

July to September 2020
Teenz RPG Series on

Old Testament survey

What is the OT all about?

Do pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance before you begin your devotional time, for unless the Spirit reveals the meaning, we cannot understand scripture (1 Corinthians 2:10). Then you must read the scripture text; please don't be tempted to read the devotional alone without reading the Bible. Memorising the scripture text will help you meditate upon it (Psalm 1:2), even long after you have finished your devotional time. After reading the devotional, always end with self-reflection: compare yourself against the standard of God's Word, and humbly yield to the Holy Spirit to direct you towards that standard (James 1:23-25). Be ye doers of the Word, not hearers only!

At the end of this series, may you be able to say as David said,

*"O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee,
my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is."*

(Psalm 63:1)

May all glory be God's alone!

Dn Milton Ang

On behalf of the Teenz RPG committee

WHY STUDY THE OLD TESTAMENT?

If you were to just look at the physical makeup of your Bible, you would realise that more than three quarters of it is made up of what we call the Old Testament (OT). Out of the 66 books of the Bible, 39 of them are from the OT, and 27 from the NT, yet most Christians today are far more familiar with the New Testament (NT). Many churches also seem to have a much greater focus on the NT, and in so doing, neglect the majority of the Bible. When they do so, they miss out a huge portion of precious Holy Scriptures that God has given to His children for their blessing. One may ask what relevance the OT has for us today, seeing that it is but a bunch of old records of things that happened thousands of years ago.

Well, we must realise that the whole Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, has great purpose and meaning for us, even today. In Luke 24 we see the resurrected Jesus meeting a pair of His disciples on the road to Emmaus. They were still mourning for the perceived loss of their Master, for they did not realise that the Bible had clearly prophesied that Jesus would rise again. It was at that moment that Jesus then rebuked them, and beginning at Moses, i.e. the beginning of the Old Testament, He patiently instructed and explained to them from ‘all the scriptures’ about the things concerning Him. These scriptures that He was referring to was none other than the complete Old Testament that the Jews would all be familiar with. In verse 27 it was described as ‘*Moses and all the prophets*’, and later in verse 44 it was ‘the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms’. What is clear from these descriptions is that Jesus was to be clearly seen and understood from the writings of the OT. The books of prophecy and poetry, the types, foreshadows and prophecies concerning Jesus all throughout the law should have been clear enough for them to understand.

As we go through all the books of the Old Testament, we must realise that they are far more than a collection of nice stories and wise sayings. They are the very words of God that spoke of the living Word of God, Jesus Christ, who was to come as the Saviour, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. It is an amazing unfolding drama of redemption that we will follow over the next three months as we journey through the OT.

Thought: Learning about the Old Testament is to learn about Jesus Christ!

Prayer: Lord prepare my heart as we start this new series on the OT.

WHY IS IT CALLED THE OLD TESTAMENT?

A few years back, when we were on a Holy Land tour in Israel, a few of us happened to strike up a conversation with an orthodox Jew at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. In the course of our discussion, someone in the group asked him which Hebrew ‘Old Testament’ text he used. He looked momentarily confused, and perhaps rather offended, and clarified that there is only one Torah, and that is the only Bible they know. To them, calling their Bible old can perhaps be rather insulting.

For us, we see the Old and New together as the complete revelation of God. The Old Testament refers to the first 39 books of the Bible all written before the first coming of Christ. It is written primarily in Hebrew, with some parts of it in Aramaic, a language that is rather similar to Hebrew.

The word ‘testament’ (Hebrew berith, Greek diatheke) means ‘covenant’. A covenant is simply a formal promise, a pledge or pact made between two parties. In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul described himself as a minister of the New Covenant, meaning to say that his ministry was to preach Jesus Christ, to tell of how they are to simply believe the gospel by faith, and they would be saved. This was in contrast to the Old Covenant which the Jews still saw themselves in, which was to be done away with after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Under the Old Covenant or Testament which was primarily instituted by Moses, they still had an imperfect or incomplete understanding of the gospel message, being blinded as it were by a veil. They did not fully understand the significance of their system of offerings and sacrifices. Now of course we know that those things were done to help them to look forward to the coming of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The contrast between the Old and New is therefore in one sense chronological, but also in terms of how much is revealed. Previously in the Old Testament, they could only look forward through types, foreshadows and prophecies. However, in the New Testament we have the direct instruction of the Word of God, and a much clearer understanding of who Jesus Christ is, and exactly what his life, death and resurrection means to us. Thus, both Testaments are precious to us, for together they give us a complete picture of who God is, and how we can be reconciled to Him.

Thought: Old does not mean lousy and out-dated, but simply different.

Prayer: I thank God that I have both the Old and New Testaments in my hand – the complete revelation of God.

HOW DID THE OT PROPHETS UNDERSTAND THEIR OWN WRITINGS?

Sometimes when we read certain sections of the Old Testament, especially some of the prophetic books, we may have difficulty understanding parts of it. This could be discouraging, maybe even frustrating at times. There may even have been times when we have been reluctant to read the Bible because we found it so hard to understand! Have you ever had such experiences?

We may be encouraged to know that even the Old Testament prophets themselves, those who were given the direct revelation from God to write His Word, had difficulty interpreting their own prophecies. Peter tells us how even the prophets *“enquired and searched diligently”* about the salvation grace that would come through the Messiah. They had to study hard to understand the true meaning of the two seemingly intertwined but contradictory lines of prophecy, of both the sufferings and glory of Christ. Therefore, Peter says that they had to search (examine their own writings deeply) as to what these prophecies signified. It is an amazing insight into the actual process of inspiration, whereby the prophets were the one who penned the words, which were exactly as God intended, and yet they themselves had to diligently study and enquire as to the exact meaning and interpretation of these prophecies.

Indeed, Bible interpretation is by no means an easy field of study. It requires much effort, patience and diligence. If we do not understand what is going on after a first cursory reading, we must not be discouraged, but continue to persevere in our study. Today, we are privileged with a vast pool of resources available, with huge volumes of commentaries, powerful Bible software, and an ever-expanding database of online material to tap on. Numerous men of faith have studied diligently, and made interpretations and observations being guided by the Holy Spirit. Of course this does not excuse us from exercising our own due diligence in the study of God’s Word, nor are we to just blindly access these resources without any discernment. But when we do come upon difficult passages or have questions about certain issues, there are many avenues that we can turn to, if only we would put in the effort to learn!

Thought: Be encouraged not discouraged when you come upon tough passages!

Prayer: Lord, may You grant me the diligence and discipline to study Your Word.

HOW DID JESUS REGARD THE OLD TESTAMENT?

During Jesus' ministry on earth, there were many scribes and Pharisees who opposed the things that He was doing. His love, compassion and focus on sin and repentance was in stark contrast to the proud, hypocritical self-professed righteousness of the Pharisees. They were legalistic, whilst Christ showed grace and mercy. They were so concerned with keeping the letter of the law and fulfilling the myriad of other teachings that they had added to the law that they lost sight of what the purpose of the law was in the first place. Thus, they became jealous of and angry at the popularity of Jesus, and often sought occasions to accuse him of breaking the law.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sought to correct all these misconceptions and to assert what his view of the OT law was. He clearly declared that He was certainly not here to do away with the 'law or the prophets' (a phrase often used to refer to the whole of the Old Testament), but that He had come to fulfil it perfectly. He did so both through the fulfilment of many prophecies pertaining to His birth, life, death and resurrection, and also through His perfect obedience to the law whilst He was on earth. In so doing, He showed the prime importance of the Old Testament. It was certainly not a document to be cast aside, since it establishes the standards that God has set for His people.

Furthermore, Jesus made a wonderful and astonishing assertion, that until heaven and earth passes away, that is to say until the end of the world is come, not one single jot nor tittle will pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. What Jesus meant was that God's Word in its entirety, down to the very last tiny detail of each word, will most certainly be preserved through the ages. At this juncture the New Testament had not been written yet, so He must have been referring to the Old Testament. He confidently stated that these writings of the law and the prophets will certainly be fulfilled to the letter, and so it was a document that would be of great use and blessing to the church through the ages! You and I must regard the OT as such.

Thought: *"For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven".*

Prayer: Thank you Lord, for preserving Your Word and making it available to us.

IS THE OT RELIABLE AND ACCURATE?

Through the ages, the Bible has come under numerous assaults from all angles as agents of Satan have sought to cast doubt on God’s Word. Satan knows the power of the Word of God, of how its words are able to turn a soul from rebelling against God to become an obedient servant of Him.

In recent years, as we see the Lord’s return nearing, we also see more intensified attacks on God’s Word. Numerous so called ‘Bible scholars’ have questioned the Word of God, casting doubts on various points of it. Their theories would range from those who see the Bible as but a curious collection of myths and legends, to those who claim the Bible to be inspired, but yet contain many mistakes and still require some ‘editing’, claiming that words have been lost in the transmission process. The focus of many who would deny the 100% perfection of the Bible is actually on the Old Testament. They point to some apparent contradictions and discrepancies in the names, dates and numbers, in an attempt to prove that the Bible has mistakes! How sad that Christians themselves would attack God’s Word.

As we read the Bible, time and again we see the Old Testament attesting for itself. The prophets proclaim “thus saith the Lord”, giving us confidence to know that it is indeed the very words of God that we are reading, and not a haphazard collection of man’s writings. Our confidence comes from God Himself. He validates His own Word. He promises us that He will preserve His Word, pure, perfect and complete for us, and so we simply take Him at His Word. Psalm 12:6-7 is one such promise, where it is clearly proclaimed that the words of the Lord are pure as silver purified seven times – the number of perfection. In other words, it is 100% perfect, guarded and preserved by God. The promise is that the Lord will keep and preserve them not just in David’s time, but for every generation, such that we will always have the perfectly pure Word of God in our hands, available for us to read, learn and cherish.

If there are particular parts of the Bible that we do not understand or which seems contradictory to us, we must realise that the mistake is not in the Bible, but rather our own faulty understanding. We ought always to humble ourselves before God than to be quick to find fault and criticize it!

Thought: God’s Word today is perfect! No doubts about it at all.

Prayer: Lord, we praise You, for the perfection of Your Word.

WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT?

When the Lord Jesus Christ came to this Earth, there was a lot of confusion with regards to who He really was, and what was His purpose of coming. For example, in Matthew 16:14 his disciples stated that *“some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets”*. They, of course, were certain that He was indeed Christ, the Son of the Living God. But even then, they did not really know what that entailed, for they continually expected that He would be the one to establish a real physical kingdom on Earth.

However, the whole truth can actually be found in the Old Testament. In fact, that was the very purpose of the Old Testament – to testify of Christ! That is what Jesus Himself explained to the Jews in John 5. He told them that there is actually a witness greater than John the Baptist, and that was the very words of God – the Holy Scriptures! He called upon them to search the Scriptures, for in them they would clearly see prophecies, types and foreshadows concerning Jesus. He told them that if they really did understand and believe the writings of Moses, then they would certainly recognize Jesus for who He was, and believe in His words as well!

This was the very reason why God recorded so many great details in the whole of the Old Testament, for in the whole volume of the book it is written of Jesus (Hebrews 10:7). It was for the Jews to understand and realise that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, their saviour who had come to cleanse them from their sins. Sadly, few Jews today recognize and acknowledge Jesus as such.

If you were to examine the Old Testament in the light of what has been revealed of Jesus in the Gospels, you would truly be amazed by the number of prophecies that have been fulfilled exactly in Him, of His birth, life, death and resurrection. Remember that these were written hundreds of years, some even more than a thousand years before Jesus came to Earth. God, in His infinite and perfect wisdom, saw fit to write all of them down, preserved for us in the Bible, that it would be beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus Christ is indeed the Son of God, the Saviour of the World.

Thought: What is the probability that one person would fulfil all the prophecies concerning Christ?

Prayer: Lord, my heart is filled with the wonders of Your Word!

IS THE OT STILL RELEVANT FOR US TODAY?

The relationship between the Old and New Testament can be described as perhaps the two wings with which the bird of Christianity can fly with, or the two pillars or foundations upon which the building of Christianity is built upon. Whichever the analogy you use, the idea is clear – the whole Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments, are essential to our understanding of God and salvation. Together they form the complete revelation from God.

Peter was quick to stress this point in his epistle, as he warned about the apostasy of the last days. He wrote to encourage Christians to *'be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets'* – a clear reference to the words of the Old Testament; and also to heed *'the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour'* – referring to the New Testament. Together they form a complete unit which would be our protection against sin and apostasy. Those who would ignore the Bible, especially the history found in the Old Testament, would be the scoffers of the last days, who *'willingly are ignorant'* of the literal account of the global flood in Genesis, and as such do not believe in the second coming of Jesus. If they would take heed of the prophecies of the Old Testament, they would also have realised that many of them remain yet unfulfilled, as they spoke of the return of the King and Judge of the world, who would come to rule the whole Earth from Jerusalem.

Certainly, the Old Testament remains relevant for us even until today, for it comes in one complete set together with the New Testament. It is the foundation upon which the Church is built. To ignore it would certainly be to our detriment, for in so doing we miss out on the bulk of God's revelation to His people. In the writings of the prophets, we see detailed accounts of God's dealing with His children, of His abiding and nurturing presence with them. We read of the wonderful praises that His people write of Him, and also of the wise words of exhortation directed to His children. We also read of prophecies fulfilled in Christ, and those yet to be fulfilled, looking forward to His second coming. Indeed, there are so many precious gems found in the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments. Would we spend the effort to mine them?

