

CLIFF NOTES ON

THE BIBLE



Cliff
NOTES

The Greatest Love Story Ever Told

Discover **H.O.P.E.**

A simple way to experience God's Word

Hear from God

Read the passage

Observe

1. What STANDS OUT to you?
2. What does this text tell us ABOUT GOD?
3. What does this text tell us ABOUT PEOPLE?

Put into Practice

How can you live what God is showing you
in this text?

Based on this passage I WILL...

Encourage Others

Share **HOPE** with someone by sharing what
you learned.

Books of the Bible

The Old Testament

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus

Numbers, Deuteronomy

Joshua, Judges, Ruth

1 Samuel, 2 Samuel

1 Kings, 2 Kings

1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles

Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

Job, Psalms, Proverbs

Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations

Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea

Joel, Amos, Obadiah

Jonah, Micah, Nahum

Habakkuk, Zephaniah

Haggai, Zechariah

Malachi

The New Testament

Matthew, Mark

Luke, John

Acts (of the Apostles)

Romans, 1 Corinthians

2 Corinthians, Galatians

Ephesians, Philippians

Colossians,

1 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians

1 Timothy, 2 Timothy

Titus, Philemon, Hebrews

James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter

1 John, 2 John, 3 John

Jude, Revelation

Genesis

The first book of the Bible is appropriately called by a Greek word which means "birth" "genealogy" or "origin." The Hebrew name for the book is the same as its famous first line: "In the beginning." It is also the first of the five books of the Torah which is translated as the Law or the Teaching. It formed the foundation of Israel's belief in One God. The Torah or Law is attributed to Moses who was God's prophet and liberator for Israel.

Genesis divides into two main sections. Chapters 1-11 are about general themes from Creation through the Fall of humanity, Noah and the flood and ending with the Tower of Babel. This descent from grace in the Garden of Eden to division at Babel is reversed in the next section (chapters 12-50) by the calling of Abraham. The covenant or relationship which God graciously offers to his family is passed to Isaac, Jacob and the twelve patriarchs. The book ends with Joseph, prime minister of Egypt, who saves his brothers and their families from famine even though they attempted, years before, to kill him.

Question - As you read Genesis 1 and 2, put aside for a minute all the concerns about science vs. religion and notice how calmly and majestically God calls everything into existence out of darkness. Notice how delighted God is with His work and how He rests from His work. How does God feel about you - His creation? Do you take pleasure in your creations? Do you give yourself permission to rest from your work? What new insights do you see from the creation of Adam and Eve and the first human relationship?

Exodus

The title of the second book of the Bible means "the road out" which is appropriate because it details Moses' efforts to free the people from Pharaoh's hands. It is the greatest story of deliverance after the Cross. Raised in Pharaoh's house, Moses is forced to flee for his life into the desert. On the mount of Sinai God calls to him in the burning bush and sends him back to free His people Israel. The book breaks down into three sections. Chapters 1-18 - Deliverance from Egypt, Chapters 19-24 - Covenant at Sinai, Chapter 25-40 - True and False Worship.

Question - Exodus 1 and 2 tell the story of a rapidly growing Israelite nation under the control of the Egyptians and the birth and early life of Moses. Fear drives Pharaoh to try to exterminate them. Two midwives are commanded to slay the male children, but they fear God more than the king and refuse his evil orders. It's interesting that we know the names of the midwives, but not the name of Pharaoh. They receive more honor than him. We do not face the same persecution other Christians endure around the world. Are we too much in compliance with our culture? What opposition do you face for being a believer? Despite his Hebrew birth, Moses is raised in the house of Pharaoh. Yet he quickly falls from grace and must flee to the desert. How does this prepare Moses for his future role as Liberator?

Leviticus

The name comes from the Levis (the tribe not the jeans!). Moses and his brother Aaron were from this tribe, and Aaron's sons became the priests who oversaw worship and offerings to God. While the rules in this book may seem as interesting as reading a law book, they have a very essential purpose - helping God's people stay holy. Holiness is not a halo - it means that you belong to God - you are His. These commandments are what made Israel different from all the other nations - God's precious possession.

Question - Did you notice how the offering of an animal or grain needs to be perfect and spotless? The worshiper who brings the animal must place his hands upon the animal to transfer his sin to the offering before it is sacrificed. How does this set the stage for the day when God will offer Himself for us on the Cross?

Numbers

It seems like the right name for a book with so much census data. But the Hebrew name for this book is "in the desert." After receiving more laws, the tribes move through the desert toward the Promised Land. But, unfortunately, their lack of faith that God would go ahead of them into the land caused them to rebel against His command. The punishment was 40 years in the desert. There are also battles with other nations on the way to the edge of the Jordan River.

Question - While the listing of these names and numbers may not be interesting to read, think about all the people today who are interested in genealogy. Why is it important to keep such lists? How does knowing our background uncover a side of ourselves we never knew? Chapter 2 focuses on the arrangement of the tribes as they camp and march. Why are order and unity important in their journey through the desert? What can you do to bring more order and unity to your world?

Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy, the name of the last book of the Torah or Law of Moses means "second law." But it is more than just a repetition of what God gave to Moses. The people of Israel stand on the verge of the Promised Land. The great Liberator and Lawgiver knows that God will not let him cross the Jordan with them. Deuteronomy is part farewell address and part locker room pep talk. He emphasizes what is truly important - loving the Lord your God with all your being (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Later, kings used Deuteronomy to reform corruption and bring people back to God. Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy three times when He went face to face with the devil. Here is where we find the first and greatest commandment. It is generally divided into three addresses by Moses (1:1-4:43; 4:44-28:68; 29-33) followed by the death of Moses in chapter 34.

Question - Moses reviews the terrible mistake God's people made when they were more in awe of the Canaanites than of God and refused to follow Him and take over the land. The result was 40 years of wandering until all that generation passed away. Where is God challenging you to go? What is He asking you to do? Join a Growth Group? Get into a mission project? Be more open about your faith at school, work or home? Being honest with a friend or family member? Playing it safe now may make things worse later. Trust God and follow in His steps.

Joshua

With the death of Moses, his close associate Joshua takes up the leadership of Israel and must accomplish the long-anticipated task of taking over the Promised Land. It begins with a crossing of the Jordan River reminiscent of the dividing of the sea under Moses. The first battle is against the famous walls of Jericho - perhaps the oldest continuously inhabited city. This leads to a campaign against the central towns followed by a northern campaign and a southern campaign. The book ends with a covenant ceremony in which Joshua challenges the people, "choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).

Question - Joshua is told four times in one chapter to be strong and courageous. But the key to his strength and courage is not human power but obedience to God and His Word. "Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it" (1:8). Are you meditating on God's Word? How can it help you to have courage and strength to face what's ahead this year?

