objects of idol worship. They started sending their tithes and offerings to the Temple so the priests and Levites could continue their fulltime service to the Laws of God.

In all the history of Judah, there was no king like Hezekiah. He reigned for 29 years.

154 King of Assyria

Later Kings

II Kings 18:13 – 19:37,

II Chronicles 32:1-23

The Assyrian army invaded Judah when Hezekiah was king. They had already conquered Israel a few years before.

When they arrived at Jerusalem, the commander of the Assyrian army called for a meeting with Jewish officials outside the walls of the city. He said, “Sennacherib, the great king of Assyria, sends this message to Hezekiah: Why do you resist my great army? Do you think other nations will come and help you? Listen. They won’t come! They’re afraid of us.

“Oh, are you trusting in the Lord your God? Why? It was your God who sent us here to destroy you!”

While the commander was talking, the people of Jerusalem were on the city walls—listening to everything he was saying. He spoke in Hebrew and was loud enough so they could hear. The Jewish officials said, “Please, speak in your language. We understand it.”

The commander laughed and yelled louder, “No! This message is not only for your king. It’s also for the common men. They’re the ones who’ll suffer when we crush you.”

He pointed to the men on the wall. “Listen to me! Don’t trust your king. Don’t trust your God! Trust Sennacherib, the great king of Assyria! He’ll take good care of you. We’ve conquered many nations and their gods weren’t able to protect them. Your God can’t stop the great king of Assyria!”

When King Hezekiah heard this report, he ripped his clothes and went into the Temple to pray. He sent messengers to the prophet Isaiah asking him to pray for God’s people.

Isaiah sent word to Hezekiah. “I have a message from the Lord. He says, ‘I’ve heard this man. Don’t be afraid of him. I’ll whisper into his ear and he’ll rush back to his country. Once he

gets there, someone will kill him.’ ”

Suddenly, the commander heard of trouble back in Assyria. He knew his king needed him. The entire army left.

Some time later, Sennacherib moved his army toward Jerusalem once again. Along the way, he sent a message to Hezekiah. “Did your God tell you that you’re safe from me? Don’t believe him! I’ve conquered the gods of many other nations, and burned them with fire. They couldn’t protect their nations. What makes you think your God will protect you?”

Hezekiah took the letter to the Temple. He spread it out before God and prayed. Isaiah sent a message to Hezekiah, but it wasn’t addressed to him. It was God’s answer to Sennacherib.

It said, “Who do you think you are? I’ve told Jerusalem to spit on you. Who do you think you’re mocking? I’m the one who put you in power so you could judge other nations. Now are you so arrogant that you yell at me? Here’s what I’m going to do to you. I’m going to put a hook in your nose, and a bit in your mouth. Then I’ll take you back to the barn from which you came!

“Hezekiah, don’t worry about Sennacherib. Not one arrow will hit the walls of Jerusalem. Before his army gets here, they’ll turn around and go back to their country. I’m your defense! I’ll fight this battle and save the city.”

That evening the army of Assyria set up camp. The sun went down and men sat around the campfires until it was time to sleep. When the sun arose the next morning, 185,000 soldiers were dead where they had slept. The king of Assyria had an army of dead men!

He quickly returned home to Nineveh and knelt down before his idol. Two of his sons came in and killed him. Sennacherib, the great king of Assyria, was dead, and Jerusalem was at peace.

155 Fifteen Years

Later Kings

II Kings 20, II Chronicles 32:24-33

King Hezekiah became extremely sick. The prophet Isaiah went to him and said, “God told me this sickness will kill you. So prepare to die.” He then turned and left the room.

Hezekiah cried out to God. “Oh Lord! I’ve walked with you and lived according to your commandments. Please spare my life.” He turned his head to the wall and cried bitterly.

Once again, God talked to Isaiah. “Go tell King Hezekiah I’ve heard his prayer and have seen his tears. Therefore I’ll add fifteen years to his life. I’ll also give him a sign so he’ll know that this promise is true. I’ll cause the shadow on the sundial to go backward ten degrees.”

Hezekiah watched the shadow on the sundial and saw it move back ten degrees. Immediately his sickness began to leave him until he totally recovered. He sang before the Lord and gave thanks.

After he recovered, a delegation came from Babylon with gifts. They gave him a letter from their king saying he was glad about Hezekiah’s recovery.

Hezekiah was pleased with this, and honored the delegation with a tour of his palace and government buildings. He took them to the treasury house and showed them all of the nation’s treasures—including gold, silver, spices, and precious oil.

After the men from Babylon left, the prophet Isaiah asked, “Who were those men and what did they say to you?”

The king said, “They’re from a far-off country, a place called Babylon.”

“What did you show them?”

“I showed them everything. I didn’t hide anything of value from them.”

The prophet said, “Listen to the words of the Lord. ‘A day will come when Babylon will invade Judah and take everything they’ve seen back to their country. Your descendants will become personal slaves to the king of Babylon.’ ”

Hezekiah bowed his head, and finally said, “This message from the Lord is good. None of this will happen in my lifetime. While I live, there will be peace and security.”

156 An Evil King Who Repented

Later Kings

II Kings 21, II Chronicles 33

Hezekiah was one of the best kings of all the descendants of David. His son Manasseh, however, was one of the most wicked of them all. He became king when he was 12 years old, and he ruled for 55 years.

He acted worse than the kings of Canaan before the Israelites got there. His father had destroyed all the altars to false gods, but Manasseh had them rebuilt. He put several inside the Temple itself. He led the whole nation to practice witchcraft, and even sacrificed his own sons to false gods.

God spoke to Manasseh and the nation of Judah, but they didn't listen. Finally, the Lord allowed military commanders from Assyria to capture the king. They put a ring in his nose and led him away in bronze chains. He was put in a prison in Babylon.

This was the darkest time of Manasseh's life. So he humbled himself and called out to God. The Lord heard his prayer and was gracious to him.

The time came when God allowed him to go back to Jerusalem and once again be king. Once he was there, Manasseh knew that the Lord had done this for him, and he was grateful.

He removed all the idols and altars from the Temple. He restored the altar of God and used it to give thanks to the Lord. He built up the walls of Jerusalem and made the city more secure. Through his leadership, the military became stronger.

When Manasseh died, his son Amon became king. He ruled for only two years, but he was as evil as his father had been in his early years. Unlike his father, however, he did not turn to the Lord.

His servants plotted against him and finally killed him. A mob of people in Judah hunted down those men and executed them.

They then took Amon's son and made him king. His name was Josiah, and he was only an 8-year-old boy. Still, Josiah became a great king of Judah.

157 A Book is Found

Later Kings

II Kings 22, II Chronicles 34:1-32

Josiah was eight years old when he became king of Judah. He walked with the Lord from the day he became king until the day he died 31 years later. He was the last great king before the people of Judah went into captivity.

When he was 26 years old, he hired men to restore the Temple. Money had been given for that purpose, so he gave it to the workmen and said, "You have proven yourselves to be men of integrity. Therefore you don't have to keep an account of this money."

One day, the high priest found the Book of the Law, written by Moses. He sent it to the king, who had it read out loud. When Josiah heard what was written in the book, he ripped his clothes and said, "Surely the Lord's anger is great against us! Our ancestors made a contract with God and then broke it over and over. His judgment on us must be close at hand. Go and find someone who can ask the Lord about this."

The priest went to a certain section of the city to the home of Huldah, a woman prophet. They asked her about what was written in the book. She said, "I have a message from God to the man who sent you here. God says, 'The people of this land have totally turned against me. They

serve idols and false gods. I'm about to fulfill the judgment written in the book you found. Disaster will soon fall on this place and everyone who lives here. Nothing can turn away the judgment that is coming.' "

Huldah then said, "I have another message to the king of Judah. The Lord says, 'When you heard the words of this book, your heart was sad and you ripped your clothes and cried. You have sought me with humility, and I heard you. Therefore, you will not see the disaster I'm bringing on this place. I will wait until you die and are buried.' "

The priest took these words back to Josiah. When he heard them, he gathered together all the elders of Jerusalem and Judah. They in turn went and got the rest of the people. Everyone went to the Temple, where they heard the king read the Law of Moses. They heard about the agreements their nation had with God.

Once the reading of the Law was done, Josiah stood in the place reserved for the king. In front of everyone, he made those same commitments to the Lord. He vowed that he would follow God's commandments with all of his energies and power. All the people agreed to do the same.

158 Josiah's Reforms

Later Kings

II Kings 23, II Chronicles 34:32 – 35:27

King Josiah and the nation of Judah renewed their commitment to the Laws of God. The king then took all the false altars out of the Temple and had them burned. The people also went throughout Jerusalem and destroyed all the idols that were in the city.

Once that was done, the king personally went throughout the land of Judah and oversaw the destruction of idol worship in all the cities. Next he went throughout the land of Israel and destroyed all the idols and altars that were there. When he found a major pagan spot, he desecrated the altar so the people would never use it again.

He went to the altar Jeroboam had built at Bethel. Josiah totally destroyed everything that was around it. He saw some tombs nearby, so he sent men to get some human bones. He burnt them on top of the altar to desecrate it.

Then Josiah saw a monument nearby. He said, "What's that?"

The men of the area said, "That's the tomb of the prophet who came from Judah. The Lord sent him here to speak against Jeroboam when he dedicated this altar to his golden calves. He prophesied and told the people what you would do to this altar. Today you have fulfilled his prophecy. It is also the grave of a old prophet from Samaria."

Josiah said, "Don't disturb these bones." He then returned to Jerusalem.

The king organized a Passover feast like no other. He and prominent men of Judah gave generously so everyone could have a sacrifice to give.

In the entire history of Judah, there had never been a king like Josiah, who loved and served the Lord with all his mind, heart, and strength. He totally followed the ways of God.

Still, the Lord planned to have Jerusalem destroyed. He was going to send the people of Judah into exile, just as he had done to Israel. But he didn't allow it to happen until after Josiah died.

When the king was 39 years old, the pharaoh of Egypt led his army past Judah on the way to help Assyria. Josiah took his army out to stop them. The pharaoh said, "My battle isn't with you. I'm going to fight someone else. Don't interfere, or God will use me to destroy you."

Josiah didn't listen to this advice. He went into battle, but disguised himself so the enemy wouldn't know he was the king. Suddenly an arrow hit him, and he slumped down in his chariot. His servants rushed him back to Jerusalem, and there he died.

All of Judah mourned Josiah's death. The prophet Jeremiah wrote a song that was sung at his funeral.

159 Broken Pot

Later Kings

Jeremiah 1 & 18 – 20,

II Kings 23:28-37, II Chronicles 36

Stories 159 – 164 happened during the life and ministry of Jeremiah, the prophet.

During the time of King Josiah, the prophet Jeremiah was called of God to preach to the people of Judah. The Lord said, “You’re to tell them they’re wicked, and Babylon will come and take them away. It’ll be useless to resist this invasion because I’m the one making it happen.”

Jeremiah said, “Lord, I don’t want this job. I’m too young, and I’m not good at public speaking.”

The Lord said, “I chose you for this job before you were born. I’ll tell you exactly what to say. Still, the people won’t listen, and they’ll try to kill you. But don’t worry. I’ll be with you and protect you.”

For years, during the time of King Josiah, the Lord told Jeremiah all the reasons why Judah would be punished and sent into exile. Jeremiah was burdened for the nation, so he cried and prayed for them. God said, “Stop that! These people are heading for disaster and there’s nothing you can do about it. I wouldn’t listen even if Samuel and Moses stood before me and pleaded for them! This situation is beyond religious acts and the giving of prayers.”

The Lord sent Jeremiah to the potter’s house. There he saw the potter working with a clay jar on the turning wheel. Suddenly he found a flaw in the pot. So he simply crushed the clay down and started over.

The Lord said, “Oh Israel, this is what I’m doing to you. You’re like clay in my hands and I’ll crush you so I can make you into that which will have my blessing and joy.”

The Lord told Jeremiah to buy a clay pot and go to the rulers of Judah. The prophet bought the pot and stood before the leaders of the people. He held it up in the air and said, “The people have forsaken the Lord to worship idols. Therefore, listen to what God is saying to you!”

He threw the pot down and it shattered into pieces! He said, “Jerusalem will be like this clay pot. I’ll totally destroy the city. Your enemies will slaughter the people. The city will lie in ruins just like this clay pot.”

One of the priests got angry and had Jeremiah beaten and put in stocks. The next day the priest went to release him. Jeremiah said to him, “The Lord has changed your name. It is now ‘Terror’. In terror, you’ll see your friends killed in the streets. In terror, you’ll watch the city be destroyed. You’ll be taken to Babylon where you’ll die; and there you’ll be buried.”

King Josiah was killed when he fought the army of Egypt. The people of Judah made his son king. Three months later, the pharaoh of Egypt captured Jerusalem and took the new king to Egypt, where he died. The pharaoh set up another son of Josiah to be king of Judah. His name was Jehoiakim.

160 Burning the Book

Later Kings

*Jeremiah 26 & 36, II Kings 24:1-7,
II Chronicles 36*

Stories 159 – 164 happened during the life and ministry of Jeremiah, the prophet.

Jeremiah had been prophesying for 23 years when Jehoiakim became king. Judah was under the control of Egypt and the king paid them high taxes year after year.

God told Jeremiah to go to the Temple and tell the people to repent or the Temple would become ruins. After he was done preaching, the priest and prophets grabbed him saying, “We’re going to kill you. How dare you come and speak these things in the name of the Lord!”

The officials of Judah defended Jeremiah saying, “He has a right to speak in the name of the Lord. Set him free.” They let him go, but told him he couldn’t come back to the Temple.

The Lord told Jeremiah, “Write a book of all the things I’ve told you about the coming judgment on Judah and Jerusalem.”

Jeremiah sent for Baruch, his scribe, and dictated to him everything the Lord had said. When they were done, the prophet said, “I’m not allowed to go to the Temple, so go there and read this book to the people.”

Baruch went and read the book in the Temple. Officials of the king heard about the book and asked him to read it to them. When he was done, the officials were afraid. They said, “The king needs to hear this.”

They told the scribe, “We’re taking this book to the king. You and Jeremiah hide, and don’t tell anyone where you’ve gone.”

They took the book to King Jehoiakim, and

he allowed it to be read to him. Because it was winter, he was sitting in front of a fire. Every time a portion of the book was read, he cut that part out and threw it into the fire. His officials asked him not to do this, but he kept doing it anyway until the entire book was gone.

Everyone in the room heard the book, but no one ripped his clothes or was afraid. Jehoiakim then gave the order to imprison Jeremiah and his scribe, but God protected them.

The Lord said to Jeremiah, “Write another book, just like the one that was burned. Also, give this message to King Jehoiakim. ‘You burned the book because you didn’t want anyone talking about how Babylon will destroy Jerusalem. Here’s what will happen to you. Your dead body won’t be buried, but will rot in the open sun. Also, the throne of David will be taken away from your descendants.’”

Jeremiah dictated the book once more and Baruch wrote it down. As time went by, he added more to it.

Jeremiah told the people of Judah, “Babylon will come and destroy this city and take you into captivity. You’ll be there for seventy years. After that, God will bring your children back to this land.”

God sent a special message to Baruch. “You’re concerned about what will happen to you. You bear the burden of being a scribe for God’s prophet. Don’t worry. I’ll spare your life when I destroy this city. I’ll be with you wherever you go.”

161 Two Baskets of Figs

Later Kings

*Jeremiah 24, II Kings 24:8-17,
II Chronicles 36*

Stories 159 – 164 happened during the life and ministry of Jeremiah, the prophet.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, invaded Judah. King Jehoiakim dropped his allegiance to Egypt and swore his loyalty to Babylon. Several years later, Babylon and Egypt got into a fierce battle. Jehoiakim switched his loyalty back to Egypt. Jeremiah warned him not to do this, but he didn't listen.

Once again, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah, but this time captured Jerusalem. Jehoiakim was put in chains and taken to Babylon, where he died. His son Jehoiachin became king.

Nebuchadnezzar took things from the Temple to put into the temples of his gods. He also took the best young men back to Babylon to serve as advisors. Among them was Daniel.

Jehoiachin was king for only three months when he also rebelled against Babylon. Jeremiah warned him that if he did this, he'd be taken away just like his father. The young king didn't listen.

Nebuchadnezzar's army came back, and this time they took all the treasures and gold from the Temple. They stripped the city of everything of value, including the craftsmen, military men, and scholars. 10,000 people were marched off to Babylon. Among them was Ezekiel.

Only the poor were left to oversee the land. Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin to Babylon and put him in prison. His uncle, Zedekiah, was made king of Judah.

After they were gone, God gave Jeremiah a

vision. The Lord said, "What do you see?"

The prophet said, "I see two baskets filled with figs. One is full of the most delicious fruit I've ever seen. The other has rotten figs that smell awful."

The Lord said, "The people in captivity are like the good figs. I'll watch over them and care for them. Their children will come back to this land, and they'll have a desire in their hearts to know me. I'll be their God and they'll be my people."

"But these people here in Judah are like the rotten figs. They're corrupt and rotten, and I'll treat them that way. I'll send heartache, plague, and famine. When I'm done, I'll throw Zedekiah and his people into the garbage."

The Lord had Jeremiah send a letter to those in exile. He said, "Build houses in Babylon and plant gardens. Get married, have children, and help your children get married. Get involved with your community and help your city to prosper. Don't believe anyone who tells you that you won't be there long. It's not true. You'll be in exile for 70 years, so make yourselves at home.

"I'll care for you. You can call on me whenever you want—and I'll listen. When the time of your exile is over, I'll bring you back here and restore to you all you left behind.

"The people here are like rotten figs. After I send them heartache, plagues, and famine, I'll throw them into the garbage."

162 Jerusalem Under Siege

Later Kings

*Jeremiah 37, II Kings 24:18 – 25:2,
II Chronicles 36*

Stories 159 – 164 happened during the life and ministry of Jeremiah, the prophet.

Nebuchadnezzar had made Zedekiah king of Judah. After he had been king for nine years, he rebelled against Babylon. He thought Egypt would help him. Jeremiah said, “If you do this, the king of Babylon will totally destroy Jerusalem.”

Zedekiah didn’t listen to the prophet, so Nebuchadnezzar brought his army and circled the city, not letting anyone in or out. Zedekiah asked Jeremiah to pray and ask God for help. Suddenly the Egyptian army came up from the south. With that, the Babylon army moved away from Jerusalem.

The Lord sent a message to Zedekiah. “Here’s what I am going to do. Pharaoh’s army will return to Egypt. Babylon will come back and burn this city to the ground. You can’t stop them. Even if your army went out and defeated them, leaving only a few wounded men alive, those few men would get up, come into the city, and burn it to the ground.”

Jeremiah decided to go outside the city walls and look at some property he owned. A guard saw him walking out of the city gate. He said, “You’re going to the Babylonian army.”

The prophet said, “No, I’d never do that.” But the guard didn’t believe him, and took him to

the city officials. They were furious with him and had him beaten and put in a dungeon. He stayed there a long time.

Soon the Babylonians came back and once again encircled the city. Zedekiah secretly sent for Jeremiah, and brought him to the palace. The king said, “Do you have a message from the Lord?”

Jeremiah said, “Yes I do. He says, ‘You’ll be defeated by the Babylonians.’ ”

Then the prophet said to the king, “Don’t send me back to that dungeon. I’ll die if you do. What have I done? Everything I’ve said has come true. Where are the prophets who said Babylon wouldn’t return? I beg you. Don’t send me back.”

So King Zedekiah gave the command that Jeremiah wasn’t to go back to the dungeon. He was kept in the palace prison, where he received better care.

Soon there was no food in the city because the Babylonians had stopped everything from going in or out. The rulers of Jerusalem sent a message to Jeremiah. “Please, pray and ask God to deliver us! Perhaps he will give us a miracle like he’s done in the past.”

The Lord sent a message back to them, “No! I won’t deliver you. I’m the one fighting against you. I’ve given you to the king of Babylon. You’ll suffer hunger, disease and plagues. People and animals will die. Those who live through this will be given to the Babylonians.”

163 Well of Mud

Later Kings

Jeremiah 32, 33, 38, 39, 40:1-6, 52:1-30

II Kings 25:3-21, II Chronicles 36

Stories 159 – 164 happened during the life and ministry of Jeremiah, the prophet.

The Lord gave Jeremiah a message for the people. He said, “The choice is yours. You can have life or death. If you stay in Jerusalem, you’ll suffer hunger, disease, and death. If you surrender to the Babylonian army, you’ll live. I’ve given this city to them, and they’ll totally destroy it.”

When the officials of Judah heard this, they went to the king and said, “This man must die. He’s a traitor. He’s telling people to abandon us.”

So Zedekiah allowed them to do what they wanted with Jeremiah. They put ropes around him and let him down into an empty well. It didn’t have water in it, but instead the bottom was nothing but mud. Soon the prophet had sunk down into the mud.

Another official ran to the king and said, “This is wrong! The prophet will die in that well. He has no food or water.”

The king gave permission for the man to pull Jeremiah out of the well. So he got 30 other men to help him. They threw old rags down the well and told the prophet to put these under his arms to protect him from the ropes. They then pulled him out of the well and took him back to the palace prison.

The Babylonians kept the city under siege for two and a half years. Finally they broke through the walls and took the city. When Zedekiah heard this, he got out of Jerusalem during the night and tried to escape.

The Babylonians chased after the king and soon caught him. They brought him back to Nebuchadnezzar. He took Zedekiah and made him watch as they killed his sons in front of him. They then gouged out his eyes, put him in chains, and led him away to Babylon.

The Babylonians totally destroyed the city so it could never again resist them. They destroyed the Temple, burned all the houses, and broke down the walls. The city was totally demolished. The Babylon army took the rest of the people away to Babylon, leaving only a few to tend the land.

Nebuchadnezzar heard about Jeremiah, so he told his captain, “Find this man, and make sure he isn’t hurt. He’s to be cared for and given whatever he wants.”

The captain went and found the prophet. He was in chains along with the others who were being sent into exile. The captain took the chains off Jeremiah and said, “You’re free to go. If you come to Babylon with us, we’ll take care of you and meet your needs for the rest of your life. But if you want, you can stay here in Judah. The choice is yours.”

Jeremiah said he would stay in Judah, so they allowed him and Baruch to go back to their homes. The Lord also protected the official that had helped the prophet get out of the well.

The Lord said to Jeremiah, “The day will come when I’ll raise up a righteous Branch from the line of David, and He’ll bring justice and righteousness to the land. He’ll be called, ‘The Lord our Righteousness.’ ”

164 Going to Egypt

Later Kings

Jeremiah 40 – 44, 52:31-34

II Kings 25:22-30

Stories 159 – 164 happened during the life and ministry of Jeremiah, the prophet.

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, totally destroyed Jerusalem. He left a few people to care for the land, and made Gedaliah governor of Judah.

Rebel soldiers still lived in the hills of Judah. Gedaliah met with them and said, “The king of Babylon wants to have peace with you. So stop fighting. Look at what the people left behind when they went into exile. You can harvest their grapes and olives and summer fruit. Select a town and go live there. I’ll represent you with the Babylonians.”

The soldiers followed this advice and lived in the land. Jews who lived in other countries came back and accepted Gedaliah as their governor. Altogether, they had a great harvest that year.

The king of Ammon hired ten Jews to kill Gedaliah. The people of Judah warned the governor about this plot. They said, “We have it good here. We don’t want these traitors to ruin it for the rest of us.” But Gedaliah didn’t believe them. He thought they were simply trying to get an advantage over their fellow countrymen.

Gedaliah invited the ten traitors to have a meal with him. During the meal, the men drew their swords and killed the governor. After throwing his body down a large well, they headed

back to Ammon. The men of Judah chased after them. There was a battle, but most of the traitors got away.

The people of Judah knew what Nebuchadnezzar would do once he found out his governor had been killed. They made plans to escape to Egypt. They went to Jeremiah and said, “Ask the Lord what we should do. We promise we’ll do whatever he says.”

Ten days later, Jeremiah gave them a message from the Lord. “Don’t move to Egypt, but stay in Judah. I’ll be with you and protect you from the king of Babylon. If you stay, I’ll build you up and establish you here.

“I know you’re afraid, but listen to me. Your fears are waiting for you in Egypt. You won’t find war, hunger, and disease in Judah. No, they’re waiting for you in Egypt.”

The people yelled at Jeremiah, “You’re lying to us. The Lord didn’t tell you that. You want us to stay here so Babylon will kill us.”

The people left Judah and went to Egypt. They took the prophet and Baruch with them. Jeremiah finished his book in Egypt, and then he died.

Years later, a new king ruled Babylon. He brought King Jehoiachin out of prison and gave him his freedom. He was also given a living allowance and was invited to eat at the table of the king of Babylon. He lived in comfort for the rest of his life.

165 Valley of Dry Bones

Daniel

Ezekiel 37

Ezekiel was taken into captivity, along with many other Jews. He became a prophet of God.

One day the Lord took his spirit to a valley. He saw that it was filled with bones. They were so dry, they would turn to powder if you touched them.

The Lord said, "Son of man, can these bones become alive again?"

"Oh Lord, only you can give the answer to that."

God said, "Stand among them and say, 'Dry bones, hear what God says to you. Yes, the Lord is talking to you. He's telling you he's going to put breath back into you, and you'll once again be alive. You'll have flesh, and muscle, and skin ... and life. Then, you'll know he's the Lord.' "

So Ezekiel stood and told this to the bones. Suddenly he heard the sound of rattling all across the valley. The bones had become solid, and were reconnecting themselves. Soon there were complete skeletons lying all over the ground.

As the prophet watched, tendons and muscles formed on the skeletons. And then skin stretched over the flesh. They were like dead bodies lying on the ground, all across the valley. But even with all of this, they didn't have life.

The Lord said to Ezekiel, "Son of man, preach to breath. Say, 'Hear what God says to you. Yes, the Lord is talking to you. He's telling you to ride on the four winds and come and enter into these dead bodies.' "

So Ezekiel said this to breath. Suddenly the

wind blew and breath entered into all the dead bodies, and they became alive! They sat up ... and then got up. It was then Ezekiel realized they were a vast army.

The Lord said, "Son of man, these bones represent all twelve tribes of Israel. Right now they're saying, 'We're no longer a nation. There's no hope for us. Our bones are dried up.'

"Preach to them! Say, 'Hear what God says to you. Yes, the Lord is talking to you. He is telling you that he's going to open your graves of exile and bring you back to the land of Israel. He'll put his Spirit in you, and you'll live again. Then you'll know that he is the Lord.' "

The Lord spoke to Ezekiel again. "Son of man, find a small piece of wood. Carve the word 'Judah' on it. Find another piece of wood and carve the word 'Israel' on it."

Ezekiel did this. Then the Lord said, "Hold them together as if they are one piece of wood. Carry them around until people ask you what it means.

"Tell them the Lord God is saying, 'There'll come a time when I'll bring both nations together again. They'll no longer be two nations, but one. I'll give them their own land, the land I gave Jacob. They'll have one king. David will rule over them. They'll no longer corrupt themselves with idols. I'll make them clean and they'll be my people, and I'll be their God.' "

166 Daniel's Decision

Daniel

Daniel 1:1-16

Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylon. He conquered Jerusalem and took the people captive. He then ordered his officials to select the best young men and train them to serve in the royal court. They were to be given the best instruction in language, literature, and wisdom. This training would last three years, and during that time, the king would provide them the best food and wine.

Four of the young men selected were Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men determined before the Lord that they wouldn't defile themselves by eating and drinking things that were against God's Law. Daniel asked the overseer to leave those things out of their daily diet.

"Oh no. I couldn't let you do that! A day is coming when you'll stand before the king. He'll see that you're scrawnier than the others, and then he'll have me killed!"

At this point, Daniel chose his words carefully. "Please, before you decide, do a test. Allow the four of us to eat vegetables and drink water for ten days. Then see how we look in

comparison to the others."

The overseer highly respected Daniel, so he agreed to this test. At the end of ten days, Daniel and his friends looked better and healthier than all those who had been eating the king's food and wine. So the overseer allowed the four of them to continue eating only vegetables and drinking water.

God was with Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He gave them knowledge, and allowed them to understand wisdom. Daniel also understood visions and dreams.

At the end of three years, Nebuchadnezzar interviewed all of the young men who had gone through his training program. None of the others ranked as high as Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. So they began serving in the king's court. He consulted them in every matter concerning wisdom and understanding.

In time, the king valued their counsel ten times higher than his other counselors. Daniel continued to serve in the court through the reign of many kings.

167 Nebuchadnezzar's Dream

Daniel

Daniel 2

Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that troubled him. He called his counselors and told them they were to interpret his dream. They said, "Tell us the dream and we'll tell you what it means."

The king said, "Listen carefully to what I'm about to say. You're to tell me my dream as well as its interpretation. If you can do this, I'll give you great rewards and honor you before everyone. But if you can't do this, you'll die a slow death, and all of your property will be destroyed. Now, tell me my dream!"

His counselors were shocked. They asked a second time, "Please, tell us your dream and we'll give you the meaning."

Nebuchadnezzar grew impatient. "You're stalling for time. You heard what I said. If I tell you my dream, you'll simply make up something just to humor me. The only way I'll know your interpretation is correct, is if you can tell me the dream."

At this point, the counselors begged him. "No king has ever asked their counselors to do this. Only the gods know what people dream when they're asleep."

Nebuchadnezzar became angry. He made a declaration that all the counselors were to be killed. So the guards started gathering them up. Daniel heard of this and immediately sent a message to the king, "Give me some time and I'll tell you your dream, as well as the interpretation."

God showed Daniel the king's dream and gave him the interpretation. Then Daniel went to meet with the king. Nebuchadnezzar looked at him and said, "Is it true you can tell me my dream and its interpretation?"

Daniel was careful with his answer. "No man is able to do what you're asking, but there's a God

in heaven who has shown me what you dreamed when you were asleep.

"He gave you a vision of what's going to happen in the future of the world. You saw a massive statue in your dream. It had a head of gold. Its arms and chest were silver, and its belly and hips were bronze. It had legs of iron, and its feet were a mixture of iron and clay. Suddenly a stone was cut out of a mountain, but you couldn't see the hands that did it. This stone hit the feet and the entire statue was destroyed.

"The pieces crashed to the ground and the wind blew it away as if it had no weight at all. As you watched, the stone got larger until it filled the entire earth.

"That was your dream. Now here is the interpretation. God has made you the head of gold. After you, will arise another kingdom that's not as good as yours.

"Then a third kingdom of bronze will rule the world. The fourth kingdom will be as strong as iron and will crush everything in its way. This kingdom will divide into two parts like the legs of the statue. The last kingdom will also be divided into two feet with ten toes. It'll have the strength of iron, but be as brittle as common clay.

"The stone carved out of the mountain is God's kingdom, which will be formed without human hands. God will destroy all the kingdoms of this world, but His kingdom will never end.

"Oh king, God has shown you the future with a dream, and it'll happen just as the dream has said."