Thought: Thy Word is like a deep, deep mine, with jewels rich and rare.

Prayer: Lord, help me to love Your Word and hide it in my heart!

MUST WE OBEY EVERY LAW OF THE OT?

As Christians, we have the freedom to eat shellfish and wear t-shirts that are not 100% cotton. We do not have to purify ourselves every time we touch a dead body, circumcise all male children at 8 days old or stone a person to death if he curses his parents. But when we read the Old Testament, we know that these and so many other laws are commanded in Holy Scripture. If we claim to obey the Bible, why is it that these laws no longer seem to apply to us? Are we sinning every time we eat pork? Certain Christians seem to think so, for they assert that certain laws, or in some extreme cases all the laws, continue to apply to us today. On the other hand, there are non-Christians who would read the OT and cite some of the more stringent or peculiar commands and use it to mock Christians, and deride the Bible saying how Christians are inconsistent in their adherence to Scriptures.

What then is the right biblical interpretation and application of these laws? We realise that this very issue caused no small amount of controversy in the early church, even amongst the Apostles. It was a problem faced especially by the Galatian church. Therefore, Paul had to pen an epistle to them to explain theologically why as Christians they no longer had to adhere to the laws of the Old Testament, and were free in Christ. His main argument was that the law in the past was but a tool to point them in the direction of Christ. All the laws, offerings and sacrifices, and particular requirements of the OT law were like a schoolmaster, to bring them unto Christ. Now that Christ has come, we are no longer servants to the law, but free in Christ, no longer required to observe what Paul described as *“weak and beggarly elements”*, which have no power to save. They were only effectual when they were practiced in faith in the OT period by the believers who were looking forward to Christ.

In this NT period, we are no longer the nation Israel, the national witness of God, but individual believers in the universal Church of Christ. Only the moral law, the 10 commandments, apply to us. The rest of the OT laws, the Civil law and Ceremonial laws, which were for the effective governance and religious functions of the nation Israel, have since been abrogated (done away with). However, reading them is still useful for us as we draw principles and applications from them to apply in our walk with God.

Thought: Does freedom from the law give us license to sin?

Prayer: Lord may You grant me the discernment to understand Your law, both the Old and New Testaments.

WHAT IS THE TANAKH?

The English Bible that we are all familiar with lists 39 books in the Old Testament. You might be interested to know that according to Jewish tradition, they actually only have 24 books. This does not mean that they have rejected or taken out some books. Instead, their arrangement and classification is slightly different. There, the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles are one book each. Ezra and Nehemiah are also combined into one, and all twelve Minor Prophets are classed together as one as well. However, the actual contents of all these books are exactly the same as the one that we have in the English translation.

The ‘Tanakh’ is the name used by the Jews to refer to the canon of the Hebrew Bible, known to Christians as the Old Testament. It is actually a Hebrew acronym formed from the initial letters of the three main subdivisions of the Hebrew Bible – the ‘Torah’ (teaching), ‘Nevi’im’ (prophets) and ‘Ketuvim’ (writings).

This was the classification that was commonly in use during the time of Jesus. Collectively, these books were established and affirmed as the Word of God, given to His people through the prophets. It was a fixed canon that was unquestioned by the Jews, revered and treasured as the Holy Scriptures by which they ordered their lives. Jesus Christ Himself confirmed this throughout His ministry on Earth, for time and again He quoted from the Old Testament and asserted them to be the authoritative word with the phrase *‘it is written’*.

On the road to Emmaus Jesus confirmed beyond a shadow of doubt that these are the three categories of scripture – ‘in the law of Moses (Torah), and in the prophets (Nevi’im) and in the psalms (writings, Ketuvim)’. Collectively, they are referred to as ‘the scriptures’ in verse 45, and Jesus again affirmed that fact with the phrase *‘it is written’* in verse 46. It is in this completed revelation of the Old Testament that numerous prophecies and shadows concerning Christ were written, and were now being fulfilled in His life, death and resurrection. Thus there is no question at all that the Tanakh, the Old Testament written in Hebrew and Aramaic, is indeed the very Word of God, affirmed by the testimony of Jesus Christ himself in the gospels.

Thought: Christ confirmed the canon! Why should we question it?

Prayer: Lord, we thank God that we can have utmost confidence in Your Word, the Holy Scriptures.

WHAT IS THE PENTATEUCH?

The Pentateuch is the collective name given to the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. It comes from two Greek words which literally mean 'five scrolls' or 'five books'. Together they constitute a single literary unit known to the Jews as the Law of Moses or the 'Torah', which literally means 'teachings' or 'doctrines'.

These five books were all penned by Moses during the course of the people of Israel's wilderness wanderings. It tracks the history of Man beginning with the creation account and the Garden of Eden and briefly narrates the first two thousand years of Man's existence before God judged the world through the global flood. After the world was repopulated through Noah and his sons, the focus zooms in on the descendants of Abraham, with whom God made a covenant that He would form a nation, and that from him would come forth a seed that would bless the whole world. The rest of the Pentateuch then charts the formation of this nation through Abraham, Isaac and then Jacob, who was given the name Israel. The sons of Jacob thus made up the 12 tribes of Israel, who were sent to Egypt for a season, where they multiplied and prospered, till God saw fit to bring them out to go to the Promised Land. Of these events, Moses was not a direct eye-witness. However, we can have absolute certainty that these are true historical facts and not just a collection of myths, for they were given through the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. God Himself was the one who guided and directed all these events, and He alone can give us the whole complete truth on these matters.

From the book of Exodus onwards, Moses would become directly involved in all the events narrated, as God through Moses brought the multitude of Israel out of captivity in Egypt; crossed the Red Sea; encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai where they received the law; and wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, before finally pausing at the entrance of the Promised Land where Moses penned the book of Deuteronomy. In all this, we see the genesis of a nation, where from a single man named Abraham, God raised a people, gave them a law, and a land to call their own. Through all this, a Seed was to rise from that nation – the Messiah, Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Thought: Israel has an amazing and exciting history – all led and directed by God Himself!

Prayer: Lord, help me to see Your guiding hand in my life as well.

WHAT IS GENESIS ALL ABOUT?

The name 'genesis' literally means the beginning or origin of anything, and that is basically what this book is all about. This is the first book of the Bible, and teaches us about the beginning of beginnings. It spans a period of about two thousand years, highly significant in the history not just the nation Israel, but of man's existence. It recounts the majestic creation of the universe; the introduction of man onto this Earth; and the wonderful relationship that God had with Adam and Eve in the beautiful Garden of Eden. But then it also narrates the fall of Man, where sin entered into the world through Adam and Eve's rebellion and succumbing to the deceit of Satan (Genesis 3). It tracks how generations of patriarchs lived and died (Genesis 4), until a point where the wickedness of man was so great in the earth, and their thoughts were evil continually (Genesis 6:5). As a result, God had to judge the whole world through a global flood that destroyed every living substance upon the face of the ground (Genesis 7:23).

Yet amidst all this death and destruction, God gave a message of hope. Just as Genesis gave us the origin of sin, it also revealed to us the plan of Salvation. As God delivered the verdict of His judgment upon the sin of Adam and Eve, He also gave them the first gospel in Genesis 3:15, that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent. This described how a descendant of Eve, a second Adam, would come to overcome the Devil, to destroy sin and the curse of sin, and grant life and salvation to mankind. Do you realise the phrase "*seed of a woman*" points to the Virgin Birth? This would be the first of many revelations that God would give His people in the Old Testament, to slowly reveal to them what His divine plan of salvation is to be. Do study this unfolding revelation of redemption!

Through the rest of the book of Genesis, God focuses His attention on tracing the lineage of this seed from Adam, through Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Judah. God directs history, guiding these patriarchs and teaching them faith, setting in motion processes that would culminate in the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ thousands of years later.

Thought: Genesis is the book of beginnings.

Prayer: Lord, help me to understand and learn the many truths found in the book of Genesis.

WHY MUST I INTERPRET GENESIS LITERALLY?

There is a huge controversy raging in Christendom today concerning the interpretation of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. There are many who claim to be Bible-believing Christians, yet in the same breath turn around and cast doubt upon God's Word. Instead of taking God at His word and believing the simple understanding of Scripture to be true, these people have elevated science and human understanding to become their authority. They look at the creation account of Genesis 1 and 2; the account of man's fall in Genesis 3; long lives of the patriarchs in Genesis 4-5; the accounts of the global flood in Genesis 6-8; and the beginning of races and languages in Genesis 11 and dismiss them all as myth! They say that these are but a collection of legends and stories passed down through the ages, and cannot be understood as a literal historical account of what really happened. The reason why they take such a view is because what they read in the Bible just does not seem to tally with what they learn in modern science, archaeology, history and anthropology. Scientists would tell us that the world is billions of years old, created by a big bang, and that man evolved from a 'primordial soup' of elements. This seems to contradict the simple truths of Genesis, and thus they decide to reinterpret the Bible with this modernistic godless worldview. As a result, what happens is God's Word is compromised and ignored, and science and man's wisdom become the source of truth.

As Bible-believing Christians, we must simply take God at His Word. The Scriptures clearly state that God created everything in the beginning out of nothing, and that the whole Creation was created in six literal 24-hour days. The line 'and the evening and the morning' clearly attests to that fact. The moment we accept the atheistic theories of evolution, we reject the idea that man was created in the image of God, that God's creation was 'very good'. Instead, the world around us becomes nothing more than a coincidental accumulation of death, mutation and decay. The doctrines of sin and judgment have to be completely reinterpreted as well, because death would seem to be a part of the natural order of things, and not a judgment that came as a consequence of sin. This cannot be! God created the world perfect, and will one day restore all things in the New Heaven and Earth that we look forward to.

Thought: God created me, not by random chance.

Prayer: Lord, I thank You for the wonders of creation, for it shows forth Your handiwork.

WHAT IS A COVENANT?

There are many theologically significant and important themes that are found in the book of Genesis. One that stands forth clearly in the book of Genesis is that of covenants. What are covenants, you may ask? A covenant is simply a promise – an agreement or contract made between two parties. It can be man to man, or God to man. The covenants that we are interested in the Book of Genesis would of course be the covenants that He makes with man. In these covenants, God alone is the one who sets the terms and conditions.

There are two main covenants that are evident in the Bible, both of which are found in the book of Genesis. The first is the Covenant of Works, which God gave to Adam in the Garden of Eden. The terms of the Covenant were simple – if they were to obey and not eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they would pass the test and be granted eternal life, in the state of perfect holiness. However, if they were to eat (and they did do so in the end), then they would surely die.

After man fell, God showed His mercy and grace by giving a promise in Genesis 3:15. Through that first gospel, He ushered in the Covenant of Grace, whereby it was no longer a conditional promise that required man’s obedience, but it was an unconditional promise that relied on God’s grace. He alone would fulfil all the conditions of the covenant in sending the seed of the woman (Jesus Christ) who would one day come to destroy the works of the Devil.

This covenant was thus gradually revealed to man through the progress of time. God would slowly explain more about this seed through the various promises He would make to Abraham (like we read in Genesis 17), Isaac and Jacob, and later to men like David and prophets like Isaiah, Micah and others. The promises were consistent – that there would be a seed that would come as a Saviour, the Messiah who would deliver and redeem them all. It was therefore to this promise that the Old Testament saints like Abraham looked forward to, knowing that it was salvation by grace through faith, for salvation is of the Lord.

Thought: Salvation is always of the Lord, by grace through faith.

Prayer: O Lord, I thank You that You alone made salvation possible for us, for we can do nothing to save ourselves.

WHAT IS EXODUS ALL ABOUT?

From the end of the book of Genesis till the beginning of Exodus, a period of about 400 years has elapsed. At the end of Genesis, it was just a family of 75; Jacob, his children and their families. They had arrived in Egypt and settled comfortably in the land of Goshen. Now, instead of being special guests of Pharaoh, they had been reduced to slaves who were cruelly ill-treated by their masters. What had happened? Did God make a mistake in sending the family of Israel down to Egypt? Did not God promise Abraham Isaac and Jacob abundant blessings?

As the account of Exodus unfolds, we begin to realise the wonderful wisdom and providence of God. Nothing happens by chance, and nothing ever happens outside the control of God. It was all in the direct will of God that Jacob and his 12 sons would settle inside Egypt, where they would be shunned and isolated in the land of Goshen and allowed to prosper and multiply. As shepherds, they were an abomination to the Egyptians (Genesis 46:34) and thus they did not run any risk of mingling with the locals and falling into idolatry, which they might have had if they had stayed in Canaan. Thus, they remained pure descendants of Israel, about 2 million strong by the time God decided that it was time for them to depart, and allowed them to be so oppressed that they would want to leave.

It was at this juncture that God heard their cries. God knows and hears our every thought, our every fear. He told Moses out of that famous burning bush that He has seen their affliction and heard their cry, and had chosen him to be the one to bring them out of Egypt and into a land flowing with milk and honey. Moses was to stand before Pharaoh to plead for the freedom of his people. Moses did not know it yet at that point of time, but God would use him to bring about 10 plagues upon the nation of Egypt, each one getting progressively more terrible, finally culminating in the death of the firstborn of every household. God's purpose was to perform a miracle so great that it would be forever etched in the minds of Israel. In time to come, God would always reference these events in Exodus, reminding them that He is the God who with a mighty hand brought them out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Thought: The same God that brought Israel out of Egypt has also delivered me from the bondage of sin!

Prayer: Lord, help me to always remember my salvation.

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TABERNACLE?