Judges

Between the death of Joshua and the kings of Israel, the people of Israel lived in a loose tribal arrangement with no central government or leader. Unfortunately, the people frequently wandered from the One True God and worshiped the idols of their neighbors. A constant refrain in the book is "everyone did as he saw fit." As the people drifted away from God's protection, He would give them over to their desires and the result was an attack by armies from neighboring states. When the cry went up to God, the Lord raised a national leader or "Judge" to rally the people and repel the enemy. Sadly, once this Judge died, the cycle started over again. Chapter 2 describes the whole cycle.

Question - Chapter 1 describes the struggles between the Israelites and the Canaanite nations who remain. Sometimes the Israelites conquered and destroyed them. Sometimes the Israelites forced the Canaanites to be their slaves. Sometimes Israel followed their lead and worshiped their gods. As followers of Christ God now calls us not to conquest but to peace (Matthew 5:9). In a nation that is increasingly moving away from Christianity, what challenges do you face trying to be "in the world" but not "of the world"? How do you avoid judging others and becoming like others?

Ruth

This little four-chapter book occurs during the very chaotic, bleak era of the Judges. In a time when Israel alternated between attacking their neighbors and becoming like them, this story of a righteous outsider to Israel sounds a note of hope and grace. Ruth, a young widow from the country of Moab, helps her bitter mother-in-law Naomi after she loses her husband and two sons. They return to Bethlehem where Ruth meets and marries a relative of Naomi's named Boaz and thus continues the family name and line. The book has a surprise ending - Ruth, the outsider from a despised nation becomes the ancestress of King David and ultimately Jesus.

Question - Naomi's name means "sweet or pleasant." But with the death of her husband and sons she asks people to call her "Mara" which means "bitter." She feels the Lord has afflicted her. She left full and came back to her home in Bethlehem empty. On the return to Israel, Naomi attempts to send her daughter-in-laws Orpah and Ruth home to Moab. Orpah leaves but Ruth clings to her and makes the famous vow in verses 16-17. Thankfully, Ruth becomes the key to Naomi's redemption... and ours. Why, when we are depressed or grieving, do we push people away? Why do we blame God? How can we look for those people God places around us who can fill us with His love and hope?

I Samuel

The confusion of the Tribal Confederacy gives way to a king. The crisis is the loss of the Ark of the Covenant to the Philistines - the lowest possible point. The people ask for a king. God at first tells Samuel, "I am your king." But the Israelites want what every other nation has. So, the last Judge Samuel becomes the kingmaker who anoints the first king, Saul. Unfortunately, Saul is a troubled king and soon God rejects Saul in favor of a young and rising shepherd boy named David. With Samuel's aid, David is secretly anointed king. Jealous and fearful, Saul tried to kill his son-in-law David. Eventually this first volume ends with the tragic death of Saul in battle.

Question - The book opens with the story of Hannah who longs for a child. She makes a vow that if God blesses her with a child, she will offer him to the service of Lord. This child is Samuel - the last and greatest Judge. How does our faithfulness to the Lord affect others in our family? Would you be able to give to God what you most desire? How might God bless it beyond your imagination if you put it in His hands? Hannah's faithfulness stands in stark contrast to Eli's wicked sons. How do selfish desires lead to destruction?

II Samuel

The second part recounts the kingship of David. Though he is often called "a man after God's heart" and the image of the future Messiah, this book gives a very realistic picture of David's strengths and weaknesses. He unifies and extends the nation to the limits promised by God and centralizes the government and worship of the people in the newly captured capital of Jerusalem. But later in the book David commits adultery with Bathsheba and has her husband murdered. He then faces rebellion by his own son Absalom. Though the revolt is defeated, David grieves for his lost son. The book closes with David buying the land on which the Temple will be built.

Question - An Amalekite comes to David with a false story about how he put the dying King Saul out of his misery. The messenger, knowing how Saul pursued David, probably thinks he will receive a reward, especially since he brings the crown and the arm band from Saul. What he doesn't know is that David, when he had the chance to kill Saul, refused out of respect for Saul and for God's choice of him as king. After David executes the man, David cries out in lament for Saul, his king and father-in-law and for Jonathan his best friend. The people in the Bible are not afraid to express grief, to cry out to God, even to be angry with God. Why do we tend to cover over our grief or avoid it? David refused to take the easy path to the throne by killing Saul. Is there a situation in your life where you are tempted to take the easy way instead of the right way?

I & II Kings

Like I & II Samuel, I & II Kings were originally one book later divided into two. They cover the story of Israel from David's turning over the throne to Solomon, through the division of God's people into two kingdoms - Israel in the North (10 tribes) and Judah in the south (2 tribes - Judah and Benjamin). The break happens under Rehoboam, Solomon's son. So, Israel was only united for three kings - Saul, David and Solomon. Judah in the south continued to be ruled only by David's line as God promised in 2 Samuel 7. But Israel in the north has a continuing succession of one dynasty after another. All the kings in the north are judged to be bad and idolatrous. Many in the south also receive this judgment but a few, such as Hezekiah and Josiah who reform the nation, receive a good evaluation. The northern 10 tribes were taken into captivity in 722 B.C. by the Assyrians and disappeared. 2 Kings ends with the tragic destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. by the Babylonians and the removal into captivity of the remaining people to Babylon where they lived for 70 years.

Question - I Kings. David is old and manipulated by two forces - one supporting his older son Adonijah and the other favoring Solomon. The second faction prevails, and Solomon rises to the throne and becomes the wisest and most powerful of all Israel's rulers. How does this story demonstrate that God can transform even our sins and selfish motives into something that follows his plan?

Question - II Kings - Elijah is clearly not someone you want to fool with. Did you notice how the third commander took a different approach and saved his men? Elijah's name means - the Lord is my God. Who are you more in awe of - the powerful people in this world or the Lord? How does that impact your choices?

I & II Chronicles

This two-part history was also originally one book. It starts back at the creation with Adam and works through the genealogy to the Patriarchs, the 12 Tribes and the Kings. It's a recap of the entire Bible up to this point written at a time later than Kings and relying on it.

Question - I Chronicles - Take a minute and trace the line from Adam to Noah to Abraham to Israel. What is your legacy of faith? How was belief in God passed through your family tree? Did it stop at some point? How are you passing it on?

Question - II Chronicles - This chapter presents the famous scene when Solomon, at the beginning of his reign, asks the Lord not for wealth, riches, honor or long life but for wisdom to govern God's people. This pleased the Lord and so He gave Solomon not only the wisdom but also the other gifts. Solomon started out well, He even had the privilege of building the Temple. But later he became distracted by wealth, riches and honor. He stopped seeking God first and the result was a division of his kingdom after his death. Jesus said, 'Seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness and all these things will be added unto you' (Matthew 6:33). How can you put God first in every area of your life? What difference will it make?