Nebuchadnezzar fell down with his face to the ground. He said, "Your God, he is God! He's the Lord!" Nebuchadnezzar then made Daniel a great ruler in his kingdom.

168 A Furnace Filled with Fire

Daniel

Daniel 3

Nebuchadnezzar made a gold statue. It was 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide. He then gathered together all the officials of his kingdom. They came and stood before the statue.

One of the officials made a declaration. "When you hear the orchestra play, fall to the ground and worship the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. If you don't do this immediately, you'll be thrown into a furnace filled with fire." The orchestra started playing and the crowd fell to the ground in front of the gold statue.

This occasion gave some of the officials an idea. They thought this was their chance to get rid of some of the Jews that were among them.

They said to the king, "Your command was clear. When the orchestra played, everyone was to drop to the ground and worship the statue. You said if anyone didn't do it, they'd be thrown into a furnace filled with fire. There are three Jews who ignored you, and they're in high positions in the kingdom. Their names are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They don't serve your god, and they didn't worship the gold statue."

Nebuchadnezzar was furious. He sent for the three Jews and had them stand before him. "I've been told you don't serve my god, and you didn't worship the gold statue. I want to see if this is true. The orchestra will play, and when it does you're to drop to the ground and worship the gold statue. If you don't, you'll be thrown into the furnace filled with fire. There's no god that can rescue you from my power."

The three men didn't hesitate to answer the king. They said, "We would never argue with you, but please understand. Our God is able to rescue us from the furnace filled with fire. He can easily rescue us from your power, but if he doesn't, let it

be known, we still won't worship the gold statue you've set up."

Nebuchadnezzar became so mad his face was twisted with rage. He shouted to his guards, "Make the furnace seven times hotter! Tie up these men and throw them into it!"

The furnace was made hotter, and the three Jews were tied up and thrown into the fire. Since the furnace was so hot and the king wanted the execution to be done quickly, the flames killed the guards as they threw the men in.

Suddenly the king was shocked at what he saw. He got up and shouted, "Didn't we throw three men into the fire?"

"Of course Your Majesty. We threw in three men."

"But look! I see four men in there. The fire's not hurting them, and they aren't tied up. They're freely walking around. And look! The fourth man is like a god."

Nebuchadnezzar got closer to the furnace and yelled in. "Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, servants of the Most High God. Please, come out."

The three men came out of the fire. Everyone gathered around and saw that the men and their clothes were totally unaffected by the fire. They didn't even have the smell of smoke on them.

Nebuchadnezzar made a proclamation. "I give praise to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They chose to die rather than worship any god but their God. So he sent his angel to rescue them. No one is to say anything offensive about the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. If anyone does, that person will be torn to pieces and their house made into a garbage dump."

169 Becoming a Wild Animal

Daniel

Daniel 4

One night, King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that terrified him. He immediately called in all of his counselors and fortune-tellers. He told them the dream, but they couldn't make sense of it.

Finally he called for Daniel and said, "I know you have the spirit of the gods in you. You have the answers to all mysteries. I had a terrible dream last night, and no one can interpret it for me. I'll tell it to you, so you can tell me what it means.

"I saw a tree in the middle of the earth. It was tall and strong. Everyone on earth could see it. Even heaven looked at it. It had beautiful leaves and enough fruit for everyone to have as much as they wanted. It provided shelter for the animals, and birds lived in its branches.

"I was admiring the tree, when a messenger came from heaven. This holy one yelled so all could hear, 'Cut down this tree! Chop off its branches, strip off its leaves, and scatter the fruit. Chase away the animals and birds. But be careful. Leave the stump with its roots still in the ground. Secure it with bands of iron and bronze.

"Now leave him alone for seven years. He'll have the mind of an animal and eat grass in the field. Each morning he'll be covered with the dew of heaven. He'll stay this way until he realizes the Most High is the supreme ruler over all kingdoms of the earth. He gives them to whomever He wants. He could even give a kingdom to the lowly slave.'

"Daniel, this is what I dreamed. You're the only one who can tell me what it means."

Daniel was shocked! He didn't say a thing, but just stared at the king.

Nebuchadnezzar said, "Daniel, don't be afraid. Simply tell me what it means."

"Oh my king. I wish the meaning was for your enemies. But it's not. You are the tree, tall and strong. You benefit people far and wide. The holy one, coming down from heaven, passed a judgment on you.

"You'll be driven away from people and live like a wild animal. You'll eat grass and sleep under the dew of night. You'll stay that way for seven years until you realize the Most High is the supreme ruler over all kingdoms. He gives them to whomever He wants.

"Still, the holy one said to leave the tree's stump with its roots. This means your kingdom will be waiting for you once you acknowledge that heaven rules.

"Here is my advice. Remove sin from your life. Be just. Show mercy. Perhaps God will show mercy on you."

A year later, Nebuchadnezzar was walking on the roof of his palace in Babylon. Suddenly he stopped and said, "Look at this! It's Babylon the great, and I've built it. I've done it because I'm powerful. This kingdom shows my great glory!"

While he was still saying these words, a voice from heaven said to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, I'm taking this kingdom from you. People will chase you away, and you'll live among the animals. You'll graze on grass for seven years. You'll stay there until you learn the Most High is in control over all kingdoms. He can give them to whomever he chooses."

Instantly the king went insane. People finally forced him from the palace and he went out into the fields. He ate grass for food. His hair grew long and his fingernails were like claws. The dew covered him each night.

At the end of seven years, he looked up into the sky and his sanity returned to him. He said, "I praise the Most High. He lives forever and there is no end to his kingdom. He does what he wants, and no one can hold him back."

God sent nobles and advisers looking for him. When they saw that he was back in his right mind, they reinstated him to his old position. He had his kingdom back, but from that day on he always said, "I praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven. His works are true and just."

170 Handwriting on the Wall

Daniel

Daniel 5 & 9

King Belshazzar was the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar. He decided to have a feast with a thousand Babylonian nobles. He sent for the golden cups the Babylon army had taken from the Temple of God in Jerusalem. They were used to drink in honor of their many gods.

Suddenly ... the fingers of a man's hand appeared near a wall that was well lit by lamps. As Belshazzar watched, the fingers started writing on the wall. This made the king so terrified that he shook with fear.

When the hand was done writing, it disappeared. Belshazzar read the words on the wall, but didn't know what they meant. He sent for his counselors and said, "If you can interpret what these words mean, I'll give you great riches and make you the third ruler over Babylon!"

They looked at the writing but weren't able to understand what it meant. This made Belshazzar even more terrified.

The queen mother said, "Don't be afraid. There's one counselor you haven't called. His name is Daniel, and he's a man filled with the spirit of the holy gods. Your grandfather always called on him whenever he had a problem he couldn't solve. He'll tell you what this means."

Belshazzar called for Daniel and said, "I know you have the spirit of the gods in you. If you can tell me what this means, I'll give you great riches and make you the third highest ruler in Babylon."

Daniel didn't hesitate. "You may keep your gifts and titles. I'll read the writing and tell you what it means.

"The Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar this empire and made him the most powerful man on earth. Yet he humbled himself before God and acknowledged that he was Lord of all.

"You know this, yet you're proud and defy the Lord God. You used the golden cups from

the Temple of God to praise false gods. You mock the God who holds your life in His hands. Therefore, He has sent you this message: NUMBERED, NUMBERED, WEIGHED, and DIVIDED.

"Here is the interpretation:

NUMBERED – God has numbered the days of your kingdom. Your time is up!

WEIGHED – You were weighed on a scale to determine your worth. You're worth very little!

DIVIDED – Your kingdom is no longer yours. It's been divided between the Medes and Persians."

Immediately, Belshazzar called his servants and told them to put fine clothes on Daniel and expensive jewelry around his neck. He proclaimed Daniel to be the third highest ruler in Babylon.

That very night, the army of the Medes and Persians came into the city, killed Belshazzar, and took over the kingdom. Daniel became a respected counselor in the Persian court.

Years later, Daniel was reading how Jeremiah said the city of Jerusalem would lie in ruins for seventy years. Daniel prayed and asked God what was going to happen after that. God sent him an angel to explain what would happen.

The angel said, "An order will be given to rebuild Jerusalem. That order will begin a special 490-year period for your people. After the first 483 years, Messiah will come. He'll be killed, and Jerusalem will be destroyed again. The last seven years will begin when an evil ruler makes a 7-year peace agreement with Israel."

By telling Daniel this, God showed Israel what would happen before he set up his kingdom on earth.

171 Den of Lions

Daniel

Daniel 6

When Darius became king, he appointed an official over each of his 120 provinces. He then selected three administrators to supervise the 120 officials.

Daniel was one of the three administrators, and he was the most capable. The king was about to give him authority over the entire kingdom.

The officials and the other two administrators didn't want this to happen. They decided to make Daniel look bad to the king. They searched for a flaw in his life or some kind of corruption in what he did for the government. They couldn't find anything. Finally they said, "There's only one way we can do this. We must find something in the laws of his God."

Finally they found it, so they created a plan. They went to the king and said, "Oh King Darius, live forever. The officials and administrators have agreed on a way we can honor you. With your permission, we want everyone to worship you for 30 days. We'll craft a law that says no one can worship any other god during that time. We want you to sign it as a law of the Medes and Persians that can't be changed. If anyone disobeys this law, they'll be thrown into a den of lions." Darius was pleased with this honor, so he signed the law.

Daniel heard about this after it was done. Still he followed his normal routine of worship. Three times a day, he went into his house and opened the upper windows that faced Jerusalem. There, he knelt down and prayed, giving thanks to God. It was exactly what the men knew he would do.

They went to the king and said, "Is it true that you signed a law that said for 30 days no one may worship any other god besides you? And didn't it say that anyone who violated this would be thrown into a den of lions?"

He said, "Of course. I made it a law of the Medes and Persians, which can't be changed."

"Oh king, we're sad to tell you that Daniel, a

Jewish exile, is breaking that law. He bows down and worships his God three times a day."

Darius was shocked! He knew he had to find a way to rescue Daniel. He worked on it all day. Finally the men came and said, "You know that the law of the Medes and Persians can't be changed."

So the king gave the order to go get Daniel. The king talked to him just before he was thrown into the den. "Oh, may the God you serve rescue you from these lions."

Daniel was lowered into the den, and then a stone was placed over the opening. The king put his seal on it so that no one could interfere with this judgment. He went back to his palace and cancelled the evening entertainment. He refused to eat, and he couldn't sleep all night.

When it was finally morning, he rushed back to the den of lions. Once the stone was removed, he yelled, "Oh Daniel, servant of the living God. Was your God able to rescue you from the lions?"

Daniel yelled back, "My king, God sent his angel, who shut the mouths of these lions. I haven't been hurt in any way. God knows I'm innocent. Your Majesty, I haven't wronged you in any way."

The king gave the order to have Daniel pulled out of the den. Darius then told the guards. "Go get those men who plotted against Daniel. Get their wives and children. Throw them all into the den of lions."

All the men and their families were brought and pushed down into the den of lions. The lions were waiting at the bottom and tore them apart before they reached the floor.

King Darius sent a decree throughout his kingdom. It said, "Everyone is to be afraid of Daniel's God because he's the living God. His kingdom will last forever. He's able to rescue those who serve him."

172 Rebuilding the Temple

Ezra & Nehemiah

II Chronicles 36:21-23, Ezra 1 – 6,

Haggai 1 – 2

Jeremiah had said Judah would be in captivity for 70 years. At the end of that time, the king of Persia said, “The Lord has told me to send his people back to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple. Therefore, they’re free to go and build the house of God.”

The king gave gold and silver for the project, and he gave back the temple vessels taken when Jerusalem was destroyed. He donated money to buy cedar from Lebanon to panel the inside of the temple. He even provided livestock so the people could make sacrifices to God. The Lord stirred the hearts of his people. Many accepted the challenge to go back to Judah to do the work of God. Some, who couldn’t go themselves, gave money and supplies.

When the people arrived, they made sacrifices to God on the temple site. The people shouted for joy, and then began building the temple.

The people living there were upset that the Jews had come back. They tried to stop the project, but nothing worked. Finally, a new king ruled over Persia. They sent him a message, and slanted the news about the new temple. They convinced him to stop the construction.

The Jewish builders had no choice but to stop and wait for the situation to change. This gave them a chance to build their own houses. Before long, one family after another had cedar paneling in their homes. Eventually the stockpile of cedar from Lebanon was gone! They knew that it couldn’t be replaced. So, whenever someone talked about building the temple, the people said, “This isn’t a good time to build.”

The prophet Haggai said to the people, “I have a message from the Lord! ‘Consider your ways! You say it isn’t time to build the house of God. Yet you live in paneled houses while my house lies in ruins. Consider your ways!’ ”

Haggai told them that God had removed his blessing from their lives. “You plant a large amount of grain, yet you harvest very little. You eat, but you’re still hungry. You drink, but you’re

still thirsty. You wear clothes, yet you’re not warm. You earn money and put it into bags, not knowing that the bags have holes. Consider your ways!”

The people listened, but they knew there was no cedar to finish the temple. Haggai said, “God says go into the hills and get common wood and use that in the temple. He says he’ll be pleased with what you build, and he’ll be glorified.” So the people obeyed and went into the hills and got wood to replace the missing cedar. Then they made preparations to restart the project.

In time, another king came to power in Persia. This one gave the order, “Anyone who opposes the building of the temple will be put to death!” With this decree, the people living around Jerusalem weren’t allowed to hinder the construction of the temple. Instead, they were commanded to give supplies for its completion.

The people worked with enthusiasm. Haggai came with another message from the Lord. “I’m pleased you’re obeying me! Look, I’m providing for you. You haven’t planted your seed, your vines haven’t yet brought forth grapes, and your trees haven’t bloomed. Yet you’re harvesting my blessings and provisions.”

Most of the people were happy when they saw that the building was nearly done, but some of the older men said, “We remember Solomon’s temple. It was beautiful! This temple is small and not beautiful at all.” The builders became discouraged.

Haggai came with another message from God. “Who remembers the temple built by Solomon? How does this one compare? Don’t be discouraged. The glory of this temple is going to be greater than you can imagine. I’m going to shake the nations and the whole world will focus on this very spot. The ‘Desire of all Nations’ will come and I’ll fill this temple with glory. Be strong and keep your eyes focused on the present work. I’m with you as I’ve always been.”

So the people were encouraged ... and they worked ... and they finished the temple.

Ezra 7 – 10

Ezra was an expert in the laws of God. Therefore, it was decided he should go to the new Temple in Jerusalem and teach the people.

The king of Persia gave him letters authorizing him and his helpers to go to Jerusalem. The king sent along a large amount of gold and silver.

Ezra was also authorized to appoint judges who knew the laws of God. He was told the kingdom of Persia would punish anyone who disobeyed those laws.

Men volunteered to go with Ezra and move their families to Judah. They suddenly realized there were no Levites in the group. So Ezra sent out a plea, and several Levites volunteered to go.

Everyone knew going from Persia to Jerusalem was a dangerous trip. They had families, their possessions, and a large amount of gold and silver. Yet they didn't have soldiers to protect them. Ezra didn't ask the king for armed guards because he had said, "God is our protector. His strong hand is upon people who serve him."

So the group prayed and fasted, asking God for his protection. They set out on their journey, and God protected them as they traveled. No one tried to ambush them along the way. They arrived safely in Jerusalem, and took all the gold and silver to the Temple.

Several leaders went to Ezra as he made preparations for his instructions about the laws of God. They said, "Many of our people have not

separated themselves from the non-Jews that live in the area. They have married their women, and these wives have brought their pagan ways with them.

Ezra was shocked when he heard this. He ripped his clothes and went to the Temple and fell on his knees and spread out his hands to the Lord. He prayed "Oh God. We're doing it again—just like our forefathers. You sent them into captivity because they took foreign wives and started worshiping idols.

"Now you've given us a brief moment, allowing us to come back here. And what did we do? We married foreign wives. Oh, God we're not worthy of your blessing. You have the right to totally destroy this small group of people who live here."

Ezra continued to cry, and pray, and confess sin. As he did, people came and sat and prayed with him. More and more came until there was a large crowd gathered around. They all cried and confessed their sins.

Finally the people said, "We know we've done wrong, but there's still hope. We'll make a promise before God. We'll send away our foreign wives and their children. But you must help us if we're to do this properly. Get up! Take action! Show us what to do and we'll do it."

So Ezra agreed to oversee this and make sure it was done properly. All the people sent their foreign wives away and turned from idols. They then totally committed themselves to the Lord.

174 Rebuilding the Walls

Ezra & Nehemiah

Nehemiah 1 – 13

Nehemiah was a Jewish man who served the king of Persia. One day he got news that the people in Judah were suffering. He was shocked to hear the walls of Jerusalem were in ruins. He started crying and was depressed for days. He prayed and asked God to help his people.

The king saw he was sad, so Nehemiah told him about the situation in Jerusalem. The king said, “How can I help?”

“Please, send me to Jerusalem and give me permission to rebuild the walls.”

“Go. I’ll give you letters for safe travel.”

When he arrived at Jerusalem, he didn’t tell the people why he had come. Instead, he spent three days looking over the situation. Finally he brought the leaders together and explained how the king of Persia had given him permission to rebuild the city walls. He said, “We can’t live with this disgrace any longer. It’s time to rebuild the walls!”

The leaders agreed and committed themselves to the project. It was decided that each leader would choose a section of the wall as his personal responsibility. They immediately organized their families to start building.

The non-Jewish people of the area were shocked when they saw what was happening. They laughed and told jokes. “These people are too weak to rebuild their city. Ha! I can see it now. They build a section of wall, and it falls down when a little fox jumps on it.”

Still, the builders were determined and worked faster. Soon the wall was halfway up, and they started joining the various sections. This made their enemies furious. They realized they had to stop this construction. They threatened to sneak up and kill the workers. They said, “We’ll do whatever it takes to stop this wall!”

Fear gripped the hearts of the builders, so they set up guards to watch day and night. Nehemiah said, “Don’t be afraid. God is stronger than your enemies. Be prepared to fight! Fight for your fellow Jews. Fight for your sons and daughters. Fight for your wives and your homes.”

The workers set up a warning system in case there was an attack on any section of the wall. Men were prepared to rush to that area and fight.

Everyone worked together and soon the walls were done, except for the gates. The enemy decided their only hope of stopping the project was to kill Nehemiah. To do this, they had to get him out of the city. So they sent a message asking him to meet them in a nearby village.

Nehemiah said, “I’m doing a great work here. Why should it stop so we can talk?”

They begged him to meet with them. Finally they sent a message, “People are saying you’re building the wall so you can rebel against the empire and make yourself king. Unless you meet with us, we’re going to tell the king of Persia about your rebellion.”

Nehemiah ignored their threats and continued working until the wall and the gates were finished. It only took fifty-two days to complete the project. At last the city was protected.

The people rejoiced and sang praise to God. Ezra stood before them and read the Law of Moses so all could hear. The people dedicated themselves to follow God’s commandments. The Jews who lived in the surrounding towns decided that one out of every ten families would move into the city. God had done great things for Israel, and even their enemies were amazed!

175 Esther Becomes Queen

Esther

Esther 1 – 5:8

One day the queen of Persia embarrassed the king in front of the lords of the court. They all agreed the king should replace her. So an order went out saying all the beautiful virgins were to come to the palace. From them, the king would choose a new queen.

Esther was a beautiful young woman who had been raised by her older cousin Mordecai. She went to the palace because of her beauty and virtue. But ... her cousin told her not to tell anyone that she was Jewish.

In the course of time, she was selected to be the new queen. Soon after this, two events happened about the same time. The first was that Mordecai heard a plot to kill the king. He reported it, and the plot was stopped. His good deed was recorded in the official records.

The second event was that a man named Haman was made the highest-ranking official in the government. From then on, people bowed when he walked by—everyone except Mordecai.

When Haman saw this, he became angry and wanted Mordecai killed. But he wanted more than that—he wanted to totally destroy the Jews.

So he went to the king and said, “There are people in the empire who are different than everyone else. They don’t obey your laws because they have their own. It’s not good to let them live. Allow me to serve you by organizing their destruction. It would be my honor to personally pay for the cost of doing this.”

The king was pleased at Haman’s willingness to serve the kingdom, so he gave him the authority to destroy the Jewish people. Haman set a date and then sent out a proclamation. It said all the Jews were to be killed on that date. This would include the men, women and children. Their possessions were to be given to those who did the killing.

Once the proclamation was translated into many languages, it was sent out to all the nations

in the empire. Fear and panic gripped all the Jews of the land.

Esther was in the palace and didn’t know about this decree. Soon she heard that Mordecai was mourning in a public place. She sent a servant to ask him what was wrong. Mordecai told the servant everything and gave him a copy of the decree. He said, “Tell the queen she must talk to the king and beg him to have mercy upon her people.”

She sent a message back to him. “No one is allowed to go before the king without an invitation. Those who do are put to death unless he points the golden scepter toward them. It’s been 30 days since he has last sent for me.

Mordecai sent a message back to her. “Don’t assume you’ll escape, just because you live in the palace. Listen, if you don’t help, your people will be delivered by some other means. Still, you will die! I believe you were brought to the kingdom for such a time as this.”

She sent back a note. “Tell our people to fast for three days. They’re not to eat or drink anything. My servants and I will do the same. Then I’ll go and stand before the king, even though it is against the law. If I die, I die.”

After three days, Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court so the king could see her from his throne. When he looked up, he was pleased to see her and immediately pointed the golden scepter towards her. She walked up and touched the top of it.

He said, “Tell me what you want and I’ll give it to you.”

She said, “If it pleases you, I want you and Haman to come to a banquet I have prepared.”

“Done!” said the king. “Guard, run get Haman and bring him here. We’re going to Queen Esther’s banquet.”

Continued in the next story

176 Esther Saves Her People

Esther

Esther 5:9 – 10:3

Continued from the previous story

The king and Haman attended Queen Esther's banquet. Afterwards the king said, "Now tell me your request so I can give it to you."

"Oh king, if it's true you want to grant my request, please bring Haman and come to another banquet tomorrow. I'll tell you my request at that time."

Haman was proud as he left the court that day. He had been invited to the queen's banquet two days in a row! Suddenly his joy turned to anger as he noticed Mordecai once again not bowing before him. He was with friends that evening and told them how this Jew had ruined his joy.

They said, "Build a 75-foot gallows. Go to the king early in the morning and ask him to order Mordecai's death. Hang him on the gallows right away so you can enjoy the queen's banquet." Haman sent for a servant and ordered the gallows to be built.

The king couldn't sleep that night. So he had someone come to his bedroom and read official records. The servant read how Mordecai had saved the king's life by revealing a plot to kill him. The king said, "How was this man rewarded?"

The servant looked back at the records, then said, "He wasn't, my king."

"Nothing was done to reward this man?! Go into the court and see if anyone is there."

The servant found Haman waiting to see the king. The king said, "Bring him in." Before Haman could talk, the king said, "What should I do for a man I want to honor in a special way?"

Haman immediately thought of himself. He said, "Oh, my king. You should honor this man by putting your royal robe and crown on him. Place him on your horse and have your most noble official lead him through the streets yelling, 'This is what the king does for a man he wants to honor!'"

The king was pleased. "Excellent. Go and find Mordecai and do everything you've said. Be

careful not to leave anything out."

Haman stood there in shock, but he had to fulfill everything he had suggested to the king. He put the royal robe and crown on Mordecai, placed him on the royal horse, and led him through the city yelling, "This is what the king does for a man he wants to honor."

When it was all over, Haman went home in humiliation, but his summons to the queen's banquet was waiting for him. So he had to rush to get there.

After they had eaten, the king asked Esther, "Tell me what you want so I can give it to you."

"Oh king, if it pleases you to grant my request, spare my life and the lives of my people. A man has plotted to have my entire race destroyed."

The king was shocked, "Who is this man and where is he?"

Esther pointed at Haman. "Our enemy is this wicked man."

Haman was terrified. He couldn't even speak. The king looked at him and became angry. He got up and walked into the garden so he could think.

Haman ran over and fell down next to Esther to beg for his life. The king walked back into the room and saw Haman lying next to the queen. He said, "Are you going to rape the queen with me standing right here?"

As soon as he said this, servants rushed over and put a hood over Haman's head. One of them turned to the king. "Haman has built a gallows to hang the man who saved your life."

This angered the king even more. He pointed to Haman, "Hang him on it!"

Haman was immediately taken out and hanged on the gallows he had built. After this, the king replaced him with Mordecai.

So the Jewish people were saved from the disaster Haman had planned for them, and Mordecai became the highest-ranking official in the government.

177 Gabriel's Announcements

Jesus – Early Years

Luke 1:5-80

Zechariah was a priest who followed God. He and his wife Elizabeth didn't have children, and they were past the childbearing years.

One day, Zechariah was chosen to go to the temple and burn incense at the altar. The people waited outside in prayer. Suddenly an angel appeared to the priest and said, "Zechariah, your prayers have been answered. Elizabeth will give birth to a son, and you're to call his name John. He'll be a joy to your heart. He'll be great before the Lord and will prepare the way for Messiah."

Zechariah was afraid and said, "How is that possible? We're too old to have children."

The angel said, "My name is Gabriel, and I stand in the presence of God. He sent me to give you this good news, and you don't believe me. Therefore, you won't be able to speak until what I've said comes true."

The people outside were wondering what was taking the priest so long. After the angel left, Zechariah went out and stood before them. He tried to say something but found that he couldn't talk. So the people knew he had seen a vision.

The priest went home, and soon Elizabeth was expecting a child. With joy, she secluded herself.

When she had been pregnant for six months, that same angel went to a town called Nazareth. He appeared to a young woman named Mary. She was engaged to marry a man named Joseph. Both were descendants of David.

Gabriel said to her, "Mary, you're blessed by God." The young woman was startled and didn't know what to say.

The angel said, "Don't be afraid. You've found favor with God. You'll give birth to a son, and you're to call him Jesus. He'll be great, and

there'll be no end to his kingdom."

Mary said, "How can this be true? I'm a virgin."

"You'll conceive when the Holy Spirit hovers over you. Therefore, the child will be called the Son of God! Mary, all things are possible with God. Even your cousin Elizabeth is about to have a baby in her old age."

With that, Mary bowed her head and said, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let this happen just as you have said."

After the angel left, Mary went to visit her cousin. As soon as Elizabeth heard her voice, her baby jumped inside her, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. She said, "Oh Mary, you're blessed above all women, and that child you're carrying is blessed. How am I worthy to have the mother of my Lord visit me?"

Mary stayed with this wise older woman for three months, learning from her and receiving encouragement. Afterwards, she went home to face her family.

After Mary left, Elizabeth gave birth to a baby boy. Neighbors and family came to rejoice with the old couple. They said, "We'll call the child Zechariah, after his father."

Elizabeth said, "No! His name is John."

"John! There is no one in your family named John. We'll talk to Zechariah about this." The priest wrote on a tablet, "His name is John!"

Immediately he could talk. "Oh, bless the Lord. He is sending the Promised One who will bring us back to God."

He picked up his son. "You'll be a prophet of God and prepare the way for Messiah. He'll bring us salvation and forgiveness of sin. He will bring us peace."

178 The Birth of Jesus

Jesus – Early Years

Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 2:1-38

Joseph found out Mary was pregnant soon after she got home from her visit with Elizabeth. He knew he wasn't the father. Still, since he was a righteous man, he didn't want to make a public example of her. No, he decided to simply break off the engagement and put her away quietly.

He was deep in thought about this when an angel appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, don't be afraid to take Mary and make her your wife. The child she's carrying is from the Holy Spirit. When he's born, you're to name him Jesus. He's the Savior. He will save his people from their sins." Joseph didn't hesitate. He immediately made Mary his wife, but he wasn't intimate with her until after the child was born.

They lived in Nazareth, which was in the northern part of Israel. Yet the Scripture said that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, which is near Jerusalem. At that time, the empire of Rome sent out an order requiring everyone to register in the city of their ancestry. Therefore, Joseph and his wife had to go to Bethlehem.

Soon after they got there, it came time for Mary to deliver her child. As soon as the baby was born, she wrapped him in strips of cloth, and laid him in a feeding trough because there was no room in the sleeping area. Messiah was born.

That same night, shepherds were watching their flock in a nearby field. Suddenly an angel stood with them, and the area was flooded with the glory of the Lord. The shepherds were terrified, but the angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to bring you great news!"

He then pointed toward the nearby town. "Tonight, the Savior was born in Bethlehem.

He is Messiah. Go there, and look for a baby wrapped in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

Suddenly the whole area was filled with angels who were praising God, and saying, "Glory to God in the highest! Peace and goodwill to the earth." Then, they disappeared.

The shepherds immediately did as they were told. They went to Bethlehem and found Mary, Joseph, and the baby, just as the angel had said. They told them what happened that night, and everyone was amazed. Afterwards, they went back to the field, praising God for what they had seen.

Forty-one days later, it was time for Joseph and Mary to take Jesus to the temple, and offer sacrifice to the Lord. So the three of them went to Jerusalem.

There was a man at the temple named Simeon. God had told him that he wouldn't die until he had seen the Promised One. The Spirit of God had prompted him to go to the temple that day. He saw Joseph and Mary and asked if he could hold the baby. Looking into the face of Jesus, he said, "Oh, praise be to God!" Looking toward heaven, he said, "Lord, you can now let me die. My eyes have seen your salvation."

A woman named Anna walked up to them. She was 84 years old, and she had served God in the temple ever since her husband died after seven years of marriage. She asked to see the child. Afterwards, she said to everyone, "The Promised One has arrived! The Promised One has arrived!"

Joseph then took his little family back to their home in Bethlehem.

179 Gifts for the King

Jesus – Early Years

Matthew 2

While Jesus was still a young child, some men came from the east. Their research revealed that a royal redeemer would one day come to Israel. They studied the stars, and saw signs that indicated this king had finally been born.

They went to Jerusalem and talked to Herod, the king who was appointed by the Romans to rule over Israel. They said, “Where’s the child who has been born King of the Jews? We see his star, and we’ve come to worship him.”

Herod was evil and cruel. He became angry when he heard the news of a different king born in his domain. Still, he controlled himself and told the men he’d look into the matter. He called for the priests and teachers and asked, “Where does your Scripture say Messiah is to be born?”

They were quick to answer. “He’s to be born in Bethlehem.”

Herod went back to his visitors and asked to hear more about the heavenly signs and exactly when the royal star first appeared. He then told them, “Go to Bethlehem. Once you have found the child, report back to me. I’d like to go...

uh... worship him as well.”

The men traveled the few miles to Bethlehem and went right to the house where Joseph, Mary, and the young child lived. They bowed down before Jesus and worshiped him. They gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

God warned these men that they were not to return to Herod, so they avoided Jerusalem and traveled home a different way. That night, an angel appeared to Joseph. “Get up! Herod will send soldiers to kill the child. Go to Egypt and stay there until I tell you to return.” So Joseph got up in the night and took his family to Egypt.