Whilst the first half of the book of Exodus narrates how God brought His people out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and how He led them to the foot of Mount Sinai to give them the Law, the latter half of the book is filled with instructions on the building of, and the actual construction of the tabernacle itself. You might wonder, why did God devote such a large portion of the Bible to describe the tabernacle in such great detail? What was its significance and role in Israel, and how is it relevant to us?

At this point some Bible interpreters, in their earnest desire to find Christ in all parts of the Bible, become overzealous in their explanation of the significance of the tabernacle. They seem to find a special hidden meaning or spiritual significance in every single part of this construction, down to the number of tent pegs, the make-up of the curtains, and the dimensions given. However, our interpretations only go as far as they are supported by statements and allusions in the rest of Scripture. We should not give in to fanciful interpretations that only come from the creative imagination of man.

What we do see of the Tabernacle was that it was God's dwelling place amongst man. The meaning of the word 'tabernacle' is literally 'dwelling'. God chose to show His glorious divine presence amidst His people, and thus the Tabernacle and all its furniture was built for that purpose. As they travelled through the wilderness, God's presence and glory amongst them would be readily evident through the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night that covered the tent. This gave them shelter in the day and warmth by night. It was to be their guide and source of comfort.

The Tabernacle was also to house the various instruments to facilitate the offerings and sacrifices that Israel would bring. It would be the place where God would meet with man, and where man could approach the most High God. In that sense, Christ is seen in the Tabernacle, for He would be the Mediator that replaces this entire sacrificial system, for now through the one-time perfect sacrifice of Christ, He offered Himself up for us, and is the great High Priest through which we can approach God.

Thought: Christ is our greater and more perfect tabernacle!

Prayer: Lord, I thank You that I can come boldly before Your throne of grace to obtain mercy, and find grace in time of need.

WHAT IS LEVITICUS ALL ABOUT?

Often times when people attempt to read through the Bible from the start to the finish, they would not have much problem with Genesis and may struggle a little bit with the second half of Exodus. However, when they get to the book of Leviticus, it seems they hit a brick wall, lose all momentum, and then give up as quickly as they started.

However, if you really did take time to study and ponder the contents of the book of Leviticus properly, you would realise that it is in fact a book rich with meaning, with many lessons to be learnt on how we as children of God ought to obey our holy and perfect God.

One line that is repeated a number of times throughout this book, and aptly sums up the theme of this book is *“be ye holy: for I the LORD thy God am holy”* (Leviticus 11:44, 19:2, 20:7, 26, 21:8). Clearly, the focus of this book is to teach Israel how they ought to approach the thrice holy God. It gives them very clear and detailed guidelines as to what His expectations are with regard to their manner of worship through the offerings and sacrifices, how they ought to deal with uncleanness. They are even told what food is clean to eat, how they ought to conduct themselves daily, and various other miscellaneous instructions with regard to their day to day lives. Through these, they were able to see the high standards of holiness that God has set. They were to be a national witness for God, and so they were to live in such a manner that the nations around would see and know that they worship a true and living God. At the same time, through the continual need for cleansing and offerings for sin and uncleanness, they realised the futility of trying to attain salvation by works, and instead look forward to the hope of a Messiah who could come and save them once and for all.

For us today, the many ceremonial and civil laws of Leviticus no longer apply. We are not the nation of Israel anymore, but children of God in the body of Christ. Yet we are still called to be a witness and testimony for our Lord Jesus Christ. The same standards of holiness still apply, and so what we can draw from the book of Leviticus is not the letter but the spirit of the law, whereby we see God’s high standards for holiness, and the importance of separation from the world and sin.

Thought: God is Holy, so I should strive for holiness too!

Prayer: Lord, help me to be holy in all my thoughts, words and actions.

WHAT ARE ALL THE OFFERINGS ABOUT?

The first seven chapters of the book of Leviticus describe for us in rather intricate detail the whole Levitical system of offerings and sacrifices of the nation of Israel. On the surface, they seem to be a repetitive, complicated and tedious set of instructions as to how each animal is to be killed, drained of blood and burnt up as an offering unto God. As we read them, we struggle to find any significance or relevance to ourselves. We tend to think that these are just instructions for Israel then, and have nothing to do with us as present day Christians.

The answer comes only when we come to the New Testament. We see Jesus Christ being declared by John the Baptist as *“the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world”*. Later on further comparisons are made in the book of Hebrews, where Christ is seen as our perfect sacrifice, being given once and for all for the remission of our sins: *“By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God;”* (Hebrews 10:10-12)

Thus if we were to closely examine the Levitical sacrifices, and meditate over each one of them, we would be able to see Christ in them. We see Christ as our Burnt Offering, the perfect Lamb of God that was completely consumed, who became the atonement for our sin and was a sweet savour sacrifice holy and acceptable unto God. Christ was our Meat Offering, His perfect life offered as a tribute to God, His body broken to be meat for our souls. Christ was our Peace Offering, for it was only through His death and the shedding of His blood that we can have peace and communion with God. Christ was our Sin and Trespass Offering, for through his sacrifice He has made expiation and propitiation for our sins, and paid the debt that set us free from the penalty of sin.

We understand therefore that these offerings were instituted that they could be a *“shadow of good things to come...”* (Hebrews 10:1), helping Israel to look forward to Christ, the perfect Lamb of God. Do you?

Thought: Christ gave himself as a perfect offering to atone for my sin!

Prayer: Lord I thank You for Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF NUMBERS ABOUT?

The name of ‘Numbers’ it is a rather apt summary of what this whole book is about. Two large portions of this 36 chapter book is given to a genealogical record of the numbers of the whole nation of Israel – once at the start of the 40 year wilderness wandering, and once towards the very end. It is important to note though, that the people that make up the two numberings, though similar in number, are a completely different set of people. All those numbered in the first numbering, except Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Caleb, died in the wilderness, and it was a new generation that would be standing at the banks of River Jordan ready to enter into the Promised Land.

In between the two censuses, various other events (especially rebellions of Israel) of the wilderness wanderings are narrated, and a few other laws and instructions are fleshed out. The contents of the book will span nearly 40 years, from the time that they leave Sinai till the end of the book where they defeat Og and Sihon and claim the lands east of Jordan.

At the beginning of the book, Israel had spent more than a year encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai, from the time they received the 10 commandments (Exodus 20) till then. They had built the Tabernacle, ordained the priesthood and received all the laws of God. Now it was time to proceed on with their journey, no longer as a band of slaves but as a conquering nation ready to occupy their land. From a motley crew of slaves who had fled from Egypt, they were transformed into an ordered nation, with a political, military and religious system. This transition is most noticeable in the book of Numbers, as we see God Himself as the one preparing His people. Though He judged them for the rebellions and made them wander in the wilderness, yet His goodness never left them, and He continued to care for them as the apple of His eye. Precisely because He loved them, He continued to chastise them that they may turn back to Him.

Our journey through this Earth is like a wilderness wandering. Will we be rebellious like Israel, requiring chastisement? Or will we show forth a testimony like Moses, Joshua or Caleb, ever faithful, pleasing to God?

Thought: I am a stranger and pilgrim here, this World is not my home!

Prayer: Help me to be faithful always, as I sojourn on the Earth.

WHY DID THEY WANDER FOR 40 YEARS?

We are all familiar with the ‘40 years of wilderness wandering’, but do we really know why the children of Israel had to wander for 40 years? Was it a time arbitrarily set by God? Did it really take that long for them to walk from Egypt to Canaan? Were they really all that lost? If you read Deuteronomy 1:2, you will notice that it takes only 11 days to journey from Horeb (Mt Sinai) to Kadeshbarnea, which is close to the southern border of the Promised Land. Yet instead of 11 days, Israel spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness! Why?

These 40 years of wandering was actually a punishment from God. They could have gone straight into the Promised Land after the spies scouted the land at Kadeshbarnea, but because of their lack of faith that resulted in their rebellion, they were made to wander for those 40 years – a year for every day that the spies scouted out the land. God’s judgment for them was that no one above the age of 20 at the time of the rebellion would be allowed to enter into the Promised Land, for they were without excuse! They were a generation that had personally witnessed God’s power in the 10 plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. Instead of giving glory to God and trusting in Him, they rebelled against him again and again. This final rejection at Kadeshbarnea was the last straw. God said enough was enough, and they were to face the punishment. Thus those 38.5 years (they had already spent 1.5 years travelling from the Red Sea to Kadeshbarnea, most of it camped at Mt Sinai) were in fact years during which they were waiting to die. One by one, Moses, Joshua and Caleb watched every single one of their contemporaries’ *“carcasses be wasted in the wilderness”* (Numbers 14:33). It was indeed a sorrowful time, but yet it is the just punishment of the Holy God.

As we read these chapters, we must understand that rebelling against God is a terribly serious offense! God has done so much to redeem us from the bondage of sin, just as He had redeemed Israel from bondage in Egypt. Yet we continually turn our backs against God and run back into sin – acts which we know cause great grief to God. Are we rejecting God’s Will for us in our lives? Are we still indulging in sins that we know we shouldn’t be? We ought to repent before it is too late, and we end up like Israel.

Thought: When I rebel against God, I am doing the work of the Devil!

Prayer: Lord, help me to have the courage of Joshua and Caleb, to obey even if it means going against the crowd.

WHAT IS DEUTERONOMY ABOUT?

Oftentimes when we read the book of Deuteronomy, we feel like it is just a rehash of the previous three books, and tend to just skim through it and gloss over the finer details. We do not really stop to think and question why God would inspire Moses to seemingly record the law a second time, and rearrange the order of things. In essence, that is what the book of Deuteronomy is all about – the second giving of the law. The name itself, ‘Deuteronomy’ is derived from two Greek words: ‘deuteros’ which means second, and ‘nomos’ which means law.

The timeframe of the book is right at the end of the 40 years of wilderness wandering, just before Moses’ death and Israel’s entry into the Promised Land. They had already conquered the land East of Jordan and were encamped there waiting to cross the river and enter into Canaan. Here they paused for about a month as Moses delivered a final few addresses to them before he died. His purpose was to exhort this new generation of Israelites – most of them were born in the previous 40 years in the wilderness, and might not have personally witnessed God’s miraculous deliverance from Egypt. Moses’ fear was that they would again balk at the thought of entering the Promised Land, failing to trust God and obey Him. Thus his exhortation was centred round pleas and encouragements to trust in the Lord and remember His promises. We see this clearly in Moses’ closing address in Deuteronomy 31. Although Moses knew that he would not be allowed to enter, yet he cared greatly for the people, and repeatedly exhorted them to be strong and of a good courage, to remember that God’s presence would certainly be with them. They were encouraged to be strong and courageous in the face of their enemies. Just as God had helped them to victories in the past, He would certainly help them in the battles ahead.

Indeed, Moses had a true shepherd’s heart. His mission from the Lord was to lead His people into the Promised Land, and he did not rest until he did all that was possible in his power to see his mission through. That was the purpose of the book of Deuteronomy – to make sure there would not be a repeat of the debacle at Kardeshbarnea, but that Israel would indeed march triumphantly into the Promised Land, and declare the glory of God to the nations round about.

Thought: God is always faithful, even when we are not.

Prayer: Lord, help me never to doubt Your faithful presence with us, but to always seek to trust and obey.

WHAT WERE THE REQUIREMENTS FOR A KING?

Tucked away somewhere in the middle of the book of Deuteronomy, comes a rather interesting section where God gives certain instructions that describe certain things that the king of Israel would need to take note of. Remember that this was given in the time of Moses, about 400 years before Israel would have its first king. Yet God in His providence and wisdom saw fit to give these instructions first, so that when they finally did get a king, they would know what to do to ensure that he would be a godly one.

There were 3 prohibitions and 1 requirement in the selection of a king. First, he was not to multiply horses, lest he became self-confident and trusted in his own arm of flesh (Psalm 20:7). Horses were mainly found in Egypt, and that was another reason why he should not seek after them, for Egypt was the very place that they had been delivered from. They should not return there to bolster their military might. Rather, they should learn to trust in God. Second, he was not to multiply wives to himself, for God hates the sin of polygamy. God’s intent has always been for one man to have one wife, and any more would be adultery. Furthermore, wives were often taken by kings for the purpose of strategic political alliances. The nation Israel was to be separate from the world and a witness for God. Any alliances that they made would inevitably be with heathen idolatrous nations, and this would turn their hearts away from God, as happened to Solomon and so many other kings. Finally, kings were not to multiply silver and gold unto themselves, for it was not for money or treasures that they were to serve. Greed can so often get in the way of godly service, and again turn a king away from God. If he was in office simply to seek after wealth and luxury, he would make a very poor king indeed.

Instead of seeking after all these things, the king was to spend his time seeking the most important thing, and that is the Word of God. Upon coming to office he was to write out a copy of the law, and read it all the days of his life, that it would be a constant guide to him in all that he did, and cause him to walk close to the Lord. If he did so, then he would learn to fear the Lord and keep His commandments, and be a godly king to his people.

Thought: The requirements of kings make good Christians as well.

Prayer: Lord, may You help me to abide in Thy Word, that I may learn to fear You and keep Your commandments as well.

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF JOSHUA ABOUT?

Yes, as you might have guessed, the book of Joshua is about Joshua! With the death of Moses at the end of the book of Deuteronomy, Joshua has risen to a position of prominence as the leader of Israel. He was the one responsible for actually leading the children of God into the Promised Land, and helping them attain the final component of what was needed to make them a full and complete nation – a land to call their own.