Ezra

Despite years of captivity in Babylon, the people of Judah did not lose their identity and assimilate as the 10 northern tribes did. When the Persians defeated the Babylonians, Cyrus the Great emperor of Persian (559-530 B.C.) gave an edict which allowed the captured peoples to return home. Ezra, a priest, led the return. He oversaw the reconstruction of the destroyed Temple and reformed the faith of God's people by bringing them back to the Law.

Question - Cyrus is not a follower of the God of Israel. And yet the Lord uses him to fulfill the prophecy made through Jeremiah. Can you see in your own life how God used people who did not know Him to accomplish His Will? How might He be doing that now?

Nehemiah

When the exiles return to Jerusalem you might think the first thing they would do is build defenses. In fact, they established the Temple first because they knew that a relationship with God is where their security lay. With the Temple now built, Nehemiah arrives as governor to oversee the construction of Jerusalem's walls. He is the picture of leadership. He mobilizes forces and stands up to opposition from insiders and outsiders. The walls are restored in 52 days which leads to a great celebration. The remains of some of Nehemiah's walls can still be seen today in the holy city.

Question - When Nehemiah hears of the terrible condition of Jerusalem and its people he immediately goes into prayer and confession. Why is this not our first reaction? Why is confession often the last thing we do? Where do you need to confess to God right now? In chapter 2 Nehemiah begins by secretly inspecting the walls. Why is it good to understand the reality of the situation before you present the plan and inspire hope? What challenge do you face today which needs this approach?

Esther

This is one of those books which almost didn't make it into the Bible! One reason is the word "God" never appears in it. Yet God's hand is working behind the scenes all the way through this inspiring story of courage in the face of genocide. In fact, the most famous line from the book - 4:14: "And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" indicates that the seemingly random events of our lives can be used by God to accomplish His will when we are obedient. Esther, also known by her Jewish name Hadassah, is one of the wives of King Xerxes of Persia. Because her heritage is unknown, she is able to step forward and foil evil Haman's plans to destroy the Jews.

Question - The first chapter reveals King Xerxes to be a man who must use the power of his position and his laws to control his wife and keep women in their place. Yet the real hero of this tale is a powerless woman who proves to be more righteous and influential than the king and his officials. How does Esther's example teach us how God wants us to influence this world? Would you be willing to take a stand as Esther did?

Job

The first section of the Bible - Genesis-Esther - covers the history from creation to the return of God's people from captivity. Now we start a new section usually called "Wisdom Literature" which spans from Job to Song of Solomon. These books are more poetic or proverbial. This section sometimes borrows from the wisdom of other culture but reinterprets it for the people of Israel who worship the Lord, the One True God. Job itself is most likely a play which dramatizes the question, "Why do the righteous suffer?" Job is not an Israelite. Nor are his friends. But the question echoes through all lands and faiths. Job's three friends are no help at all. They tend to blame Job. Despite what you've heard about "the patience of Job" he loses his patience and gets angry with God. The Lord's reply is overwhelming. What right does the creature have to tell the Creator how to run the creation? While it is true, it's not a completely satisfying answer. Certainly, Satan is part of the reason we suffer. Of course it's possible to grow through suffering. And Job does get back his wealth though not his children. Job is not a complete answer to the question but thankfully it's also not the only answer in the Bible. In the Cross of Jesus, we see the Creator coming down and suffering for His creation. Like Job, the Father loses His Child - but this time, it is a cause for hope.

Question - How is Satan involved in our pain? Why does God let evil persist? Could you keep your faith in Job's situation? How does the Cross form the intersection between the world's suffering and God's solution?

Psalms

The Psalms are the center of the Bible for good reason. Here all the real and raw emotions of faith are released in song, poetry and prayer. Some are songs of praise and celebration while others are cries of lament and revenge. Sometimes we are lifted to the throne of God on these words. Other psalms disturb us with their anger and self-pity. Yet thankfully, God did not cut out the hard parts so we can see He is willing to listen to the full range of human emotion. In a way, the Psalms are a model of therapy long before the advent of psychology. After the psalmist cries aloud the inner pain, it often leads to a final conclusion - "But I still trust in Your unfailing love."

Question - In Psalm 1 notice the progression - walk, stand, sit - that leads to evil. We are often sidetracked into sin. Compare this with the benefits of delighting in God's Word. Water is not plentiful in Israel, so a tree planted by streams of water has the best chance to grow and bear fruit. How has your reading of God's Word this month helped you put down roots and bear fruit for God? Psalm 2 is a Psalm likely used for the coronation of Israel's king. It is often quoted in the New Testament in reference to Jesus. The Lord laughs and scoffs at earthly kings and their plans. How can reading the news from God's point of view give you a new perspective?

Proverbs

This book of wise sayings goes back to Solomon who asked God for wisdom to rule His people. These mostly short sayings can apply to almost any time and place.

Question - The key to the whole book is stated in 1:7: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline." Here the word "fear" refers to everything from worship, respect and awe to trembling. Why is it not wise to fool around with God's teachings? Why do people ignore what is clearly right and get themselves into dangerous situations? How can we get back on God's track?

Ecclesiastes

Another example of wisdom literature, the name of this book means "The Teacher." It is attributed to Solomon although his name does not appear in it, and the author could be any king who was a descendent of David. This book has a more cynical tone. "Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly Meaningless! Everything is meaningless" is its opening cry. The pursuit of work, riches, pleasure and even wisdom are found to be ultimately a waste of time. Finding contentment in your work, following God's commands and yearning for the eternity God places in our hearts is the only way to live (3:9-14).

Question - While the opening chapters may seem depressing, recognizing the ultimate emptiness of our efforts can be a humbling and valuable lesson. How have you let the pursuit of something earthly take the place of your pursuit of God?

Song of Songs

This is an extended poem on the love between a Lover (Solomon), the Beloved and a chorus of friends. As the NIV Study Bible says, it "depicts love in all its spontaneity, beauty, power and exclusiveness - experienced in its varied moments of separation and intimacy, anguish and ecstasy, tension and contentment."

Question - You may feel this chapter is too romantic for the Bible. Some rabbis did not want to include it. But we must remember that God created love, romance and sex. We twist them and use them to tempt, tease and sell things. How is God's gift of love between a man and a woman different from lust?

Isaiah

From here to the end of the Old Testament is the Prophetic section. The books, Isaiah through Daniel, are called "The Major Prophets" while the twelve smaller books which follow are termed "Minor Prophets." The titles only refer to their length and not their importance. With a name meaning, "The Lord saves," Isaiah warned the king and his people to return to the Lord or face the coming threat of the Assyrians starting in 740 B.C. The southern Kingdom of Judah survived this attack because of good kings such as Hezekiah. But the northern ten tribes in the Kingdom of Israel were swept away never to return. On a different note of salvation, Isaiah gives us most of the prophecies which refer to both Jesus' birth (chapter 9) and His death (chapter 53). Isaiah's calling in the Temple (chapter 6) is a powerful image of what happens when you come face to face with Almighty God.