Herod was angry when he realized the men from the east had disobeyed him. He sent soldiers to Bethlehem and had all the young boys killed—those under the age of two.

In time, Herod died, and the angel told Joseph it was safe to return to Israel. Still, he decided to move his family to Nazareth instead of going back to Bethlehem.

Jesus grew and became strong. He was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

180 Twelve Years Old

Jesus – Early Years

Luke 2:40-52

When Jesus was twelve years old, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. When it was time to return home, Jesus stayed behind at the temple, without his parents knowing. They traveled a whole day, thinking he was among the crowd.

That evening they realized he was missing. They went back to Jerusalem and searched for him for three days. Finally they found him in the court of the temple, sitting among the teachers. He was listening to them and asking questions.

Everyone who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his ability to answer questions.

His mother ran up and said, “Son, how could you do this to us? We’ve been searching for you.”

He said, “Surely you knew I’d be here in my Father’s house—doing his business.” They didn’t understand what he was talking about.

Jesus went back to Nazareth, and lived in submission to his parents. He grew, and matured, and was respected by all that knew him. God’s blessing was on his life.

181 Baptism and Temptation

Jesus – Early Ministry

Matthew 3:1 – 4:11, Mark 1:9-13

Luke 3:21 – 4:13, John 1:19-34

When John became a man, God led him into the wilderness. He wore clothes made of camel hair, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He preached that people should repent from their sins and turn from their wicked acts. He told them, “Don’t rely on being children of Abraham. God can make children of Abraham from rocks.” He then baptized those who wanted to live for God.

Some religious leaders asked him, “Are you the Messiah?”

He said, “No, I’m not the Christ. I was sent to prepare the way for him. He’ll come after me. I’m not even worthy to untie his shoes.”

The next day, John was baptizing at the Jordan River, when he saw Jesus coming toward him. John shouted to the crowd, “Behold, here comes the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! This is the Son of God.”

Jesus walked into the water and asked John to baptize him. John said, “No, I should be baptized by you.”

Jesus said, “Allow this to be. It’s God’s will.”

So John baptized Jesus in front of all the people. When he came up out of the water, the sky suddenly opened and the Spirit of God, like a dove, came down on him. Then a voice said, “You’re my Son! I’m pleased with you.”

After the baptism, the Spirit of God led Jesus

into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights. After that, hunger gripped his entire body.

Suddenly the tempter was by his side, “If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread so you can have something to eat.”

Jesus said, “God’s word says ‘Man is not to live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of mouth of God.’ ”

The devil took him to Jerusalem—onto the highest point of the temple wall. Jesus looked down at the rocks far below. The devil said, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down off of this wall. God’s word says there are angels taking care of you. They’ll keep you from hitting those rocks below. You won’t even stub your toe on them.”

Jesus said, “Yes, but God’s word also says, ‘You’re not to tempt God and put him to the test!’ ”

The devil then took Jesus to a very high mountain. He caused the kingdoms of the earth, in all their glory, to appear before them. He turned to Jesus and said, “I’ll give you everything you see. All you have to do is bow down and worship me.”

Jesus turned and looked at him. “Leave me, Satan! God’s word says, ‘He’s the only one to be worshiped. God is the only one to be served.’ ”

With that, the devil left him. Soon angels came to Jesus and cared for his needs.

182 Water to Wine

Jesus – Early Ministry

John 1:35 – 2:11

One day, John saw Jesus walking past. He turned to his own disciples and said, “Look, there’s the Lamb of God.” Two of John’s disciples immediately started following Jesus and spent the entire day with him. One of them was a man named Andrew. He went to his brother and said, “Simon, we have found the Messiah!”

His brother was curious, so he went to see for himself. As soon as Jesus saw him, he said, “Your name is Simon, but from now on you’ll be known as Peter.”

The next day, Jesus found a man by the name of Phillip, and said to him, “Follow me!”

Phillip went and found his friend Nathanael. “We’ve found the one that Moses and all the prophets talked about. His name is Jesus, who is from Nazareth.”

Nathanael was surprised. “Nazareth! Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

“Come and see for yourself.”

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming, he said, “Here comes a true Israelite—an honest man—one who has no pretense.

Again Nathanael was surprised. “How do you know me?”

“Ah, I saw you before Phillip talked to you—when you were still under the fig tree.”

For the third time, Nathanael was surprised. Then he said, “You are the Son of God, the true King of Israel.”

Jesus said. “Nathanael, you believe because I said I saw you under the fig tree. You’re going to

see greater things than this!”

It was during this time that Jesus and his disciples were invited to join his mother and attend a wedding at Cana. Later in the day, Mary came to Jesus and said, “They’ve run out of wine.”

He looked at her and said, “Why are you bringing this situation to me? You know it isn’t my time yet.”

She turned to the servants. “Do whatever he tells you to do.”

They looked at him waiting for his instructions. He saw six large stone water pots standing nearby. Each could hold about 20 gallons of water.

He said to the servants, “Fill those pots with water.”

They quickly filled all six pots full of water, right to the brim. Once that was done, they looked at Jesus. He said, “Now draw some out and take it to the manager of the feast.”

The servants did as they were told. The manager of the feast didn’t know where this wine had come from, so he tasted it. To his surprise, it was better than any they had served that day! He went to the bridegroom and said, “Where have you been hiding this? Usually the best wine is served at the beginning of the feast. Then, as the day goes by, the lesser quality is served. You have saved the best until now.”

This was the first miracle that Jesus performed.

183 The New Birth

Jesus – Early Ministry

John 2:13 – 3:21, Numbers 21:4-9

Jesus took his disciples to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. When he got there, he saw people in the temple exchanging foreign money and selling animals for sacrifice.

He made a whip out of strips of leather and drove the animals out of the temple. He also turned over the money tables, scattering coins everywhere. He said to the owners of the doves, “Take these things out of here! You’ve made my Father’s house into a market place.”

Some of the leaders challenged him and said, “Who gave you the authority to do this? Give us a sign.”

He said, “Tear down this temple and I’ll build it again in three days.” They were amazed! They didn’t realize he was talking about his own body.

Others gathered around Jesus during the Passover and listened to his teaching. They believed in him when they saw his miracles.

Nicodemus was a Jewish ruler and a Pharisee. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Teacher, we know you’re from God because we see your miracles.”

Jesus got right to the point, “Listen to me carefully. Unless a person is born again, he can’t see the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus was shocked. “That’s impossible! How can a man get back in his mother’s womb and be born a second time?”

Jesus explained, “To get to heaven, a person has to experience both physical birth and spiritual birth. If you’re only born once, you’ll focus on the things of this earth. Those who are born spiritually focus on the things of the Spirit. You must be born a second time.

“Don’t be so amazed. There are many things you can’t see with your eyes. You hear and feel the wind, but you can’t see it. So it is with the Spirit of God.”

Nicodemus shook his head, “I just don’t understand.”

Jesus sat back and looked at him. “You are a teacher of Israel, and you don’t understand these things?

“In the wilderness, the people of Israel complained against God. He sent snakes among them, and many died. He then told Moses to make a brass snake and put it on a pole. Those who looked at it were healed. Others died because they refused to look.

“So it’ll be with the Son of Man. He’ll be lifted up, and those who believe on him will have eternal life. God loved the world so much that he sent his Son to save the world and bring eternal life to those who believe.

“Let me explain it carefully so you can understand. If you believe on the Son of God, you will have eternal life. If you don’t believe on him, you must suffer God’s judgment.”

184 Woman at the Well

Jesus – Early Ministry

John 4:1-42

One time Jesus took his disciples through Samaria as he traveled from Jerusalem to Galilee. This was unusual since Jews avoided any contact with Samaritans.

Around noon, they came to a well near one of the Samaritan villages. Jesus was tired, so he sat down while his disciples went into the town to buy food.

A Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Please give me some water to drink.”

The woman was surprised. “Jews usually don’t talk to Samaritans. So, why did you ask me for a drink, since I’m a Samaritan woman?”

Jesus said, “If you knew who I am, you would ask me to give you living water.”

She said, “Sir, the well is deep, and you have no bucket. How can you get ‘living water’? Are you greater than Jacob who dug this well?”

Jesus said, “Those who drink from this well will get thirsty again. But those who drink my water will have a living well inside them that continually springs up to eternal life.”

The woman was amazed. “Oh please, give me this water so I’ll never get thirsty again. Then I won’t have to come back to this well.”

“Go get your husband and bring him here.”

She looked away. “I don’t have a husband.”

“I know you don’t. You’ve had five husbands, and the one you are living with now is not your husband.”

Her eyes snapped back. “Uh, sir, I can tell you’re a prophet. Please settle this age-old argument. We Samaritans say that this mountain is the place to worship God. The Jews say a person has to go to Jerusalem to

worship. Who’s right?”

“Woman, listen carefully. The time has now come when God is looking for those who will worship him in spirit and truth.”

She was almost speechless! “I know that some day the Messiah is coming, and he’ll explain all these things.”

Jesus smiled. “The person speaking to you is the Messiah.”

The woman left her water jug, and rushed back to the village just as the disciples were returning with the food. They were amazed that Jesus had been talking with her, but no one said anything about it.

When the woman got to the town, she told everyone about the man she had met at the well. “Come and see someone who told me everything I’ve ever done in my life. Surely he’s the Christ.” The men were curious, so they went out to see what she was talking about.

Meanwhile, the disciples were trying to get Jesus to eat the food they had brought from town. He said, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.”

They looked at one another. “Did someone bring him something to eat?”

Jesus shook his head. “No, my food is to do the will of God.

“You think we still have four months until harvest.” He pointed to the men coming out from the town. “Look over there. It’s time to harvest right now.”

The men came and talked with Jesus, and finally asked him to stay with them for a while. He stayed for two days, and many believed on him as their Lord and Savior.

185 Rejected in Nazareth

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Matthew 4:13-17, 13:54-58

Luke 4:14-32, John 4:43-54

A royal official from Capernaum went to see Jesus. He said, “My son is sick and about to die. Please come to Capernaum and heal him.”

Jesus tested him by saying, “You’re like everyone else. You won’t believe if you don’t see miracles.”

The man pleaded, “Sir, please come and heal my son. He’ll die if you don’t come quickly.”

Jesus had compassion on him and said, “Go in peace. Your son will live.”

The father looked at Jesus, and suddenly believed him. On his way home, his servants met him and said, “Your son lives!”

The official asked them, “What time did he get better?”

They said, “The fever left him about one in the afternoon.”

The father knew it was the exact hour Jesus said his son was healed. The man’s entire family put their trust in Jesus as the Christ.

After that Jesus went to Nazareth (where he had grown up as a child). He went to the synagogue as he normally did. He stood, and the book of Isaiah was handed to him. He read:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor;
to heal the brokenhearted,
to announce pardon to prisoners,

to recover sight to the blind,
to give liberty to the oppressed,
to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”

Once he had read this, he closed the book and gave it back to the attendant. He then sat down. Everyone in the synagogue looked at him. Finally he said, “Today, this Scripture is fulfilled.”

Everyone was amazed. They said, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son who grew up in our town?”

Jesus looked at them and said, “I know what you are thinking. You’re saying, ‘We heard about his miracles in other cities. We want to see some here.’ ”

“Oh, the saying is true, ‘A prophet will be honored, except in his own town.’ In the great famine during the time of Elijah, there were many widows in Israel, but God provided for a Gentile widow. During the time of Elisha, there were many people in Israel with the disease of leprosy, but God healed a Gentile from Syria.”

The people in the synagogue were furious. They grabbed him and led him out of the city. They headed to the place where they executed people by throwing them off a cliff. When they got there, they realized he wasn’t with them. He had turned, walked through the crowd, and left.

After that time, Jesus no longer lived in Nazareth, but settled in Capernaum.

186 Fishing for People

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Matthew 8:14-17, Mark 1:21-39

Luke 4:31 – 5:11

Jesus went to the synagogue in Capernaum. A demon-possessed man yelled at him, “Go away! Leave me alone! I know who you are! You’re the Holy One of God.”

Jesus said, “Don’t talk! Come out of him.”

The demon threw the man onto the floor. He screamed as the demon left his body. The crowd was shocked. They had never seen such authority and power.

Afterwards, Jesus went to the home of Peter and Andrew. Peter’s mother-in-law was sick in bed with a high fever. The family asked Jesus to heal her. So he touched her hand and said to the fever, “Leave this woman!”

Taking her hand he said, “Please, get up.” Immediately the fever left her and she got up. She was totally recovered, so she started serving the guests in her house.

By evening, almost the entire town was at the house. Jesus taught the people, healed the sick, and cast out demons.

The next morning, he got up before sunrise and went to a place where he could be alone. There he prayed and talked to his Father.

When the people of the town woke up, they started searching for Jesus, and finally found him. He told them he was going to visit the other towns in the area. They begged him to stay with them, but he said, “No, I need to preach the kingdom of God in other cities as well.” He then

traveled throughout Galilee, teaching the people, healing the sick and casting out demons.

One day he went to the shores of the Sea of Galilee to teach the people. They crowded around him to hear the word of God.

There were two fishing boats on the shore, and the fishermen were washing their nets nearby. Jesus got into the boat that was owned by Simon Peter, and asked him to push off a little from shore. Once this was done, he sat down and taught the people.

After he finished, he said to Peter, “Go into deeper water and let out the nets.”

Peter said, “Lord, we fished all night and didn’t catch anything. Still, if that’s what you want, I’ll cast out a net.”

He then took the boat into deeper water. When he cast out his net, he immediately caught a large school of fish—so many fish that the net started to rip apart. Peter yelled to his partners, “James, John!” They rushed out and helped gather in the fish. They filled both boats ... until they were in danger of sinking.

Peter was totally overcome by this miracle. He fell to his knees and said to Jesus, “Go away! I’m a sinful man!”

Jesus said, “Simon, don’t be afraid. In the past you caught fish. From now on, you’ll catch people.”

The fishermen brought their boats to shore, where they left everything and followed Jesus.

187 Sermon on the Mount

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Matt 5 – 7, Luke 6:37-42

Jesus went up a mountain to teach his followers. He explained what it meant to be a disciple of Messiah and how to live a life that is pleasing to God. He started with:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.

Blessed are those who mourn, because they'll be comforted.

Blessed are the gentle, because they'll inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, because they'll be filled.

Blessed are those who give mercy to others, because mercy shall be given to them.

Blessed are the pure in heart, because they'll see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, because they'll be known as the children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.

Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you because of Me.

Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, because great is your reward in heaven. That's how they treated the prophets who came before you.

If you do these things, you'll be the salt of the earth. You'll be the light of the world. Many will see it and glorify God.

Don't think that I've come to do away with the Law of God—just the opposite! My disciples are to live by a higher standard.

For example, the Law says you're not to murder. You're to live by a higher standard. You're not to hate anyone. When you hate a person, it's as bad as killing them.

The Law says you're not to commit adultery. You're to live by a higher standard. You're not to have lust in your heart. Uncontrolled thinking is the basis for misery, unfaithfulness, and divorce.

The Law makes provision for equal justice—

“an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”.

You're to live at a higher standard. Love those who mistreat you and take advantage of you. If someone does something bad to you, do something good for them.

The disciples became uneasy as they heard about this “higher standard.” It was a different way of living. It didn't seem possible. Jesus continued by saying:

There are three big areas that will keep you from serving God—pride, money and worries.

Watch out for pride in your spiritual life. God wants you to give to the poor, but not as a display of your generosity. He wants you to pray, but not for the purpose of impressing others. God wants you to fast, but not as a show for others to enjoy. He wants you to do these things privately. They aren't hid from God, and he will reward you.

Money is another area that will keep you from serving God. Money and God are both masters that demand your total dedication. You can't serve them both. Dedicate yourself to God and use money to glorify Him. If you don't, you'll be controlled by money and what it can buy you. Focus your life on heavenly treasure.

Watch out for common worries, like food and clothes. These things are not to fill your lives with fear. Keep your eyes on God, and accept what He gives you. Look around you. He takes care of the birds and flowers. Don't you think He cares more for you? He knows what you need. Focus on him, and let him worry about you.

The entire crowd became restless at such radical teaching, but they once again grew quiet when Jesus continued. He talked about their attitude toward others. He said:

Don't set yourselves up as a judge of why other people do what they do. Remember. You'll be judged by the same standards you set for others.

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Judging others is as silly as a man with a piece of lumber sticking out of his eye. He ignores it because he is focused on the speck of sawdust in someone else's eye. It's as silly as a blind man trying to help another blind person down the street. Both will fall into a ditch.

Instead of judging others, give to them. No, not just a little. Give to them in a big way. It's like a shopkeeper who says, "For a certain price, you can have one bucket full." As you fill that bucket, you shake it and press it down so you can get more in. Then you use your body to fill the bucket above the rim. That is how you're to give to others! And if you do, that is how it will be given to you!

The crowd was quiet as they thought about what they were hearing. Jesus held out his hand to them and said:

If you're going to be my disciples, do what I say. There are two roads before you. One is wide and well traveled. It's the natural way, and most people use it. You're to go a different way. It's narrow, and less traveled. It's your choice.

It's like two men who decided to build a house. The first built upon a solid foundational rock. The other man built his house on sand. When the houses were done, they looked very much alike. But then the storms came and beat on both houses. The house built on the rock stood firm, while the other one fell.

Build your life upon the firm foundation of what I'm teaching you. If you do, you'll be strong when the storms of life blow against you. Ignore what I say, and your life will crumble.

When Jesus was done teaching the people, they were amazed. They realized that he taught like one with great authority.

188 Forgiving Sins

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Matthew 9:9-13, Mark 2:1-17

Jesus went into a house to teach. As soon as word got around, the house filled up with people. Among them were Pharisees and teachers of the Law. The crowd went out through the doorway, with people standing outside.

Four men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a cot. They quickly realized they had no way of getting close to Jesus. So they carried the man and his cot up the outside stairs onto the roof. There, they made an opening by removing the tiles. When it was big enough, they lowered the man into the middle of the crowd and in front of Jesus.

When Jesus saw the faith of the four men, he turned to the man on the cot, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

The religious rulers were shocked when they heard this. They thought, “How dare he say that! This is blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins.”

Jesus knew what they were thinking. He said, “Why are you so troubled? It would’ve been easy for me to say, ‘Get up and walk.’ But you needed to know that the Son of Man has the authority to forgive sins.”

He then said to the man, “Get up! Pick up

your cot, and go home.”

Immediately the man got up, picked up his cot, and walked out in front of everyone. People were amazed and glorified God. They said, “We’ve never seen anything like this before.”

After that, Jesus left the house and walked toward the seashore. Along the way, he saw a tax collector named Matthew sitting at a tax booth. The Jewish people hated tax collectors and said they were traitors to Israel.

Jesus stopped and said to him, “Matthew, follow me.” Immediately, the man left everything and followed Jesus.

Soon afterwards, he hosted a reception for Jesus in his house. He invited many other tax collectors. They came as well as other people of low reputation.

The religious leaders were appalled! They said to his disciples, “Why is your Master eating with tax collectors and sinners?”

Jesus heard this, so he answered them. “Doctors are for sick people, not for those who are well. I haven’t come to work with people who think they are righteousness. I’ve come to bring repentance to sinners.”

189 Calling the Twelve

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Matthew 10, 12:9-15

Mark 3:13-19, Luke 6:6-16

One evening, Jesus left the crowd and went up a mountain. He wanted to be alone so he could talk with the Father. He prayed the entire night.

At daybreak, he came down and called a select group of disciples to himself. These were to stay with him so he could teach them and prepare them to preach. He gave them power to heal the sick and cast out demons.

He selected Simon, who was renamed Peter, and his brother Andrew.

The next two were James and his brother John, who were called “sons of thunder.”

There was Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas, who was a twin, and Matthew, who had been a tax collector.

Within this group was another James, so history calls him “James the Less.”

Thaddaeus was also called Judas, but he wasn’t the one who betrayed Jesus.

There was another Simon, and he was known as “the Zealot”.

Finally there was Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus.

He said to these men, “I’m sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as wise as serpents, yet harmless as doves.

People will hate you just like they hate me. But don’t be afraid. The Father is watching over you. He knows when a sparrow falls to the ground, and you’re more valuable than a sparrow. He even knows how many hairs are on your head.

Members of your family will want you to be loyal to them instead of me. If you choose their

approval, you’re not worthy of me. If you follow me, you’re to take up your cross and bear my shame.”

If you find a life without me, you’ll lose it, and if you lose your life because of me, you’ll find it.”

Jesus went to a synagogue to teach. In the crowd there was a man with a crippled hand. Some of the religious leaders saw this as their opportunity to catch Jesus breaking God’s Law. The Law said a person wasn’t to work on the Sabbath, and they considered it work when Jesus healed someone. So they asked him, “Is it legal to heal on the Sabbath?”

Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he turned to the man with a crippled hand. “Get up and stand here.” So the man got up and stood before them all.

Jesus then said to his accusers, “I have a question for you. Is it legal to do good on the Sabbath, or to do evil? Is it better to save life or destroy it?” They didn’t answer.

“If you had a sheep who fell into a pit on the Sabbath, you wouldn’t hesitate to pull him out. People are better than a sheep! Therefore I’ll answer your question. Yes, it’s absolutely legal to do good on the Sabbath.”

He then turned to the crippled man. “Stretch out your hand!”

The man stretched out his hand, and when he did, it was healed and as strong as his other one.

This infuriated the religious rulers, and they immediately started discussing how they could kill Jesus.

190 A Roman and a Funeral

Luke 7:1-17

A Roman officer lived in Capernaum. He was a good man and did wonderful things for the people of Israel. One day his servant got sick and was about to die. He asked some of the Jewish leaders if they would go talk to Jesus on his behalf. He said, "Beg him to come heal my servant."

They went to Jesus and said, "He is a good man and loves our nation. He has even built a synagogue for us." Jesus agreed to go with them to the man's house.

As they got near, the Roman officer sent friends to Jesus with this message. "Please, I'm not worthy to have you come into my house. I understand authority. When I say things, others have to obey. So I know if you said the word, my servant will be healed."

Jesus was amazed and said, "I haven't seen this kind of faith in all of Israel!" The friends of the man went back to his house, and found that the servant was healed.

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Jesus took his disciples to another town, and a large crowd followed them. As they approached the gates, they saw a funeral procession. It was for a young man who was the only son of a woman who had also lost her husband.

Jesus saw her desperate situation and went to her. He said, "Don't cry."

He then walked over to the open coffin and put his hand on it. Immediately the pallbearers stopped. Jesus said, "Young man, listen to me. Get up!"

The man opened his eyes and then sat up. He looked around and asked what was happening. Jesus helped him down and took him to his mother.

The crowd was stunned, and then afraid. Finally, they started to praise God. The news of this went throughout all of Israel, and into the surrounding countries.

191 Forgiven and Grateful

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Luke 7:36-50

A Pharisee named Simon invited Jesus into his house for a meal. People ate their meals while leaning on a cushion next to the table, with their feet behind them.

While they were eating, a woman came who was known to be a great sinner. She stood behind Jesus and started to cry. She then knelt down and washed his feet with her tears. She let down her hair and used it to dry his feet. She then kissed them and anointed them with expensive oil.

Simon thought to himself, “Well, this proves that Jesus isn’t a prophet. If he were, he’d know what kind of woman this is and he wouldn’t let her touch him.”

Jesus knew what he was thinking. He said, “Simon, I have a question for you. Two men owed a debt to the same banker. One owed \$2500, while the other owed \$25,000. Both were unable to pay it back, which meant they would be sold into slavery. Instead, the banker decided to forgive their debts and set them free. Which of

these men will be the most grateful and the loyal to the banker?”

Simon was quick to answer. “Of course, the one who owed \$25,000.”

Jesus said, “You’re absolutely right. I came into your house and you didn’t provide me water to wash my feet. Look at this woman. She didn’t say a word, but simply washed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.”

“You didn’t welcome me with a kiss. But this woman hasn’t stopped kissing my feet.”

“You didn’t offer me oil to freshen up. Look, she has anointed my feet with a generous amount of expensive oil.”

“Why is she doing this? It’s because her sins are many, and she’s grateful to be forgiven. Those who feel they’ve been good all their lives don’t experience such deep gratitude.”

He turned to the woman. “Your sins are forgiven.” This shocked those sitting around the table, but Jesus continued on. “Go in peace. Your faith has saved you.”

192 Four Soils

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Matthew 13:1-23, 31-32, Mark 4:1-32

Jesus told the crowds a story about a farmer who went out to plant his field. He threw the seeds around him as he walked along.

Some seed fell upon the path. It lay on top of the hard soil and never sprouted, so birds came and ate it. Some seed fell among the rocks, where there was very little soil. It sprouted, but didn't have strong roots. So it shriveled up because of the hot sun.

Some of the seed fell into a patch of weeds. It sprouted, but the weeds used up all the moisture and sunlight. The new sprouts couldn't mature and bear fruit.

But some of the seed fell on good soil that was made ready for it. There, it was cared for, nourished, and grew to become mature plants. The harvest was great!

Jesus didn't explain the meaning of this parable to the crowd, so the disciples asked, "What does it mean?"

Jesus said, "The seed is the Word of God. The various soils are how people receive it. Some people receive the Word of God like the seed that fell on the path. They hear it, but they don't

understand it—and like the birds—the Devil comes and takes the seed away from them so that they won't believe.

Some receive the Word like the seed that fell among the rocks. They gladly receive it, but don't take the time to establish roots. They don't endure because of trials and persecutions.

Some people receive the Word like the seed that fell in the weed patch. They receive it, but their priorities keep them from maturing and producing a harvest. Worries, money, and pleasure capture all their time and attention.

But some people receive the Word of God like the seed that fell upon good ground. They hear the Word with an open heart, and understand it. Therefore, they mature and the harvest is great.

Jesus went on to say, "The kingdom of heaven can be compared to a mustard seed. A man saw it was a very small seed. Still, he planted it in the ground to see what would happen. That small seed produced a tree. It had branches that spread out, so that birds came and made their nests there.

193 Teaching with Stories

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Matthew 13:24-30, 34-43

Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus continued to tell the people stories. In fact, he didn't say anything to the crowds without using stories.

One time he told them about a farmer who planted wheat in his field. After a long day, he returned home and went to bed. During the night, a man who hated him went into the fields and planted weeds.

Those particular weeds look exactly like wheat while they're growing. So at first, no one knew what had happened. It became obvious when the plants began to mature. The farmhands said, "What should we do? Should we go into the fields and pull up the weeds?"

The farmer said, "No, if you do that, you'll destroy the wheat. Let's wait until harvest."

When harvest came, the farmer sent his workers into the field. They gathered the wheat and put it into barns. They then pulled up the weeds, tied them in bundles, and burned them.

The disciples came to Jesus and asked what this meant. He said, "The farmer is the Son of Man, the field is this world, and the wheat is the children of God. The enemy is the devil and the weeds are those who follow him."

"At the end of time, the Son of Man will send his angels to gather in the children of God. After that, they will gather in the wicked, and throw them into a blazing furnace."

At another time, Jesus said that God's kingdom is like a wealthy man who decided to go on a long journey. He called in his trusted servants and assigned them responsibilities so his business could prosper while he was gone. He allotted money to each of them. To one he

gave \$5,000, to the next \$2,000, and to the last he gave \$1,000. This was determined by the abilities of each servant.

Immediately, the first servant went out and put his money to work. By doing so, he earned another \$5,000. The second man did the same and he earned another \$2,000. But the third man found a safe spot, dug a hole, and buried his \$1,000.

After a long time, the master came back. The three servants stood before him to give an accounting of what they had done. The first one said, "You allotted me \$5,000. Look, I have put that money to work, and I've doubled it."

The master was thrilled. He said, "Great job! I'm proud of you. I'm promoting you to a higher position, with much better benefits."

The second man said, "You allotted me \$2,000. Look, I have put that money to work, and I've doubled it."

Again, the master was thrilled. "Great job! I'm proud of you. I'm promoting you to a higher position, with much better benefits."

The third man stepped forward and said, "Master, I knew you were a shrewd businessman and didn't tolerate mistakes. I was afraid, so I went and hid my \$1,000 in a safe place. Here it is, every bit of it."

The master was furious! He said, "You worthless good-for-nothing. How can you be so lazy? If nothing else, you could have gotten a little interest at a bank. But no, you did nothing."

He yelled to the guards. "Take this man's \$1,000 and give it to the servant with \$10,000. Then take this worthless servant and throw him out into the darkness. There he will be destitute with nothing but his stupidity."

194 Calming Two Storms

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Matthew 8:23-34, Mark 4:35 – 5:20,

Luke 8:22-39

Jesus taught the crowd all day. In the evening, he said to his disciples, “Let’s go to the other side of the lake.” So they took several boats, and started on their journey to the Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee.

Being tired, Jesus went to the back of the boat and lay on a large cushion. Soon he fell into a sound sleep. During the night, a fierce storm hit the lake. Large waves crashed over the boat and threatened to capsize it. Jesus slept through it all.

The disciples woke him up and said, “Master, wake up! Don’t you care that we are about to die?”

Jesus woke up and faced the storm. He said, “Stop! Be still!” Immediately the wind stopped and the sea became calm.

He then turned to the disciples and said, “Why did you fear? Where’s your faith?” Then he lay down and went back to sleep.

The men looked at the sky and the calm sea. They said, “What kind of man is this, that even the wind and sea obey his voice!”

Their boat came to shore near a place where a wild man lived in the tombs. No one was able to control him. Many times they tried to put chains on him, but he easily snapped them off. He roamed the hills naked, and lived in tombs. He cried and yelled, and cut himself with stones.

When he saw Jesus and his disciples get out of their boat, he ran and knelt down before him. He shouted, “I know who you are. You’re Jesus,

the Son of the Most High God! Leave me alone. Don’t torture me.”

Jesus said, “What’s your name?”

“We’re called Legion because we’re many. Please, don’t send us into the abyss. Look, there are pigs over on that hill. Send us there.”

Jesus looked at the pigs, and said, “Yes, you may go there.”

With that, the demons left the man and entered the pigs. All 2,000 of them went wild and rushed down the hill and off the steep bank. They plunged into the sea and were drowned.

The men who were tending the pigs ran into the town and told the people what had happened. A crowd came out to see for themselves. When they got to Jesus, they saw the man who had been demon possessed. He was sitting quietly, fully clothed, and listening to Jesus.

Again, the men told what had happened. Everyone was afraid, so they asked Jesus to leave.

As he got into the boat, the man who was healed said, “Please, may I go with you?” Jesus turned to him and said, “Go back to your people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you. Tell them about God’s mercy on your life.”

So Jesus and his disciples left the shore and returned to the Jewish side of the lake. The man went to his hometown and started telling everyone what Jesus had done for him. The people who heard this were amazed.

195 Twelve Years

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Matthew 9:18-26, Mark 5:21-43

Luke 8:40-56

Jesus and his disciples left the Gentile side of the lake, and went back to the Jewish side. A large crowd was waiting for him.