There are three major sections in the book of Joshua. The first section from chapters 1-13 is about Joshua leading Israel to enter into and conquer Canaan, and the various battles that they faced, including the famous victory at Jericho. The second from chapters 14-21 is the division of the land, apportioning lots to each tribe as they settled into the Promised Land. The final section is from chapters 22-24, where Joshua gave them some final instructions and exhortations, before he died, to follow God and obey Him.

The message of Joshua is quite simply summed up in Joshua 23, as Joshua called upon the Israelites to remember all that God had done for them in giving them this Promised Land. He reminded them that it was indeed God Himself who had fought for them, as every single battle they faced and won was only made possible because God was with them. Thus he exhorted them to continue to be courageous, to obey the commandments of God, and to cleave to Him. As long as they continued to obey, they would be blessed and their land would have peace. However, the moment they departed from God, He would leave them as well, and His anger would be kindled against them.

The very same simple principles apply in each of our lives as well. The lessons are simple: Obey God, keep His commandments, and never depart from Him. This is the simple formula we must all apply if we want success in life. This was the exhortation to Joshua at the beginning of His leadership (read Joshua 1:1-9), and he obeyed it faithfully throughout his conquest of Canaan. He was successful, in that his life was approved by God and well pleasing in His sight. If we want the same spiritual successes in our lives as well, we must heed the words of Joshua, to love the Lord, and cleave to Him.

Thought: Love, cleave, serve and obey.

Prayer: Lord, may You grant me spiritual success in all my battles as well, as I wholly lean upon You.

WILL YOU SERVE THE LORD?

The two most commonly quoted passages from the book of Joshua are the first and last chapters of the book. The book begins with God exhorting Joshua, preparing him for the onerous task that lay ahead of him. He was assured of God’s presence with Him, to be strong and very courageous and to always obey the Lord. In the ensuing chapters of the book, we see Joshua heeding God’s advice and God keeping His promise - The Israelites were granted victory in every battle that they faced.

At the close of his ministry, it is now Joshua’s turn to exhort the children of Israel, calling upon them to affirm their allegiance to God and promise that they would put away their idols and serve only the true and living God. He began by recounting how it was the Lord who had made them what they were. Starting from the time that God called Abraham to leave home and go down to Canaan, there is a whole long list of what God did (notice a whole string of verbs in the first person singular; I gave, I took, I sent, I brought etc.) God reminded them of His goodness to them despite their repeated rebellions, as He brought them out of Egypt, through the wilderness and finally into the Promised Land.

In response to all that God had done for them, comes the challenge from verse 14 onwards: Will you serve the LORD? Joshua confidently declared that, he and his house would certainly serve the Lord. The people too, replied in kind and said, *“God forbid that we should forsake the LORD, to serve other gods”* (v. 16). They acknowledged all that God had done and affirmed that, they would certainly serve the Lord. It was a very good response, and surely it was a sincere one as well. However, Joshua’s reply was quite surprising: he said that they could not serve the Lord, for He is a holy and jealous God. Joshua was warning them that such a vow was not to be taken lightly or flippantly. Indeed we cannot hope to serve the Lord sincerely and in truth if we still harbour sin in our hearts. Yet the people were truly sincere, and affirmed their commitment. And so Joshua sealed their promise through a covenant with God, that they would put away all their idols, serve the Lord and obey His Word. Dear teen, will you do the same, in all seriousness and sincerity?

Thought: As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!

Prayer: Help me O Lord, to serve You in sincerity and in truth.

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF JUDGES ABOUT?

With the death of Joshua, we enter now into a very dark age in the history of Israel, known as the period of the Judges. The theme verse that sums up this whole period is the very last verse of the book: *“In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes”* (Judges 21:25). It was a time of terrible spiritual apostasy and moral decline. After Joshua and all the elders that were with him passed away, the next generation that rose up forgot all the miracles of God, and very quickly went into idolatry and great wickedness.

It was a very dark age for this young nation of Israel. Time and again the Israelites turned away from God and were chastised for it. We read of a continuous cycle, as evident in Judges 2, of sin where they rebelled against God and went after other idols; of judgment where God sent another nation to oppress them; then of repentance where they cried unto God for mercy; and finally deliverance where God raised up a judge to deliver them. However soon after that, they would fall into sin again, and the cycle would be repeated.

All these would not have happened had they obeyed the Lord in the first place. Their duty was to fully occupy the Promised Land and wipe out all the heathen nations. However, the root of the problem was that *“when Israel was strong, they put the Canaanites to tribute, and did not utterly drive them out”* (Judges 1:28). They allowed the idolatrous influences to remain alongside them. In their moments of spiritual weakness, they were easily influenced to turn away. This became a snare to them for the next few hundred years, and led to so much suffering and affliction, all because they refused to deal with sin when they could.

How about us? Are there sins in our lives that we allow to remain and fester? God likewise calls us to throw down the idols in our lives. Have we obeyed? Or do we wait until God comes with his painful chastisements and punishments before we scurry back to Him for deliverance?

Thought: I must deal with every idol in my life – swiftly, decisively and conclusively.

Prayer: Lord, help me to be strong and very courageous to deal with the sins in my life.

HOW COULD THEY BE SO WICKED?

When you read through the book of Judges, especially the last 5 chapters, you may be extremely appalled by the depths of depravity that the nation of Israel had descended into. Some of the accounts are so terrible that it can even make your stomach churn. It seems the Israelites had lost all notion of basic human ethics and morality.

One such example can be found in Judges 19. The account concerns a Levite – one who was supposed to be a religious servant of Israel and a teacher of the law – and his concubine. While lodging overnight in the city of Gibeah, the local men surrounded the house he was staying in, clamouring for the Levite that they might sexually assault him. In response, his host offered his virgin daughter, and the Levite offered his concubine. They eventually accepted the latter, and raped and abused the concubine through the night. The Levite found her collapsed upon his doorstep the next morning, and callously commanded her to get up and resume their journey. When he realised that she was dead, he brought her body home, divided her body into 12 pieces and sent the pieces throughout Israel as evidence of the sin of Gibeah.

Does it not sicken you to read such an account? There are just too many wrong and terrible things in this story to point out. Suffice to say, the account above is a snapshot of how morally depraved the people had become. Why did this happen? The reason is repeated a number of times in the book of Judges – “that in those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). Basically there was no authority, no governance, and so everyone became a law unto themselves, and did that which their hearts desired. Without God, the Israelites became what we see in the book of Judges.

It is easy to stand in judgment and criticise the Israelites for their corruption. Yet we must realise that our hearts too, are “deceitful above all things and desperately wicked” (Jeremiahs 17:9). If we were not surrounded with the godly influences that we have around us, if we did not have parents or the law of the land to control us, but were given free rein to do all that our hearts desired, how do you think we would turn out? We may not actually do the things the Israelites did in Judges, but do we not imagine the similar evils in our hearts?

Thought: Only by God’s grace am I kept from sin.

Prayer: Lord, help me to realise my depravity, and the true value of grace.

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF RUTH ABOUT?

In the midst of the terrible apostasy in the 400 year period of the Judges, there is a bright glimmer of light, as we read the story of a young lady Ruth, her mother-in-law Naomi, and her future husband Boaz. This is indeed a very touching love story - complete with brave, honourable, generous and wise characters that we can learn from. Yet one might wonder why such a book was included in the Biblical canon in the first place. The whole account seems so insignificant and trivial in comparison with the national issues that many of the other books deal with.

Our answer comes at the end of the book in Ruth 4:17-22, where it is revealed to us that Ruth is actually the great-grandmother of David who became King of Israel. It is indeed the story of God's grace, that amidst the apostasy of the period of Judges, God provided for Himself a remnant through a Moabite lady whose courageous faith continued to shine despite the godless surroundings that she found herself in. God was looking out for His own people. He would care for this young lady from Moab, and promote her to become a part of the lineage of Jesus Christ Himself!

In Ruth we see a wonderful example of faithfulness, of a lady who was devoted to her mother-in-law, even after the death of her husband. This love that she showed was said to make her better than seven sons (Ruth 4:15). We also see the wonderful fruits of a witness for the Lord, for there must have been something special that she noticed in Naomi that made her want to uproot herself from her homeland to become a poor widow in a foreign land. Naomi must have shown forth a testimony that prompted Ruth to declare that Naomi's God would be her God as well.

Although the story begins with two recently widowed women, sorrowfully mourning over their losses, it ends with them experiencing great blessings because of their faith. They would never have imagined what plans God had in store for them, in providing Ruth with a noble husband, and blessing her with a son who would become the grandfather of the greatest king Israel would have. Likewise for us, all God expects of us is that we be faithful to Him, and He will always guide us.

Thought: Will you be faithful to our faithful God?

Prayer: Lord, help me learn from the godly examples of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz.

WHAT IS A KINSMAN REDEEMER?

Throughout the book (Ruth 2:1,20, 3:9,12,13, 4:1,2,6,14), we see Boaz described as being a near kinsman of Naomi, and by virtue of that relationship, was a kinsman of Ruth as well. As a kinsman, he had the right and also the responsibility to buy the parcel of land that used to be Elimelech's, and work the land on their behalf. At the same time, he was also obliged to marry the widow of the deceased kinsman so as to raise up children in his name (Ruth 4:5). These were in accordance to the OT laws found in Leviticus 25:24-25 and Deuteronomy 25:5-6.

In Ruth 4, Boaz goes to the city gate to fulfil his responsibility as kinsman, to offer to redeem the land and also take Ruth to be his wife. There was actually another closer relative than Boaz (Ruth 3:12) who had the right to claim the land before Boaz. Boaz therefore described the situation and made the offer to that relative. Whilst that relative was willing to redeem the land, he was not interested to take Ruth as his wife, and therefore it fell to Boaz to fulfil the responsibility of both. However, we must not look upon Boaz's actions as merely a fulfilment of obligation, for behind the transaction was also a commitment of love and affection. Boaz was a generous and kind man who had taken a liking for this dear filial damsel. He saw the virtue in her and had shown, through his actions, that he cared for her. And so the story that started out with a tragic beginning concluded with a beautiful end. Boaz was described to Naomi as the *'restorer of thy life'* (Ruth 4:15), and Ruth would bear a child that would be the grandfather of King David.

Through this account, we are reminded of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, our gracious redeemer who willingly died on our behalf that He may pay the price to redeem us from our sins. He did this out of love, and in redeeming us, He also claimed us, the Church, to be His holy bride, as *"Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish"* (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Thought: What is the price that was paid for my redemption?

Prayer: Lord help me to appreciate what Christ did on the cross to redeem me from my sins.

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF 1 SAMUEL ABOUT?

The book of 1 Samuel gives us the transition from the period of the Judges to the period of the Kings (or kingdom). This is an interesting book of contrasts and characters, as we see three main people featured in this book – Samuel, Saul and David. They are three very famous and significant individuals in the history of Israel. Samuel would be remembered as the last judge and first prophet of Israel; Saul the first king but also a failed king who was the last of his line; and David who was God’s choice as successor, the noblest of all the kings of Israel and the line from which the Messiah would come forth. In this book we see the wonderful account of Samuel’s mother, Hannah, praying for his birth, followed by the early years of Samuel. We also read of how Israel clamoured for a king, and the rise and eventual fall and death of the first king, Saul. We also see how the humble shepherd boy, David, rose to prominence and the subsequent persecution that he suffered at the hands of King Saul.

One chapter where we see all three mentioned together is 1 Samuel 13. In this chapter, we are given an interesting insight into what sort of person the three are, and why God approved of or rejected them. God’s rejection of Saul happened early in his reign, not long after he had entered into office. While waiting for Samuel to come to conduct the offerings before the battle, Saul became impatient and decided to take matters into his own hands. As he conducted the offering, Samuel arrived and questioned why he had done so, for as a king he had no right to administer the sacrifices, as that could only be done by the priests. Saul shifted the blame from himself and lied in response. Thus Samuel denounced him: *‘thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the LORD thy God’* (1 Samuel 13:13). God rejected Saul, and His judgment was that the kingdom would be taken from him and given to another. It is at this juncture that David is introduced for the first time, as *‘a man after his (God’s) own heart’* (1 Samuel 13:14). In stark contrast to Saul, David would be one who would keep the commandments of God, and seek after Him. Thus we see that Saul was not a true follower of God, and from subsequent accounts of him, he turned out to be a self-seeking wicked murderer.

Dear teen, what sort of person do you strive to be? – One after God’s own heart like David and a faithful prophet like Samuel, or a self-seeking betrayer and unrepentant sinner like Saul?

Thought: Am I a disappointing appointment like Saul?

Prayer: Lord help me to never disappoint You in my service to You.

WHY DID THEY WANT A KING?

After the death of Joshua, Israel came under what is known as a theocracy. They did not have any main central leader, but God was supposed to have been their leader. He was their Lord and King, and they were to obey His laws. He was personally involved in caring for them – ready to help and raise up judges to deliver them when they cried out to Him, but also to chastise them when they disobeyed. This system would have worked if the Israelites had remembered God and kept His commandments. However, they did not. Instead every man did that which was right in his own eyes. They were happy as long as Samuel would be their judge and lead them. However, his sons were wicked and ill-suited to rule. As a result, they demanded a king to judge over them, just like all the nations around them.