Question - The first chapter gives us a picture of corruption, idolatry, injustice and neglect even though the people continued to follow all the rituals of religion. How does our society give the impression of being a religious nation while missing the point of caring for the poor, needy and lost? What can we at Woodside do to minister to the body and spirit of the people around us? The second chapter presents a picture of the Last Days when all nations will come to Jerusalem – the mountain of the Lord's temple. Spend time meditating on this picture of judgment and hope.

Jeremiah

The Assyrian Empire which threatened Jerusalem in Isaiah's day has come and gone. Now the Babylonians bear down on God's people. During the reigns of five kings Jeremiah preached against the faithlessness of the nation and predicted destruction. His obedience to God brought him punishment and imprisonment. In 586 B.C. the Babylonians destroyed Solomon's Temple and the city of Jerusalem. Many were taken away into captivity in Babylon. Jeremiah went the opposite way to Egypt. It is from Jeremiah we first hear the idea of a New Covenant or Testament (31:31-34).

Question - Chapter 1 is Jeremiah's call to be a prophet. Like many who are called to serve the Lord, Jeremiah felt inadequate and afraid. His fear was justified for God was calling him to proclaim destruction before a new beginning could arise. What is God calling you to do which makes you feel nervous? Share your faith, ask forgiveness, right a wrong, warn a loved one on the wrong path? Chapter 2 begins Jeremiah's denunciation of Judah's wayward behavior. Why do earthly idols hold such power over people? Where do you need to turn back to God?

Lamentations

This book, attributed to Jeremiah, is a cry of agony over the ruins of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. A lament is a common type of literature in the Old Testament. Despite the anguish expressed in these lines, it actually has a very carefully crafted form. Laments one, two, four and five are written as acrostics - the verses begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In the midst of his grief the author is still able to say, "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (3:22-23).

Question - Try to put yourself in the place of the author looking over the ruin and rubble of Jerusalem. How does expressing our grief out loud help us to get through it? Why are we so afraid to let it out?

Ezekiel

Unlike Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel writes in Babylon. In 597 B.C. the Babylonians took a first wave of 10,000 Jews into exile. Ten years later they would destroy the Temple and city and carry away an even larger group. Ezekiel was in the first group, and his prophecies were directed at those still in the holy land. He saw fantastic visions and even the plan of a rebuilt Temple.

Question - This is one of the most visionary passages in the Bible and it reminds us of the Revelation in the New Testament. The images of creatures with four faces and four wings are angels who overwhelm Ezekiel. Why are people always afraid to meet God? What does it mean to be truly in awe of God? How does Jesus take away this fear? In chapter 2 God calls Ezekiel to proclaim His Word and tells him, "Do not be afraid." Is fear preventing you from saying or doing what is right and true?

Daniel

Like Ezekiel, Daniel is an exile in Babylon at the beginning of the book. As a young man he is taken into the royal palace with youths in training for leadership from several conquered nations. Daniel lives through the fall of the Babylonian empire and the rise of the Persians. Chapters 1-6 tell the story of Daniel's faithfulness in the face of temptations and torture. Here we find the famous three youths in the fiery furnace (ch.3) "the handwriting on the wall" (ch.5) and the lion's den (ch.6). The second half of the book is filled with apocalyptic predictions leading up to Jesus' time and includes a reference to "one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven" (7:13). This is the term Jesus most frequently applied to Himself.

Question - Daniel and the three other Jewish youths are taken to the royal house for training as the future leaders in the king's court. But they refuse to eat the unkosher food. Yet they don't draw attention to their sacrifice and God blesses them. How can you quietly resist the influence and control of our culture and remain faithful to God? Give up social media and movies for a week? Avoid people who are doing wrong? Stick with those who are a positive influence? In chapter 2 Daniel interprets the king's dream. Do you believe God speaks to you in dreams? The interpretation reveals God rules history even when it doesn't seem that way. How does this help you face the problems in our world today?

Hosea

Now begins the twelve minor prophets - "minor" in length but not importance. Hosea leads off with a painful tale of betrayal and adultery. The only prophet from the northern kingdom of Israel, Hosea's life becomes a living parable. His wife leaves him to run after other lovers and the children she bears are not his. In the same way, Israel has abandoned her first love, the Lord, and gone after other lovers: idols. Idolatry, according to Scripture, is spiritual adultery and it wounds God. Yet here we see grace because God tells Hosea to take his wife back as a sign that the Lord will take back and love His wayward Israel.

Question - Have you ever been wounded by the betrayal of a loved one or friend? This hurt is harder to take than from an enemy. How does our sin wound God? What was it like for Jesus to bear our sin? Do you really believe God's grace is greater than your sin?

Joel

Little is known about the prophet who wrote this little book. A locust plague is devouring the crops and Joel views it as an advancing army. It is a foretaste of the "Day of the Lord," the time of judgment. This would be a very dark book except for a shining prophecy about the coming day when the Lord "will pour out my Spirit on all people" (2:28-29) - a prophecy of Pentecost.

Question - In our modern age it's hard for us to imagine the devastation caused by a locust swarm. We get a glimpse of it as we see the future problems we are causing to the earth. Joel saw it as a time for repentance. What are some practical ways you can become better at caring for the Lord's creation? Chapter 2 gives us the prophecy of Pentecost when God pours out His Spirit and gives birth to the Church. Are you open to the Spirit? How can you be led more by the Spirit?

Amos

Of all the prophetic books in the Bible, Hosea was only one from the ten tribes in the northern kingdom of Israel. The rest were from the southern kingdom of Judah. Amos is from Judah, but he preaches to the northern kingdom of Israel at Bethel - an alternate temple to Jerusalem. Unlike Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Amos is not a priest but a shepherd and a harvester of sycamore trees. The message of Amos is a call to social justice - care for the poor, widows and orphans - instead of selfishness, corruption and greed. The people were outwardly religious, but their faith does not translate into care for their neighbors.

Question - In chapter 1 Amos brings a message of judgment on each of Israel's neighboring nations before he focuses on Judah and Israel in chapter 2. You can imagine the Israelites enjoying Amos' indictment of everyone else's sins until suddenly his finger turns and points at them. Why are we so quick to see other people's sins but miss our own? How can we become more aware of where we fall short? Where have you failed to love God and/or love your neighbor this week?

Obadiah

This prophet, whose name means "servant of the Lord," wrote the shortest book in the Old Testament - only one chapter. So today you get to read a whole book of the Bible! Obadiah brings God's warning against Edom - a nation to the east and south of the Holy Land below the Dead Sea. As Edom celebrates Israel's defeat and Jerusalem's destruction, Obadiah prophesies that Israel will rise again while the arrogant, prideful Edom will fall.