A man named Jairus ran up and fell down before Jesus. He was a ruler of the synagogue. He said, “My daughter is dying! She’s only twelve years old. I beg you, please come and heal her.”

Jesus agreed, so he and his disciples followed Jairus. A large crowd also followed.

As they walked down the road, they passed the home of a certain woman. She had suffered a bleeding disorder for twelve years. Many doctors tried to help her, but her condition only got worse. This continued until her money was all gone.

When she heard that Jesus was passing by, she thought, “I’d be healed if I could get close enough to touch the edge of his clothes. No one would need to know anything about it.”

So she made her way through the crowd and reached out and touched the edge of his clothes. Instantly she knew she had been healed. Jesus felt the power go out from his body, so he stopped and said, “Who touched me?”

Peter looked at the crowd and said, “What do you mean who touched you? Look at all the people around you.”

Jesus ignored him and continued to look for

the person who had touched him. When the woman realized she couldn’t hide what she had done, she knelt down before him, trembling.

Jesus said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Your faith has healed you. Go back home. That disease won’t return.”

As they talked, some people came and said to Jairus, “You don’t need to bother the Master any longer. Your daughter has died.”

Jesus heard them and said to Jairus, “Don’t be afraid. Just believe in me.” They continued on to his house.

When they got there, they saw that the mourners had already arrived. It was their job to play flutes and cry very loud. Jesus said, “Why are you making all this noise? The girl is only asleep.”

They laughed at him because they knew she was dead. So he had them put out of the house. He then took Jairus and his wife, as well as Peter, James, and John, and went to where the girl was lying. He reached out and took her hand. “Child, get up.”

Instantly, the girl opened her eyes and got up. The parents watched in amazement. Finally Jesus said, “Get her something to eat.”

Then he told them, “Don’t tell anyone about this.” Still, the news of this event spread throughout the entire area.

196 Pool of Bethesda

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

John 5

There was a pool in Jerusalem called Bethesda. It was near the Sheep Gate. Local people believed that occasionally an angel would stir the waters of the pool. They felt a sick person would be healed if he or she were the first to get into the water after it was stirred. Therefore, a large group stayed near the pool, waiting for the angel.

Jesus went to that pool when he was in Jerusalem for a Jewish festival. He saw a man who had been sick for 38 years. The Lord said, “Do you want to be healed?”

The man said, “Yes, but when I see the stirring of the waters, someone always gets into the pool before me.”

Jesus said, “Stand up! Pick up your bedroll and walk.” Immediately the man was healed and got up. Jesus slipped away into the crowd as the man was picking up his bedroll.

Some of the Jewish leaders saw the man carrying his bedroll. They said, “How dare you! This is the Sabbath. It’s not legal to carry bedrolls on the Sabbath.”

The man said, “But... but... a man healed me and then told me to pick up my bedroll and go home.”

“Who told you to do this work on a Sabbath?”

“I don’t know. He healed me and then disappeared into the crowd.”

Later, Jesus saw this man in the Temple. The Lord said, “You’ve been healed, but you must stop sinning. If you don’t, something worse will happen to you.” The man then knew who had

healed him. So he rushed to the Jewish leaders and told them that it was Jesus.

Hearing this made them more determined to end the influence Jesus had with the people. They felt his actions on the Sabbath were totally unacceptable.

Jesus said to them, “My Father works on the Sabbath, so I will too.”

Hearing this, the leaders started talking about killing him. They said, “He breaks the rules about the Sabbath. Now he calls God his father. He thinks he’s equal with God!”

Jesus said, “The Son only does what the Father tells him to do. The Father loves the Son, and gives him power so he can give life to anyone he wants. The Father has made the Son the judge of people. If you don’t honor the Son, you’re not honoring the Father who sent him.

“I’ll give eternal life to those who hear me and believe on Him who sent me. Those who believe will not be judged, but have passed from death into life.

“How do you know if I’m telling you the truth? I’ve told you but that’s not good enough because I’m talking about myself. You heard John the Baptist talk about me, but you didn’t believe him. The Father spoke about me, but you closed your ears to him. My miracles show that I’m telling the truth, but you don’t accept them as proof.

“You study the Scriptures constantly. They talk about me, but you turn your eyes away from those Scriptures. The truth is, you’re just not willing to come to me and have life.”

197 Beheading of John the Baptist

Mark 6:14-29, Luke 9:7-9

To make his wife happy, King Herod had John the Baptist arrested. John had preached against their marriage, saying, “It is a sin to marry your brother’s wife.”

Herod’s wife wanted him dead! But Herod knew that John was a righteous man. The king also feared the people, knowing that they thought he was a prophet. Besides, he enjoyed hearing John preach. So, he decided to keep the prophet in prison, instead of killing him.

Herod hosted a big banquet to celebrate his birthday. He invited a large crowd of important people. During the party, he sent for his wife’s daughter, and had her dance for the crowd. Herod was pleased with her performance. So he said to the girl, “Ask me for something and I’ll give it to you.”

He could tell that this impressed the people at his banquet, so he added, “Ask me anything. I swear I’ll give it to you, up to half my kingdom.”

The daughter knew she should ask advice about this. So, she talked to her mother. “What should I ask for?”

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

This was exactly what her mother wanted. “Ask for the head of John the Baptist.”

The girl rushed back to the party and said, “I want the head of John the Baptist on a platter. And I want it now.”

Herod was shocked. Still, he had made his promise in front of his guests. So, he told the guard to go and behead John, and give the head to the girl.

The guard did as he was told. He went to the prison and beheaded John. He then brought the head back and gave it to the young woman on a platter. She took it to her mother.

John’s disciples went to the prison and got his body. After they buried it, they went and told Jesus.

Some time later, Herod heard about the things Jesus was doing. It struck him with conviction. He said, “I killed John, and now he’s risen from the dead. He has come back with great powers.”

From that day on, Herod wanted to meet and talk with Jesus.

198 A Meal and A Walk

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Matthew 14:14-33, John 6:1-21

Mark 6:30-52. Luke 9:10-17.

Feed the 5,000 is the only miracle that is recorded in all four Gospels.

Jesus went up a mountain where he taught his disciples. A large crowd went with them so they could hear him teach.

Soon it became apparent that they were hungry, and there was no food. Jesus knew what he was going to do, but still he asked Philip, “Where can we get food for these people?”

“Lord, even eight months salary couldn’t buy enough food for all these people.” The other disciples said, “Send them into the villages so they can buy food for themselves.”

Jesus said, “No, I want you to feed them. Go and see how much food we have.”

Andrew came back with a young boy. “Lord, this lad has five barley loaves and two small fish. But how can that help us with such a large crowd?”

Jesus said, “Give them to me.”

He took the bread and fish, and blessed them. He then divided them among the disciples and said, “Give this to the people and tell them they can have as much as they want.”

They served the food to the people, who ate until they were satisfied. There were over 5,000 people there. Then Jesus said, “Go and pick up the remains.” When they did, they had twelve baskets full of bread and fish.

The people said, “This is the one the

Scripture talks about— ‘the great prophet like Moses.’ ” They started talking among themselves about making him king.

Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he sent them away and told his disciples to go back by way of the sea. And he went up the mountain and prayed.

While Jesus was praying, a storm moved over the sea. Huge waves pushed the ship out toward the middle. The men rowed hard to get back to shore, but the wind was too strong for them.

At three o’clock in the morning, Jesus walked across the sea on top of the water. The men looked out and saw someone walking among the waves. They screamed because they thought it was a spirit.

Jesus said, “Don’t be afraid. It’s me.”

Peter said, “Lord, if it’s you, ask me to come to you.”

“Come.”

So Peter got out of the boat and started walking toward Jesus. Suddenly he looked at the waves and the wind. He became afraid, and started to sink. He cried out, “Lord, save me.”

The Lord reached out and grabbed him. He said, “Oh Peter, your faith is so small. Why did you doubt?”

The two of them walked back, and got into the boat. Suddenly the storm stopped. The disciples knelt down and worshiped Jesus. They said, “It is true. You are the Son of God.”

199 Bread of Life

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30,

John 6:22-71

The day after Jesus fed the 5,000, the people found him on the other shore and knew that he had arrived by a particular boat. They also knew that same boat had left the day before without him. They said, “How did you get there?”

Jesus ignored their question and got right to the real issue. He said, “You’re here because you filled your stomachs with the bread I gave you. You should be looking for living bread that gives you eternal life.”

They said, “What does God require of us?”

Jesus said, “This is what God requires. Believe on the One He has sent you.”

They said, “Give us a sign so we can believe. You could feed us from now on. That would be like Moses who gave us manna in the wilderness.”

He said, “Your fathers got manna in the wilderness, but eventually died. I am the Bread of Life that God sent down from heaven. The bread I offer is my body, and the drink I give is my blood. My flesh and my blood will bring you eternal life.”

The people were shocked! They said to one another, “How can this man say he came down from God? We know his parents. And how can he give his flesh for us to eat, and his blood for us to drink?”

From that day, many of his listeners stopped following him. They said, “This is too hard to believe.”

Jesus turned to the twelve and said, “Do you want to leave as well?”

Peter said, “Lord, where can we go? You’re the one who gives us eternal life. We’ve seen, and now believe. You are the Holy One of God.”

Jesus said, “I’ve chosen you twelve, yet one of you will turn against me.”

After that, Jesus took his disciples to Tyre and Sidon, a Gentile area north of Israel. While he was there, a Gentile woman came and begged him. “Son of David, Have mercy on me. A demon has taken control of my daughter and tortures her constantly.”

Jesus totally ignored her and didn’t say a word. She kept begging until his disciples said, “Lord, send her away. Her crying is starting to annoy us.”

Jesus looked at her and said, “God sent me to help His lost sheep, the people of Israel.”

With that, she knelt down in front of him and said, “Lord, help me.”

He said, “It’s not right to take the food that belongs to the children and feed it to wild dogs.”

She said, “Yes, Lord, that’s true. But the puppy dogs are allowed to sit under the table and eat the crumbs that fall down to them.”

He said, “Woman, great is your faith! You can go home now. The demon has left your daughter.”

She got up and went home. There she found her daughter lying on her bed. The demon was gone.

200 Feeding 4,000

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Matthew 15:29 – 16:16,

Mark 8:1-21, 27-30

Jesus left the region of Tyre and Sidon and went to the Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee. As he taught the people, a great crowd brought those with various physical problems. They brought the lame, the blind, the crippled, and those with many diseases. Jesus healed them all, and the crowd was amazed.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “I’m concerned for the crowd. They’ve been with us for three days, and their food has run out. I don’t want to send them away without feeding them because they’ll collapse with hunger as they go.”

The disciples said, “Lord, we don’t have enough food to feed this large crowd.”

“How much do you have?”

“We have seven loaves of bread and a few small fish.”

“Tell the crowd to sit down.”

He took the bread and fish and blessed it. He then broke it into pieces and gave it to his disciples. They turned and gave it to the crowd. 4,000 people were there. Everyone ate until they were full. The disciples then collected the leftovers and found they had seven baskets full.

Afterwards, they sent the crowd home. Jesus and his disciples got in the boat and went to the Jewish side of the lake.

The Jewish leaders were there, and started arguing with him. They wanted him to give them signs from heaven. He refused and got back into the boat.

As they were going back to the Gentile side of the lake, the disciples realized they forgot to

bring enough food for the trip. They only had one small loaf of bread.

Jesus said to them, “Watch out for the yeast of the religious leaders.” The disciples assumed he was scolding them for forgetting the bread.

He said, “Your faith is still so small! Why would you think I’m concerned about the bread situation? You were there. You saw how 5,000 people were fed with just five loaves of bread and two fish. How many baskets did we collect afterwards?”

“Twelve.”

You saw how 4,000 people were fed with just seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. How many baskets did we collect afterwards?”

“Seven.”

“So listen carefully and understand what I’m saying. Watch out for the yeast of religious leaders.” Finally the men understood what he was talking about.

Once they got to the other side, Jesus took them to Caesarea Philippi. There, he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

“Some say you’re John the Baptist. Others say you’re Elijah or Jeremiah.”

“Who do you say I am?”

Peter said, “You’re the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus said, “Peter, you’re blessed! You didn’t learn this from human sources, but the Father has revealed it to you.”

He then told all of his disciples “For now, don’t tell anyone I am the Messiah.”

201 The Transfiguration

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-29

Luke 9:28-36

Jesus took Peter, James, and John and went up on a mountain to pray. As the Lord prayed, the three disciples fell asleep. Suddenly they woke up and saw the face of Jesus becoming brighter and brighter. His clothes were a brilliant white and shone like light.

Then they realized that two men were with him, and they knew it was Moses and Elijah. They also shone like the sun. Moses and Elijah talked with Jesus about his death.

Peter spoke up when the two men started to leave. He said, “Lord, it’s good that we are here. Please allow us to build three shelters—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

As he was talking, a bright cloud covered them. This made the disciples afraid. A voice said, “This is my Son. Listen to him!”

The disciples fell down in terror. Jesus walked over and touched them. “Don’t be afraid. Get up.” They looked around and everything was back to normal. The only person with them was Jesus.

As they went down the mountain, Jesus said, “Don’t tell anyone about what you saw today, until after I’ve risen from the dead.” They wondered what he meant by ‘risen from the dead’, but no one said anything about it.

Instead, they said, “Lord, why do the scribes tell us that Elijah must come first?”

He said, “It’s true. Elijah will come in the last days before everything is made right. But listen carefully. Elijah did come, and people did not recognize him. They caused him to suffer in the same way I’ll also suffer at their hands.” The

disciples then understood that Jesus was talking about John the Baptist.

A large crowd was waiting for them at the bottom of the mountain. A man ran up and knelt before Jesus. “Lord, have mercy on my son, my only child. A spirit takes him and throws him down, sometimes in the fire, sometimes in the water. He can’t talk. He foams at the mouth and goes into convulsions.

I came to your disciples, but they weren’t able to help him. If you can do anything for him, please help us.”

Jesus noticed that the father had said, “If you can do anything...” so he said, “Everything is possible to a person who believes.”

The father started to panic. “Lord, I believe. ... Oh, Lord, help my unbelief!”

Jesus said, “Bring the child to me.”

When the spirit saw Jesus, he threw the boy to the ground. He rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

Jesus said to the spirit, “Come out of this boy, and never enter him again.”

The spirit came out of the boy violently. The child screamed, and fell down to the ground. People gasped and said, “He’s dead.” Jesus walked over and took the boy by the hand and helped him up.

Later the disciples asked the Lord, “Why couldn’t we drive the spirit out of him?”

Jesus said, “This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting.”

202 Paying Temple Tax

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Matthew 17:22-27, Mark 9:33-42

Jesus headed back to Capernaum with his disciples. Along the way he said, “They’ll give the Son of Man to people who will kill him. But in three days, he’ll rise from the dead.”

The disciples were confused about what he was talking about. Still, they didn’t ask him about it because they were in the middle of their own discussion. They were arguing about which one of them was the greatest.

When they got to the house in Capernaum, Jesus had all twelve men gather around. He then motioned for a child to come stand next to him. He said, “If you want to be the greatest of everyone, you must become the servant of everyone.”

He then put his arm around the child. “When you welcome a little child like this in my name, you are welcoming me. But it’s much more than that. You’re welcoming God.”

John spoke up. “Lord, we found a man casting out demons in your name. But he wasn’t a part of our group. So we told him to stop.”

“No, no! Don’t stop him. A man isn’t working against me if he’s doing miracles in my name. If

he’s not against us, he’s for us. Listen, if a man gives even a cup of water in my name, that man will be rewarded.”

He once again put his arm around the child. “Listen very carefully to me. If one of these little ones believes in me, and someone causes him to sin, it would be better if that man were tied to a large rock and thrown into the sea.”

The next day, a man who collects temple tax walked up to Peter and said, “Does your teacher pay the temple tax?”

“Uh, yes, he does.” But Peter wasn’t sure.

Back in Capernaum, Jesus saw him deep in thought. He said, “Simon, give me your opinion. When a king issues a tax, does he make his family pay it?”

“Oh no. Others have to pay, but not his family.”

Jesus said, “That’s true. The sons of the king don’t have to pay. But we don’t want to offend others on this issue. So go to the sea and catch a fish. When you have it, open its mouth. There you’ll find a coin. It’ll be enough for you to pay the tax—for you and me.”

203 Seventy Times Seven

Jesus – Galilean Ministry

Matthew 18:21-35

Peter asked Jesus a question. “Lord, what if someone wrongs me and I forgive him, but he wrongs me again? How many times should I continue to forgive him—seven times?”

Jesus said, “Peter, listen carefully. You’re to forgive him seventy times seven!

“Think of it this way. A king decided to settle the accounts with those who owed him money. So he brought in a man who owed him a million dollars. The king realized there was no way this man could pay him back. So he said to his accountant, ‘Take this man, his wife, and his children, and sell them. And then sell everything he owns. Get as much as you can, and apply it to his debt.’

“The man fell to the ground and yelled, ‘Oh king, please be patient with me and I’ll pay you everything I owe.’

“The king knew this was an empty promise, but he was sympathetic. He said, ‘Release this man. I’ll forgive his entire debt.’ The man could hardly believe his ears. His entire debt was

gone, and he was free.

“A few days later, this same man found a friend who owed him 5,000 dollars. He grabbed him and started choking him. ‘You owe me 5,000 dollars, and I want it now.’”

“The friend fell down and yelled, ‘Oh please, be patient with me and I’ll pay you everything I owe.’

“ ‘No, I’ve lost my patience with you! I’m going to throw you into a work prison, and you’ll stay there until I get all my money.’

“The king was shocked when he heard what happened. He had the man brought before him. ‘You ungrateful wretch! I forgave your debt of one million dollars because I had pity on you. How could you treat your friend like this, and for 5,000 dollars!? Guard, take this man and throw him into prison.’ ”

Jesus then said to Peter. “My heavenly Father has been generous with you when he forgave all of your sins. Therefore, you are to be generous in forgiving others.”

204 Woman Caught in Immorality

John 7:1 – 8:12

It was time for a festival in Jerusalem. Jesus pretended he wasn't going, but he went without anyone knowing. The religious leaders were looking for him... but couldn't find him.

Still, everyone was talking about him. Some said Jesus was a good man, while others said he deceived people with his teaching. No one wanted to say too much because they feared the religious leaders.

Halfway through the festival, Jesus went to the temple and started teaching the crowd. Everyone was amazed at what he said.

The religious leaders sent guards to get him. They went, but they weren't able to grab him because it wasn't time for him to die. Soon, the guards were spellbound by his teaching. They finally returned to the religious leaders. The leaders said, "Where is he? Why didn't you bring him?"

The guards said, "We've never heard anyone talk like this man."

The next morning, Jesus was once again teaching at the temple. The religious leaders went to him with a woman they had caught in immorality. They thought they could use her to trap Jesus and get evidence against him.

Jesus – Heading Back South

They said, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of adultery. The law of Moses says we should stone her. But we want you to tell us what we should do."

He acted like he didn't hear them. He stooped down and used his finger to write in the dust. They didn't allow him to ignore them. They kept asking about this situation. Finally he stood up and faced them. "Go ahead and stone her. But have the one without sin throw the first stone." He then stooped down and started writing on the ground again.

The men stood there without saying anything. Finally they started leaving one by one, starting with the older men. Then Jesus stood up and looked around. He and the woman were the only ones standing in the middle of the crowd. He said to her, "Woman, where are those who were accusing you? Didn't they condemn you to death?"

She said, "No, they didn't, Lord."

He said, "Well, I won't condemn you to death either. Go, and don't sin anymore."

He then turned to the crowd and said, "I am the light of the world. Those who follow me will never walk in darkness because they'll have the light of life."

205 A Man Born Blind

Jesus – Heading Back South

John 9

Jesus and his disciples passed a man who had been blind since birth. His disciples said, “Teacher, whose sin caused this man to be blind? Was it his sin, or his parents?”

Jesus said, “His blindness isn’t the result of a particular sin. It was given to him so he could display God’s power. Don’t forget, I am the light of the world.”

Jesus then spit on the ground and made wet clay. He placed it on the man’s eyes and said, “Go to the pool and wash this off.”

The man went to the pool, washed his eyes, and suddenly he could see. He went home, and his neighbors were shocked that he could see. They thought maybe he wasn’t the same man. He said, “It’s true, I’m the man who was born blind!”

“How did you get your sight?”

“A man called Jesus spit on the ground and made wet clay. He put some on my eyes and told me to go wash it off. As soon as I did, I could see.”

They said, “Where is this man?”

“I don’t know.”

They took him to the Pharisees, and he explained the whole thing to them. He ended his story by saying, “So I went to the pool and washed it off just like he told me. Now I see.”

This started an argument among the religious leaders. Some didn’t think this miracle was from God, because it was done on the Sabbath. Others pointed out that evil men can’t do miracles.

So they asked the man. “What do you say? What kind of man healed your blindness?”

Without hesitation he said, “He’s a prophet!”

They didn’t want to hear that. So some questioned whether the man had ever been blind

in the first place.

They called for his parents. “Is this your blind son? If so, how is it he can see?”

The parents were afraid to answer because they knew the religious leaders could have them expelled from the synagogue. They said, “He’s our son, and yes, he was born blind. That’s all we know. We have no idea why he can now see. He’s an adult, ask him.”

So they once again turned to the man. “Don’t praise this man Jesus, who is evil. Give your praise to God.”

The man said, “I don’t know about theology. All I know is, I used to be blind, but now I can see.”

Again, they didn’t like his answer. So they once again asked him how it happened.

He said, “I’ve already told you what happened. Why do you want to hear it again? Are you planning to become his disciples?”

They were stunned at his boldness. “No! We are disciples of Moses who talked with God. This man? We don’t know what authority he has.”

The man was surprised. He said, “You don’t know where he gets his authority? Look at me! I was blind and he healed me! God doesn’t give that kind of power to evil people!”

This made the Pharisees mad. “How dare you try to teach us!” They immediately threw him out of the synagogue.

Jesus heard about what happened, so he went and found the man. He said, “Do you believe in the Son of God?”

“Lord, who is he, that I may believe?”

Jesus smiled, “You have seen him with your own eyes. He is the one talking to you.”

The man fell down and said, “Lord, I believe.”

206 Lepers, Judge, & Pride

Jesus – Heading Back South

Luke 17:11-19, 18:1-14

As Jesus was traveling to Jerusalem, he went through a certain village. Ten men with leprosy walked toward him. They were required to maintain a space between themselves and other people. So they yelled to him from a distance. “Master, have mercy on us.”

Jesus turned to them and yelled back. “Go show yourselves to the priest.”

They looked at one another and decided to do as he said. Along the way, they suddenly realized they were all healed.

One of the ten men was from Samaria. He immediately turned around and ran back to Jesus. He shouted praises to God as he went. He fell down in front of the Lord and thanked him.

Jesus looked around and said, “Weren’t all ten of you healed? Where are the other nine? You’re from Samaria, yet you’re the only one to come back and thank God.”

Then Jesus helped the man get up. “Go, your faith has healed you.”

Later, Jesus was teaching the crowd about the importance of never getting discouraged when they pray. He said, “There was a judge who didn’t fear God, and was totally unconcerned about people.

“In his town, there was a widow who kept going to him saying, ‘I want the court to give me justice against the man who wronged me.’ At first the judge refused to help her. Finally he said, ‘I don’t care what happens to this woman, but I’m

going to help her anyway because I’m tired of her bothering me.’ ”

The Lord said, “You should go to God with that same determination. But you have an advantage over that widow. Her judge didn’t care for her, but you have the heavenly Father who loves you and wants to help you.”

Jesus told another story to a crowd when he noticed that some thought they were better than others. He said, “Two men went to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, who was honored by everyone. The other was a tax collector, who everyone hated, thinking he was a traitor to the nation.

“The Pharisee stood in a prominent spot and prayed. ‘God, I’m glad I’m not like other people—like those who are greedy or dishonest—or like those who are unfaithful to their wives. I’m especially glad I’m not like that wretched tax collector over there. Lord, as you know, I fast twice a week and give you a tenth of everything I earn.’

“The tax collector stood off to the side, away from everyone. He didn’t even look up, but kept hitting his chest in shame. He said, ‘God, I know I’m a sinner. Please have pity on me.’

Jesus said, “Both men went home, but only one was justified before God. It was the tax collector, not the Pharisee. God will exalt those who humble themselves, but he will humble those who exalt themselves.”

207 Good Samaritan

Jesus – Heading Back South

Luke 10:25-42

There was a man who was an expert of the law of Moses. He asked Jesus, “How can a person earn the right to go to heaven?”

Jesus said, “Tell me what is written in the law.”

He said, “Love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.”

“Ah,” said Jesus. “Go and do that, and you’ll live.”

The man realized how impossible that was.

“Uh, well, exactly who is my neighbor?”

Jesus said...

“A man was traveling down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Robbers grabbed him and beat him until he was almost dead. They then took his money and clothes, and left him on the side of the road.

“The man desperately needed help, and soon a priest came along. He saw the man, but moved to the other side of the road and hurried on his way. After that, a Levite passed by, but he also avoided the situation and ignored the man.

“A third man traveled down the road, but unfortunately he was a Samaritan, a group of people hated by the Jews. Still, he had pity on the Jewish man. He stopped and treated his wounds. He placed him on his donkey and took him to an inn. There he made him comfortable

and treated his wounds again.

“The next day, the Samaritan gave the innkeeper money and told him to take care of the wounded man. He said, ‘If it costs more, I’ll pay you when I come back.’

“So,” said Jesus, “three people saw the man lying on the side of the road. Which one was a neighbor to him?”

The answer was simple, “The one who showed mercy.”

“Yes,” said Jesus., “go and follow his example.”

After this, Jesus went to a village. He had friends that lived there, and they invited him and his disciples into their home for a meal.

While they were talking, one of the sisters named Mary sat at the Lord’s feet, listening to everything he said. Martha, her sister, was busy preparing the meal for their guest. In her frustration, she went to Jesus. “Lord, have you noticed that my sister has left all the work for me to do? Please, tell her to come help me.”

The Lord said, “Oh Martha, Martha. You have too many worries. You have forgotten there is only one thing that is absolutely necessary. Mary has chosen that one thing, and it won’t be taken away from her.”

208 A Large Banquet

Jesus – Heading Back South

Luke 14

A prominent Pharisee invited Jesus to his home on the Sabbath. The Lord noticed that everyone was carefully watching him; and then he saw why. In front of him stood a man who was suffering because his body was swollen.

Jesus turned to the religious leaders and said, “I have a question for you. Is it legal to heal on the Sabbath?” No one said a word.

Jesus turned and healed the suffering man. After sending him away, the Lord said to those around him, “If your son fell into a well, you wouldn’t worry if it was the Sabbath or not. You would quickly pull him out. You would do the same for an animal.” The people were unable to contradict him, so they didn’t say anything.

At the meal, Jesus saw that people were quick to claim the best seats for themselves. He said, “When you are invited to a special dinner, don’t rush and sit in the most prominent place. If you do, your host may have to move you to make room for someone more worthy. He might assign you a lower place while everyone is watching.

“How much better it would be for you to select a lower place. Then your host might come and say, ‘Don’t sit there. Please move up higher.’ This would be done in front of everyone.

“Always keep in mind... if you constantly promote yourself, you will eventually be humbled. But if you live in humility, believe me, you will be exalted by others.”

He then turned to those hosting the dinner, “The same goes for you. When you prepare a special meal, don’t invite those who make you look good, or those who have the ability to repay you in kind. No, invite the poor, the crippled, and blind. If you do, you will be blessed! Invite those who have no way to pay you back. God will see it and repay you at the resurrection.

Jesus told this story. “A great man decided to host a large banquet. He organized his guest list and everyone agreed to come. So a date was set. The man and his servants made all the preparations. Once everything was done, servants were sent out to those who were invited. They said, ‘Come! Everything is now ready.’

“Without exception, all the men made excuses why they couldn’t attend. One said, ‘I just bought a field. So I have to go see it.’ Another said, ‘I just bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to see how good they are.’ Yet another said, “Haven’t you heard? I just got married. I’m going to stay here with my new wife.’

“The master of the feast was angry when he heard all these excuses. He said to his servants, ‘Go out into the city streets and alleyways. Bring in the poor, the crippled, and blind.’

“Once this was done, there was still room. So the master said, ‘Go out into the country, along the lanes and highways. Insist that they come to my banquet. I want my house full. But make sure none of the original guests are allowed in.’ ”

209 Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son

Matthew 18:12-14, Luke 15

The religious crowd was upset when they saw common sinners flocking around Jesus. They said, “He allows tax collectors and sinners to be around him. He even eats meals with them.”

Jesus responded by telling them these three stories. He said...

“A shepherd owned 100 sheep. During the evening count, he realized that one was missing. So he left the ninety-nine and started searching for his lost sheep. When he found it, he put it on his shoulders and carried it home. He called his friends and neighbors and said, ‘Come celebrate with me. I found the sheep that was lost!’

“So it is in heaven. There is rejoicing when a sinner repents and turns his life over to God.”

“A woman suddenly realized that one of her ten wedding coins was missing. She lit a lamp and carefully swept the entire house until she found it. She was so relieved that she called her friends and neighbors and said, ‘Come and rejoice with me. I lost one of my coins, but now I have found it.’

“So it is in heaven. When one sinner turns back to God, there is rejoicing among the angels.”

“A man had two sons. The younger one came to him and said, ‘I want my inheritance, and I want it now. Divide up your estate and give me my share.’ This made the father sad, but he divided his estate and gave each son his portion.

“The younger son left home and traveled to a far off place. He had wild parties and spent his money freely until it was all gone. Suddenly a severe famine hit the land, and he had no place to live and nothing to eat.

“He took a job watching over pigs. His hunger became so great he started to envy what the pigs were eating. He was totally destitute, and no one gave him anything.

“One day he said, ‘I’m about to die of starvation, yet those who work for my father have enough to eat. I’ll go back and humble myself

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before my father. I’ll ask him to hire me as one of his servants. I’ll say, ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God and against you. I know I can’t be a family member again, but please hire me as a field hand.’

“He started walking home. When he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. With joy, the man ran to his son and threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. The son pulled back, bowed his head, and started giving his speech. ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God and against you. I know I can’t be a family member again...’

“The father called out to his servants, ‘Quick, go get the best clothes and shoes, and put them on my son. Get a family ring for his finger.’ He turned to some other servants. ‘Go to the field and get the choice calf. We’re going to have a feast tonight! My son was dead, but now he’s alive. He was lost, but now he’s found. We’re going to celebrate!’

“That evening, the older son finished working in the field, and walked toward the house. He suddenly heard music and saw people dancing. He asked one of the servants. ‘What’s going on?’

“ ‘It’s your brother. He has come home, so your father killed the choice calf and is celebrating. He wants you to join him.’

“The older son became angry and wouldn’t go to the party. The father went out to him and said, ‘Son, please come and rejoice with me.’