Realise that a request for a king was not wrong per se. It was God’s intention that Israel would one day be ruled as a monarchy, to have a king over them. In fact, God even made laws with regard to this king: of how his reign ought to be like, and what duties he would have (Deuteronomy 17:14-20). What was wrong about their request was their reasons and motivations. In seeking for a king, they gave no spiritual reasons, only carnal ones. They were not looking for a strong, spiritual leader who would help them keep close to the Lord. They wanted a king only because it was what all the other nations had. They wanted to be like the world, to emulate the success of the world, which was precisely the opposite of what Israel was supposed to be. They were supposed to be a nation separate, set apart for God. Yet they wanted a king because it seemed like a trendy, useful thing to have, and so they insisted on their request, despite the many warnings that Samuel gave them. In so doing, they rejected their real king – the Lord Jehovah. They failed to remember that as a nation, they would be far more successful than any other nation, if only they would submit to the rule and authority of God and His Word. Their worldly wisdom and covetous eyes thought that once they had a king, then they would *“be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles”* (1 Samuel 8:20). In so doing, God told Samuel that *“they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them”* (1 Samuel 8:7).

Thought: God on our side is better than a thousand kings of man.

Prayer: Lord I pray that You will help me to never reject You as the Lord and Master of my life.

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL ABOUT?

1 Samuel ends with the death of Saul and Jonathan, and 2 Samuel continues with the rest of the reign of King David. He is now no longer a fugitive on the run, but has assumed his position as King of Israel. This book recounts the 40-year reign of King David and the various interesting events during his rule. We see the character of David more fully fleshed out as we see his ascension to the throne and his triumphs, as well as his defeats. We see him as a person, vulnerable to temptations and fears. We also see him as a man of God, fiercely passionate in serving his Lord and Master, and sincerely penitential when he repents of his various sins.

There are many historically significant events chronicled in the book of 2 Samuel. We read of the great victories in the early years of David's reign – a dawning of a golden era for the nation, as Israel was established as one of the greatest nations in the region (2 Samuel 2-4, 8-10). David captured Jerusalem and made it his capital (2 Samuel 5), and brought the Ark of the Covenant there (2 Samuel 6). He desired to build God a temple, a beautiful structure to be God's dwelling place. Though his request was denied, David was rewarded with something far greater - a covenant that promised that the seed of David *“shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever”* (2 Samuel 7:13). This is a clear messianic prophecy that the seed of David, Jesus Christ, will be the one to rule over Israel forever – a covenant that will be fulfilled in the Last Days.

Along with David's victories, we also have a taste of bitter defeats, as he succumbed to his lusts in sinning with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-13), and also showed his pride in numbering his people (2 Samuel 24). God's judgment upon David for his adultery was that *“the sword shall never depart from thine house”* (2 Samuel 12:10), and we see David face the consequences for his sin in the rest of the book, as domestic problems plagued his household (2 Samuel 13-14), with two attempted coups by his sons: Absalom (2 Samuel 15-19) and later Adonijah (1 Kings 1). Yet through all his struggles, David remained faithful to His God, and towards the close of his life, he looked back and declared that indeed God was his rock, and in Him he would trust (2 Samuel 22:2-3). Time and again he would cry unto the Lord, and He always answered. David's reign may not have been perfect, yet as a man after God's own heart, his passion for God set an example for all of us to follow.

Thought: Is God my rock, my fortress and my deliverer?

Prayer: Lord help me to always call upon You in my time of need.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MAN AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART?

One unique distinction that stood out in the life of David is that God described him as *'a man after God's own heart'*. It is interesting to note that when God uttered those words through the prophet Samuel to King Saul, *"the Lord hath sought him a man after God's own heart"* (1 Samuel 13:14), it was actually years before David himself was born. Yet at the time, God had already chosen him to be the next king over Israel. This description of David, henceforth, became a benchmark of sorts for the succession of the Kings of Judah that was to follow, for it was against the heart and deeds of David that they were measured. In the description of many of the Kings, variations of the phrase 'did (or did not) that which was right in the eyes of the LORD, as did David his father', or 'his heart was (or was not) perfect with the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father' is repeated over and over again as a way to summarise the quality of each king's reign.

What is it about David's life and conduct that made him so special? What qualities or traits that made him stand apart from other men and granted him this special mention? There are many admirable things about David's relationship with God and how he had such a love for Him. His concern was always for the glory of God, as seen in his battle against Goliath (1 Samuel 17). Through the many Psalms he wrote, we see a man who loved God's Word and constantly sought after it. Even when he sinned, he was sensitive to rebuke, and always quick to repent (2 Samuel 12, Psalm 51).

Perhaps one other example of David's love for God that is sometimes overlooked was his earnest desire to build a house for the Lord. It troubled him to see that the ark of God was housed in tents, whilst he had a palace of cedar. Even though God denied his request and designated his son, Solomon, to be the one to build God's house instead, that did not in any way temper his desire for God's house to be a glorious one. So while he could not be involved in the actual building, he threw his whole heart into the preparation for it, such that before he died, he had amassed a huge store of wealth that he gave to Solomon, and exhorted him to build a glorious house for God.

Thought: Do I care about the house of the Lord?

Prayer: O Lord help me learn from the life of David, to be a man/woman after Thine own heart.

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF 1 KINGS ABOUT?

Although the name of the book suggests that this is the book where the period of the kings begins, the narrative actually only starts from the reign of King Solomon, who was the third and final king of Israel as an undivided nation. The rest of the book (both 1st and 2nd Kings) contains the intertwined records of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms – of Israel and Judah respectively.

The main events narrated in 1 Kings are the death of King David, the reign of Solomon, the period of the divided kingdom, and the ministry of Elijah the prophet. These were momentous times in the nation of Israel, and later the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah. They were supposed to have been the blessed nation; God’s chosen people, and the apple of His eye. They were blessed with a land flowing with milk and honey. They had the true and living God on their side. They had wrought amazing victories, and all the surrounding nations feared them in the past. Yet as we read through 1 Kings, what we see is a nation crumbling and ravaged by civil wars, sin and idolatry. What had once been a proud and glorious nation under King David had now become two small nations squabbling with each other. They had turned their backs on their God, and were now paying the price for it. Yes, there were a few bright spots - moments in Judah’s history where there were good kings and moments of revival – but by and large both nations were on the decline as the surrounding nations pecked at their borders and slowly conquered their lands portion by portion.

All these came about because of their sin. God had promised both nations that if they obeyed, they would be blessed and they would not be removed from their lands (1 Kings 9:4-5, 11:38). They were also warned that disobedience would bring about swift judgment from the Lord (1 Kings 9:6-9). However, in 1 Kings 12, we see the sad mistakes that the first kings of both Israel and Judah made, because of their pride and disobedience. Their blunders were costly to their nations, for God judged them for their rebellion. Such is the consequence of those who turn away from God, and try to live their lives apart from God. Dear Teen, are you tempted by the ways of the world? Do you sometimes resort to worldly wisdom, and rebel against the Lord?

Thought: Sin (like crime) doesn’t pay.

Prayer: Lord, help me to realise the folly of sin and rebellion, and help me to always walk in Your ways.

WHY DID SOLOMON FALL?

Solomon is said to be the wisest man that ever lived. He was blessed by God with a *“wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee”* (1 Kings 3:12). His reign over Israel was a golden era of peace and prosperity, when all the surrounding nations journeyed to his courts just to pay tribute to him and to witness his legendary wisdom. He started his reign very well, humbly acknowledging his inadequacies and asking the LORD for discernment and understanding. The early parts of his reign were spent in service to the Lord, in building the temple and establishing the kingdom. In 1 Kings 8 we read his excellent prayer at the dedication of the temple, showing his love and devotion for the Lord, and sincere desire to do His will.

However, upon closer look, we see that cracks in his relationship with God had already begun to show much earlier on. Solomon made mistakes that would be fully manifested in 1 Kings 11, where he completely fell away from the Lord by seeking other gods. In 1 Kings 3:1, he *“made affinity with Pharaoh king of Egypt”* and married Pharaoh’s daughter. In so doing, he compromised with the idolatrous Egyptians, who would later lead him to seek after their gods. This was only the first of many such sinful alliances that he made that led to his downfall (1 Kings 11:3-4). He completely ignored God’s command for kings not to multiply wives to themselves (Deuteronomy 17:17), and married 700 wives and had 300 concubines! In addition, we also read in 1 Kings 3:3, that although he loved the Lord, yet his worship was sinful for he sacrificed and burnt incense in high places, and not at the Tabernacle where he was supposed to. (Deuteronomy 12:2, 11-14)

From these incidences we see that Solomon’s disobedience began as small seeds that blossomed into full-blown sin and rebellion in his later years. He did evil in the sight of the Lord in seeking after other gods, practising all manner of abominable worship. We thank God that he did repent and return to the Lord in his later days and wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, lamenting the vanity of seeking after the carnal things in life. May we all learn from Solomon’s example, to never allow sin and temptation to draw us away from our Lord.

Thought: We must nip sin at the bud, and never allow it to blossom!

Prayer: Lord, may You keep my heart always fixed upon Thee.

WHAT IS 2 KINGS ABOUT?

The book of 2 Kings is a continuation of 1 Kings. It follows the rise and fall of the various kings of both Israel and Judah. It is probably one of the saddest and most tragic accounts in the history of Israel, as we see both the northern and southern Kingdoms decline and ultimately fall into captivity.

At the beginning of the book we read of the last few acts of Elijah before he is taken up to heaven, and see his ministry passed on to Elisha. Though they were godly and fearless prophets, quick to rebuke the sin and idolatry of the various kings of Israel, it was to no avail as there was little they could do to stem the moral and religious decline of the nations. There are a few bright spots in the book - resulting from the ministry of the prophets, and also during the revivals that occurred during the reign of good kings like Hezekiah and Josiah - but the trend was generally downwards.

2 Kings 16-17 describes the final downfall of the northern kingdom, the nation of Israel, with the sacking of Samaria. After they were conquered, the Assyrians removed the children of Israel and brought people from many of the surrounding nations to occupy the cities. As a result the Samaritans became a mixed race who practised a sort of syncretistic religion. They still worshipped Jehovah in name, for they understood Him to be the God of Samaria, but they worshipped Him with their own methods: in high places and before idols. This is why during the time of Jesus, the Samaritans were despised and looked down upon by the Jews.

2 Kings 25 describes the final destruction of the southern kingdom, the nation of Judah, as Jerusalem is razed to the ground, the Temple of the Lord plundered and destroyed, and the once glorious city of God made desolate. The Jews were carried off captive into Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar, and prophets like Daniel and Ezekiel were amongst the prisoners. One of the last kings of Judah, King Zedekiah, had to watch the Chaldeans kill his 4 sons, before they put out his eyes. It was indeed a sad and tragic end, but no less than what they deserved, for God had warned them time and again that this would be the punishment for their disobedience. They did not heed the warning, and thus had to pay the price.

Thought: The wages of sin is death.

Prayer: Lord, help me to realise the gravity of sin, and to fear Thee, and to always walk in Your ways.

“the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight”

WHY DID ISRAEL GO INTO CAPTIVITY?

The northern kingdom, the kingdom of Israel, was doomed from the very beginning. God made a promise to their first king, Jeroboam, that *“if thou wilt hearken unto all that I command thee, and wilt walk in my ways, and do that is right in my sight, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did; that I will be with thee, and build thee a sure house, as I built for David, and will give Israel unto thee.”* (1 Kings 11:38). However, shortly after he became King of Israel, he irreversibly turned his nation away from the Lord when he built two golden calves and declared them to be the gods of Israel. He devised his own system of worship when he installed a new order of priests from the lowest of people, and declared new feast days (1 Kings 12:25-33). This caused every single generation after him to follow in his grievous sin, and it became a snare to them. Every single king of Israel after him prayed to these idols, and never truly followed after the true and living God, Jehovah. Thus the nation was continually ravaged by one rebellion after another, and just plunged deeper and deeper into idolatry and wickedness.

Finally after slightly more than two hundred years of continual disobedience, God said enough was enough, and used the King of Assyria to be His instrument of judgment upon Israel. This account is detailed for us in 2 Kings 17:5-6, where Samaria fell after a three-year siege. The subsequent verses from verse 7-23 give us the reason why God saw fit to judge Israel in such a manner. The reason is simple – *“for so it was, that the children of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, which had brought them up out of the land of Egypt, from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods.”* (2 Kings 17:7). Their varied heinous sins are described in the following verses: idolatry, false abominable worship, stubborn and wilful disobedience, and a rejection of God’s chastisements and rebukes. Because of all this, God was very angry with Israel, and thus rejected them as a nation, and *“removed Israel out of his sight”* (2 Kings 17:23).

Indeed *“it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”* (Hebrews 10:31). Dear teen, may you learn from and be warned by the example of Israel.

Thought: Does God’s longsuffering have a limit?

Prayer: Lord may You help me to fear You always, and never incur Your fearsome wrath.

WHAT IS 1 CHRONICLES ABOUT?

As we come to the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, we realise that it is a book somewhat similar to how the book of Deuteronomy relates to the preceding books from Exodus to Numbers. It is basically a second account of the events of the books of Samuel and Kings, with some details left out and others added. However, if you read more closely, you will notice that there is actually a distinct focus and emphasis in Chronicles. In fact, it can be described as more of a commentary of the historical events, where a certain message is conveyed through the way that the events are put together.

Reading through the first 9 chapters of 1 Chronicles, you might think it is just a very tedious and unimportant listing of names. Again we must read closely and examine the significance of these names. The chronologies actually begin all the way from Adam, continue through Abraham to Jacob, and then list out the descendants of each of the twelve sons of Jacob that make up the nation of Israel. There is a particular focus on the line through David and Solomon, as that is the kingly line. Far more than being just a tedious list of names, this is actually the history of the nation Israel in a nutshell! We may not know these people, but God knows each and every one of them by name, just as He knows each of us who are His children.