Question - Why do we sit in judgment when others stumble and fall? How can we be "servants of the Lord" who, like Jesus, are willing to kneel and serve...even our enemies? What's a situation in your life now where you could offer care instead of criticism?

Jonah

This beloved story of Sunday School children is really a powerful parable about obedience to God's call over our own plans. When called to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh, the capital city of the powerful Assyrian Empire, Jonah quickly heads the other way to Tarshish (ancient Spain). These were at opposite ends of the known world. A storm and a "great fish" (not a whale) are appointed by the Lord to turn Jonah around. Yet when he goes to Nineveh, preaches and successfully turns the people of a foreign religion to the One True God, Jonah is still sullen and angry. Even when he is successful, he has the wrong attitude. He cares more for the plant, giving him shade than a whole city of people. The story ends without telling us if Jonah finally had a change of heart.

Question - Why do we head the other way when God gives us an opportunity to share His good news? Why are we more concerned about trivial things than about the lives and eternal home of the people in our lives? Who are you avoiding who needs to hear about Jesus?

Micah

A contemporary of Isaiah, Micah criticized Israel and Judah for their idolatry and their lack of concern for the poor. Micah speaks for all the prophets when he says, "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8). Micah also gives us the prophecy that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem (5:2).

Question - The worship of idols is a problem in both Israel and Judah. Why do we worship things and use God instead of using things and worshiping God? We need and crave control. What area of your life do you need to let go? How can you give more control of it to God?

Nahum

The focus of Nahum's prophecy is the evils of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. It has already destroyed Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel and taken the ten tribes into captivity. Nahum predicts the coming destruction of Assyria which came true in 612 B.C. when the Babylonian Empire overran Nineveh.

Question - In the first chapter we see the two sides of God's character - anger over injustice and idolatry and compassion and care for those who trust in Him. At the cross, God's righteous anger was satisfied by His grace and mercy. The chapter ends with an announcement that one will come to the mountains, bringing good news of peace. Do you know this good news? Have you asked Jesus to forgive your sins? Are you sharing that good news with others?

Habakkuk

We know little about this prophet except that he probably ministered during the threat of the Babylonians. Unlike most prophets, instead of speaking to the people, Habakkuk, like Jeremiah, talks back to God and complains. His cries sound more like the laments of the psalms. The book ends with Habakkuk up in his watchtower saying that even if everything is shaken, he will still trust in the Lord. "Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (3:18).

Question - Habakkuk learned that sometimes God moves nations and history in ways we cannot understand because we can't see the end of all things nor view the big picture from God's perspective. Was there a time in your life when you could not see God's hand but later discovered how He was working? Are you looking for where He is working now in your life? Do you trust Him even when circumstances are not going your way?

Zephaniah

Living during the time of Jeremiah and the Babylonian empire, Zephaniah is a fourth generation descendent of King Hezekiah. He predicts destruction is coming from Babylon because the kingdom of Judah has turned from the Lord. But Zephaniah at the end of the book also prophesies that God will one day restore the remnant of Israel.

Question - Zephaniah describes in graphic detail the darkness and destruction of the "Day of the Lord." Many times, nations think God is on their side and nothing wrong will happen to them. How can we call our nation back to God and away from the worship of idols?

Haggai

Writing in a later time than most other prophets, Haggai encourages the Jewish captives returning from Babylon to rebuild the temple. The Lord states the people have built themselves luxurious homes while His house (the Temple) still lies in ruins. Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest hear and follow Haggai's words and begin the work. The Lord promises to glorify this new Temple and bring peace to it.

Question – Woodside's home is for God's glory and God's use. How can we dedicate ourselves to offer this building so God's work may be done in this place? What sacrifices do we need to make in order to open the way for His Kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven?

Zechariah

Born into a priestly family in Babylon, Zechariah returns with the exiles to resettle and rebuild Jerusalem. As a contemporary of Haggai, he also criticizes Judah's leaders for not continuing the rebuilding of the Temple. Zechariah records eight-night visions. The key to the whole book is in 1:3 "Therefore tell the people: This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Return to me,' declares the Lord Almighty, 'and I will return to you,' says the Lord Almighty."

Question - What draws you away from the Lord? Sometimes problems distract us. Sometimes pleasures. Yet even good things, such as family and work, can get in the way. They may be good but not "the best." What's getting in the way of your relationship with the Lord today?

Malachi

The last of the twelve Minor Prophets rounds out the Old Testament. Zerubbabel finished the Temple in 516 B.C. In 458 Ezra the priest restored the religious practices of the people and Nehemiah, in 444, rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. All was well until Nehemiah returned to Persia in 433. God's Word and worship were ignored and proper tithes were not offered. Malachi probably preached in this period. He called for the Jews to bring the full tithe to the Temple. He also spoke about the coming "Day of the Lord." In the final verses he promises that Elijah will return to prepare God's way - a fitting end to the Old Testament and a preparation for John the Baptist who will fulfill this prophecy in the opening of the New Testament.

Question - The people brought crippled, injured or diseased animals to God's altar but they gave their best animals as payment for their taxes to their governors. This shows they feared humans more than God. What do our offerings and the way we spend money say about us? What we say we believe may be contradicted by our actions and by our date books and credit card statements. Is the Lord truly first in your life? What actions demonstrate this?

Matthew

The New Testament or New Covenant opens with the four Gospels - stories of Jesus' life, teachings, death and resurrection. Because of his extensive use of Old Testament prophecies and the opening genealogy which traces Jesus' line back to Abraham instead of Adam, many conclude that Matthew is speaking primarily to a Jewish audience. His goal is to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah. One of the prominent features of Matthew is the Sermon on the Mount which begins with the Beatitudes.

Question - While the list of names in chapter 1 may not seem exciting, there are some interesting hints about the way God works. There are fourteen generations between four key periods - Abraham, David, the Exile and Jesus. There are only five women mentioned - Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba (wife of Uriah) and Mary. The first four all have questionable life-stories. Matthew follows the royal line which also includes many questionable and evil men. Yet all were used by God to accomplish His plan. How might God be using all the circumstances of your life, good and bad, to accomplish His will? Chapter 1 and 2 also tell the story of the birth of Jesus, the visit of the Magi, the horrific attack of Herod and the flight to Egypt. Even though the story is familiar, are there any new things you notice about how God enters the world?

Mark

The shortest of the Gospels, Mark is traditionally thought to be the record of what Peter preached about Jesus. Today, most scholars believe Mark is the first Gospel written and Matthew and Luke are based on him. The turning point of the Gospel is Peter's Confession that Jesus is the Christ in Mark 8:27-29. From here on the road leads to Jerusalem and the Cross. The Resurrection is proclaimed but the ending seems to be cut off at 16:8 with the final verses added by a later author.