“The son was angry and said, ‘I’ve been faithful to you all these years, and have done everything you asked. Not once did you kill even a small goat to honor my faithfulness.’

“ ‘But now, this scoundrel takes family property and gives it to prostitutes, and you reward him with a fatted calf.’

“The father looked at him and said, ‘Oh my son—you’ve always been here, close to me. All that I have is yours. But your brother—he was dead. Now he’s alive! He was lost. Now he’s found! Come celebrate with me. Let’s rejoice together.’ ”

210 The Rich Man and Lazarus

Matthew 13:44-46, 25:1-13

Luke 16:19-31

Jesus said, "There was a rich man who dressed in fabulous clothes, lived in a luxurious house, and ate the best food.

"Lazarus was a poor man who lay at the gate. He was sick and full of sores. He longed to eat crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Dogs often came and licked his sores.

"In time, Lazarus died, and angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and found himself in the place of the dead, a place full of fire and suffering.

"He looked up and saw Lazarus next to Abraham. The rich man yelled, 'Father, please send Lazarus with a drop of water on his finger to cool my tongue. I am in constant torture!'

"Abraham said, 'Son, remember how you enjoyed all the good things of life, while Lazarus lived in misery? Now he lives in comfort while you live in agony. Besides, going there is impossible. A large chasm has been placed between us.'

"The rich man said, 'Oh, Father Abraham, I beg you, send Lazarus to my brothers. He can tell them about this place of torment. I don't want them to come here.'

" 'Son, they already have warnings. They have the writings of Moses and the prophets.'

"The man said, 'That's not enough! They will listen if someone comes back from the dead. Then they will repent.'

"Abraham said, 'No, that's not true. If they ignore the writings, they won't listen, even if someone comes back from the dead.' "

Sometime later, Jesus told this parable. "The

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kingdom of heaven is like ten bridesmaids who went out to meet the bridegroom before the wedding. Five of them were wise and five were foolish. The bridegroom was late in coming, so the ten young ladies fell asleep and their lamps burned out. In the middle of the night, they heard the shout, 'The bridegroom is coming!'

"The women woke up and tried to relight their lamps, but the oil had burned out. The five wise bridesmaids had brought extra oil, but the other five hadn't. The five foolish girls said, 'Please, give us some of your oil.'

"The others said, 'No, there isn't enough to share. Hurry, run and buy some more.' So the foolish girls ran to get some more oil.

"While they were away, the bridegroom came. Everyone went into the house and the doors were closed and locked. When the foolish girls came back, they knocked on the door. 'Please, let us in. Open the door.'

"Then, from inside the door they heard, 'No! I don't know you.'"

Jesus gave another example about the kingdom of heaven. He said, "It's like a man walking through a field. He suddenly saw a valuable treasure! He knew he couldn't take it off the property. So he sold everything he had and bought the field.

"It is also like a man who was in the market for valuable pearls. He suddenly saw one that was under priced and the owner didn't know it's true value. They settled on a price, then the man went and sold everything he had. When he raised enough money, he went and paid for the pearl."

211 Raising Lazarus

Jesus – Heading Back South

John 11

Lazarus, and his sisters Mary and Martha, lived about two miles from Jerusalem in a town called Bethany. Lazarus became extremely sick, so his sisters sent for Jesus. He was a friend of their family. They said, “Lord, your friend is sick.”

Jesus waited two days after getting this message. He then said to his disciples, “We’re going to Judea.”

They said, “Lord, it’s not safe to go there. The Jews are looking for you so they can kill you.”

He said, “Our friend Lazarus is asleep, and I need to go wake him up.”

“Lord, it’s good that he’s asleep. It’ll help him get better.”

Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead! And it was for you that I didn’t go sooner. What I’m about to do will help you believe in me. Now, let’s go to Bethany.”

Thomas said, “Well, we might as well go and die with him.”

When they were almost there, they learned that Lazarus had been dead for four days. Martha heard that he was coming, so she went to meet him. “Lord, you could’ve healed my brother. He’d be alive today if you would’ve been here. I know all things are possible with you.”

Jesus said, “Martha, your brother will rise again.”

“I know, Lord. He’ll be a part of the resurrection in the last day.”

Jesus said, “I’m the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even if they die. They will always be alive—forever. Martha, do you believe this?”

“Yes Lord. I believe you’re the Messiah, the Son of God.”

She then went back to their house and whispered to her sister. “Mary, the Teacher is here and is asking for you.”

Mary got up and ran to Jesus, and others followed her. When she got to him, she fell at his feet. “Lord, my brother would still be alive if you had come sooner.” She then started to cry.

Jesus was greatly moved when he saw Mary and the others crying. He said, “Where did you put him?” She got up to take him there. With that, Jesus started crying.

They took him to the place where they had laid the body, which was a cave with a stone across the entrance. When Jesus saw it, he said, “Take away the stone.”

Martha stepped forward. “Lord, he’s been dead for four days. By now, the smell will be great.”

He turned to her, “Remember what I said? If you believe, you’ll see the glory of God.”

So, she stepped back, and the men removed the stone. Jesus looked up and prayed, “Father, I thank you that you always hear me. Take this miracle and use it to help people believe that you sent me.”

He then looked at the entrance to the tomb and shouted, “Lazarus, come out!”

All eyes turned to the tomb. Suddenly the dead man came out, still bound with linen cloth from head to foot. Jesus said, “Unwrap him, and let him go.”

Many of the Jews believed on Jesus that day. But when the religious rulers heard about it, they called a council. It was decided that Jesus must die before everyone believed in him.

They also made plans to kill Lazarus, because his resurrection was causing so many people to turn to Jesus.

212 The Great, the Rich & the Poor

Matthew 20:20-28, Mark 10:46-52

Luke 19:1-10

The trip to Jerusalem took Jesus through Jericho. Along the way, the mother of James and John knelt before him and said, “Lord, I want my sons to sit next to you when you’re in your kingdom—one on your right side, and the other on the left.”

He said, “You don’t know what you’re asking.” Turning to the men he said, “Are you able to suffer like I’m about to suffer?”

They answered with confidence. “Yes, Lord. We’re ready to suffer.”

Jesus looked at them for a moment. “It’s true. You’ll suffer for me, but what you’re asking is not within my control. The Father will choose who will sit on the right side of me and on the left.”

The other ten became angry with the brothers when they heard this conversation. Jesus called them together and said, “In this world, people of authority become lords over others. They expect to be praised and served. This isn’t to be true of you. If you want to be great, start serving others. If you want to become the greatest one of all, start serving everyone.”

“Follow my example. I didn’t come so others would serve me. I’m giving my life so others can live.”

A chief tax collector lived in Jericho, whose name was Zacchaeus. He wanted to see Jesus as he passed through town, but he was a short man and couldn’t see over the crowd.

So he ran down the path ahead of the people, and climbed up in a sycamore tree. He knew he’d be able to see Jesus when he passed under the tree.

When the Lord got to that spot, he stopped!

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He looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, come down from that tree. I’m staying at your house today.”

Zacchaeus quickly got down from the tree and welcomed Jesus into his house. People started to murmur, “How could he even think about staying in the house of that great sinner?”

But Zacchaeus said to the Lord, “I’m going to give half of everything I own to the poor. And where I’ve cheated people, I’ll pay them back four times the amount I took from them.”

Jesus said, “Today, salvation has come to this house. I came to seek and to save those who are lost.”

As Jesus left Jericho, he passed a blind man named Bartimaeus. He was begging on the side of the road. He heard the crowd and said, “What’s going on?”

“Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.”

When he heard this, he yelled, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

People nearby told him to be quiet. But he yelled even louder, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Jesus stopped and looked in his direction, “Go, bring him to me.”

They went to Bartimaeus and said, “Jesus is calling for you. Hurry, get up and go to him.”

Bartimaeus got up, threw down his beggar’s coat, and went to Jesus. The Lord said, “What do you want me to do for you?”

“Teacher, I want to see!”

The Lord said, “Go. Your faith has healed you.” Immediately, Bartimaeus could see, and he started following Jesus.

213 Triumphal Entry

Jesus – Final Week

Matthew 21:1-11 Mark 11:1-11

Luke 19:28-44, John 12:1-19

Jesus and his disciples were invited into a home for a meal. Lazarus was also invited and Martha helped serve. While they were eating, their sister Mary poured expensive oil on the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the smell of the perfumed oil.

Judas Iscariot said, “Lord, that oil was wasted! It could’ve been sold, and the money given to the poor.” He didn’t really care for the poor, but was in charge of the disciples’ money and was stealing from it.

Jesus said, “Leave her alone. You’ll always be able to help the poor, but you won’t always have me. Mary has anointed me for my burial. And as the gospel spreads throughout the world, people will hear of what she did.”

The next day, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. He told two of his disciples, “Go into the village, and there you’ll find a donkey with her colt. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone asks what you’re doing, tell them the Lord has need of them.”

The two went into the village and found the donkey and colt. The men untied them and started walking away. The owners said, “What are you doing?” They replied, “The Lord has need of them,” so he allowed them to go. So the disciples brought donkey and colt to Jesus.

No one had ever ridden the colt before that

day, yet the disciples put their robes on it and helped Jesus get on. As he rode along the path, people spread their robes in front of him. The crowds grew as he rode down the Mount of Olives. They got palm branches and laid them on the path.

People shouted for joy, and praised God for all the miracles they had seen. “Blessed is the King who is coming in the name of the Lord!” As Jesus continued on, they shouted, “Hosanna! Hosanna to the Son of David.”

Some of the Pharisees said to Jesus, “Do you hear what your followers are saying? Make them stop!”

Jesus said, “If they stop, the stones will start shouting.”

As he was about to enter the city, he stopped and started to cry. He said, “O Jerusalem! Jerusalem! If you had only known! This was a special day for you, a day that would bring you peace. But now your eyes will be covered so you won’t be able to see. A mighty army will destroy you. All because you didn’t recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”

He and the crowd continued into Jerusalem. The entire city was shaken by the event. Visitors from other countries asked, “Who is this?” The people said, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth.”

214 Last Week of Ministry

Jesus – Final Week

Matthew 21:12-46, Mark 11:12 – 12:44

Luke 19:45 – 21:4

During the last week before Passover, Jesus spent each day in Jerusalem while staying overnight in a town nearby. As he and his disciples walked toward the city on the second morning, Jesus saw a fig tree in the distance. He walked up to it but there was no fruit on the tree, just leaves. So he said to the tree, “You’ll never produce fruit again.”

When they arrived at the temple, Jesus saw people selling animals for sacrifice and exchanging foreign money. He threw them out, and turned over their tables.

He then sat down and said to the people, “The Scriptures say, ‘My house is to be known as a house of prayer.’ You’ve made it a den of thieves.” This made the religious leaders angry. They talked of killing him because he was becoming so popular.

The next morning, the disciples noticed the fig tree. “Teacher, look! The tree is all shriveled up!”

Jesus said, “Have faith in God, and you’ll do more than this. You can say to a mountain, ‘Throw yourself into the sea,’ and it’ll happen. But you must believe it will, without doubt in your heart. Also, you can’t hold a grudge against someone else.”

Jesus continued to teach the people in the temple. One day he said, “A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it. He then went on a long trip, but before he left, he hired some men to care for his vineyard.

“When it was time for harvest, he sent a servant to collect his fruit. The men beat the

servant and sent him away empty. The owner sent other servants, but they were all treated the same way. They even killed a few.

“Finally the owner said, ‘I need to send someone with authority so they’ll listen to him. Therefore, I’ll send my only son.’

“When the men saw the son, they said, ‘If we kill him, we’ll inherit everything!’ So they grabbed him, killed him, and threw him outside the vineyard.”

Jesus said, “What do you think the owner will do to these men?”

The people were quick to answer. “He’ll kill those men! He’ll then give the vineyard to people he can trust.”

The religious leaders knew this story was about them. They agreed that Jesus had to be arrested soon, but they didn’t know when and where. It had to be done carefully because they were afraid of the crowd.

Later, Jesus looked across the temple complex at the treasury. He watched the crowd dropping money into the treasury, especially the rich people who were putting in large amounts. Suddenly a poor widow came and dropped in two tiny coins worth less than a cent.

Jesus called his disciples around him and said, “Listen to me. That poor widow has put more in to the temple treasury than all those other people. They gave a little out of all they have. But she is extremely poor. What she gave was all she has. She gave the only money she has to live on.”

215 The Last Supper

Jesus – Final Week

Matthew 26:14-30, Mark 14:10-26,

Luke 22:1-30, John 13:1-30

The religious leaders met together to decide how they were going to kill Jesus. As they were talking, Judas Iscariot came and said, “What will you give me if I deliver him to you?” They were delighted, and agreed to give him thirty pieces of silver.

At the same time, Jesus was making plans for he and his disciples to celebrate Passover together. He said to Peter and John, “Go into the city and look for a man carrying a water jug. Follow him until he enters a house. Tell the owner of the house, ‘The Lord says his time has come. He’ll eat Passover in your guest room.’ He’ll take you to his upper room. Prepare the meal there. Get everything ready for us.”

The two men found everything just as Jesus had said. So they prepared the meal. That evening, Jesus and his disciples met there to celebrate Passover.

During the meal, Jesus got up and took off his coat. He wrapped a towel around his waist and poured water into a basin. He then started washing the feet of his disciples.

Peter was shocked. He said, “Lord, are you about to wash my feet?”

“Peter, you don’t understand what I’m doing now, but some day you will.”

“No, Lord. I won’t let you wash my feet. I should be washing yours.”

Jesus looked at him. “If I don’t wash your feet, you can’t be a part of what I’m doing.”

“Oh master, if that is the case, then wash me all over, my feet, hands, and head.”

“No, Peter. When a person takes regular baths, only his feet need washing.”

Once he had finished, he sat back down at the table and said, “You’ve seen what I’ve

done. A servant isn’t better than his master. If I’ve humbled myself before you, you’re to humble yourselves before each other.”

Soon, Jesus became very sad. He said, “One of you will betray me. It has to be—because it was foretold from ages past. Still, it would be better for that person if he’d never been born.

The disciples were shocked and started asking “Lord, is it me? Am I the one?”

Jesus said, “During this meal, I’ll dip bread in the broth and hand it to the person who will do this.”

Judas leaned over and whispered, “Am I the one, Lord?”

Jesus looked at him and said quietly, “You know you are,” and handed him the bread dipped in broth. As Judas took it, Satan entered his heart and he stood up.

Jesus looked up at him and said, “Go and do it quickly.” Judas then walked out of the room. The others thought he was simply going on an errand.

As they were eating, Jesus took the bread and blessed it. He then broke it and said, “Take this and eat it. It’s my body, which I give for you. Remember me as you eat.”

After the supper, he took the cup and blessed it. He gave it to them and said, “All of you drink from this. It’s my blood, which will be poured out for the forgiveness of sins. I’ll not drink wine again until I sit with you in God’s kingdom.”

Jesus talked with them for a long time, and then prayed for them. Afterwards they sang a hymn, and went out to the Mount of Olives.

216 Gethsemane

Jesus – Final Week

Matthew 26:31-56, Mark 14:27-52

Luke 22:39-53, John 18:1-11

As Jesus and his disciples walked out of the gates of Jerusalem, he said, “All of you will abandon me tonight... but after I rise from the dead, I’ll meet you in Galilee.”

Peter spoke up, “Lord, I’ll never desert you, even if everyone else does.”

Jesus stopped and looked at him. “Oh Peter, this very night you’ll deny you even know me—and not just once. Before the rooster crows in the morning, three times you’ll tell people you don’t know me.”

Peter was shocked, “Lord! Even if it means death, I’ll never deny you.” All the other disciples said the same thing.

They came to a grove of olive trees called the Garden of Gethsemane. At the entrance Jesus told his disciples, “Sit here while I go and pray.” He then took Peter, James, and John into the garden. Once there, he started to agonize. He said, “I’m overcome with grief. Stay awake and pray with me.”

He then went a little farther and fell down. “Father, this cup of agony—do I have to drink it? You can do anything. Take it away from me! But if not, I’ll follow your plan for me.”

He went back to the three men and found them sleeping. He woke them up and said, “Peter, stay awake and pray with me. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

He went back and once again he prayed in deep agony. “Oh Father, take this cup from me! Still I’ll drink it if it’s your will.”

Once again he saw that the three men were sleeping. He said, “Why are you sleeping?” They looked at him and didn’t know what to say.

When he prayed the third time, he started to sweat, but it was like drops of blood that fell to

the ground. An angel appeared and gave him strength.

He went back to where his disciples were once again sleeping. Looked at them, he said, “Go ahead and sleep because the time is close.”

About then, Judas led a band of guards into the garden. He knew it was a place Jesus often went with his disciples. He said, “Watch me carefully. Jesus is the one I’ll kiss.”

They went into the garden carrying torches, swords, and clubs. Jesus turned to his disciples. “Get up! My betrayer is here.”

Judas walked up to him and said, “Hello Master.” And then gave him a kiss.

Jesus said, “Oh Judas, do you betray me with a kiss?” He then turned to the guards, “Who are you looking for?”

“Jesus of Nazareth!”

“I am he!”

Instantly, they were knocked back and fell to the ground. As they got up, Jesus said again, “Who are you looking for?”

They looked at one another and said, “Jesus of Nazareth.”

“Well, I told you I am he. Now let these others go their way.”

Peter suddenly realized what was happening. He pulled out his sword and attacked a servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

Jesus stopped him and said, “Put your sword away. Don’t you understand? I could pray right now and my Father would send thousands of angels to protect me.” He then turned and touched the servant’s ear and healed it.

With that, all the disciples ran away. Then the guards took Jesus, tied him up, and led him out of the garden.

217 Trial before Jews

Jesus – Final Week

Matthew 27:1-10, Mark 14:53-72

Luke 22:54-71, John 18:15-27

Guards took Jesus from the Garden of Gethsemane and led him to the home of the former high priest. Peter followed at a distance. Once there, he sat by a charcoal fire in the middle of the courtyard. A servant girl looked at him and said, “Aren’t you one of his disciples?”

“No ... no, I’m not.” He then moved to a different part of the courtyard.

The old priest questioned Jesus concerning his teachings. Jesus said, “I taught in public places, and I didn’t hide anything. If you want to know what I taught, ask these who heard me.”

One of the guards slapped him. “You’re to be respectful when you talk to this man of God!”

Jesus turned to him, “Why did you hit someone who spoke the truth?”

They then took Jesus to a balcony that overlooked the courtyard so he could stand before the high priest. Several people testified against him, but they couldn’t agree about what he said. Others were called to clear up the confusion but simply made it worse.

Finally, in frustration, the high priest said, “Tell me plainly. Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?”

Jesus said, “Yes, I am.”

The priest was shocked and ripped his clothes. He shouted, “We don’t need anything else! You heard him. He blasphemes God.”

Everyone yelled, “Kill him!” They beat him

and spit on him.

Peter was watching this from the courtyard. One of the men looked at him and said, “Here’s one of them! He was with Jesus!”

Peter saw everyone looking at him. “No, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know him.”

About an hour later, a man spoke up. “I saw you in the garden. You’re one of them.” Turning to the others he said, “Listen to his speech. He’s from Galilee.”

With that, Peter started to swear. Then he said, “Leave me alone! I tell you, I don’t know this man!”

As soon as those words left his mouth, a rooster crowed. Peter looked up and saw Jesus looking at him.

He remembered the words; “You’ll deny me three times before the rooster crows in the morning.” He left the courtyard and cried bitterly.

When the sun came up, the Jewish court was brought together and Jesus was condemned to die. They then took him to the Romans for execution.

When Judas saw all that had happened, he went to the religious leaders. “I’ve sinned! I’ve betrayed an innocent man.”

They laughed, “Why should we care. You deal with it.”

Judas then threw the silver coins on the floor and left. He found a tree and hung himself.

218 Trial before Romans

Jesus – Final Week

Matthew 27:11-26, Mark 15:1-15,

Luke 23:1-25, John 18:28 – 19:16

Jesus was taken to Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate asked the religious leaders, “What’s this man guilty of?”

They said, “He says he’s a king. He should die because he’s a rebel against Caesar. We would execute him, but we’re not allowed to do that. Therefore we’ve brought him to you.”

Pilate turned to Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?”

“Yes, I am.”

Pilate then found out that Jesus was from Galilee, which was under Herod’s rule. Herod happened to be in Jerusalem so Pilate sent Jesus to him.

Herod was glad because he wanted to see some miracles. But Jesus wouldn’t even talk to him. Finally Herod and his guards mocked Jesus by putting kingly robes on him and sending him back to Pilate.

The Jewish leaders accused Jesus of many crimes, but he stood there and didn’t defend himself. Pilate said, “Don’t you hear what they’re saying? What’s your defense?” Still, Jesus said nothing.

Pilate finally concluded there was no proof that Jesus was guilty of any crime worthy of death. He then thought of a way he could set the man free. Every Passover, he released a prisoner to the people. He thought he could simply beat Jesus, and then release him.

Pilate was about to present this to the people,

when his wife sent him a message. “I’ve had nightmares about the man you have on trial. Don’t do anything to him. He’s innocent.”

Pilate stood before the people. “Which one shall I release to you—Jesus called Messiah, or Barabbas, a thief and a murderer?”

The religious leaders knew that Pilate might do this, so they had prepared the people. “Barabbas! Give us Barabbas!”

Pilate was shocked. “What should I do with Jesus, who is called Christ?”

“Crucify him!”

Pilate turned away because he didn’t want to kill an innocent man. Finally the Jewish leaders threatened him, “If you release this man, we’ll tell Caesar you helped a man who was in rebellion against the empire.”

Pilate went back to reason with the people, “Do you want me to crucify your King?”

They shouted louder and louder. “Crucify Him! Crucify Him! We have no King but Caesar!”

Pilate realized the people were on the verge of a riot. He finally gave in to their wishes, and called for a basin of water. He washed his hands in front of them and said, “You’re witnesses that I’m innocent. This man’s blood isn’t on my hands.”

They shouted, “Let his blood be upon us and our children!”

With that, Pilate had Jesus whipped and then handed him over to the guards to be crucified.

219 Crucifixion and Burial

Jesus – Final Week

Matthew 27:27-61, Mark 15:16-47

Luke 23:26-54, John 19:16-42

Jesus was condemned to die by crucifixion. Pilate turned him over to Roman soldiers, who put a crown of thorns on his head. They laughed at him and said, “Look, the King of the Jews.” They beat him and spit on him.

They then led him away to be crucified. Along the way, they grabbed a man and made him carry the cross. A large crowd followed, mourning and crying.

They took Jesus and two criminals outside the city walls to a place called “The Skull”. All three were nailed to crosses, with Jesus in the middle.

Pilate put a sign on his cross, which read, THE KING OF THE JEWS. The chief priest said, “Don’t write The King of the Jews!” But Pilate said, “I’ve written what I’ve written.”

After the crosses were put into place, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them! They don’t know what they’re doing.” It was nine o’clock in the morning.

Some of the people shouted, “If you’re the Son of God, come down from that cross.”

Religious leaders laughed, “Oh, he can save others, but He can’t save Himself! He said he was the Son of God. Why isn’t God helping Him?”

One of the criminals hanging next to Jesus yelled, “If you’re the Messiah, save yourself and us.”

The other criminal yelled back, “Don’t you fear God? We deserve to be crucified, but this man is innocent!” Then he said, “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Jesus said, “Today, you’ll be with me in Paradise.”

The soldiers took and divided the clothes of Jesus among themselves. His robe was seamless, so they threw dice to see who would get it.

Jesus saw his mother standing near the cross, and John nearby. He said, “Mother, look to John as your son. John, take care of my mother.”

Around noon, darkness covered the entire area and lasted for three hours.

At three o’clock in the afternoon, Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Then he said, “It’s finished,” and bowed his head and died.

At that moment, there was an earthquake. Huge boulders split in two. The veil in the temple ripped from top to bottom. The soldiers standing near the cross were afraid when they saw all of this. They looked up at Jesus and said, “It’s true! This was the Son of God!”

Later in the afternoon, other soldiers came to break the legs of those on the crosses. They did this to speed up their death. First they broke the legs of the two criminals. When they came to Jesus, they saw that he was already dead. To make sure, a soldier thrust a spear into his side.

A rich man named Joseph went to Pilate and got permission to bury the body of Jesus. The religious leaders also met with Pilate and said, “This deceiver told his disciples that after his death he would rise from the dead on the third day. We’re afraid that they may come and steal the body and then tell everyone that he rose from the dead.” Pilate agreed to put a Roman seal on the stone, and he assigned guards to watch the grave.

Joseph and his friend Nicodemus helped take the body down from the cross. They wrapped it in strips of linen cloth, with a mixture of spices. Joseph then laid it in his own tomb and rolled a large stone across the entrance. A Roman seal was put on the stone. Then soldiers stood in front of the grave to guard the body of Jesus.

220 The Resurrection

Jesus – Post Resurrection

Matthew 27:62 – 28:15, Mark 16:1-8

Luke 24:1-12, John 20:1-18

All was quiet at the tomb of Jesus until early Sunday morning while it was still dark. Suddenly there was an earthquake and an angel appeared at the gravesite. He rolled back the huge stone and sat on it! The guards were terrified and fainted. And then ... all was quiet once again.

As the sun came up, Mary Magdalene and some other women walked into the garden so they could put spices on the body of Jesus. They were wondering how they were going to get someone to roll back the stone from the tomb.

When they came to the tomb, they realized the soldiers were gone and the stone was rolled back. They looked, and saw that the tomb was empty!

Mary turned and ran to tell the disciples about the empty tomb. The other women stayed in the garden. Finally, they went inside the tomb. They saw two angels. One of the angels said, "Don't be afraid! You're looking for Jesus who was crucified. He's not here, because he has risen. Go tell his disciples and Peter." So the women went to do as they were told.

Meanwhile, Mary found the disciples and told them, "They've taken the body of Jesus and we don't know where it is!"

When Peter and John heard this, they ran to the tomb. John got there first, but didn't go in. Peter rushed in, and John followed. They saw the strips of cloth that had been wrapped around the body of Jesus, but the body was missing. They left the tomb and walked home, confused about what had happened.

After they were gone, Mary Magdalene arrived back at the garden, weeping as she walked.

When she got to the tomb, she saw the angels.

One of them said, "Why are you crying?"

"Because they have taken away my Lord and I don't know where he is."

She turned and saw a man standing near her. She didn't realize it was Jesus. She thought it was the gardener. "Sir, if you have taken him away, please tell me where he is so I can go get him."

Jesus said, "Mary!"

Instantly, she knew who it was! She fell down and grabbed his feet, "My Master!"

He said, "Don't hold me, but go tell my disciples that you have seen me." Immediately she got up and ran to find the disciples.

Jesus then appeared to the other women as they were walking back into the city. They fell down and worshiped him. He said, "Go find my brothers and tell them that I'll meet them in Galilee."

All the women found the disciples and said, "Jesus is alive! We have seen him and talked to him. He's alive!" The men were overcome, and could not believe it was really true.

The guards who were at the tomb were terrified by the events of that morning. They went and told the religious leaders exactly what happened. After some discussion, the high priest gave the guards a large amount of money and said, "Tell people that the disciples of Jesus came and stole his body while you were sleeping. We will make sure you don't get in trouble with Pilate." The guards took the money and did as they were told.

221 Road to Emmaus

Jesus – Post Resurrection

Luke 24:13-45

In the afternoon of the day Jesus rose from the dead, two disciples left Jerusalem and started walking to Emmaus. They were discussing the events of the previous few days. Suddenly they noticed someone walking near them. They didn't realize it was Jesus.

He said, "What are you talking about?"

They turned and looked at him. "Are you a stranger here? Don't you know about the things that happened in the last few days?"

"What things?"

"We're talking about Jesus of Nazareth, the one who spoke the words of God. Our leaders had him crucified three days ago.

"This morning, some women went to the tomb. They came and told us that the body was missing. A couple of men went, and sure enough, it was missing. Now the women are saying they saw angels and have actually seen the Lord alive."

Jesus spoke up. "Why are you so slow to understand? The prophets clearly said Messiah had to suffer these things." Then he started at the beginning of Scripture and explained the parts that were about him.

As they came near Emmaus, they said to him. "It's too dark to continue on. Please, stay with us." So, he went into the house with them.

At the evening meal, Jesus took bread and

blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them. Immediately they knew who he was. And then—he disappeared!

They looked at one another in amazement. Finally one of them said, "Our hearts were on fire as he explained the Scripture to us!"

They quickly returned to Jerusalem to tell the disciples what happened. They were in a room that was securely locked because they feared the Jewish leaders.

When the two men arrived, they said, "It's true! The Lord has risen. He walked with us explaining the Scripture. We didn't recognize him until he broke bread with us." The disciples couldn't believe it.

Suddenly the Lord stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Still, the disciples couldn't believe that what they saw was really Jesus. They thought it was a spirit.

He said, "Look at the scars in my hands and feet. Here, touch them. A spirit doesn't have flesh and bone like this."

They still couldn't believe because of their joy. He said, "Do you have something to eat?" They gave him some fish and honeycomb, and he ate it.

Then Jesus opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

222 Winning Back Two Disciples

John 20:24 – 21:19

Jesus – Post Resurrection

Thomas wasn't with the disciples when Jesus appeared to them. So they found him and said, "Thomas, we've seen the Lord! He's alive!"

"That's impossible! To believe that, I'd have to feel the nail scars in his hands, and touch his side where he was stabbed."

Eight days later, Jesus suddenly appeared to the disciples, and Thomas was with them. The Lord said, "Peace be with you!"

He turned to Thomas and said, "Come and touch the scars on my hands, and in my side. Stop questioning whether or not I'm alive."

Thomas fell to his knees. "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus said, "Thomas, you believe because you see me. Blessed are those who don't see me, still they will believe."

Sometime later, a few of the disciples were at the Sea of Galilee. Peter said to the others, "I'm going fishing." They said, "We'll go too."

They went out in a boat and fished all night, but didn't catch anything. In the dim of early morning, a man stood on shore and asked, "Have you caught any fish?"

"No."

"Cast your net on the right side of the boat."

They did, and suddenly the net was full of fish. John said to Peter, "It's the Lord."

When Peter heard this, he wrapped his

clothes around him, jumped into the water, and swam for shore. The others came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish.

Once they got there, they saw Jesus cooking bread and fish over a fire. He turned and said, "Bring me some more fish." Peter helped the others haul in the net, which had 153 large fish.

Once everything was ready, Jesus said, "Come and eat." They gathered around and he gave them bread and fish.

When they were done eating, Jesus said, "Simon, do you love me more than these?"

Peter was surprised by the question, "Yes, Lord. I love you."

"Then feed my lambs."

He asked a second time, "Simon, do you love me?"

"Yes Lord, you know I love you."

"Then feed my sheep."

A third time Jesus asked the question. "Simon, do you love me?"

Peter was grieved by this question. He said, "Lord you know all things. You know I love you."