The focus of the rest of the book of 1 Chronicles is the reign of King David. Comparing the books of Samuel and this book, you will come across some unique passages that were not previously mentioned. There is a special emphasis here on the Temple of God. In the last 10 chapters of the book, the focus is on David's preparation for the building of the Temple. Although he himself was not given the privilege to actually lead in the construction of the temple, we see all the arrangements he made to ensure that Solomon, his son, would actually build the temple. He spared no effort to amass the materials and money required, even paying out of his own pocket. Furthermore, he also passionately exhorted all the leaders of Israel as well as Solomon to be strong and faithful to build the house of the Lord, for he knew how important it was for the Lord's house to be a glorious one.

Thought: Where is God's Temple today? Read 1 Corinthians 3:16-17.

Prayer: Lord, help me to have a care and concern for Your glory, for Your house, for Your temple.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF 1&2 CHRONICLES?

To be able to fully appreciate the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, it is important that we understand the context, timeframe and purpose of the book. Whilst the books of Samuel and Kings are books that simply chronologically record the history of Israel, Chronicles is a book written in retrospect. As you read 1 Chronicles 9, you would realise that the Babylonian captivity is actually noted there. The names listed here are actually of those who returned from the exile. Reading the last few verses in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, we see the return to Jerusalem being recorded as well. This would indicate that this book was actually written after the Jews had returned from captivity. Ezra is widely considered to be the author of these two books, as a scribe of the law whose concern for the people was that they would obey the law of God and walk with Him. Most of the people he was writing to had never seen Jerusalem before in their lives, having grown up in Babylon. They had never experienced temple worship, served any Hebrew king, witnessed the wonderful miracles of the past that God had shown to His people when He defended them against their enemies, nor seen the glory of the Lord fill the temple.

The message of Chronicles is clear. It was written to instruct them in and remind them of the great spiritual heritage that they as the children of God shared. Returning to a land that was their home and yet foreign, facing a future that was exciting and yet bleak, they had to be encouraged and exhorted to not make the mistakes that their forefathers had made, so they could once again be a people that would find favour with God.

Thus as you read through the books of Chronicles, you would see a focus on obedience. This would be key for the Jews if they wanted to carry on living in the land with God's blessings. Captivity happened because their fathers turned away from the Lord, and now as they returned to Jerusalem and tried to build back the lives that they had lost, they would certainly need God with them. Temple worship is emphasized as well, as we see David preparing, Solomon building, and the various kings either using or neglecting the temple. This would be vital in their relationship with God, for it always begins with a right attitude of worship. As we read these two books, may we commit ourselves to worshipping God aright as well.

Thought: Obedience is the key to seeking after God's blessings.

Prayer: Lord may You help me to trust and obey!

“if ye seek him, he will be found of you; but if ye forsake him, he will forsake you”

WHAT IS 2 CHRONICLES ALL ABOUT?

Whilst the books of 1 & 2 Samuel would parallel the accounts in 1 Chronicles, the books of 1 & 2 Kings would parallel the accounts in 2 Chronicles. However, whilst the books of Kings would describe the events in both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, 2 Chronicles would focus exclusively on the southern kingdom, the nation of Judah. Why is this so? This is because the line of kings from Judah, through David and Solomon, would be the line from which the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ would come from. As you read the genealogy in Matthew 1, you would notice many familiar names from the books of 1 & 2 Chronicles being listed. The 10 tribes of the Northern Kingdom, because of their terrible wickedness and idolatry, would be all but ignored by the Chronicler.

In addressing the returning Jewish exiles, the Chronicler was reassuring them that despite the failures of the past, God’s covenants to them would still hold true. The land and nation that He promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and the promise of a king through David and the future restoration of Israel were all still valid, and would be fulfilled by God Himself. God had not forgotten, and neither should the people. However, there were other covenants that God had established with His people that were conditional, and pertained to the physical blessings they could have in the land. We see this theme being clearly portrayed especially in 2 Chronicles – that obedience brings blessing, whilst disobedience brings judgment. This was what the Lord told Solomon when He appeared to him at the dedication of the Temple. As long as they remained faithful, God would prosper them in the land, and establish His kingdom there. However, the moment they turned away, God would remove them from the land and send a judgment so sore that it would be *“an astonishment to every one that passeth by it”* (2 Chronicles 7:21). This is exactly what happened to their forefathers, resulting in their captivity. In writing to this new generation of Jews, the hope was that they would not repeat the same mistakes of their fathers in sinning against God, seeking after idolatry and trusting in men rather than God. God was giving them one more chance – that if they *“shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land”* (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Thought: Obedience brings blessings, disobedience brings judgment.

Prayer: Lord, help me to learn from the mistakes of the past.

WHAT SORT OF LEGACY WOULD YOU LEAVE?

In the book of 2 Chronicles, we are given a very broad overview of almost 400 years of Israel's and Judah's history. Each king, however long he reigned, would have his life summed up in the space of just one or a few chapters. In it we read of his trials and difficulties, accomplishments and victories, but also his errors and failings.

In 2 Chronicles 29 we have the account of Hezekiah, one of the best kings to ever have reigned in Judah. His rule comes after the terrible reign of King Ahaz who because of his sin, *“made Judah naked, and transgressed sore against the LORD”* (2 Chronicles 28:19). Instead of being negatively influenced by his wicked father, Hezekiah stood strong and *“did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done”*. He did much to revive the nation of Judah, and thrived amidst the difficulties that he faced. When he led the nation to keep the Passover, *“there was great joy in Jerusalem: for since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there was not the like in Jerusalem”* (2 Chronicles 30:26). Indeed, his life left a great and wonderful mark in the history of Judah, and did much to draw them out of sin and idolatry and back unto the Lord.

Looking at Manasseh on the other hand, we read of one of the worst kings to have ever ruled the nation. He was so wicked that he seemed to have taken wickedness to new and unprecedented levels. The depths of depravity which he caused the nation to descend into is shocking, even in today's decadent and immoral society. In his reign, he probably undid all the good that Hezekiah had wrought, for *“Manasseh made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err, and to do worse than the heathen, whom the LORD had destroyed before the children of Israel”* (2 Chronicles 33:9). Though Manasseh did repent and turn to the Lord later in his life, the damage had already been done, for the people continued to err and sacrifice in high places (2 Chronicles 33:17), and Amon his son was as evil as he was in his early days. What a contrast to Hezekiah, and what a sad legacy he left behind, to be remembered as one of the most wicked kings of Judah.

As we read of these kings, may we ponder and examine our own lives, and ask what sort of legacy we would leave behind. How would the Lord describe the lives that we are now living?

Thought: Have I done right or evil in the sight of the Lord?

Prayer: Lord, grant me the strength to always seek good and hate evil.

WHAT IS EZRA ALL ABOUT?

605-586 BC was the period that Jerusalem was under siege, sacked, had her temple destroyed, and experienced the final Babylonian invasion that sent all of Judah into captivity. However, God had promised them through the prophet Jeremiah that they would not stay captive forever, but the punishment would last only for seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11, ref. 2 Chronicles 32:21). After that, God would bring them back into their land once again. The close of 2 Chronicles mirrors the beginning of the book of Ezra, where the period of captivity had passed, and the Jews were now allowed to return home to rebuild Jerusalem. The date is 538 BC. King Cyrus and the Persians had conquered the Babylonians, and were now the largest kingdom in the world. As was predicted by the prophet Isaiah, King Cyrus decreed that the Jews should be allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild, and so begins the events of the book of Ezra.

There are two main segments in the book of Ezra, set about 80 years apart from each other. The first, from chapters 1-6, describes the first return to Jerusalem led by Zerubbabel in 538 BC. He leads a band of close to 50,000 returnees and straightaway initiates the task of rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. Despite facing numerous oppositions, setbacks and delays, they eventually complete the task, and celebrate a Passover in Jerusalem for the first time in many years.

The second part, from chapters 7-10 describes the second return led by Ezra (who is the writer of this book) in 458 BC. Whilst Zerubbabel led in the physical restoration of Jerusalem, Ezra's focus was more with regard to their spiritual restoration. Many years had elapsed since they had joyously consecrated the temple and they had again lapsed into sin. Many of them had committed the grave sin of marrying foreign husbands and wives. Ezra's purpose therefore was to preach the Word of God to them, to cause them to repent and turn back unto the Lord. In this he was successful, for he led them in a time of national mourning for their sin, confessing their faults and taking concrete action to make amends.

Through these events, we remember that God will always be faithful to His people, to fulfil His promises to them, and to draw them back unto Himself whenever they stray. Indeed, we serve such a wonderful God!

Thought: God will always be faithful to His people.

Prayer: Lord, I thank You for Your faithfulness. Help me to be faithful!

ARE YOU EASILY DISCOURAGED?

When the first group of returnees arrived at Jerusalem, they came in high spirits, excited to commence the construction of the temple. They all gathered together to worship the Lord, and laid the foundation with great celebration and praise to the Lord (Ezra 3). It was indeed a great beginning, for God was glorified in all that they did. However, soon after they started, they began to face opposition. Their adversaries were displeased with their presence, and began to seek various ways and means to discourage them from the work.

The wiles of the Devil are such that as long as you are serving, being effective for the Lord, you become a prime target for his attacks. This is what the people were facing in Ezra 4. There were two main attacks that were launched against them. The first, from Ezra 4:1-3, can be described as the ‘soft approach’, whereby the Samaritans tried to claim allegiance with Israel, and sought to infiltrate their ranks through deception, and spoil the work from within. Against this first attack, Zerubbabel and Jeshua remained strong and resisted their offer, choosing to rely only on the Lord. However, the second attack that came was the more ‘hard approach’, through the means of persecution and oppression. *“The people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building, and hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose”* (Ezra 4:3-4). They wrote letters of complaint to the king, filled with lies and false accusations about the people of Judah, such that the king gave them the authority to force them to cease from the work.

Against such relentless opposition, they capitulated. Although they had every right from the decree of King Cyrus to return to build (Ezra 1:2), they decided that it was too much of a hassle to fight for the Lord, and just meekly threw up the white flag and surrendered to their enemies. As a result, the work ceased for 16 years. They just left the half-complete foundations, ignored the work they so excitedly started just months ago, and returned to their lives. It was only when the Lord sent prophets Haggai and Zechariah to goad them back into action that the work resumed and was finally completed 4 years later (Ezra 6:15).

Thought: Am I an easy target to the attacks of Satan?

Prayer: O Lord, I pray that Thou would help me to stand strong against the temptations, deceptions and attacks of the evil one.

WHAT IS NEHEMIAH ALL ABOUT?

After the events of the book of Ezra, the temple at Jerusalem had already been rebuilt, and the city had been re-occupied by the people of Israel. However, Jerusalem was still but a pale shadow of its former glories. It was no longer the strong city that it once was, but more like a struggling outpost surrounded by some outlying settlements, constantly under threat by its neighbours. That was the report that Nehemiah received about it, that *“the remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach, the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates therefore are burned with fire”* (Nehemiah 1:3).

As a man of God who cared for God’s glory, this troubled Nehemiah greatly. Although he grew up in Babylon and never saw Jerusalem himself, he yearned to go back to his people to help them. He interceded on their behalf, and then made a request before the king to send him back to Judah to build a wall for Jerusalem. This was indeed a brave request, for a servant to stand before the king and to ask for such a thing. Yet because of the burden that was placed in his heart, Nehemiah was willing to take that risk.

Thus the whole book chronicles the various trials and challenges that Nehemiah and the people faced in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, and also some reforms that were made in re-consecrating the people back to obedience with God. They would be faced with both external and internal problems. There would be enemies who would try to attack them from without, whilst they tried to resolve the conflicts that were plaguing them from within. Nevertheless, under Nehemiah’s wise leadership, the wall was completed in just 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15).

But it was not just a physical rebuilding that Nehemiah was interested in. Like how it was in the book of Ezra, there was also a time of national revival led by Ezra himself, for he and other scribes preached to Israel from the Word of God (Nehemiah 8). As a result, they repented and renewed a covenant with the Lord, and Jerusalem returned to the Lord.

Indeed, what began as one man’s burden for the glory of God resulted in Jerusalem being revived both physically and spiritually. Dear Teen, do you care for the glory of God? What are you doing about it?

Thought: Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God.

Prayer: Lord, place in me a desire for Thee and for Thy glory.

WHAT IS THE SWORD AND TROWEL?

In the midst of rebuilding the walls, the people of Jerusalem faced much opposition. There were those like Sanballat and Tobiah who mocked them (Nehemiah 4:1-3), and conspired to mount a military attack against them (Nehemiah 4:7-8). In the face of such opposition, the people remained strong. Instead of being discouraged or retreating and giving up, they cried unto God and prepared themselves for it. They relied on God, but also fulfilled their own human responsibility by making certain arrangements to ensure that the work continued, and that their safety was also not compromised.

Nehemiah encouraged the people to remember their God, and how He would fight on their behalf. He then set up a 'guard duty roster', such that at any one time, half of them would stand guard with shields, spears, bows and armour, whilst the other half would work. But even as they worked, they all would be armed with a sword by their side, or a weapon in their hands.