Question - In the first chapter of Mark, Jesus seems to be in rapid motion. He calls the disciples, teaches in the synagogue, drives out demons, heals many, stops to pray and then heals a person with leprosy. Notice that in the middle of a very busy day He stops to pray. Is prayer a regular part of your busy day? Do you stop and make time to commune with the One who knows and loves you best? In chapter 2 Jesus says and does things that cause controversy with the teachers of the law. Would you be drawn to this unorthodox Rabbi, cautious or standoffish?

Luke

The longest of the Gospels, Luke opens his work by stating he has carefully gathered information about Jesus from eye witnesses so that his friend Theophilus (which means 'Lover of God') will "know the certainty of the things you have been taught." Some feel Luke's Gospel is addressed to Gentiles and that Luke is the only Greek author among the Jewish Christians who wrote the New Testament. From Luke we receive many of the most beloved stories: the shepherds who worship the newborn Jesus, the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son.

Question - Chapter 1 is quite long and gives the whole background story to the birth of Jesus. It includes many beautiful poems or songs of praise to God. Both Mary and Zechariah question the angel Gabriel with almost the same words: "How will this be?" Yet each surrenders in obedience to God's plan. The key phrase is "For nothing is impossible with God" (v. 37). Where have you placed limits on God? What "impossible" thing might God want you to do? Chapter 2 tells the story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Try to put yourself in the scene with fresh eyes. What do you see and sense? What would you do if you were there?

John

John gives us a different perspective on Jesus from the other three Gospels. Instead of starting from His birth or baptism, John goes back to the creation of the World by the Word who becomes flesh. The book is organized according to key "I Am" statements: I am the Light of the world, I am the Bread of Life, I am the Good Shepherd, I am the Door. The phrase "I Am" is another version of God's Name so when Jesus applies it to Himself (John 8:58), the leaders try to stone him because of blasphemy. The purpose of the Gospel is stated in 20:31 - "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Question - Chapter 1 shows us that Jesus is the Word of God who created the world and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Take a moment and reflect on these two images - one of incredible creative power and the other of vulnerable, sacrificial suffering. Now personalize this by putting your name in the place of "the world." Chapter 2 describes the miracle of turning water into wine followed by the cleansing of the Temple. Jesus came to transform ritual and religion into faith. What in your life needs transformation?

Acts

This is volume 2 of Luke's work. Some suggest it should be called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit" because after the Spirit is poured out on Pentecost (chapter 2) it drives them out on a mission to spread the Gospel. Acts 1:8 is the summary and strategy for the whole book: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." From Jerusalem the Holy Spirit pushes them to break down dividing walls and reach new populations. The conversion of Paul (told three times in the book) signals the second portion of the book as he takes the Gospel to Turkey, Greece and eventually Rome.

Question - When Jesus ascends to heaven, the apostles were likely dazed, confused and heartbroken to lose Him a second time. Yet they waited for the Spirit to come. Are you going through a time of confusion, uncertainty or grief? How can you look to the Lord for what to do next? What barriers prevent us from sharing the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit with our neighbors? Why are we more afraid of their reaction than what God thinks? Do we really believe this is Good News?

Romans

This is the first of Paul's thirteen letters which are arranged not chronologically but from longest to shortest. This letter, written around the middle of his missionary work, is addressed to a congregation he has not visited yet although he knows several people there (see chapter 16). So, Paul explains the gospel message he preaches to them as a way of introducing himself. He hopes to visit them and have them send him on to Spain. Consequently, we have a great outline of the Good News in this magnificent work. Paul begins by pointing out that we all sin and fall short of God's glory. Then he demonstrates that we can be righteous or right with God through faith in Jesus Christ. He continues by showing how we now live life by faith and in the Spirit. Chapters 9-11 are Paul's reflection about why his Jewish brethren have not accepted the gospel. Chapters 12-16 discuss how to lead transformed lives by offering ourselves as living sacrifices to God.

Question - Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." In what ways do we hide our faith? Why are we ashamed of the gospel? How can we be more open about this wonderful, good news and the difference it can make in the lives of our neighbors?

I Corinthians

Paul founded the Corinthian church on his second missionary journey after a modest response in Athens. He stayed there a year and a half and worked with Priscilla and Aquila, Jewish believers in Jesus who came from Rome. Now, probably in Ephesus, Paul hears about troubles in the church. There are divisions, perversions, abuse of the Lord's Supper, arguments about which spiritual gifts are best, chaos in worship, doubts about the Resurrection and after life. If anyone thinks it was perfect in the early church, just read this book. Thankfully, the problems at Corinth led Paul to write this powerful response which has guided the church on some of these thorny issues ever since. Some of Paul's greatest themes - the Body of Christ, Spiritual Gifts, the Lord's Supper, the Resurrection and, of course, the Love Chapter, all appear in this majestic work.

Question - There were divisions in Corinth. What causes division in the church? How can we work through them in a way that is not just tolerance or compromise but genuine love? Paul also says that the cross of Jesus seems foolish and weak to the world but is in fact the wisdom and power of God. How can you explain this to people who dismiss the good news about Jesus?

II Corinthians

Things in Corinth have gone from bad to worse. In between the two letters Paul made a "painful visit" to Corinth where he was rejected by the church he founded. He left and wrote a "severe letter" in response (which we do not have) and sent it with Titus. But Paul could not wait for Titus to return. So, he started to go back to Corinth. On the way he met Titus who told him the good news that the church repented. In reply, Paul wrote II Corinthians. This is perhaps his most confessional letter - revealing some of the struggles he endures as an apostle but also the hope he has in Christ and our calling to be ambassadors to this world from the kingdom of heaven. In simple words he states this profound message: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (5:21). Chapter 8 & 9 talk about stewardship and Chapters 10-13 are his defense of his ministry. Because of the strong tone of this section some scholars believe this is the "severe letter" he sent earlier.

Question - Paul talks a great deal about the God of all comfort and how we must comfort others with the same comfort we have received from God. The word "comfort" literally means "to come with strength." Who in your circle needs the comfort of God from you? How will you give it? Do you need that comfort now?

Galatians

Probably the first book written in the entire New Testament, Galatians is a declaration of the freedom and grace we have in Jesus Christ. Written to the new churches he founded in Turkey; Paul is concerned they are retreating from the message of forgiveness and justification through grace he preached and returning to a religion of works. The conflict is the result of preachers who are telling Gentiles they must be circumcised if they want to be saved by Christ. Paul argues that we are saved by faith alone. The key verse is: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (2:20).

Question - Paul is vehemently against any other "gospel" than the one revealed to him directly by Jesus Christ. How do we water down, stretch or change the gospel today? Why do we insist on turning God's free gift back into a system of religion, rules and rituals?