"Then you're to feed my sheep. When you were young, you went wherever you wanted. But when you get old, someone else will take you where you don't want to go." This referred to how Peter's death would bring glory to God.

Then Jesus said, "Follow me!"

223 Commission, Ascension, & Waiting

Matthew 28:16-20, Luke 24:47-53

Acts 1

The disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had first selected them to be his disciples. He suddenly appeared and they worshiped Him. He said, "I give you authority to preach. Go to all the nations and make disciples. Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Teach them what I have taught you. Remember, I'm always with you."

For 40 days after He rose from the dead, Jesus spent time with his disciples teaching them things about the kingdom of God. He also appeared to many others, once to a crowd of over 500 people.

He then led his disciples to the Mount of Olives. He said, "Don't leave Jerusalem until you receive the promise from the Father. John baptized with water, but now you'll be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

They said, "Lord, is now the time you're going to make Israel into a kingdom again?"

Jesus said, "Only the Father knows when that will happen. Meanwhile, you're to spread the good news that people can receive forgiveness of sins."

"Wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes upon you. He'll give you power to spread this good news. Start in Jerusalem and then take it to the entire nation. Include Samaria. Finally, go to the entire world."

Jesus then blessed them. As he did, he

suddenly moved upward and disappeared in a cloud. The disciples stood there looking up.

Two men, dressed in white, appeared next to them. They said, "Why are you standing there looking into the sky? You saw Jesus go up. He'll come back in the same way."

So the disciples went back into Jerusalem. Their hearts overflowed with joy! They met in an upper room with other believers, both men and women. Mary, the mother of Jesus was there, as well as his brothers. All of the believers were of one mind and spent this time in prayer.

At one point, Peter stood and talked to the group. He said, "Judas fulfilled Scripture when he led the mob into the garden and betrayed Jesus. Judas was one of us, and had all the privileges of this ministry. Yet he sold it all for a price. With that money he bought a field, and today it is called 'Field of Blood.' "

"Still, we need someone to take his place among the apostles. Let's choose a man, but make sure he has been with us since Jesus was baptized by John. The person we choose must have seen all the miracles until the Lord was taken from us into heaven. With us, he will testify to the resurrection of Christ."

Two men were selected for final consideration. The people prayed and then threw lots to make the final decision. Matthias was chosen.

224 The Coming of the Holy Spirit

Peter – Jerusalem

Acts 2

On the Day of Pentecost, the believers were praying in the upper room. Suddenly they heard a loud noise. It sounded like a violent storm coming out of heaven. The sound filled the room, and they saw what looked like fire. Suddenly it separated and settled on each believer. Instantly, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and started to speak in foreign languages.

People from the city heard about this. Among them were Jews from many countries who spoke different languages. They went to see what was happening. When they got there, they heard the apostles speaking in various languages, including those of everyone in the crowd.

Some of the people said, “This is impossible! These men can’t speak our language. They’re from Galilee. Yet we’re hearing them in our own tongue.”

Others said, “Oh, they’re just drunk.”

Peter stood up in front of them and said, “These men aren’t drunk. This is what the prophets of old talked about when they said God would pour out his Spirit upon common people.”

“You saw the miracles of Jesus. Still, you

crucified him—nailed him to a cross and put him in the grave. But we’re witnesses that God raised him from the dead! He’s alive. He sits at the right hand of the Father. Now he has sent us his Holy Spirit. This is what you’re seeing.

“Understand what I’m saying. You crucified Jesus, but God highly exalted him and made him Lord and Messiah!”

The people said, “What you’re saying is true, but what can we do?”

Peter said, “Repent, and we’ll baptize you in the name of Jesus. Once you’ve received forgiveness of your sins, God will fill you with the Holy Spirit.”

That day, the apostles baptized those who received the message. The number of believers grew to over 3,000 people. They met together often so they could learn from each other and from the apostles.

The apostles did many miracles and wonders, and the number of believers grew day by day. These believers dedicated themselves to prayer, sharing meals together, and spending time with each other.

225 A Crippled Man Healed

Peter – Jerusalem

Acts 3 – 4:31

One afternoon, Peter and John went to the temple at the time of prayer. There they saw a man begging who had been crippled since he was born. Every day people carried him to a gate called Beautiful so he could beg money from those going into the temple

Peter stopped in front of the man and said, “Look at me.”

The man looked at him, expecting to get some money. Peter said, “I don’t have money to give you, but I have something better. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, get up and walk.”

As Peter and John helped the man up, his feet and legs became strong. He stood by himself and then he walked. He even jumped for joy while praising God!

People saw the man walking, and recognized him as the one who was crippled and sat begging at the gate. They gathered around the three men.

Peter said, “This man was healed by the name of Jesus, the one you told Pilate to crucify. You killed Jesus, but God raised him from the dead. We’ve seen him and can tell you—he’s alive.

“Look at this man. He’s standing by the power of Jesus. Turn from your sin and accept Jesus as your Messiah. God will forgive your sins.”

The Jewish rulers found out that Peter and John were preaching to the people, so they sent guards who put the two disciples in prison. Still, many people became followers of Christ. The

number of believers increased to over 5,000.

The next morning, the high priest sent for the two men, so they could stand before the council. The religious leaders asked, “Who gave you the authority to preach to the people?”

The Holy Spirit guided Peter as he answered. “This man was healed by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth—the one you killed on a cross. God raised him from the dead, and he’s the only way of salvation.”

The rulers were amazed at the confidence of Peter and John. Since the two men didn’t have a formal education, they knew their boldness came from being with Jesus.

The council couldn’t say anything about the miracle because the crippled man was standing in front of them. They could see he was healed.

They decided to threaten the disciples and demand that they stop teaching about Jesus. Peter and John didn’t hesitate to answer. “You’re asking us to disobey God so we can obey you. That’s impossible! We know what we’ve seen and heard.”

The leaders eventually released Peter and John. The two men went back to the fellowship of believers and told them what had happened. Everyone rejoiced together. Suddenly the building started to shake, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. With this, they had new boldness to tell others about God’s message.

226 Ananias & Sapphira

Peter – Jerusalem

Acts 4:32 – 5:16

The believers shared everything they owned. If someone had a need, others would sell their possessions and give to that need.

A godly man named Barnabas had some land and sold it for the needs of others. He brought the money and gave it to the apostles.

A married couple named Ananias and Sapphira also decided to sell some land and give the money to the apostles. It was to be used for the good of the church. But Ananias changed his mind after the land was sold. He and his wife decided to keep some of the money for themselves. The two of them agreed that they'd still give part of the money to the church but say they gave it all.

Ananias went to the gathering of believers without Sapphira. He gave his gift to Peter and said it was the full amount he had gotten when he sold the land. Peter looked at him and said, "Satan has filled your heart and caused you to lie to the Holy Spirit. You didn't have to sell your land; and once it was sold you didn't have to give all of the money to the church. Why did you decide to lie about this? You didn't lie to us. You lied to God."

As soon as Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. This caused great fear to spread

across the entire congregation. Several young men picked him up, wrapped him in strips of cloth, carried him out, and buried him.

Three hours later, Sapphira came to the gathering. She hadn't heard about what happened to her husband. Peter said to her, "Did you and your husband sell the land for the amount of money you gave to the church?"

"Yes, that was the total selling price."

Peter looked at her, "Why did the two of you agree to test the Holy Spirit? Listen. Do you hear those footsteps? Those are the young men who just buried your husband. Now they'll take your dead body and bury it.

Immediately, she fell down and died. The young men came and found her lying dead on the ground. They picked her up and buried her next to her husband.

News of this spread throughout the region. Because of it, people were more careful when they thought about joining the band of believers. Still, their numbers increased greatly—of both men and women.

People from Jerusalem and the surrounding towns brought sick people and placed them by the side of the road. They were healed when Peter walked by and his shadow passed over them.

227 Apostles and Deacons

Peter – Jerusalem

Acts 5:17 – 6:7

The message of Jesus spread throughout Jerusalem, which made the Jewish leaders angry. They sent guards, who arrested the apostles and put them in prison.

That night, an angel came and let them out without the guards seeing it. The angel said, “Go to the temple in the morning and preach to the people.” At sunrise, the apostles went to the temple.

Later in the morning, the high priest gathered the governing council. He then sent the captain of the guards to bring the apostles out of prison. When the captain got there, the prison cell was empty. He rushed back and said, “The guards are at their post and the doors are locked, but the men are not inside!”

At that moment, someone ran in and said, “The men you put in prison are now teaching in the temple!”

The captain of the guards took his men and went to the temple where they found the apostles teaching the people. He then realized he couldn’t use force against them because his men were afraid of the people. Still, the apostles went with him willingly.

The high priest said, “We told you not to teach in the name of Jesus. Yet you’ve filled Jerusalem with your doctrine. You’re even saying that we’re guilty of killing Jesus.”

Peter spoke up, “We must obey God rather than men. You killed Jesus by putting him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead. Now he sits at God’s right hand and gives repentance and forgiveness of sins.”

This made the religious leaders angry. They sent the apostles out of the room, and then

discussed how they were going to kill them. A respected member of the council spoke up, “Be careful what you do with these men. My advice is to leave them alone. If they’re simply following human emotions, nothing will come of it. But if this movement is from God, you can’t stop it. In fact, you’ll be fighting against God.”

After some discussion, they agreed with this advice. Still, before letting the men go, they had the apostles beaten and said, “Never speak in the name of Jesus again.”

The apostles left the council rejoicing. They said, “God has allowed us to suffer for the name of Jesus!” They continued to preach Christ, and the number of believers grew even larger.

A problem developed at this time. The church made provision for the widows among them. Some of the widows were from Israel, and some were from Jewish communities in other countries. The ones from Israel received better care than the others.

The apostles said, “We must focus on preaching the Word of God and prayer. Still, this need must be met.”

They told the congregation to select seven men who would oversee this responsibility. They said, “Whoever you choose must be highly respected and filled with the Holy Spirit. They must be known for their wisdom.” Everyone liked this idea, so they selected seven men who were qualified. The group included Stephen and Philip.

The apostles prayed for these men and gave them the responsibility for this need. This caused the number of believers to grow faster. Even a large group of Jewish priests put their faith in Christ.

228 Stephen, the First Christian Martyr

Peter – Jerusalem

Acts 6:8 – 7:60

God's power was on Stephen. Several Jewish groups tried to debate him, but found they were no match for his wisdom and power. They decided to spread lies about him and say he blasphemed God. These rumors spread throughout the city until guards went and took him to the governing council.

Men stood up and lied about him. They said, "He said that Jesus is going to tear down this Temple and change everything that Moses gave us."

They turned and looked at Stephen, when suddenly his face became like that of an angel. The high priest spoke up. "Are you guilty of these things?"

Stephen answered, "God said to Abraham, 'Leave your country and go to a place I will show you.' "

Stephen continued by giving a brief history of Israel. He told how God promised to give Abraham the land and make his descendants into a great nation. Abraham believed God even though he didn't have any children.

Eventually he had a son named Isaac who had a son named Jacob. From him came the twelve tribes of Israel. His descendants were made slaves in Egypt.

Stephen said, "God used Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. Moses told the people that there would come a Great Prophet who'd

be like him."

Stephen told how King David wanted to build a Temple for God, but it was his son Solomon who actually built it. Finally he said, "You are a rebellious people with cold hearts! You resist the Holy Spirit just like your forefathers did. They persecuted all of the prophets, and now you're walking in their footsteps. You've betrayed and murdered the Righteous One."

The council flew into a rage. They cried out against him. Through it all, the Holy Spirit controlled Stephen. Suddenly he looked up and said, "The heavens are opening and I see Jesus standing at the right hand of God."

The crowd put their hands over their ears and screamed as loud as they could. They grabbed Stephen and took him out of the city and threw him on the ground. They gave their coats to a young man named Saul. They then took large stones and threw them at Stephen.

While the stones were hitting him, Stephen looked up and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he prayed, "Lord, forgive them for this sin." With that, he fell beneath the blows and died.

This started a great persecution of the church in Jerusalem. Saul led a mob that pulled men and women out of their homes and threw them into prison. Because of this, many believers left Jerusalem and went to surrounding areas. Still, the apostles stayed in Jerusalem.

229 The Ministry of Philip

Peter – Judea & Samaria

Acts 8:4-40

When the persecution started in Jerusalem, believers were scattered throughout the region. Wherever they went, they told people about the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Philip went to the city of Samaria and preached Christ. The Holy Spirit allowed him to perform miracles among the people. Unclean spirits were cast out—screaming. The paralyzed were healed as well as the lame. The people of the city were amazed at what they saw, so they listened carefully to his preaching. They were filled with joy at what they heard.

The people there had been following the witchcraft of a man named Simon. But when they heard the gospel of Christ, they received it with joy. Simon also believed, and was baptized with the others.

The apostles heard that the people of Samaria welcomed the gospel, so they sent Peter and John to meet with them. After they arrived, they prayed for the believers, asking God to give them the Holy Spirit. The two men then laid their hands on the people, and the people immediately received the Holy Spirit.

Simon watched this with amazement. He offered Peter and John money and said, “Give me this power, so I can lay my hands on people and they’ll receive the Holy Spirit.”

Peter said, “You’ll be destroyed along with your money. You’re still holding on to your old ways. Evil lives inside of you. Pray and ask God to get rid of it.”

Simon cried out, “Please, pray for me. I don’t want these things to happen.”

After Peter and John went back to Jerusalem, God sent an angel to Philip. “Go to the road that leads south from Jerusalem.”

When Philip got there he saw an important official from Ethiopia. He was the treasurer of their Queen. He had been in Jerusalem to worship.

The Spirit told Philip to get close to the man’s chariot. When he did, he found that the official was reading from one of the prophets who had written about Christ several hundred years before.

Philip asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

The man said, “No, I need someone to explain it to me. Is the prophet talking about himself or someone else?” Philip got into the chariot and told him about Jesus and the forgiveness of sins.

As they traveled, the man said, “Look, there’s some water. May I be baptized right now?”

Philip said, “You may, if you believe that Jesus is the Messiah and accept him as your Lord.”

The Ethiopian paused and then said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”

They stopped the chariot, went into the water, and Philip baptized him. As soon as the man came out of the water, he saw that Philip was gone. The Spirit had taken him away.

Philip found himself at another place, so he went from city to city preaching Christ.

230 The Conversion of Saul

Acts 9:1-31

Peter – Judea & Samaria

Saul was on a campaign to hunt down and kill those who followed Jesus. He was given authority from the high priest to go to Damascus and bring believers back to Jerusalem.

As he and his men approached Damascus, suddenly a bright light shown around them, and Saul fell to the ground. He heard a voice saying, “Saul! Saul! Why are you fighting against me?”

“Who are you Lord?”

“I’m Jesus, the one you’re persecuting. It’s hard to fight against my will for your life.”

Those with Saul didn’t know what was going on. They could hear the sound of a voice, but they couldn’t see anyone.

Saul trembled. “Lord, what do you want me to do?”

“Go into the city and you’ll be told what to do.”

When Saul got up, he realized he was blind. Others led him into the city. He waited for three days, and refused to eat or drink anything.

The Lord spoke to a disciple in Damascus. “Ananias, go to a house on the street called Straight, and ask for Saul of Tarsus. Place your hands on him and he’ll regain his sight.”

Ananias was concerned. “Lord, everyone knows about this violent man. He’s here to imprison anyone who calls on your name.”

The Lord said, “He is a chosen servant of mine. He’ll spread the Gospel to Jews, Gentiles, and kings. He’ll suffer greatly for me.”

Ananias found him and said, “Brother Saul, Jesus appeared to you on the road, and then he told me to come to you.” Ananias placed his hands on Saul’s head. “Regain your sight and be filled

with the Holy Spirit!”

Immediately Saul could see. With joy, he was baptized and then ate some food.

Saul spent several days with the believers in Damascus, and then started preaching that Jesus was the Son of God. People were amazed because they knew he had come there to kill followers of Jesus.

But now they listened to him and found he was very persuasive when he talked about Jesus. No one could argue with him. So they decided to kill him.

Their plan was to capture him when he tried to leave the city. The believers found out about this, and took him to the city wall. They put him in a large basket and let him down on the other side. From there, he returned to Jerusalem.

The believers in Jerusalem were afraid of him. They felt he was trying to entrap them. So Barnabas brought Saul to the apostles and told them what had happened to him. “The Lord appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus. Since then he has been speaking in the name of Jesus with great courage.”

The believers finally accepted Saul and he moved freely among them. He went into Jerusalem and told everyone about the Lord. Some started arguing with him, but again they could not compete with his power of persuasion. So, they plotted to kill him.

The believers in Christ found out about their scheme, so they sent him to Tarsus.

This started a time of peace for the believers in Israel. The Holy Spirit was with them. They grew in their faith and increased in numbers.

231 Healing of Dorcas

Peter – Judea & Samaria

Acts 9:32-43

Peter traveled from place to place, preaching the Gospel of Christ and encouraging fellow believers. At one place, he found a paralyzed man who had been lying on his bed for eight years.

Peter said to him, “The Lord Jesus has healed you, so get up.” Immediately the man was healed and got up. People in that area saw the man and heard what happened, and many of them put their faith in Christ.

There was a woman named Dorcas who lived nearby in the city of Joppa. As a disciple of Jesus, she loved people and did good works for them. She became sick and died.

Her friends prepared her body for burial, and placed it in an upstairs room. The disciples in Joppa heard that Peter was in the area, so they sent two men to him. They said, “Please come

with us right away.” Peter agreed and went with them.

When he arrived in Joppa, they took him to the house where they had laid the body of Dorcas. He went upstairs and found women weeping for her. When they saw him, they showed him the various robes and clothes that Dorcas had made while she was alive.

Peter sent them out of the room, and knelt down and prayed. Turning to the body, he said, “Dorcas, get up!”

With that, she opened her eyes and saw Peter. So she sat up. He helped her up from the bed, and then called for the other women. He presented Dorcas to them—alive.

The news of this spread throughout Joppa, and many put their faith in Jesus.

232 Cornelius

Peter – Judea & Samaria

Acts 10 – 11:18

Cornelius was a military officer in the Roman army. He was a good man who worshiped God.

An angel appeared to him and said, “Cornelius, God has heard your prayers. Send men to Joppa, to the home of Simon the tanner who lives by the sea. There they’ll find a man called Peter and he’ll tell you what to do.” With that, the angel disappeared.

Immediately, Cornelius sent men to Joppa. They arrived the next day around noon. Before they got there, Peter went up to the open roof to pray. He was waiting for the noon meal.

Suddenly he became extremely hungry and fell into a trance. He saw the heavens open and a large sheet come down. In it were all kinds of animals that Jews weren’t allowed to eat. A voice said, “Peter, get up. Kill one of these animals and eat it.”

“Lord, you know I’ve never eaten anything common or unclean.”

The voice said, “When God has made something clean, never call it common or unclean.” This happened a second time, and a third. Then the sheet went back into heaven.

Peter woke up but was confused about what this vision meant. At that moment, the men from Cornelius were at the gate. The Holy Spirit said, “I’ve sent these men to you. Don’t hesitate to go with them.”

Peter went down and greeted the men. They told him about Cornelius, and he agreed to go with them. In the morning he took several believers and they started on their trip.

They arrived the next day, and Cornelius ran to meet them. He fell down in front of Peter and started to worship him. Peter said, “Stand up! I’m just a man.”

He went into Cornelius’s home and saw that he had invited others to be there so they could hear God’s message. Peter said to the group. “God revealed to me that he has opened the door and is now calling people from other nations to himself. Therefore, I’ll tell you the message that was given to Israel. It is that Jesus Christ is Lord of all.”

He then told them about Jesus and his miracles. He described how the Jewish leaders killed him, but God raised him from the dead. Peter said, “Everyone who puts their faith in Jesus will receive forgiveness of sins.”

As soon as he said those words, the Holy Spirit filled every person in the house. This shocked the Jewish believers when they saw that the gift of the Holy Spirit was given to Gentiles.

Peter turned to them and said, “Is there any reason why we shouldn’t baptize these people?” They all agreed, so the new believers were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

News of this quickly spread to believers throughout the nation. The leadership in Jerusalem asked Peter, “You stayed in the home of Gentiles and even ate meals with them?”

He explained exactly what happened. He told them about the vision on the housetop, the crowd at the house of Cornelius, and how the Holy Spirit filled the people. He concluded by saying, “God gave them the same gift he gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ. How could I fight against God?”

The believers in Jerusalem had no argument when they heard this. They said, “God has given forgiveness of sins and eternal life to the Gentiles.”

233 Christians at Antioch

Peter – Judea & Samaria

Acts 11:19-30

The killing of Stephen started a great persecution. Therefore, some believers went north to a city called Antioch. When they first got there, they preached only to Jews, but eventually they shared the message of Christ with Gentiles as well. God honored this and gave great power to their teaching. Many Gentiles put their faith in Jesus.

The church in Jerusalem heard about what happened and felt they needed to investigate, so they sent Barnabas. When he got there, he watched what the church was doing—and found that God was blessing them with abundant grace!

Barnabas was thrilled, so he encouraged the believers. He told them to always follow Jesus and remain true to what the Lord taught. The people responded to the teaching of Barnabas because they knew he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.

This resulted in even more people coming to Christ—in large numbers. Barnabas soon realized he needed help. So he went to Tarsus and found Saul. The two of them returned to Antioch, and for a full year they worked together with the believers. They taught large crowds of people.

It was in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

The Lord revealed to the church in Antioch that there would be a great famine. When it came, it was especially bad in Judea.

The Christians in Antioch were concerned about their fellow believers in Jerusalem. They took a collection, and every family gave according to their ability. Then they asked Barnabas and Saul to take their offering to the church in Jerusalem.

234 Jail Break

Peter – Judea & Samaria

Acts 12

Barnabas and Saul arrived in Jerusalem about the time King Herod decided to persecute the Christians. He started by arresting James the brother of John. Eventually Herod had James killed. When he saw how much this pleased the Jews, he arrested Peter and had him put in prison. Sixteen soldiers guarded him. The church began praying for Peter, and didn't stop.

The night before he was to be executed, Peter was sleeping between two guards. His hands and feet were in chains. The other guards were standing next to various doors in the prison.

Suddenly, an angel appeared and filled the prison cell with light. Peter didn't wake up; so the angel poked him. "Wake up and get dressed." Peter looked up and saw the angel, but he didn't believe this was really happening. He thought he was seeing a vision. Still, he got up, and his chains dropped to the floor.

The angel said, "Follow me." Peter followed him through several guard posts until they came to the iron gate that led out into the city. Peter watched as it opened by itself.

They went along a city street when suddenly the angel disappeared. Peter stood alone in the night air, and finally realized he wasn't dreaming.

He went to where believers were praying for him, and knocked on the gate. A servant

girl came to answer. She was surprised to hear Peter's voice through the door. She ran back into the house and yelled, "Peter is standing at the door."

They didn't believe her, but she kept saying, "I know what I heard. Peter is at the door."

They said, "That's impossible! Peter is in prison. You probably heard his angel."

Peter continued knocking at the door, so they finally opened it. They were shocked when they saw him standing there, and they all started talking at the same time. Peter said, "Please, let me tell you what happened."

He then told them exactly how the Lord sent an angel to deliver him. They all gave praise to God for what he had done.

The next morning, the guards were horrified to find that Peter was missing! When Herod found out, he had all sixteen men executed.

Herod then went to a resort on the coast and delivered a speech to a crowd of people. After he was done, they shouted, "This is the voice of a god!" Herod was filled with pride. Suddenly, an angel struck him, and he was infested with worms and died.

The work of God continued to grow and spread. Barnabas and Saul left Jerusalem and headed back to Antioch, taking John Mark with them.

235 First Missionary Journey

Acts 13

The Holy Spirit said to the church at Antioch, “I’ve called Barnabas and Saul to a special work.” So the leadership sent them out to serve the Lord.

They took John Mark with them, and sailed to the island of Cyprus. There they preached at Jewish synagogues as they moved across the island. Saul was also called Paul.

The governor of the island was known for his sound wisdom, and his willingness to learn. He called for Barnabas and Paul to come and tell him God’s message. As they talked, a man who practiced witchcraft kept interrupting. He was trying to keep the governor from putting his faith in Christ.

Paul turned to the sorcerer and said, “You’re an enemy of God. Stop talking against the Lord. Look! The Lord is about to make you blind.”

Instantly the man became blind. Others had to lead him out of the room. The governor was shocked, and he listened even more carefully to Paul. Soon he put his faith in Christ.

After this, Paul and the others sailed to the mainland, where John Mark returned home to Jerusalem. The rest of them went to the synagogue because it was the Sabbath. The leader said to them, “Friends, speak to us if you have an encouraging message.”

Paul stood and talked to them. He started by reminding them of the stories of Israel. He then

Paul – 1st Missionary Journey

said, “God promised to bring a Savior from the line of King David. Jesus fulfilled that promise. The rulers in Jerusalem knew these things. Still they killed Jesus by putting him on the cross. Then they buried him in a tomb, but God raised him from the dead!”

“We’re here to tell you that Jesus is the Son of God, and he brings forgiveness of sins to those who believe in him. Be careful that you don’t miss what God is doing for you.”

Some of the Jews listened to Paul and received the grace of God. Others wanted him to come back the following Sabbath so they could talk about it some more.

The Jews returned the next week and found that almost the entire city was there to hear the message of God. They became jealous and spoke out against Paul and Barnabas.

Paul said, “It was right for us to bring God’s message to you first. But you didn’t accept it. You’re not worthy of eternal life. Now we’ll turn to the Gentiles because they’ll listen.”

The Gentiles were glad when they heard this, and many received the message. The Word of God spread throughout the region, which made the Jews furious. They finally convinced the town leaders to persecute Paul and Barnabas.

Eventually, the men had to leave that area. Still, the disciples in the city were filled with the Holy Spirit, and joy was in their hearts.

236 From Worship to Stoning

Acts 14

Paul and Barnabas went to a city called Iconium and preached the message of Christ at the Jewish synagogue. The reactions were extreme. A great number of Jews and Gentiles put their faith in Jesus. But others were offended and eventually stirred up the population against the Christians. Soon the entire city was in an uproar.

City officials decided that the only way to solve the problem was to kill Paul and Barnabas. The apostles found out about this and were able to escape.

They went to a town called Lystra, and Paul preached the gospel of Christ. A man was sitting nearby who had been crippled since birth. He listened carefully to everything that was being said. Paul looked at the man and realized that God had put faith in his heart. So he said to him, “Stand up!” Immediately the man got up and started walking.

The people saw this and were amazed. They started yelling, “The gods have come to visit us!” People crowded around to see the gods who looked like men. Soon a pagan priest ran up with some animals. He and the people started sacrificing to Paul and Barnabas.

The apostles were horrified and ran out among the people, “What are you doing? We are men just like you. We’re here to bring you good

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news. God wants you to leave such foolishness and turn to him. He created all things, and he’s the one who provides for your daily needs.” Still the people wanted to sacrifice animals to them.

During this commotion, Jews arrived from the other cities where Paul and Barnabas had been. It didn’t take them long to turn the crowd into an angry mob. They picked up large rocks to kill Paul. Surrounding him, they threw the stones until he fell beneath the blows. This continued until they thought he was dead. His body was dragged out of the city and thrown onto a trash heap.

The believers of Christ gathered around the body of Paul to mourn his death. Suddenly he stood up—and walked back into the city!

The next day he and Barnabas went to another city, where many people put their faith in Christ. At this point, they revisited the various places they had been. They encouraged the believers and appointed elders for the churches. All of these towns were in a region called Galatia.

Finally they sailed back to Antioch to visit the church that had sent them out. When they arrived, the people gathered to hear all that had happened on their trip. Paul and Barnabas told what God had done, and how he opened doors so Gentiles could put their faith in Christ.

237 Keeping Jewish Laws

Acts 15:1-35

Jewish teachers from Jerusalem went to Antioch. They started teaching members of the church that a person had to obey Jewish law in order to be saved. Paul and Barnabas were shocked at this teaching and tried to correct it. This only started an argument.

Finally, the church leaders felt they needed to get guidance from the apostles. So they sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, along with several others.

When they arrived at the church in Jerusalem, the two men gave a report of how eagerly the Gentiles received the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Pharisees among the membership responded by saying, "It's wonderful that they've put their faith in Christ. But now they must be circumcised and be taught to obey the laws of Moses."

This caused a lot of discussion. Finally, the church leaders realized that this issue had to be resolved if the work of God was to prosper. They decided to meet together and not leave until they knew God's will on this matter.

At one point, Peter spoke to the group. He said, "I was the first one to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. God forgave their sins and gave them the Holy Spirit. The way he treated them was no different than how he has treated us. I don't believe God would be pleased if we required them to do something that we Jews have not been able

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to do. Listen to what I say. It's only by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that we can be saved from our sins, both Jews and Gentiles."

Paul and Barnabas then told what God had done among the Gentiles. They described the miracles and the wonders that were done.

Finally, James (the brother of Jesus) stood up and spoke to the others. He said, "We must remember that years ago the Scriptures told us about this. It clearly states that God will call Gentiles by his name. Here's my advice. It wouldn't be right to put all of our rules on the Gentiles. Instead, let's give them three simple commandments:

- Don't eat meat that has been offered to idols.
- Don't be immoral.
- Don't eat blood or anything that has been strangled."

The church agreed on this idea. They put it in a letter and sent it to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They also sent a couple of men so there would be no doubt that the letter was from them. One of the men was Silas.

When they arrived at Antioch, they gave the letter to the church leaders, who read it to the congregation. The church received the letter with joy. Everyone was encouraged when they heard of their freedom in Christ.

238 Freedom to Serve

Paul – 1st Missionary Journey

Galatians 1 – 6

Teachers from Jerusalem went to the church in Antioch and taught that Gentiles had to obey the Laws of Moses in order to be totally forgiven from their sins. After the Christians in Antioch rejected this doctrine, those same teachers went to Galatia—to the churches Paul and Barnabas had started during their first missionary journey.

Paul found out that the Christians in Galatia were accepting this teaching, so he wrote a letter to them explaining their freedom in Christ. He said:

I'm shocked that you turned away from the grace of God. These false teachers told you that you have to keep Jewish Law in order to be completely saved—and you believed them! How can you be so foolish as to accept this “other gospel?”

I gave you the pure gospel of Christ. So even if an angel from heaven comes and tells you something different—that angel is cursed! Yes, you heard me right. Let me be perfectly clear. Anyone who preaches this heresy is cursed.

Believe me, I understand what they're teaching. I loved Jewish tradition—so much that I tried to destroy the churches of God. But Christ saved me and called me to preach the gospel to Gentiles. He personally instructed me for three years in Arabia.

Now listen. Those same false teachers came to Antioch and tried to enslave our believers. I didn't tolerate it for one moment—absolutely not! The church finally sent Barnabas and me to Jerusalem to bring this issue before the apostles. They saw that God called me to the Gentiles in the same way Peter was called to the Jews.