Knowing how critical the situation was, they also doubled their efforts, and laboured relentlessly until the work was done. They worked from dawn to dusk (Nehemiah 4:21), and didn't even have time to change their clothes, except to wash them (Nehemiah 4:23). They were rewarded for their efforts in the end, for despite all the difficulties that they faced, the wall was completed in just 52 days – indeed a testament to their strength and fighting spirit.

In his lifetime, the famous preacher Charles Spurgeon started a magazine called “Sword and Trowel”. His inspiration came from this account in the book of Nehemiah 4, where they built the walls despite being surrounded by enemies, and armed themselves with weapons whilst continuing in the work (a trowel refers to a small hand tool for digging or smoothing, kind of like a flattened spade). In this account we see a picture of resilience and tenacity despite difficulties and oppositions, but we also see the picture of a Christian, whose duty is exactly that – to serve, to labour for the Lord, to build up and edify, but at the same time also to defend against the enemies of God, to take up arms and fight the good fight of faith. As Christians, we are described as both labourers and soldiers for the Lord (2 Timothy 2:1-6). May we all strive to fulfil these roles in our lives!

Thought: To serve the Lord is to fight against His enemies.

Prayer: Lord may you also arm me with a sword and a trowel, that I may serve You faithfully, and fight the good fight of faith.

WHAT IS ESTHER ALL ABOUT?

Chronologically, the events in Esther actually come in between the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Whilst the events of both those books take place mostly in Jerusalem, events in Esther take place in the city of Shushan, the capital of the Persian Empire. The story revolves around the lives of a Jewish lady Esther, Mordecai her cousin, Ahasuerus (known as Xerxes I in world history) the King of Persia, and Haman his right hand man. It is an exciting drama of intrigue, romance, betrayal and vengeance; full of plot twists, dramatic irony and political wrangling. Esther, the main character, rises from being just a poor Jewish orphan girl to become the Queen of Persia, and later also the one instrumental in saving her people from sure destruction. Her nemesis would be Haman, an ambitious self-serving Jew-hater who was determined to destroy Mordecai and the whole Jewish race.

Whilst the story itself is interesting enough, the main excitement actually happens behind the scenes. Although the name of Jehovah or God is not mentioned once throughout the book, His divine footprints are evident everywhere. It is clearly the Almighty sovereign God who is working out His divine providence in preserving His people from sure destruction. It was certainly providence that Vashti was dismissed, and in turn Esther was raised by God to such a position for a time such as this. It was also no coincidence that the king could not sleep that one night, and was somehow led to read the account of Mordecai's heroic act, which led to the honouring of Mordecai at the expense of Haman's humiliation. It was surely God's divine justice that caused Haman to be hanged on the very gallows that the latter had built to hang Mordecai, and for Mordecai to be raised to the position that Haman vacated.

Indeed just as God had been active in the lives of Esther, Mordecai and the Jewish people in captivity, God is certainly active and working in your life as well. Nothing at all happens by chance. If we are truly the children of God, we would be comforted and assured by this wonderful teaching of God's providence in the lives of His people, as clearly seen in this book.

Thought: *“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose”.*

Prayer: I thank You Lord for Your miraculous and wonderful providence working in my life!

WHAT IS ‘PUR’ AND ‘PURIM’?

If you were to visit Israel or any Jewish community around the world sometime around March, you would have the privilege of witnessing the celebration of the Jewish festival of Purim. You might see carnivals, and many of them dressed up in costumes, perhaps even cross-dressing, as they party, feast, drink and give gifts to each other. Some have even described the festival of Purim as the Jewish Mardi Gras. In fact, because the dates are rather similar, these festivals are sometimes even celebrated together.

Reading the end of the book of Esther, we realise that this Jewish festival actually has its roots from the Bible. The word ‘purim’ is the plural form of the Hebrew word ‘pur’ which simply means lots, as in to cast lots (like a ‘lucky draw’). This is what Haman did in Esther 3:7, in seeking to find an auspicious date which they could seek to destroy the Jews. However, God sovereignly guided the lot cast so that the date set was as far away as possible, giving Mordecai and Esther enough time to prevent the attack and prepare the Jews. After the date had come and gone, and the Jews were able to defend against the attack and smite their enemies, they acknowledged that God was indeed at work amongst them, for He had turned their *“sorrow into joy, and from mourning into a good day”*. They would remember this event with feasting and joy, and giving of gifts to each other and to the poor, so they fixed this date upon their calendar (Esther 9:26-28).

Whilst the festival of Purim does indeed have a very meaningful biblical significance, it is sad that the Jews today have turned it into an excuse for partying and drunken revelry. Where it should have been a day where they should remember and meditate on God’s wonder-working power in protecting them from their enemies, and His merciful deliverance from destruction, they have turned it into a day where they would feast and celebrate for no reason other than to have fun. In fact, it is similar to how many Christians today claim to remember events like Christmas and Easter, but only pay lip service to Christ. Instead of meditating on the wonderful events of His birth and resurrection, these holy days have simply become holidays, festive commercially motivated seasons that only promote pagan godless lifestyles, instead of the worship of the Holy God.

Thought: What is the true meaning of Christmas and Easter?

Prayer: Lord, help me to make this year’s Christmas a meaningful one.

“shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?”

WHAT IS JOB ALL ABOUT?

Many of us are familiar with Job 1-2, and also the last chapter, Job 42. We all know how Job’s faith was put to the test by a barrage of terrible trials from the hand of Satan himself, and how he proved himself exemplary in the face of all these testings. We also read with joy, of how the Lord *“blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning”* (Job 42:12). But then how about the rest of the book of Job? What are the 39 chapters in between all about? What can we learn from them?

Job 2:11 actually gives us the introduction to the whole middle section of the book of Job, as we see three of Job’s so-called friends come to mourn with Job and attempt to comfort him. From Job 3 onwards, it is actually a long discourse between Job and the three friends, who are later also joined by a fourth from Job 32 onwards. Initially Job pours out his great grief and laments to them, and tries to find an answer for his suffering. As his friends reply in turn, each of them tries to explain why Job was suffering all these calamities. Their main thesis is that Job’s suffering comes as a result of his sin, and each one of them exhorts him to repent. As he denies their accusations one by one, they come up with more and more specific sins which they believe he had committed, as the reason for God’s judgment upon him. Thus instead of coming to comfort him, Job’s friends end up being the devil’s advocate, accusing him and furthering his sorrow, claiming that he deserved all the sufferings that he received.

Finally, God appears to Job in chapter 38, and all doubts were quashed before the Almighty God. His friends were certainly wrong in their false accusations, but neither was Job blameless. God did not directly answer their queries, nor did he give any explanation as to why Job suffered. Instead, with a few simple questions, God proves his sovereignty and power, and shows how ignorant and weak man really is. To this mighty spectacle of God’s ability, Job had no answer, except for a humble confession *“Behold I am vile, what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth”* (Job 40:4). The lesson we see is that it is never man’s place to question God, or to justify our actions before Him. We can never fully explain why anything happens in our lives, but we are to simply trust the almighty God who created the heavens and the earth.

Thought: We can never fully fathom the ways of God.

Prayer: Lord may You grant me the faith to believe that You are always in control of all things.

WHAT POWER DOES SATAN HAVE?

When we read of the ferocious way in which the life of Job is completely turned upside down by the attacks of Satan, there does seem to be cause to fear. It seems Satan is so almighty, being able to control the Sabeans and Chaldeans to do his will; to guide the winds and bring about calamities; and to even directly harm the health of Job, causing him great anguish and suffering. He did all these things mercilessly, fully intent on making Job curse God. He did not have a single shred of concern about the pain that he caused upon this innocent man. In the blink of an eye, he took away everything that Job held dear – his family, his possessions, and even his health. Indeed, Satan is like a great evil ferocious dragon, like a roaring lion that goes about seeking poor innocent men that he may devour.

However, if we were to read the book of Job a little more carefully, we would be able to find more cause for comfort than fear. In Job 1:10 we see Satan accusing God of placing a hedge about Job, his house and all that he had, such that Satan was unable to do anything against him. This is the protection that God has over His children, that He zealously guards them from any harm and danger. It was only when Satan bargained with God, to challenge God to see if Job’s worship of Him was true, that God granted him permission to affect some parts of Job’s life. Initially he was allowed only to touch all that Job had, but he could not touch Job himself. Thus Satan took away all his wealth and family. It was only in chapter 2, when Job weathered the sufferings of all that happened in chapter 1, and remained steadfast trusting in the Lord, that God allowed Satan to also harm his health, but not take his life. It was then that Satan was allowed to afflict Job with sore boils and all manner of disease.

Through these two chapters, we see the very important lesson of God’s ultimate sovereignty, even over Satan. Though Satan does seem to be very powerful in this world, he will always be limited by God’s will. He has to first seek God’s permission before he would be allowed to do anything at all. At times, God may allow trials to happen to us, but only to test us and to help us to grow in faith, as with what happened to Job. God is all-powerful, Satan is not. May we learn to have even more faith and trust in God, and have the courage to resist the trials and temptations that Satan would throw at us.

Thought: Satan has some power, but God has infinitely more!

Prayer: Lord may You grant me the strength to defend against the fiery darts of the wicked one.

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF PSALMS ALL ABOUT?

We are all familiar with the book of Psalms. I am sure one of the first few passages of the Bible that you memorised would have been Psalm 23 – a psalm so famous that even many non-believers know about it as well. But there are many more psalms in this book than just the 23rd Psalm. We have turned to various psalms to comfort us when we were in the depths of despair; to assure us when we were in dire distress; to draw strength and comfort when faced with difficult situations or people; to rejoice and sing praise when we are filled with exultation for God.

The book of Psalms does not read like the other books of the Bible, in that it does not have any chronological or narrative sequence to it. Instead, it is more like a hymn book, a collection of songs, poetry, taken from various time periods in Israel's history. Whilst most of the psalms would be written by David or other writers around his time, the earliest psalm would be Psalm 90 which was written by Moses, and the latest would perhaps be Psalm 126, written after the captivity.

There are many themes and topics presented by the various psalms. We see psalms of wisdom that give us instruction for daily living; we see psalms of lamentation, where the distresses and difficulties of life are expressed and God's deliverance is praised; we see psalms of thanksgiving where God's greatness and gracious blessings are praised; we see psalms of penitence, where one pours out his heart in confession and repentance for his sins; and finally we see psalms of kingship, where God and Christ are portrayed as the sovereign ruler and their majesty is praised.

Through these psalms we have a whole array of the human experience. Indeed, as we read in the very first psalm, blessed is the man who has his delight in the law of the LORD, and meditates in it day and night! There are so many blessings to be had, and lessons to be learnt from a detailed study of the Psalms. We would do well to meditate on them, to dwell on those wonderful words of life that are a balm to your soul. Knowledge of the psalms would certainly go a long way in guiding us on our walk with God, and prosper us in our relationship with Him, helping us to be fruitful trees for the Lord!

Thought: Fruitful trees need healthy nourishment.

Prayer: Lord, help me to find delight in the meditation of Thy Word.

“O praise the LORD, all ye nations: praise him, all ye people.”

WHY SHOULD CHRISTIANS SING?

If you have been in a church for any amount of time, I am sure you would agree with me that singing is an integral part of church life, and by extension, a Christian's life. At almost every church gathering or fellowship activity, we start and end off with some singing. Many informal gatherings too have been greatly blessed with a guitar or piano, and a songbook in hand.

But have we asked ourselves the question – why do we really sing? What are we singing about, and who are we singing for? We might know the textbook answer to these questions, but do we really mean it? We often do it simply because we enjoy the music. It makes us feel good. It calms our soul. Perhaps it helps to kill the time, or accompanies us as we study. Do you think these are good reasons for singing and listening to Christian music?

In Psalm 117, the shortest chapter in the whole Bible, and also its middle chapter, all nations and all people are called together to give praise to the Lord. As the command is given, it is backed by two very basic but fundamental reasons as to why Christians ought to sing. Firstly, it is because *“his merciful kindness is great towards us”*. This speaks of the character of God and His works for His children. We remember the wonderful promise of salvation, which is the mercy of God which withholds punishment that we deserve, and the kindness of God that chooses to love us even when we are so unlovable. The second reason is because *“the truth of the Lord endureth forever”*. This refers to the Word of God, which teaches us of salvation, and is filled with the wonderful promises of God. We praise God because of the Word He has inspired and preserved for us, and through it we can learn of Him, of Jesus Christ and of eternity to come. Indeed, as we remember these two very simple but profound things that God has done for us, our natural response should be a spontaneous outburst of praise and thanks to God! He has done so much for us. The least we could do is to offer up a song of praise in thanksgiving. Thus we sing simply because we love God, we are filled with gratitude for what He has done, and we want to give Him all honour, praise and worship.

Thought: Do I always sing for the right reasons?

Prayer: Lord, help me to understand Your mercies and grace, and to be filled with thanksgiving for them.

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF PROVERBS ALL ABOUT?

I am sure that as you were growing up, there was a lot of advice, encouragement and instruction that your parents would have given to you. You may or may not have regarded them as wise words then, but they were certainly given out of a great love, care and concern for you. In a sense, this is what the book of Proverbs is about – it is a collection of wise sayings mostly from the pen of King Solomon, directed at his son. They are the heartfelt exhortations of a parent whose strong yearning and desire is that his child would grow up to be wise in the Lord, learn to fear Him and guard against the follies of the world. He covers a wide range of topics, including but not limited to youth, discipline, sloth, family life, temperance, temptation, speech, wealth, pride, and immorality.