Ephesians

Paul wanted to go to Rome and he got there ... in chains. After his arrest in Jerusalem, several trials and a long dangerous sea voyage he stood trial before Caesar's court. He may have been released, preached and traveled more, and then been rearrested and finally executed in Rome. Ephesians is one of the "prison" epistles - written while Paul was in jail. Yet it sings with such incredible glory it's hard to believe Paul is under arrest. The focus of Ephesians is the Church. It is the fellowship where Jews and Gentiles, once enemies, are reconciled. It is the Body of Christ blessed with leaders and spiritual gifts, knit together and growing as one. Ephesians also gives us instructions for marriages, workers and families and concludes with a focus on spiritual warfare.

Question - The first chapter opens with praise to God and a declaration that He has "blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ." Imagine what heavenly treasures God has in store for you. How different would your life be if you thought of yourself as a child of the King and an heir to his heavenly blessings? Chapter 2 reminds us we are saved by grace through faith and then describes us as God's workmanship or masterpieces. Do you live by grace not works? Do you see yourself as God's masterpiece? What calling has He created you to do?

Philippians

Philippi was a Roman colony in northern Greece and Paul's first stop in Europe. He was publicly beaten, thrown into prison and later asked to leave. Yet he had time to establish a church, and this letter shows he has great fondness for the Philippians. Now he writes again from prison, this time in Rome, and thanks them for the support they sent to him through Epaphroditus. For the most part, this letter sounds an incredible note of joy. "Rejoice in the Lord always," Paul reminds them, "I will say it again: rejoice!" (4:4). The famous passage about Jesus' descent to the cross and ascent to universal praise is found in chapter 2. Near the end, despite his chains, he declares, "I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (4:13).

Question - Paul spends some time talking about being in chains in the first chapter. He views it as an opportunity to preach Christ, and he actually rejoices in it. How can you gain this perspective on the troubles you face? How is God's gift of joy different from our pursuit of happiness? What are some ways you can impart this joy to others who struggle? In chapter 2 we see the humility of Jesus who emptied Himself for us. How can you have a humble heart today?

Colossians

The third "prison letter," Colossians, has many similarities to Ephesians. It seems the people in Colossae are being drawn away by some "new age" teachings - an interest in spiritual powers. Paul replies with a powerful declaration of the supremacy of Christ over all creation (1:15-23). The second half of the book gives important guidelines for Christian living. "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (3:12).

Question - Take some time and slowly read 1:15-23. Think about all the images and descriptions of Jesus contained in this glorious hymn of praise. How does this change your image of our Lord? Does it help you believe He is greater than all your problems? Chapter 2 addresses the false teachings which sound spiritual but actually lead away from God. How can you move toward Christ and away from the deceptive teachings of this world?

I Thessalonians

Paul started the church in Thessalonica after he was expelled from Philippi (see Acts 17:1-9). Everything was going well until fellow Jews became angry that people were becoming followers of Jesus. A riot ensued and though Paul and his companions were not hurt they had to leave the city under cover of darkness. This letter, one of Paul's earliest, is written to a church of newborn and persecuted believers. Paul speaks glowingly of their faith, hope and love. He also addresses a primary concern: when will Jesus return? He gives no timetable, but he counsels them to continue living holy lives and be ready for him to return "like a thief in the night" (5:2).

Question - In 1:3 you see Paul's famous trio: faith, hope and love. Then he goes on to commend the Thessalonians for being imitators of him and of Jesus. Of course, we are to follow Jesus, but the Lord also gives us mentors, leaders and role models who are farther along in their walk with Him to help us become more like Him. Who is your mentor or role model in the Lord? If you don't have one, find one who can personally help you grow to be more like Jesus.

II Thessalonians

This second letter to the church is shorter and again deals with the issue of the second coming of Jesus (see chapter 2). Apparently, some people were so sure it would come soon that they stopped working. Paul tells them if they want to eat, they should work. The best way to be ready for His arrival is to live obediently and to invite others to join them in following Him.

Question - Chapter 1 contains a dramatic portrait of Jesus' return as well as a description of the punishment for those who oppose Christ. While this may sound harsh to us, remember the believers were under heavy persecution at the time and Paul wants to remind them that their persecutors will not have the final say. Jesus the Just Judge is coming. Why do we shy away from talking about punishment and hell in our day? Chapter 2 tells us to stand firm. In what way can you stand firm on the promises of God today?

I Timothy

This is the first of Paul's three Pastoral Epistles - letters written not to churches but to individuals who are pastors. Paul is likely in Rome, perhaps in prison and Timothy was sent by him to stay and oversee the church in Ephesus (the western coast of modern Turkey). In this letter Paul describes himself as the worst of sinners because he persecuted the church. Yet God showed His grace and saved Paul and called him to preach the gospel. Paul warns Timothy to watch out for false teachers and gives him guidance about worship and selecting church leaders.

Question - If God can transform a man who was, by his own admission, "a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man" and use him to write most of the New Testament and spread the gospel, what can God do in your life? What sin, weakness or self-doubt holds you back from doing all God has in store for you?

II Timothy

This is probably Paul's last letter. It is written from prison, and the shadow of the executioner hangs over the letter. Yet Paul remains confident that his life is really controlled by Jesus, not Caesar. He says, "For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day - and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (4:6-8). Paul gives Timothy some last instructions because he knows someone else must carry on his work. He hopes Timothy can come and see him one last time perhaps before winter (4:21). It is a beautiful farewell from the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Question - What farewell message and final instructions about Jesus would you want to give to those you love? How can you hand over and train up other servants of Christ?

Titus

This third Pastoral letter from Paul gives instructions to another pastor - Titus - whom Paul assigned to supervise the churches on the island of Crete. Titus was one of Paul's converts - a Gentile who was not required to be circumcised in order to become a Christian. He accompanied Paul to Jerusalem and served as a living test case for Paul's message that the grace of Jesus was for all people - Jews and Gentiles. Now Titus is overseeing the work in Crete. Paul writes, "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you" (1:5). What follows is a description of the qualities required of a Christian leader. Like the two letters to Timothy, this letter gives strong guidance for how to lead the church in the way of Jesus.

Question - In the opening greeting, Paul writes that our faith and knowledge rest "on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time..." (1:2). Everyone has faith - even the atheist. The question is, "What does your faith and trust rest on?" God or something else? And is it trust-worthy? What convinces you that it is true? God proved eternal life is not a lie by raising Jesus from the dead.

Philemon

This shortest letter from the hand of Paul is a gem. Philemon was a believer, but he also owned slaves. One of them, named Onesimus, probably stole from his master and escaped. Under Roman law he deserved death. But Onesimus made his way to Paul, who was imprisoned in Rome, and became a believer in Jesus. Now Paul writes to Philemon to not only forgive Onesimus but to welcome him back not as a slave but as a brother in Christ. Paul is very careful and respectful toward Philemon, but he also makes the point that Philemon is in debt to him for the faith he received. Tactfully, Paul doesn't demand this right, instead he says, "So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me" (v. 17-18). Mirroring his Savior Jesus, Paul doesn't demand or beg. He pays the price himself for someone else's pain. Some scholars believe that Onesimus not only returned to Philemon but later became a bishop of the church in Asia Minor.