But later, I had to confront Peter on this very issue. He came to Antioch and ate freely with Gentiles. But then some Jews came from Jerusalem. He immediately separated himself from his Gentile brothers. Other Jews joined him in this. Even Barnabas was pulled into this hypocrisy. I told Peter in front of everyone that

this wasn't right!

Here's the principle he was ignoring: In Christ, there are no Jews or Gentiles. There are no slaves or free, male or female. We all died with Christ when he was crucified. We rose from the dead with him, so now Christ lives in us. Salvation comes by the death of Christ, and it has nothing to do with keeping the Law.

Do you understand this? How are you so easily deceived? Did you receive the Spirit of God because you obeyed the Law? Did God work miracles among you because you were so good? Absolutely not! It was because of your faith in Christ. Don't be so silly as to think that by keeping the Law you can add one little thing to what God has done!

God didn't even give Abraham righteousness because he kept the Law. No. He was born 430 years before it was written. He was righteous because of his faith in God. The Law was given later to show that people are sinners, and they are condemned. It reveals our need to accept Christ.

God said to Abraham, “All the nations will be blessed through you.” Think of it. The promises given to Abraham are now given to you because of Christ. Are you going to turn your back on that?

These false teachers want to take away

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these blessings, and they want to take away the freedom you enjoy in Christ. Don't let them do it! This freedom gives you the ability to serve others.

Instead of worrying about the Law, focus on being led by the Spirit of God. He'll keep you from things like immorality, going after false gods, being consumed with yourself, taking advantage of others, and losing control of your good senses.

The Spirit of God gives you the gift of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control. The Law can't do that. The Spirit of God controls your thoughts and desires. He gives you the power

- to gently restore those who have done wrong
- to help others when they need you
- to accomplish great things for God
- to give to those who invest their lives in you.

Don't submit to the Law. Instead, allow the Spirit of God to control your life. Listen, you can't fool God. You'll reap the results of what you do. Destruction awaits those who are controlled by fleshly desires. Life is given to those who let the Spirit of God use them to help others.

God knows my heart, and he knows I'm not writing to you so I can brag to others. That is what those false teachers are doing. No, I don't brag about anything except the cross of Jesus Christ. I was crucified with him, so this world is dead to me. I carry the marks of this death in my body.

Pay attention to what I say, and the grace of Jesus Christ be with you.

239 Singing in Jail

Acts 15:36 – 16:40

Paul said to Barnabas, “It’s time we visit Galatia and see how the churches are doing.” Barnabas agreed, but wanted to take John Mark along. Paul refused, pointing out that Mark deserted them on the last trip. They couldn’t agree upon this, so they decided to go different directions. Paul chose Silas to go with him.

While they were visiting Galatia, they found a young man named Timothy. He was highly respected by all of the believers, so Paul encouraged him to join their ministry.

One night, Paul dreamed he saw a man saying, “Come. Cross over the sea and help us.” Paul awoke and knew this was from God.

Once they sailed across the sea, they went to a city called Philippi. They spoke to a group of women who had gone to the river for prayer. One of them was Lydia, a woman who sold expensive purple cloth. She listened to Paul preach, and then she and her family put their trust in Christ. After they were baptized, they convinced Paul to use their house as the home base for his ministry.

In that same city, there was a demon-possessed slave girl who made money for her owners by predicting the future. She started following Paul and Silas through the streets of Philippi. Suddenly she yelled out, “These men are here to tell us about salvation.”

She did this for several days. Finally Paul turned and said to the spirit within her, “Leave that girl! By the name of Jesus Christ, come out of her.” Immediately the spirit left her.

Her owners were furious! They knew the slave girl was no longer profitable to them. So they gathered a mob who took Paul and Silas to the city officials. They said, “These Jews came to Philippi and started teaching the citizens of Rome about their God. It’s not right!”

The city officials agreed and had the two men

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beaten publicly. They were then taken to jail, where the jailer put them in chains.

Around midnight, Paul and Silas started praying, singing, and giving praise to God. Suddenly an earthquake shook the foundations of the jail. The doors flew open and the chains fell off the prisoners.

The jailer woke up and saw that the doors were open. He assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he pulled out his sword to kill himself. Paul shouted, “Wait! Don’t do that! We’re all here.”

The jailer grabbed a torch and rushed into the cell. He fell down and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

“Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you’ll be saved—you and your family.” The jailer took them to his home and Paul explained the message of Christ. The entire family believed and was baptized. The jailer then washed the wounds of the men and served them a meal.

The next morning the city officials sent guards to the jailer. They said, “You may release those men and let them go their way.”

Paul sent a message back to the city officials. “We’re not leaving! We’re Roman citizens, and you had us beaten publicly and thrown into jail without a trial. Now you want us leave quietly. We’re not going. If you want us to leave, you’ll have to come and personally release us.”

The city officials were shocked when they heard that these men were Roman citizens. They rushed to the jail and quickly apologized. They personally brought them out of the jail and asked them to please leave the city.

Paul and Silas didn’t leave right away. They went back to the home of Lydia and encouraged the believers in Christ. Then they left.

240 Riots and Laughter

Acts 17

Paul and Silas and their group traveled to Thessalonica. They spent three weeks reasoning with the Jews, explaining how Messiah needed to come and suffer and then rise from the dead. They said, “Jesus is this Promised One.”

Some of the Jews accepted Christ, as well as a large number of Greeks. This upset the other Jews, and they decided to destroy the movement. They became so angry they organized a mob against them.

Soon the entire city was in an uproar! They couldn’t find Paul, so they took several other believers and pulled them out into the street. They led them to the city officials and said; “A group of men are causing trouble throughout the entire world. They’re not loyal to Caesar but say they have another king, a man named Jesus. Now these troublemakers have come to our city, and these men have welcomed them into their homes.”

The officials were cautious and said they would look into the matter. They made the believers pay a large bail before releasing them. That night, the Christians sent Paul and Silas to Berea.

The Jews at Berea welcomed the message of Christ and searched the Scriptures to see if it was true. Therefore, many Jews and Greeks received Christ. News of this got back to the people at Thessalonica. So the Jews there went to Berea to continue their fight against the

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movement. The attacks became so severe that the Christians sent Paul to Athens by boat. The plan was for Silas and Timothy to stay at Berea and join him later.

When Paul arrived at Athens, he was shocked to see all the idols. Finally he went to the market place and told people about Jesus. They were fascinated with this talk of a man being raised from the dead. So they took Paul to a place called Mars Hill and let him talk to the crowd.

He said, “Men of Athens! I can see you’re extremely religious. I even found an idol called ‘To the Unknown God.’ Let me tell you about the God you don’t know.

“He is the Lord of Heaven and has made everything on earth. He doesn’t live in things made by people. In the beginning God created one man, and all the nations of the earth have come from him. Everything you have comes from God. He is the reason you live.

“God has been patient with you in the past, but now you’re to repent. He’ll judge you by Jesus, the one who rose from the dead.”

Some of the men laughed when they heard that Jesus rose from the dead. Others wanted to hear more some other time. A few people believed and put their trust in Christ.

Paul left Athens and went to Corinth to wait for Silas and Timothy.

241 Trials and Persecution

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I Thessalonians 1 – 5

Paul started a church in Thessalonica, but wasn't able to spend much time there. Persecution became severe and the Christians insisted on taking him out of the area. So he left Silas and Timothy to help these young Christians. He waited for them in Corinth.

He was concerned for this young church because of the persecution they were experiencing. Finally, Silas and Timothy brought wonderful news of how the people were remaining true to Christ even with all the suffering. Paul immediately wrote this letter to encourage them. He said:

Silas, Timothy, and I thank God for you constantly. We pray for you night and day. We remember how you accepted Christ in the storm of conflict. We didn't preach with flattering words, but you knew what we said was anointed by the Holy Spirit. You proved our worth and accepted our message. Now everyone talks about how you turned from idols to serve the living God, and how you patiently wait for the return of Christ.

You graciously received us, just like you received the gospel. We watched over you, as a nursing mother with her child. We took jobs to pay our own way, to make it easier for you. Our love for you was like that of a devoted father, helping you to learn how to walk with God.

Now the gospel is working inside you. People hate you because they hate the gospel. I wanted to be there during this time of trial, but Satan stood in my way. Hear what I say—You're my hope; You're my joy; You're my crown of boasting before the Lord!

When I realized that I couldn't be with you, I left Timothy and came here. I told him to help you as you faced this persecution. For a long time I didn't get news on how you were doing. Finally I couldn't stand it any longer. I sent word to Timothy and asked about you.

He personally came and told me the good news of your faith and love in Christ. He told me

that you want to see me as much as I want to see you. Praise God! You're standing firm in your faith. Oh how I long to be with you and teach you more about walking with the Lord.

Now listen. Continue to live a life that pleases God. Stay away from immorality. Don't be like those who are enslaved to uncontrolled passions. That is a lifestyle that hurts everyone involved. It also offends the Spirit of God who lives inside you. Don't forget, God severely judges people who live with such filth.

Instead, let your love be godly. But why am I telling you this? God has taught you how to love one another. I just ask that you do it even more.

Timothy told me that you're concerned about those who have died recently. Don't worry about them. Remember, Jesus also died, but God raised him from the dead! He'll do the same with those who have put their trust in him.

When Jesus comes back to earth, he will first raise those who have died in him. Then the rest of us will meet him in the air. Don't be discouraged like those without our hope. Instead, comfort each other with these words.

Of course we don't have a schedule as to when this is going to happen. Still, we are to prepare ourselves as if it will happen today.

When it does, those who live in sin will be

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caught off guard. They're like people who lock their doors at night and think they're safe. Suddenly a thief breaks into their home!

The coming of our Lord Jesus will be like the labor pains of a woman about to give birth. People will suddenly find themselves standing before God to be judged. But Jesus Christ died so we can live with him forever. Encourage one another with this truth.

Here is how you are to function as a church until the Lord comes:

- Honor those who meet your spiritual needs.
- Get along with one another.
- Don't put up with laziness.
- Be patient with those who are discouraged.
- Help the weak.
- Don't seek revenge when people wrong you.
- Always do that which is good.

Here are the three parts of living a spiritual life:

- First, rejoice, pray, and give thanks. This is God's will for you.
- Next, listen to God's Spirit when he speaks to you through others, but make sure it's from God.
- And finally, hold on to that which is good and stay away from evil.

My dear friends, we're a family, so pray for me and keep your fellowship sweet. Share this letter with everyone in the church. The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you

242 Day of the Lord

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II Thessalonians 1 – 3

The Thessalonians loved Paul's first letter and read it over and over. They talked about the Day of the Lord so much that soon they thought it had already started. Some became extremely concerned about what this meant, while others quit their jobs because they felt the Lord was setting up his kingdom. Soon those who quit their jobs had to be supported by those who still had work. Word got back to Paul, so he wrote this second letter. He said:

Silas, Timothy, and I constantly thank God for you. We thank God because you're growing in your faith, and because of your great love toward each other. We talk about you to all the churches. We brag about your faith, and your extraordinary patience in the face of severe persecution.

God has honored you by selecting you to suffer for him. Still, the day will come when God will judge those who are causing you so much pain. He'll give you rest, and they'll suffer forever. Christ will come again with his angels, and with flaming fire he'll take revenge on those who don't obey the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They'll be punished and removed forever from God's presence and from his glory.

We pray constantly that God will continue to find you worthy of this calling—that he'll continue to show the world his goodness and power through your faith. Then the name of our Lord Jesus Christ will be glorified in you.

Now I must talk to you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. I understand you've become concerned—thinking that the Day of the Lord has already started. Let me make this clear. It isn't true, and don't let anyone tell you differently.

Before that Day starts, these things have to happen first. A wicked man will rise in power, and he'll organize the world against the God of Heaven. Oh, his forces are already at work in the world, but the Holy Spirit is holding him back. The day will come when the Spirit will step aside and allow this man to oppose everything that is holy. He'll sit in God's Temple and claim he's God. He'll work all kinds of miracles and impress people with many evil deeds. He'll deceive the people who refuse to believe the truth. God will make sure they believe him.

After that, Christ will come and destroy him with no effort at all. Remember I told you all of this when I was with you. But also remember that God loves you! He set you aside as someone special, because you belong to him; and he has given you salvation by his Spirit. We're just thankful that he allowed us a part in presenting the gospel to you. Stand firm in what you've been taught.

So what should you do while you wait for his coming? Well first of all, pray for us. Pray that we can get this gospel out to as many people as possible. Pray that we'll be able to work without fear of wicked people. But of course, the Lord has always given us strength during times of trial, just as he has done for you.

The other thing you should do is stay away from a brother who refuses to work. Remember how hard we worked when we were with you? We didn't loaf around and eat other people's food. No, we worked—and we worked hard—night and day. We weren't a financial burden on any of you.

Of course it would've been proper if we had accepted support from you. But we didn't because we wanted to be an example of diligence and hard work.

Here's the rule we taught you, "If a man doesn't work, he doesn't eat!" We've heard that there are those among you who not only refuse to work, but also interfere with the work of others. Now listen to what I say, and this is also from the Lord. Quietly do your own work, eat your own food, and don't get tired of doing good. Avoid anyone who doesn't follow this rule.

Well, I'm asking the Lord of peace to stay close to you and give you his peace. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you.

243 Mob in Corinth

Acts 18

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he met a Jewish man named Aquila and his wife Priscilla. They were also tent makers, the same as Paul, so they decided to work together. Each week Paul went to the synagogue and talked to the Jews. He explained to them that Jesus was the Messiah.

Silas and Timothy finally rejoined him. It was soon after they arrived that the Jews rejected Paul's message. They even blasphemed the name of Christ. With that, Paul said, "My conscience is clear. I told you the good news that Messiah had come. I explained how we have salvation through him. You've rejected it. Therefore, your blood is on your own heads. I'll give this message to the Gentiles."

A few of the Jews believed in Christ, including the head of the synagogue. At the same time, a great number of Gentiles put their faith in Jesus.

The Lord encouraged Paul in a dream. He said, "Don't be afraid. Keep talking about me. No one will hurt you here because I have many people in this city." So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching and preaching God's Word.

One day, the Jews selected a new leader, who organized an attack against Paul. A mob grabbed him and took him to the judge saying, "This man is making our people

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worship God in ways that are the opposite of our law."

Before Paul could defend himself, the judge yelled at the Jews. "How dare you come to me with this. I don't care about your law! I spend my day punishing criminals, not arguing over words and names. Don't waste my time!" He then drove them out of the court.

A mob grabbed the leader of the synagogue and beat him in front of everyone. The judge didn't even look up.

When Paul thought his work in Corinth was done, he decided to go back to Antioch. Aquila and Priscilla went with him as far as Ephesus. Paul preached at the synagogue there, and the people wanted him to stay longer and teach them. But he refused, saying, "If God wills, I'll come back." He then left and went to Jerusalem and on to Antioch.

After Paul left Ephesus, a man named Apollos came to the synagogue. He was a powerful speaker and talked openly about Jesus. Unfortunately, he only knew what John the Baptist had taught.

Aquila and Priscilla took him into their home and explained the things of God more accurately. After that, Apollos became a great preacher for God and was able to take the Scriptures and clearly show that Jesus was the Messiah.

244 Riot at Ephesus

Acts 19

Paul left Antioch and went to Ephesus. When he got there, he found twelve believers. He asked them, “Have you received the Holy Spirit yet?”

They were confused and answered, “We haven’t heard of this Holy Spirit.”

Paul said, “Where were you baptized?”

They said, “We were baptized by John.”

“Ah, John came to prepare the way for Jesus. He baptized people who were willing to repent and look for the Messiah. But now Jesus has come.”

As soon as they heard this, they were baptized in the name of Jesus. Afterwards they received the Holy Spirit and started to praise God in various languages.

Paul stayed in Ephesus for several years. At first he went to the synagogue and preached Christ, but eventually the believers had to find a different meeting place.

God did wonderful things through Paul. People from that entire region heard God’s Word. The sick were healed and demons were cast out. People even touched Paul’s skin with pieces of cloth and took them to those who were sick, and they were healed.

Some young men saw Paul cast out a demon, so they decided to try it. They said to a demon-possessed man, “Come out of him in the name of Jesus—the one that Paul preaches about.”

The spirit said, “I know about Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?” The demon-possessed man jumped on them and beat them. He ripped off their clothes, and they ran from the house bruised and naked.

People were afraid when they heard about this. Suddenly the name of Jesus was held in high regard. Many repented of their sins and called on the name of the Lord. They collected their books on witchcraft and burned them in

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front of everyone.

A silversmith called a meeting of those who made expensive shrines to an idol called Diana. He said, “Paul is turning people away from the worship of Diana, the one everyone adores. He’s saying that a god made by hands isn’t really a god. This is an insult to Diana. Besides, we’re losing money.”

The people became more and more angry until they started shouting, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” They ran out, screaming this in the street. Soon it spread throughout the city, and confusion was everywhere. A mob grabbed some Christians and took them to the amphitheater. The entire city went there to see what was happening.

The crowd kept shouting. Some said one thing while the others said something different. The situation became totally chaotic! Most of the people didn’t even know why they were there. This went on for two hours.

Paul wanted to go to the amphitheater and defend the cause of Christ, but fellow believers refused to let him go. Even city officials sent word to him saying, “Don’t go to the amphitheater!”

Finally one of the officials stood before the crowd and said, “People of Ephesus! No one can deny that the image of Diana fell from heaven and landed here. Therefore, calm down. The men you have brought here have done nothing wrong to Diana. They haven’t robbed her temples or blasphemed her name.

“If the silversmiths have a problem with anyone, let them take it to the courts. For now, go home before you’re charged with conducting a riot for no reason.”

With that, the people went home.

245 Church Fights

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I Corinthians 1 – 7

Paul was in Ephesus when he heard about the problems in the church at Corinth. He immediately wrote this letter. He said:

I praise God for you constantly. It's obvious to all that God has enriched you with spiritual gifts so you can serve him until Christ comes again.

I'll get right to the point. I understand there are divisions among you. I've heard that some say, "I follow Paul," or "I hold to the teachings of Apollos," or "My Christianity comes from Peter." Still others say, "I don't follow anyone except Christ."

Why are you wasting your time with such bickering? When I was with you, I totally focused on giving you the simple gospel. I didn't allow myself to be distracted from the cross of Christ. I didn't care that others thought preaching about the cross was ridiculous. I knew it was the power of God.

This fighting comes from your pride. Don't you realize God uses foolish things to show his wisdom? Remember I came to you in weakness. I didn't display myself as a great person with flowing words. No, I stood among you trembling with fear. I totally relied on the Spirit of God to do his work in your lives. And he did! Your faith was born in his power. It didn't come with human reasoning. Apollos and I didn't teach you God's wisdom. The Spirit of God taught those things to you.

I know how to teach the wisdom of God to those who are mature in their walk with the Lord. But I fed you with milk, because you were babies in the faith. Obviously, you still can't be fed like mature Christians. You fight among yourselves. You're jealous of each other. When one says, "I'm of Paul," and another says, "I prefer Apollos," you're acting like you don't even know Christ.

Who are Paul and Apollos anyway? They're slaves of Christ! They were told to work with you. God said, "Paul, go plant the seeds of faith. Apollos, water the plants. Now leave them alone. I'll make them grow." We're just slaves doing our assigned jobs. God is the one who planned it all.

Take a closer look at those of us who are called apostles. We're like the prisoners of war, being paraded through the streets until they're finally killed. We're fools for Christ, weak and hated. We're homeless, and our constant companion is hunger. We have to work hard just to stay alive.

We have to bless those who curse us. We have to be patient with those who abuse us. When people slander us, we have to say nice things about them. We're the "garbage" of the world! Still, I'm your spiritual father and you're to imitate me.

I'm planning to come and visit you. When I arrive, do I have to correct you as children? No, I think you want me to come in a spirit of meekness. Therefore, I'm sending Timothy to remind you of the ways of Christ.

There are a few issues that have to be taken care of right away. First, I've heard that there is a man in the church who is sleeping with his stepmother? I can't believe you're allowing this disgusting sin. Remove that man from your fellowship—immediately! Sin is like yeast. Given time it'll take over the entire batch of dough.

I've also been told you're taking one another to court to stand before non-Christian judges.

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Aren't there godly people in the church that can pass judgment on these things? Listen, the day will come when you will judge angels. You'll also judge the people of this world. Surely you can take care of these small matters between brothers. If there's no one in the church to judge between you, simply endure the injustice! Allow yourself to be cheated!

There is also the issue of immorality. The simple fact is this. Your body was not made for sexual impurity. God made people for himself and—as a Christian—your body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. When he paid for you, the Spirit of God took possession of your body. You're no longer your own. You're to glorify God in all things.

Sexual needs are to be fulfilled within marriage. God has given me the ability to stay

single, but not everyone has this gift. Therefore they should get married rather than live with burning frustration. Once a couple is married, they need to be conscious of each other's needs.

I know some of you are married to someone who doesn't know our Lord. Stay with that person with the hope of winning them to Christ. If they leave you ... well, there is nothing you can do about that.

Accept the situation in life that God has given you. Of course it's all right to improve yourself when you can, but don't be burdened down with trying to fight against the place where God has put you. He'll perfect your ministry right where you are.

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246 Spiritual Gifts

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I Corinthians 8 – 16

Paul started this letter by scolding the church for dividing themselves into groups that judge others. He then dealt with several sins that had found root within the assembly. He went on to say:

You asked about several things, so I'll answer each of them. The first deals with eating meat that has been offered to an idol. Of course we know that an idol isn't really a god. It's just a piece of wood or stone. Still, eating this type of meat may offend someone who has just come out of idolatry. We should never sin against a fellow Christian. Therefore, I've determined not to do anything that causes a brother to stumble in his faith.

Here is another rule to live by. Do whatever is lawful to win others to Christ. You've seen my example. I've set aside many privileges, and have become all things to all people so I could win some. It's like a runner who does whatever it takes to win a race. This requires self-control in every area of life. He doesn't do anything that slows him down—and all of this for an earthly prize! My reward is eternal. Therefore, I do whatever it takes to win.

God will make sure you're not tempted in any way that's beyond your ability to resist. You'll always find a way of escape if you look for it.

All of this has to do with eating meat served to idols. Focus on helping others and establishing their faith. When someone invites you over for a meal, eat it without asking questions. But if they say it was offered to idols, leave it alone. What you eat, or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for God's glory—and don't offend others.

I've heard some disturbing news. Some of you are using the Lord's Supper as an occasion to eat your own supper. Certain members are having big meals while other are sitting there hungry. How can you embarrass your fellow

believers this way?

Remember, the bread and the cup represent the body and blood of our Lord. Don't be guilty of abusing these symbols. Disrespect for our Lord's body is the reason why some of you are sick, and yes, some have died. Therefore, examine yourselves when you come together around the Lord's Table. Show reverence, and show consideration for one another.

You asked about spiritual gifts. Remember this. The Spirit of God deals with Christians differently. He gives each of us gifts for the purpose of serving others. This is like the human body. Each part works for the good of the whole. It's the same with the body of Christ. One part doesn't say to another, "I don't need you." No, no! We all need each other's gifts. The gifts are different, but they all come from the same Spirit.

Still, our gifts are useless without love. It's love that makes our gifts work for the benefit of others. Love makes you patient and kind instead of focusing on yourself. It prompts you to act properly with others and not be quick tempered or selfish.

Love embraces truth, but doesn't keep track of what others have done wrong. It's always supportive and believes the best about others. Remember, our gifts are wonderful, but they're only temporary tools. Love will never pass away.

Before I finish this letter, I want to make the gospel clear to you. Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose from the dead. The apostles and others were witnesses of his resurrection. Finally

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he appeared to me, the most unworthy of all the apostles because I persecuted the church of God. Yet, God's grace works in me.

The resurrection of Christ is the foundation of our faith. If he's not alive, then those who die no longer exist. If Christ didn't rise from the dead, there's no hope in the world, and all we have is this life.

But the good news is this: Christ did rise from the dead. And because he did, we will too. Christ will rule over this world and abolish death itself. The last trumpet will sound, and the dead will rise with their glorified bodies. Then the bodies of those who are still alive will be changed. This takes the sting out of dying, and death is no longer victorious. Don't you see? God gives us

the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

I'll end this letter by reminding you that the Christians in Jerusalem need our financial help because of the great famine. Each of you should set some money aside to help them. Give according to how God has prospered you. Collect offerings, and then I will send some of you to Jerusalem with your gifts.

Stand firm in your faith and be strong. Do everything with love.

Oh, Aquila and Priscilla told me to send you their greetings.

I'm asking God to give you the grace of our Lord Jesus. And my friends, I want you to know that I love you.

247 The Worries of Love

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II Corinthians 1 – 6

The church at Corinth didn't respond well to Paul's first letter, so he sailed across the sea and met with them. That didn't go well either. He then sent them a very harsh letter—one that's not included in the Bible. Titus returned with encouraging news on how they took it to heart and repented of their sins. Paul then sent this letter. He said:

May the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

As you know, I planned to come to you first before visiting the churches in Macedonia. I changed my mind because I wanted to spare you another painful visit. I felt that when I did finally come, I wanted it to be a source of joy and not tears. So instead of coming, I wrote that last letter, not to hurt you, but to show my great love for you.

That man who was behind all of this trouble has hurt you as well as me. I praise God he has repented. Brothers, this isn't the time to overwhelm him with guilt. Decide the proper punishment, and then forgive him. Show him you love him and don't let Satan get the advantage in this situation.

After I wrote that harsh letter, I needed to know how you responded. I sent the letter with Titus, and told him to come back and report on your reaction. The plan was for us to meet in Troas. I went there, but he hadn't arrived yet. The Lord opened doors for sharing the Gospel in Troas, but I was totally focused on you. I left and took a ship over to Macedonia, hoping to find him there.

With you on my mind, this trip was lonely and I was overcome with concern for you. In my despair, God revealed several truths to me.

First, I realized that our life on earth is like a Roman victory march. People burn incense along the road, and the smell reminds the soldiers of their victory. But that same smell is repulsive to the captives because it reminds them of their execution once they get to Rome.

We're the ones burning along the road as Christ marches along triumphantly. This world follows behind him. To the victors in Christ, we're the smell of triumph. The world finds us repulsive because of their coming judgment.

Next I thought about how people in this world are so proud of their letters of recommendation. My thoughts were on you, and I realized that you're the letter of Christ, produced by us, written by the Spirit, and read by everyone. Because of it, I have confidence to continue on. It's not my work. It's the Spirit of God that brings life.

Compare this to the letters of stone that were given to Moses. Temporarily, his face shone like the sun, so he put a veil over his face. Because he did that, the people didn't notice when the shine faded. That veil is still there! It covers their hearts whenever the Law is read, so they can't understand it.

When a person turns to Christ, this veil is removed. The Spirit of God brings freedom, and we reflect the glory of the Lord.

As I thought on the veil and the light of the gospel, I was moved with urgency. God's mercy shines through us! It is important that we press on. We need to put aside anything that would hold us back. Our message should be plain to see.

Oh, but the god of this world has put a veil over the eyes of those who won't believe. They aren't rejecting us, because Jesus is the Light of the world, not us. They're rejecting him.

As I travelled to Macedonia, all these thoughts

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Paul – 3rd Missionary Journey

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were going through my mind. I felt weak and unable to accomplish anything. But then I realized that it's God who has given us this ministry. He uses weak people to accomplish eternal work. We can easily be pushed around and crushed, but that doesn't change a thing. It's exactly what happened to Jesus. As it was with him, so it is with us. Our trials and our death will bring life to others.

I didn't know about your situation. But I realized that our encouragement doesn't come from what happens here on earth. It comes from God! Because of that, we don't give up!

Besides, what happens to us here can't compare to what God has waiting for us in heaven. He gave us his Spirit, but he's just a down-payment of what lies ahead. While we're in this body, we're not at our heavenly home. But once

we leave our body, we're finally with the Lord.

It doesn't matter if we're here or there. Our purpose is the same. Therefore, let's work together to prepare people for the day when they'll stand before God. Christ died for us, so let's live for him.

Think of the ministry that has been given to us. Everyone who comes to Christ becomes a new creation. Their old life flows away and a new life appears. God is allowing us to be a part of this! We're working together with Christ.

This is why God wants us to be free from anything that would hold us back. That's why we should be careful not to get tied together with a non-believer. That's why we keep ourselves pure, so we can work together and get the job done.

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248 The Joys of Giving

Paul – 3rd Missionary Journey

II Corinthians 7 – 13

This second half of II Corinthians is the most personal of all of Paul's letters. Its purpose is to restore the relationship between him and the church before his upcoming visit. He continued by saying:

When I got to Macedonia, I was constantly thinking about you. I still didn't know how you responded to my letter. But then I found Titus, and his report made my heart leap for joy! He told me how you loved me and wanted to do right. He said my letter caused you grief, but a godly grief. It led you to repent and continue your walk with God. My rejoicing has never been so full.

Another source of my joy is seeing how the churches here in Macedonia are giving to help those who are suffering in Jerusalem. They organized together so they could meet that need, even though they themselves are poor. The people have given according to their ability to give, and yes, beyond their ability.

I asked Titus to share this need with you because I knew you'd want to follow the example of the Christians here. But it's also the example that the Lord Jesus gave us. He left the riches in heaven to become poor, so we could be rich.

Titus told me you immediately responded and wanted to give to this need. Praise God!

Now listen. The principles of giving are simple. First, every farmer knows—you don't harvest much if you don't plant a lot of seeds. Your giving is like planting seeds. If you're generous, you'll gain a generous harvest.

Next, each person should decide what he wants to give and then give it. God loves it when people give with gladness in their hearts.

Finally, when a seed is planted, it produces many seeds. So it is with giving. God multiplies your gift. Here is how it multiplies. First, the receiver is thankful for the gift. Second, you are blessed for giving. Next, they pray for you and

then you pray for them. And finally, they are prompted to be generous with others when they are able. And it goes on and on.

Now, concerning my letters. I know some are saying, "Paul is bold when he writes letters, but he is nothing when he's face to face."

Don't believe it. I'm the same person. I may be weak on the outside, but my weapons are powerful through God. He works through me to tear down anything that stands against him. Don't make me be that way when we see each other.

Would it help if I bragged about myself? You know I don't like to do that, but I'll do it if it helps you be true to Christ. You let others brag about themselves, and they don't even love you. I've totally given myself for you, so maybe you'll put up with just a little bragging.

I'm a son of Abraham in every way. I serve Christ more enthusiastically than anyone. Because of my walk with Christ, my body has suffered every abuse that man can give. My travels for God have exposed me to every disaster a man can endure. Danger has been my constant companion. I've given up all comforts of life for Christ. On top of all that, I'm constantly burdened about the well-being of all the churches.

I can't keep this up. Let me say it this way. I know a man who was taken to the third heaven. I don't know if he was dead or alive. All I know is, while he was in paradise, he saw and heard things that can't be talked about.