Question - Who do you need to forgive? Who do you need to let off the hook of your resentment? What two people can you help reconcile as Paul did?

Hebrews

Once thought to be written by Paul, the majority of scholars say it comes from another hand. Since it is more of a sermon than a letter some conclude it is written by Apollos, the great preacher from Alexandria who took over the leadership at Corinth after Paul left. Regardless of who wrote it, the purpose of Hebrews is to remind Jewish Christians about the supremacy of Jesus over angels, the Law, the priests, the Temple and the sacrificial system. The author accomplishes this not by putting down these old ways but by demonstrating how Jesus fulfills and transforms all these avenues to God by taking them to a higher level. So, Jesus becomes our sacrifice, our great High Priest and our way into the true Temple and Holy of Holies that is in heaven. The book of Hebrews also contains the great roll call of faith in Chapter 11.

Question – The opening chapters focus on the superiority of Jesus over the angels. Speculation about angelic beings was great in the first century and Jesus was thought to be one of those powers. This sermon points out He is above and beyond them because He is the Son of God. Why are people more curious about angels than Jesus today? How can you help someone discover that Jesus, not an angel, is the real direct Way to God?

James

Written by the brother of Jesus and the leader of the Church in Jerusalem after Peter left (possibly for Rome) James is a practical book about the godly way to follow the Lord. Many wrongly assume that when James emphasizes good works he is suggesting we need to do this along with faith. What he criticizes is an empty shallow faith which does not bear the fruit of good works. So, there is no conflict between James and Paul, just a difference in emphasis. James firmly teaches us to care for the poor, pray for the sick and tame the tongue.

Question - The letter begins, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance" (1:2-3). Trials do not make us happy. But they can produce God's joy in us when we turn to His strength and not our own to deal with them. What trial are you facing right now and how can you tap into God's almighty power and joy?

I Peter

This letter was likely written by the great Apostle from Rome (referred to as "Babylon" in 5:13) to believers facing persecution in Asia Minor (the western Turkey). It is a letter of encouragement to those suffering for their faith. Peter reminds them this should be expected since, as members of the kingdom of God, we are "strangers in the world" (1:1). We've become "resident aliens" in our own communities. He advises them how to be in the world but not of it. He then outlines what it means to live a holy life - to be one of God's own people who were brought out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Question - Peter challenges us to be holy. This does not mean you are to walk around with a "holier-than-thou" attitude. It means you belong to God, and you live to please Him. In a practical way, how can everything you do throughout the day be an act of prayer and praise to God?

II Peter

In this letter, Peter warns believers to beware false teachers. He also addresses the question about why the Lord's return seems delayed. Peter first points out that "with the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day" (3:8). In other words, time has no effect on God since He lives outside it. The Lord is waiting to return to give us more time to reach people with the Gospel, "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (3:9).

Question - In 1:5-7 Peter mentions qualities which build on each other: faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love. If this is a progression, where do you place yourself? Which quality do you need God to help you develop?

I John

The Apostle John also combatted his share of false teachers. It seems they are raising doubts about the true humanity of Jesus. They suggest He was only a spirit when he walked the earth. As John points out in the first chapter, he knew Jesus personally, heard Him, saw Him and touched Him. Today we face the opposite problem: people doubt Jesus' deity. John also gives us the classic definition that God is love and therefore we ought to love one another.

Question - 1:8-9 is a passage often said in worship during the assurance of pardon. "God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." What do you need to confess to God today? Don't delay. Clear the air now.

II John

This little letter is written to a congregation whom John calls, "The chosen lady." Once again there is the temptation to follow a false belief about Jesus. John is uncompromising in his rejection of these watered-down teachings. At the same time, he advises them to love one another as Jesus originally commanded. This is the shortest book in the New Testament if you count verses.

Question - Some people are loving, others are truthful. How can you be loving and still speak the truth?

III John

This letter is not written to a church but to a fellow believer named Gaius. John affirms him and another Christian named Demetrius, but he rebukes Diotrephes because of his pride and desire for preeminence and his refusal to show kindness and hospitality to traveling preachers.

Question - John says, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (v. 4). Do you have children (biologically or spiritually) who could use some guidance on how to walk in the truth? Your example and words are the best teacher.

Jude

Jude or Judah was the brother of James the leader of the Jerusalem church and the half-brother of Jesus. He writes to a general audience instead of a single church. The false teaching he combats is the idea that since we are saved from sin by grace, we can go on sinning all we want. Paul and James also worked against this belief.

Question - Jude tells us to "be merciful to those who doubt" (v. 22). Who do you know who is doubting and struggling to believe? How can you show them compassion and kindness? How can you lovingly invite them to take a step closer to Jesus?

Revelation

Many believers are either drawn to this book like a magnet or repelled by its frightening and confusing imagery. Revelation (not RevelationS) is often called "Apocalyptic" literature. The word literally means "to uncover" and refers to the disclosing of the future by the Risen Jesus to John, a prisoner because of his faith on the island of Patmos. After a series of seven letters to seven churches in Asia Minor (western Turkey) John is taken up into heaven where he sees amazing signs of the end of time. Revelation is an incredible consummation of the entire Bible because it draws in many themes from Genesis, Exodus, the Law and the Prophets. Some have tried to read it sequentially as a blueprint or road map for the end of the world. Perhaps a better interpretation is to view it as a series of portraits about the same event, the triumph of Jesus over the forces of darkness in heaven and on earth and the renewal of creation in the new heaven and new earth (chapter 21-22). Despite all the fantastic imagery the message is simple: The Word of God will have the final word! Like a mighty crescendo in a magnificent symphony, Revelation is a fitting way to end the grand story of all of Scripture.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.

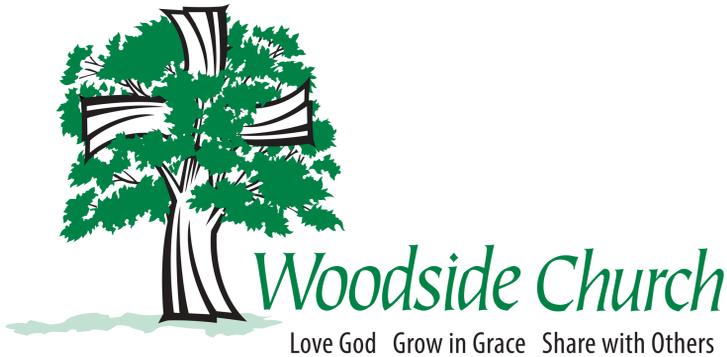
Question - Try to picture Jesus the way John sees Him in the first chapter. How does this change your image of Him and your relationship with Him? How would you live and act differently

Notes

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