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I have to stop this foolishness. I'm really only proud of one thing. God has given me a thorn in the flesh because of all the special revelations he has given to me. I prayed three times, asking him to remove it. Finally he said, "My grace is all you need, because my power will be seen in your weakness."

Now that is where I'll brag—in my weakness! God gave it to me to demonstrate his power. Therefore when I'm weak, I'm strong.

Well, I'm a fool for bragging so much. Actually it is you who should be bragging on me. While others debate whether or not I'm an apostle, it shouldn't be a debate for you.

Oh, my dear brothers. One fear clouds all my joy. I'm afraid we'll all be disappointed when I come to you. I dread the fact that I may find nothing at all has changed. I'm warning you. If that's what I find, you'll see the power of God working through me, and you won't like it.

Our time together would be much better if you're strong and I'm weak. That's why I'm writing this to you now.

Finally brothers, be of good cheer and make sure you maintain spiritual health. Give everyone a hug for me. May the grace of the Lord Jesus, the love of the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.

249 Life without Christ

Paul – 3rd Missionary Journey

Romans 1 – 7

Paul traveled to Corinth and spent three months there. During this time, he sent this letter to the Christians at Rome. He said:

I hear about your faith everywhere I go. I praise God for you all the time. I want to come and invest in your spiritual walk. God made me obligated to share his message with Gentiles everywhere. Therefore I share the Gospel with those who are cultured and with those who are barbarians. It doesn't matter if they are smart or simple minded.

I'm proud of the Gospel because it's the power of God to those who believe, no matter who they are. People can only get to God by faith. Without it, they must face his judgment.

So why is that? It's because people are wicked! God reveals himself to them in many ways. Everything around them talks about God. But they've closed their minds.

There are two types of people in this world. One type worships what God has made. They think this makes them wise, but they become fools in the process. By excluding God, they sink into moral perversion. Their sins destroy their minds. They carry death with them everywhere they go. They become good at doing evil, and they enjoy seeing it in others.

The other type of people in this world are those who create their own righteousness. They brag about their good works and think they're experts in what's good and bad. They judge others for the evil they commit, while doing the same type of sins behind the scenes. They think that judging others will help them avoid God's judgment.

All of us find ourselves in one of these two groups, and God's anger is hot toward both of them. Both groups are sinners. They argue about

who is better, but the truth is that the whole world is totally given over to sin. There's not one person who is righteous, not even one. We all stand guilty before God's judgment.

That's why God sent his son, Jesus Christ. He provides his goodness to those who put their faith in him. It doesn't matter who you are. Everyone is a sinner in need of redemption.

The Jews are the most confused about this. They claim that Abraham is their father. Yet if you look closer, he's really the father of faith. He didn't have a relationship with God based on his own goodness. No, he simply believed God, and God was pleased.

The Jews hold David up as their great king. But he delighted in God's goodness, not his own. Both men were righteous because they believed God.

In the same way, we're made good only by faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him, we have peace with God and access to his grace. This is how we can be happy even in our trials. We know God is using them for our good.

Now here is my point. Christ did this for us when we were wicked! This shows how much God loves us. Christ died for us when we were disgusting sinners. With that in mind, how much will he do for us now that we're pure in his sight?

Think of it this way. We all came from one man, Adam. We're all sinners because of him. Death and judgment are on the head of everyone who has ever lived—because of him.

Now there is another man—Jesus. Because of

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Paul – 3rd Missionary Journey

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him, we can be made righteous. Because of him, we can have grace and eternal life.

I can hear someone saying, “So, if our good works have nothing to do with our being pure before God, then we can sin as much as we want.” Absolutely not!

Baptism is a picture of this truth. Going under the water shows how we die to sin and are buried —just like Jesus died for our sins and was buried. When he rose from the dead, he left sin behind. Our coming out of the water is a picture of his resurrection, but it is also a picture of us leaving sin behind. We’re to live a new way of life.

We stay away from sin because it enslaves people. When you give in to it, you become a slave to it. In the same way, when you submit yourself to the grace of God, you become his slave.

Either way, you’re not free to do what you

want. So you have to choose. Which one will you submit to? Sin brings death, but God gives you eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Someone is bound to ask, “Wasn’t the Law of God given as a way to make ourselves righteous?” You must be kidding! It’s impossible to obey the Law. It was given to reveal our sinfulness, so we’d know that we’re hopeless and in need of help.

When I look to the Law for help, I suddenly have a problem. I want to be good but don’t know how. I don’t want to do evil but find that I’m doing it all the time. I’m a slave and have no choice. I cry out, “How can I get free?”

Praise God! We’re free through Jesus Christ who died for us. We’re no longer condemned, and we have the power to resist sin.

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250 Life with Christ

Paul – 3rd Missionary Journey

Romans 8 – 16

Paul continued his letter to the Christians at Rome by saying:

Salvation in Christ gives us several benefits. First of all, we're adopted into a new family. God is our Father. His Spirit lives within us, and we inherit everything that belongs to Jesus.

As a member of the heavenly family, we have peace about what happens to us in this life. We might suffer here, but that's nothing compared to the glory that is waiting for us in heaven.

The second benefit is what the Spirit of God is doing in our lives. He is making us ready for heaven. He helps us pray. He changes our thinking. He makes sure all of our trials are good for us. He shapes us to be more like Jesus.

The third benefit is that God is now our Father! That means we're important to him! He won't let anything happen to us that he doesn't think is good for us. Nothing can separate us from his love.

Even with all these benefits, I still have one great heartache. I wish the Jews weren't missing out on what God is doing with us. They're my earthly family, and I'd give anything for them to have salvation. I'd give up my own salvation, if they could have it.

Still, I understand that their rejection of Christ doesn't change God's promises to Abraham. I must always keep in mind that God's promises aren't to those who happen to be born into a particular family. God has always selected a people for himself from among the crowd.

The Jews can blame no one but themselves, because God has made his plan simple. People are saved if Jesus is their Lord and they believe that God raised him from the dead. Anyone can be saved if they call upon the name of the Lord.

Don't you see? The fact that Israel is rejecting

their Messiah is your opportunity. You can now be brought into God's family! It's like cutting a branch off from a tree and grafting in a wild branch. Israel has been cut off temporarily, so that the Gentiles can know God.

But don't get too proud! If a natural branch can be cut off, how much easier it would be to cut off the grafted-in branch. The time will come when the Day of the Gentiles will be over. At that point, God will turn the tables, and Israel will accept salvation.

Take advantage of God's mercy while you can. Give your bodies to him as a living sacrifice. Put aside sin and live a life pleasing to him. Change the way you think and act.

Now, here is a list of things you are to do while you live for God on earth:

- Work in concert with your fellow believers. Everyone has their special gift from God. Together you make up one body.
 - Have a high standard of living, and focus on what God wants you to do.
 - Submit to civil authorities. Just because you have a heavenly home doesn't mean you aren't responsible to earthly government officials. When you resist them, you're resisting God.
 - You're not to owe people money. Instead, you owe them your love. So pay it with interest.
 - Always live like your time of service is about over.
 - Don't be distracted by fleshly desires and lust. Instead, start acting like Jesus would act.
- Listen, God deals with each of us differently. So, honor each other's walk with the Lord.

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Paul – 3rd Missionary Journey

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One person is obeying God by setting aside a particular day, or not eating certain foods. Someone else obeys God by treating everything the same. What does that matter to you? The Lord has an individual relationship with each believer.

Having said that, you should also be conscious of the fact that some people are still weak in their walk with God. You're at liberty to follow your own convictions about things, but you're not at liberty to trip up a fellow Christian. Your job is to build them up—not tear them down by the things you do. Those who are strong in the faith have a responsibility to watch over those who are weaker.

Well, here are my plans. I am going to Jerusalem to deliver the offering that was taken by the churches here. When I'm done, I plan to stop by Rome on my way to Spain. I have wanted to meet you for so long!

Greet all my friends in the Gospel. They have faithfully worked with me throughout the years.

Oh, one more thing. Watch out for those who make a big deal out of little things. Avoid them. Their smooth talking can hurt weaker believers.

Everywhere I go, people tell me about your obedience to Christ. Everyone here wants to send greetings to you.

The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

251 Going to Jerusalem

Acts 20 – 21:17

Paul stayed three months in Corinth. Afterwards he went back to Troas, where he spent a week before starting his trip to Jerusalem.

The night before Paul left Troas, he preached to the church on the third floor of a house. He preached for hours—well into the night. A young man sat on a windowsill and soon became very sleepy. Eventually he went to sleep and slid out of the window, falling to the ground!

People rushed down, only to find him dead. Paul took the body and hugged it tightly. He finally looked up and said, “The young man is alive.”

Everyone rejoiced and together went back up the stairs. They continued their fellowship until dawn when Paul left on his trip to Jerusalem. They took the young man to his home, still rejoicing that he was alive.

Paul sailed to a town near Ephesus, and the elders of the Ephesian church went there to meet with him.

He told them, “My life has been an open book to you. Nothing was hid. We suffered persecution together, but through it all I was able to explain the Gospel to everyone in this region. Now I am leaving you and going to Jerusalem, and you’ll never see me again.

“The Spirit of God has made it clear that I will suffer for the Lord in Jerusalem. I’ll accept this because I want to fulfill God’s calling on my life.”

Paul – 3rd Missionary Journey

Paul encouraged them to live for the Lord and be true to him. Afterwards, they all knelt down and prayed together. The entire group cried and embraced Paul. They grieved over his words, “You will never see me again.”

As he continued on his way to Jerusalem, the ship stopped at the city of Tyre so it could unload cargo. This gave Paul a chance to stay with a group of believers for the few days. They said to him, “The Spirit of God told us that you will suffer great trials in Jerusalem.”

When it was time to leave, the entire church walked with Paul out of the city and down to the shore. They knelt on the beach and prayed together. He then got on board the ship and left.

The ship docked at Caesarea, the nearest port to Jerusalem. Paul stayed in the home of Philip, one of the original seven deacons. While he was there, a prophet took Paul’s belt and tied his own hands and feet. He said, “The Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him to the Gentiles.”

Everyone was concerned and begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem. He said, “Please stop. Your crying is starting to make me cry! I’m ready to be put in chains for the Lord. I’m ready to die for him.”

After a few days, Paul went to Jerusalem. The Christians there received him with joy.

252 Riot in Jerusalem

Acts 21:15 – 22:30

Paul met with the elders of the church in Jerusalem and reported on how Gentiles were turning to Christ. Everyone glorified God when they heard this.

But then the elders shared their concerns with Paul. “Jewish Christians think that you’re teaching Jews to abandon the Law of Moses. We need to stop these rumors. Four men have taken a vow to God. They want to fulfill its requirements at the Temple, but they don’t have the money to pay for it. Join them in their vow, and pay their fee. This will demonstrate that you haven’t abandoned the laws of God”

Paul agreed. So he took the vow and went to the temple with the men. The ritual took seven days.

On the last day, some Jews from Ephesus saw Paul in the market place with a Gentile Christian from their city. Later they saw him in the temple and assumed the Gentile was with him. They yelled, “Help! Here’s the man who has turned the entire world against us. Now he’s bringing a Gentile into our temple!”

Soon, the crowd became an angry mob. They grabbed Paul and took him out of the temple and started to beat him. Roman soldiers ran into the crowd to stop the beating. Their commander put Paul in chains and told his men to take him away.

The crowd shouted, “Kill him!” and started moving toward the soldiers. Seeing this, the soldiers picked up Paul and carried him. When they got to the door of the barracks, Paul said to the commander, “May I speak to the crowd?” The commander was surprised, but finally agreed to let him speak.

Paul stood on the step and raised his hand. Everyone grew quiet. He said, “I was given a strict Jewish education. I proved my dedication to our religion by persecuting believers in Jesus. I put both men and women in jail and

even had some of them killed.

“One day I went to Damascus to bring more prisoners back to Jerusalem. Suddenly, a bright light surrounded me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say, ‘Saul, Saul, Why are you persecuting me?’

“I said, ‘Who are you Lord?’ The voice said, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth—the one you are persecuting.’ He then told me to go into Damascus and I would be told what to do.

“Once I was in the city, a believer in Christ came, and I called on the name of the Lord and was baptized.

“I came back to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple. The Lord spoke to me again. He said, ‘I’m sending you to far off places and there you’ll preach to the Gentiles.’ ”

As soon as Paul said the word “Gentiles,” the crowd once again went wild. They started yelling and throwing dust in the air. They threw their coats on the ground and shouted, “Kill him! Wipe him off the face of the earth!”

Quickly, the commander took Paul into the barracks. He ordered soldiers to beat Paul until he had answered all of their questions. As the soldiers prepared to do this, Paul said to one of them, “Is it legal to beat a Roman citizen without a trial?”

The soldier immediately told the commander about this. He went to Paul and asked. “Are you a Roman citizen?”

“Yes, I was born a citizen.”

Those who were getting ready to beat Paul immediately moved away from him. The commander himself became concerned for his own life because he had put a Roman citizen in chains—and almost beat him—without a fair trial.

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253 Plot to Kill

Paul – Going to Rome

Acts 22:30 – Acts 23:35

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The commander wanted to know exactly what had caused the riot near the temple in Jerusalem. So he took Paul before the Jewish council. Paul said, “Brothers, I stand before God with a clear conscience.” Hearing this, the high priest ordered someone to slap him.

Paul turned to him, “You whitewashed wall! God will slap you. You had someone hit me in direct violation of God’s laws.”

One of the men said, “How dare you speak to God’s high priest that way.”

Immediately Paul apologized. “I didn’t realize he was the high priest. The Scripture says, ‘Don’t speak against the ruler of the people.’ ”

He then noticed that the council was made up of two opposing groups. The Sadducees didn’t believe that anyone could rise from the dead. They also didn’t believe in angels or spirits. The Pharisees believed in all of these things.

Paul said, “I’m a Pharisee and I’m being judged because I believe in the resurrection from the dead.” Immediately, the two groups started to argue, until they were shouting at one another.

One of the men grabbed Paul in anger. Others tried to pull him away. Soldiers had to rescue him to keep him from being torn apart. They took him back to the barracks.

That night the Lord stood by Paul. “Don’t be discouraged. You were my spokesman here in Jerusalem, and you’ll also speak for me in Rome.”

The next morning, 40 men met together

and made a vow. They said, “We’ll not eat or drink until we’ve killed Paul.” They then told the religious leaders, “Tell the commander you want to examine Paul again. When he gets near, we’ll kill him.”

Paul’s nephew heard about this plan, so he rushed to the barracks and told his uncle. After hearing this, Paul called for one of the soldiers. “Take this young man to the commander. He has a message for him.”

So the soldier took Paul’s nephew to the commander and said to him, “The prisoner wants you to hear what this young man has to say.”

The commander took the young man aside, “What do you want to tell me?”

The boy told the commander exactly what he’d heard. The commander said, “Go, but don’t tell anyone else about this.”

That night, he assembled a group of guards that included 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 men with spears. He sent Paul with them that very night. They took him to Caesarea to be under the protection of Felix the governor.

The commander wrote a letter to send along with him. “The Jews tried to kill this man, but I rescued him because he’s a Roman citizen. I had him stand before their ruling council, but found they’re upset with him because of some religious matters—definitely nothing worthy of death or prison. Now I’m told there is a plot to ambush and kill him. Therefore I’m sending him to you. I’ll also send his accusers so you can hear their case.”

When Paul arrived in Caesarea, he was put in Herod’s palace to wait until his accusers arrived.

254 Felix, Festus & Agrippa

Acts 24 – 26

Paul – Going to Rome

The high priest went to Caesarea along with some elders and a lawyer. They presented their case against Paul before Felix the governor. They said, “This man is a disease to the Jewish people. He causes riots everywhere he goes. Now he has come here and has desecrated our temple.”

Paul defended himself. He said, “I did nothing to deserve what was done to me. It’s true I follow Jesus of Nazareth, but I didn’t gather a crowd and preach to them. I simply went to the temple to fulfill a vow. Suddenly—and for no reason—a mob grabbed me and tried to kill me. They’re the ones who should be here defending their actions! Not me. These men standing before you have nothing against me. They even agree with me on the basic issue—that God can raise someone from the dead.”

Felix listened to both sides, but didn’t pass judgment. He thought Paul might pay him something to let him go free. Still, the governor gave Paul the privilege of seeing his friends. Felix met with him several times to talk about faith in Christ. Once he trembled and said, “I’m not ready right now. I’ll make this decision when it is more convenient.”

Two years later, Festus became governor, replacing Felix. He wanted to make the Jewish leaders happy, so he said to Paul, “Are you willing to go to Jerusalem and be tried for these charges?”

Paul said, “I’m willing to die if I am truly worthy of death. But you know that I’m innocent of these charges. Therefore, if you’re about to send me to Jerusalem, I appeal to Caesar.”

Festus said, “So, you have appealed to Caesar. In that case, to Caesar you will go.”

A few days later, King Agrippa and his sister visited the new governor. Festus told them about Paul and the trial. Agrippa said he would like to hear him. So the next day, a large crowd gathered, and Paul was brought before the governor and the king.

When Paul entered the room, he saw his opportunity. He said, “I’m pleased to stand before you, King Agrippa, because you’re an expert in Jewish customs.

“I’m not a stranger to the Jews who live in Israel. They’ve known me since I was a child. They know that I am a Pharisee and have been very strict concerning the Law. There was a time when I persecuted those following Jesus the Nazarene.

“I was on the way to Damascus when I was struck to the ground by a bright light. I then heard a voice saying, ‘Saul, why are you persecuting me?’

“I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The voice said, ‘I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Get up. You’re now my servant. I’m sending you to be a witness for me—to the Jews and to the Gentiles.’

“King Agrippa, I’ve been true to that calling. I proclaim Jesus as Messiah wherever I go. I tell people to repent and turn to God.

“So why do the Jews want to kill me? They know our Scriptures teach that Christ would suffer, die, and rise from the dead. The good news is that he now brings light to all people including the Gentiles.”

Festus yelled out, “Paul, you’re talking like a fool. All of your education has made you crazy!”

Paul said, “I’m not crazy. I speak the truth, and the king knows these things. King Agrippa, do you believe the Scriptures? I know you do—”

The king interrupted him, “Do you think you can talk to me for a few minutes and I’ll become a Christian?”

Paul said, “Whether I can or can’t, it’s my desire that all of you listening to me today would be like me, except for these chains.”

Later, King Agrippa and the governor agreed that Paul shouldn’t be in prison. They said, “We’d set him free if he hadn’t appealed to Caesar. But he did appeal to Caesar, so that is where we’ll send him.”

255 Storm at Sea

Paul – Going to Rome

Acts 27

Arrangements were made for Paul to travel to Rome on cargo ships. He was put in the custody of a Roman officer named Julius. He was kind to Paul and allowed his friends to visit him whenever they were in port.

Travel was slow because of storms. After many stops and changing boats several times, they eventually arrived at Fair Haven on the island of Crete. It was close to winter so they had to stop.

Still, the captain wanted to sail a few miles up the coast to a better port. The weather had cleared and there was now a gentle breeze.

Paul said to Julius, “Tell the captain to stay here! If he doesn’t, he’ll lose the ship and its cargo and some people may die.” The Roman officer thought about what Paul said but decided to allow the captain to move on to the other port.

They left Fair Haven and started sailing along the coast. Suddenly a fierce wind pushed the ship out into deeper water. The crew struggled to fight the wind, but the storm grew more intense. Finally the captain stopped fighting the wind and allowed it to drive the ship along.

After several days in the storm, the crew threw the cargo overboard. A couple of days later they threw the ship’s gear overboard. In time, everyone knew they were going to die. They hadn’t seen the sun or stars for days and they hadn’t eaten anything.

Paul stood before the men. He said, “I told you not to leave the harbor. You didn’t listen, but now I have good news for you. An angel appeared to me last night with a message from God. He said, ‘Don’t be afraid! You’ll stand before Caesar. No one on this ship will die.’ What God says is true.

We’ll all live, but the ship will be destroyed.”

They were in the storm for a total of fourteen days. About midnight on the last day, the sailors realized they were approaching land. They quickly let down an anchor to keep from running into the rocks.

Some of them started to let down the lifeboat so they could get off the ship. Paul shouted, “You will all die if these men leave the ship!” Immediately soldiers cut the lines and let the lifeboat fall into the water. Everyone prayed that morning would come soon.

Paul talked to the crew just before daylight. He said, “You haven’t eaten for fourteen days. Eat something because you’ll need your strength to go to shore today.” He then picked up some bread, gave thanks to God, and started eating. Everyone on the ship ate some food.

When it was light, they could see land through the storm. The captain spotted a bay with a beach. He decided to run the ship toward the beach as far as it would go. They pulled up the anchor and hoisted a sail. The fierce wind drove them toward the beach until the ship struck a sandbar. It jammed in the sand, and then started breaking up because of the waves.

The soldiers wanted to kill the prisoners so they wouldn’t escape. Julius stopped them because he wanted to save Paul’s life. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard and get to shore. Everyone else had to find planks from the ship and use them to float ashore. Soon everyone was in the water, and they all reached land safely.

Continued in the next story

256 Shipwreck & Rome

Paul – Going to Rome

Acts 28

Continued from the previous story

After fourteen days in a fierce storm, Paul's ship struck a sandbar just off the island of Malta. Everyone got to shore and the local people came out and started helping them. They built a fire because of the rain and cold.

Paul helped by gathering wood. As he was putting some on the fire, a poisonous snake bit him on the hand. Paul dropped the wood but the snake hung from his hand. The local people said, "Ah, he is a terrible murderer! He escaped dying at sea, but now the gods are bringing justice to him."

Paul shook the snake into the fire, and everyone waited for him to swell up and drop over dead. After some time, they finally realized he wasn't going to die. Then they said, "He's a god!"

The governor of the island opened up his home and made provisions for those who were shipwrecked. Paul learned that the governor's father was sick in bed. He went and placed his hand on the man's head. Instantly he was healed. News of this spread throughout the island, and people started bringing others to Paul so he could heal them.

They stayed on Malta until the winter months were over. Julius then booked passage for them

on a cargo ship that was going to Rome. As they prepared to leave, the people of the island brought them everything they needed for the trip.

When they arrived in Rome, Paul was taken to a house where he stayed until his trial before Caesar. There was always a soldier next to him, but he was free to have friends come and visit. The Christians in Rome graciously received him and encouraged him.

He sent a letter to the Jewish leaders in the city. He told them about what had happened in Jerusalem and why he was in Rome. He invited them to come and visit him. They met and talked about God's Kingdom and Jesus. Their discussion lasted all day, until late in the afternoon. Some of them believed the message but others didn't.

As they were about to leave, Paul said, "The prophet was right when he said that 'you would listen but not hear, you would look but not see.' Your stubbornness has closed your ears and covered your eyes. You can be sure of this—the Gentiles will see and hear, and God will forgive their sins."

Paul stayed in the house for two years waiting for the trial. During that time he received many guests and preached Christ to them all. No one tried to stop him.

Philemon 1

Onesimus was a slave who ran away from his master Philemon. He went to Rome and eventually met Paul who led him to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Onesimus stayed with the apostle and helped him in the ministry. Eventually they knew it was time for the “runaway slave” to return to his master. Paul was a personal friend with Philemon, so he wrote a letter to help the two men reconcile their relationship. He said...

Philemon—my dear friend—greetings to you, your family, and the church that meets in your home. I pray for you on a regular basis. I thank God for the love you have for the Lord Jesus Christ and for fellow believers. Those who meet you are encouraged in their faith.

Dear brother, you know me. I don’t normally hesitate in telling you what is right and wrong. I’m usually quick in reminding you of your duties in Christ. But I’m not going to do that this time. Instead, I am going to beg.

Picture this in your mind. I’m an old man who is in prison for the cause of Jesus Christ. In my weakness, God sent me a helper, Onesimus—a man who caused you pain and grief. But God sent him to me and I was able to introduce him to Jesus. He yielded his life to Christ and then became invaluable as a helper to me.

In a way, it was like you sent him here to help me because you couldn’t come yourself. I don’t know how I can carry on without him; but he and I both know he should go back to you. He was helping me in your stead, but we didn’t have

your permission.

Listen, he was a worthless slave when he ran away from you. Now he’s coming back as a valuable brother in Christ, a co-worker in the ministry and a dear friend of mine. Receive him back in love.

Oh, concerning those things he stole from you—put those on my account. Here, I will pick up the quill and write this in my own handwriting. “I, Paul, will repay it.” I won’t remind you of the fact that you actually owe me your very life.

Please receive him as if you were receiving me. You’ll bring joy to my life when I hear how you’ve accepted Onesimus back into your life and home.

But what am I talking about? I know you’ll do this and even more.

By the way, prepare your guest room for me. I know you’ve been praying that I’d be set free and come back to visit you. I think the Lord is going to answer your prayers.

Greet all my good friends who are there. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Paul.

Revelation 1 & 4 – 5

John was exiled to the island of Patmos for being a follower of Jesus and preaching the word of God. On the Lord's Day, he was worshiping in the Spirit. Suddenly he heard a loud voice behind him. It sounded like a trumpet blast that said, "You are going to see amazing things. Write all of it in a book and send it to the seven churches of Asia."

John turned to see who was talking. There, right in front of him, were seven gold lampstands with the Son of Man standing in the middle of them. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. His hair was white like wool—it was as white as snow! His eyes were like flames of fire and his feet like polished bronze. His voice thundered like mighty ocean waves. He held seven stars in his right hand, and when he spoke, it was like a sharp, two-edged sword came from his mouth. His face was shining like the sun!

John fell to the ground as if he were dead. The Son of Man put his hand on John and said, "Don't be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the living one. Yes, I died, but look ... I'm alive forever and ever! I hold the keys of death and the grave. Write what you see—about the things happening now and the things that will happen in the future."

John was told what to write to the seven churches. And after that, he saw a door in heaven, standing open. Suddenly that same voice, blasting like a trumpet, said to John, "Come up here!" Instantly, his spirit was in heaven and he saw a throne, and someone

sitting on it. There was a rainbow around the throne. John then saw there were twenty-four elders next to the throne, but each of them was sitting on his own throne. They were clothed in white and wearing gold crowns.

There were four heavenly beings, too, and they worshiped God all day and all night saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty!"

Flashes of lightning and the rumble of thunder came from the throne. In front, there were seven flaming torches, which were the seven spirits of God. Also in front of the throne, John saw a shiny sea of glass, sparkling like crystal.

He focused on the one sitting on the throne and saw that he had a scroll in his hand. It was sealed with seven seals. A strong angel shouted with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals on this scroll and open it?" No one was able to open the scroll and read it—not anyone in heaven or on earth.

When John saw this, he started to cry because no one was worthy. One of the twenty-four elders turned to him and said, "Stop crying! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah has won the victory. He is the heir to David's throne, and he is worthy to open the scroll."

Then John saw a Lamb that had been killed but was now standing among the elders. He stepped forward and took the scroll from the one sitting on the throne. As he did, the heavenly beings and the elders fell down before him and sang a new song. Then millions of angels came and joined them. Together, they all sang, "Worthy is the Lamb!"

259 New Heaven and Earth

Book of Revelation

Revelation 21

When the Lamb opened the book, John saw the strange things that were in it—amazing things about our future. He wrote about those things so people could know what he had seen. Near the end, John said...

I suddenly realized that everything was new. I looked into the sky and the old heaven no longer existed. There was a new heaven! I looked around and the old earth was gone. There was a new earth, and it didn't have oceans!

I looked up and I saw the Holy City coming from God out of heaven. It was the New Jerusalem, and it was beautiful! It was like a bride all dressed up for her husband.

Then I heard a voice. It said, "Look, God is going to live with people! He'll be their God, and they'll be his people. He'll wipe away their tears of sorrow. He'll do away with death, grieving, sorrow, and pain. Everything will be different."

Then God said to me. "What you're seeing is true. Everything will be new. I am the A and the Z, the beginning and the end. I give 'Springs of Living Water' to the thirsty. I'm a father of the redeemed. They are my children, and they have found my victory.

"But those who didn't believe are cowards and vile. They're full of murder, immorality, and lies. They worship devils and false gods. When all of this is done, I'll send them to the Lake of Fire. That is the Second Death!"

Then an angel came to me and said, "Come and I'll give you a closer look."

He took my spirit to a high mountain, so I could see the Holy City as it came out of heaven. The New Jerusalem was dressed in God's glory, and shone like precious jewels.

Its wall had twelve gates—three on each of the four sides. The gates had the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the foundations of the walls had the names of the twelve apostles. All of it was made of precious stones.

The angel measured the city. And I found out that it was 1500 miles in each direction, like a massive cube. The walls were made of jasper, and the city itself was pure gold. The gates were made of pearl. The main street was made of pure, transparent gold.

There was no temple because God and the Lamb were the temple. Those in the city didn't need the sun or moon because the glory of God was the light and the Lamb was the lamp.

The gates were always open because it was always day there. All the nations were welcome to come at any time. But vile and unclean people were not allowed in. Only those whose names were written in the Lamb's Book of Life were welcomed into the city.

Continued in the next story

Revelation 22

Continued from the previous story

As I was looking at the New Jerusalem, the angel showed me the River of Living Water. It was crystal clear and flowed out from the throne of God and the Lamb. It flowed down the middle of the main street.

The Tree of Life was on both sides of the street. It had twelve kinds of fruit and produced a crop each month. All the nations went to the tree and found precious healing in its leaves. It was then I realized that never again would anything be cursed.

Servants of God went to his throne and worshiped him. They were allowed to look up and see his face. His name was on their foreheads.

There was no night in the city. So people didn't need sunlight or lamps. The Lord God provided light for them. They ruled forever as if they were kings.

I was looking at all of this when the angel turned to me. He said, "What you're seeing will happen. The Lord gave me this message for you. He said, 'People are to get ready! Because when this happens, it will happen fast. They'll be blessed if they focus on what you have written.' "

At that point, I fell down and worshiped the angel. He was shocked. "Don't do that! I'm just a servant like you. You're to worship God."

He then said, "Listen carefully. What you've written is extremely important. Make sure people

read it. Don't worry about their response. Leave that to God."

Suddenly, I heard Jesus talking to me. He said, "I'm coming, and when I do, it will be fast! I'll give rewards for what each person has done. I am the A and the Z, the first and the last, the beginning of everything—and the end of it all.

"I'll bless those who are prepared for my coming. I'll invite them to the Tree of Life. They can walk right through the gates of the city and come in.

"The wicked aren't welcome. They'll have to stay outside.

"I sent this angel to you. I told him to show you these things. Remember, I'm the Root and the Branch of David. I am the Bright and Morning Star."

Suddenly I heard, "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' " Then it was echoed back. "Come!"

Again, I heard, "If you're thirsty, come! Come and drink Living Water."

Oh, my dear friends. Be careful what you do with this book. God will judge you accordingly. Don't make up what's not here. Don't pick and choose what you want to believe. It's all true!

As I wrote this, I suddenly heard Jesus saying, "Something else is true. I'm coming back—and soon."

I said, "Yes, Lord. Come!"