Proverbs 1:1-7 succinctly and clearly sets forth the purpose of the book of Proverbs for us. It teaches us *“to know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding”*. It is basically like a manual to guide a person to receive wisdom and instruction, that he may learn knowledge and discernment. To put it in modern day lingo, the book of Proverbs is like a self-help book, whereby one can become a better, more godly individual if he reads it carefully and puts these words of wisdom into practice. The advice given throughout the book is wide and varied, with very practical points on how we ought to live life, and glorify God. There is a strong emphasis on the need to flee from wickedness and sin, and to pursue after wisdom and righteousness, for that is what it means to truly fear the Lord.

But within the introduction comes also a disclaimer – not everyone who reads this book will listen and apply it. Only *“a wise man will hear, and will increase learning”* (Proverbs 1:5). The prerequisite to learning the wisdom from the book of Proverbs is that he must first be wise! This wisdom can only come from the Holy Spirit. It is the wisdom of a man who has been saved, and hungers for the Word of God. A man who is wise would therefore be teachable, willing to learn and receive instruction. He would humble his heart and submit to the wisdom of God’s Words.

As youths, we would do well to study this book carefully with a sincere and earnest desire to learn and apply it to our lives.

Thought: A good knowledge of the Bible is better than a university degree.

Prayer: Lord may You grant me the wisdom to hear and get wisdom.

DO YOU HAVE WISDOM?

Wisdom is such an important virtue in a believer's life. Proverbs 4:7 tells us that wisdom is the principal thing – it is first and foremost, the chief attribute that every Christian should strive towards. The wisdom that we are talking about is of course godly wisdom, not the wisdom of the world. This is the wisdom that can only come from the fear of the Lord, from the knowledge of God, from the understanding of His Word.

So we ask, how can we have this wisdom? As we saw yesterday, it can only come through a humble desire to learn. From verses 1-5 we see words and phrases in the imperative like 'hear', 'attend to know', 'forsake not my law', 'let thine heart retain my words', and 'keep my commandments'. The emphasis here is on hearing and learning the doctrines, laws and commandments taught in this book, and by extension, the Word of God. There needs to be a continual active effort on the part of the learner to get wisdom, for he must diligently seek God's Word and learn them all the days of his life. Can you resolve to do this?

But then we ask, why should we have wisdom? What is the use of having wisdom? The promise is that wisdom *"shall preserve thee: love her, and she shall keep thee...exalt her, and she shall promote thee: she shall bring thee to honour, when thou dost embrace her. She shall give to thine head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory shall she deliver to thee"* (Proverbs 4:6, 8-9). Armed with wisdom, the believer would have the discretion and discernment to make the right choices in life. It will be like a hedge around him to protect him. It will also honour and promote him in the sense that when you live a wise and godly life, men will naturally acknowledge it, and respect you for it. Though Solomon as King had all the right to expect honour and praise from men, it was truly his wisdom that gained their admiration, and was far more valuable a crown and ornament to him than the one made of gold upon his head. Indeed, the wonders of the wealth and power of this world pale in comparison to true wisdom. Just as David his father encouraged Solomon to pursue wisdom, the latter likewise exhorts all of us to get wisdom, get understanding, for it is the principal thing.

Thought: Do I treasure godly wisdom more than anything else in this world?

Prayer: Lord, grant me the grace to get wisdom, to get understanding, and to forget it not.

WHAT IS ECCLESIASTES ALL ABOUT?

There are many varied explanations as to what the book of Ecclesiastes is really about. There are those who see it as but the ramblings of a pessimistic man disillusioned with life. However, a simple literal reading of the book, coupled with faith in the divine inspiration of God’s word, leads us to understand that the book of Ecclesiastes is a collection of writings born from the sincere desire of an elderly man who has experienced life and all that it seeks to offer, tasted the vanity and futility of it, and now seeks to encourage men who come after him to not go down the same bitter path that he has gone. He writes not as a king commanding his subjects, but as a preacher who seeks to point men and women towards God, to fear God and keep His commandments, and not to seek after the vanities of life.

This purpose is clearly set forth in the introduction in chapter 1, where Solomon conclusively declares that if a man labours and does all things ‘under the sun’, meaning apart from God, then that life is vain, and a continual vexation of the spirit. There can be no true joy or fulfilment if in this life we never acknowledge God and live in His will. The book of Ecclesiastes is therefore a timeless commentary on the frailty of human wisdom, and the vanity of life here on earth apart from God. It is a book that is highly applicable for our current atheistic age, where men on earth refuse to acknowledge God, and live lives only in pursuit of worldly happiness and ignoring God in all that they do. Such was the experience of Solomon, and he thus wrote the book of Ecclesiastes as a reflective and retrospective look at the vanities of life that he has observed. This is a book that is filled with practical wisdom to guide a man in any age to know the true meaning of life, and to realise that a life lived apart from God is a meaningless life that promises much but will never be fulfilling. However, it is sad to see that in every age, so many people, even Christians, throw themselves headlong into the world, and chase after the things of the world, caring not that they only grant fleeting temporal satisfaction.

As we study this book, the question that we would have to continually ask ourselves is this: Do I truly understand the meaning of life? And is my life a life of vanity, doing all things apart from God, or do I truly fear God, and desire to keep his commandments?

Thought: *“Remember now thy creator in the days of thy youth”*

Prayer: Lord, may You help me to glorify Thee in all that I do.

WOULD YOU WANT SOLOMON’S LIFE?

Solomon was the wisest man ever to have lived on this earth. He was also extremely rich. He had families of servants working for him, choirs and bands giving constant live entertainment in court, and he had all sorts of luxuries that money can buy, such that he was the greatest man in all of Jerusalem. On top of that, he was also a king, and would have the power and authority to do anything and everything that his heart desired. In fact, that is exactly what he did – for *“whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour”* (Ecclesiastes 2:10). Basically there were no restrictions and boundaries to hold him back. Everything he wanted to do, he did. Anything which he saw that he liked, he got it. He was able to indulge in every pleasure that life can offer. We read of such a life, and think wow! He must be the happiest man in the whole world! He seemed to have everything going for him, and no restrictions to hold him back. The world was at his feet, and he had the youth, intelligence and vigour to enjoy it all. Are we envious? Do we too desire such wealth, power and freedom? These are exactly the things that the world desires, and sadly the Christian too is often sucked in by it.

Yet as we read on, he says that *“I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and labour that I had laboured to do: and behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun”* (Ecclesiastes 2:11). How sad! He looked at all that he had, and all that he had done, and he realised that it was all vanity – empty, futile, meaningless! We must understand that the reason why Solomon recorded all this for us was not to show off, but so that we can look back at his life and learn from his life and not repeat the same mistakes. Solomon, with all his achievements and privileges, asks us to take his word for it, and sincerely believe and realise that all these trappings of the world will never bring true joy, but only sorrow, grief, and vexation of the spirit. All these things bring no profit, no gain, for they are done apart from God. If we do not bring God into the picture, but go our own way and try to find joy in this life, it can only end in sorrow and misery. Dear Teen, do you envy the life of Solomon? Do you seek after the joys of this world, or do you seek after the joys of God and heaven?

Thought: Only in the presence of God is there fullness of joy.

Prayer: Lord, help me to find pleasure, joy and contentment in You.

WHAT IS THE SONG OF SOLOMON ALL ABOUT?

Of all the books in the Bible, Song of Solomon is perhaps one of the most unfamiliar and one that is least preached and quoted from. There is quite a lot of confusion out there as to what this book is all about, and what its purpose in the canon is. Many have allegorised the whole book away and interpreted every word of it as pointing to Christ’s love for the church. Others have turned the story around and described it as a tragic drama of how Solomon is the villain who stole the Shulamite girl away from her true love to make her one of his many wives.

Really, the simple literal reading of the text is often the best way to interpret Scriptures, as this is the way that God intended for us to understand His Word. Thus the Song of Solomon is as described – Solomon’s song that describes the true pure love between Solomon and the Shulamite girl. It is a dialogue between the two as they express their mutual love and desire for one another, and share their thoughts. As we read through the book, we see them move from courtship, to their wedding and consummation, experience some disagreements, before making up and renewing their love for each other. It is likely that this was written in Solomon’s youth, before he fell from the Lord and took many wives who turned his heart away from God.

Through this book, we can learn of the romance and loveliness of marriage, of the purity and joy that can come through a proper marital relationship. The descriptions given in this poem do not shy away from vivid imageries that express their mutual attraction of each other’s physical beauty, for that is part of what love is. Thus we learn what God’s ideal for love and marriage is, as seen through the love celebrated by Solomon.

At the same time, it is not wrong to use this as an example or illustration of what marriage love ought to be like, and compare it to Christ’s love for the church. We must be careful to see the distinction here, in that the interpretation of the book is literal, but the application can show us an example of love, and be used to illustrate how God loves us as His people.

Thought: Has my idea of true love been corrupted by the world?

Prayer: Lord, I thank You for granting us the ability to love. May You teach me what true biblical love is, and help me to show this love to the people around me.

WHAT IS TRUE LOVE LIKE?

Yesterday we saw that in the Song of Solomon we can learn about what true love really ought to be like. We can see a good example of this in today's reading, as at the close of the book, Solomon and his wife renew their love and desire for one another, expressing the depths of their mutual affection, as they are on their way to visit the wife's mother.

In verse 6 Solomon's wife asked him to "*set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm*". A seal is an imprint made as a stamp of authenticity that denotes ownership or authority. By asking to be set as a seal upon his heart and arm, she was asking for a sign to authenticate the permanence of their relationship. This is similar to our tradition today of exchanging rings at a wedding as a representation of a couple's endless love, signifying the importance of commitment and permanence in love. Furthermore, it is a powerful love that is strong as death, in that it is a force so strong that it can sever life, and change lives. Love spurned, which results in jealousy, is cruel in the pain and anguish that it causes. Yet if the love is true, it would burn hot with passion, as coals of fire, and a most vehement flame. But it is not just any regular flame that burns for a while and then dies out. It is a lasting flame that cannot be quenched, not even by many waters, or a torrent of floods! It is a love that lasts through thick and thin, through good times and bad times. It is not just a love that flares up for a moment and then dies down, but is an undying love that stands the test of time. Finally, it is a priceless quality that cannot be bought by even all the wealth in the world. If a man were to sell all that he had, he would still not come even close to acquiring the love that Solomon and the Shulamite woman described here. It is true love that cannot be forced, coerced or manipulated.

All these descriptions of love stand in stark contrast to what the world perceives as love today. What we see portrayed in the movies and popular culture today are but fleeting lusts that die down just as quickly as they flare up. Their love is conditional, based on what they can receive from the relationship, and not what they can give. Dear Teen, as you begin to think about relationships with the opposite gender, keep these characteristics of love firmly in mind, and always have the Word of God as your only guide.

Thought: Have I ever experienced such love?

Prayer: Lord help me to be patient and wise in finding a life partner.

WHAT IS ISAIAH ALL ABOUT?

Various commentators have all extolled on the majestic beauty and the great value of the study of the book of Isaiah. It is a most daunting volume of 66 chapters to look into. Often its prophecies might be confusing, its language difficult, and its applications difficult to find. Nonetheless, much has been written concerning the brilliance of this book, as Merrill Unger wrote: “Isaiah is the great messianic prophet and prince of OT prophets. For splendour of diction, brilliance of imagery, versatility and beauty of style, profundity and breadth of prophetic vision, he is without peer.”

The name Isaiah literally means “Jehovah is salvation”. This is indeed an apt title to a book sometimes also known as the fifth gospel. One of the main topics which Isaiah deals with is that of the coming Messiah and the salvation which he would bring. This would encompass the prophecies relating both to Christ’s first and second comings. However, before the oracles concerning the future salvation of Israel as a nation, Isaiah also deals with the very solemn idea of judgment which was to come. Right from chapter one, Judah is rebuked as a ‘*sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity*’. They had rebelled against God and forsaken Him, no longer acknowledging Him as master. Their sacrifices had lost all meaning, for they persisted in their evil ways. Yet if they were to repent, God promises that their sins though they be as scarlet can be white as snow, and deliverance would come for those who would be obedient to the Lord.

Perhaps one interesting but simplified way to outline the book of Isaiah would be as such: just as the Bible has 66 books, divided into an OT of 39 books, and an NT of 27 books, the book of Isaiah can be divided in exactly the same way. It has 66 chapters, and can be divided into two parts: the first with the first 39 chapters and the next with the following 27 chapters. The major theme of the first section is on judgment, and that of the second section, redemption. The NT begins with the history of John the Baptist, as the forerunner of Christ, announcing the coming Messiah, and it ends with the book of Revelation, where the Millennial Kingdom and the New Heaven and the New Earth is described. Likewise, chapter 40 of Isaiah begins with a prophecy of the one crying out in the wilderness – John the Baptist, and ends in chapter 66 with prophecies concerning the Last Days, of the New Heaven and Earth.

Thought: Jesus is the Messiah, our Saviour and Redeemer!

Prayer: Lord, grant me the wisdom to understand the difficult prophesies of Isaiah!

WHAT IS THE BEST COMFORT?

One of the main missions that the prophet Isaiah was tasked with, besides pronouncing judgment, was that of comfort. He was to comfort the people of God, to encourage them in their time of difficulty. The bulk of these encouragements come from Isaiah 40 onwards, which begins with the words *“comfort ye, comfort ye my people”*. In the previous chapter (ch. 39), judgment had just been made against King Hezekiah, prophesying that there would be a sure judgment coming against them from the Babylonians. In response, God does not leave them comfortless, but spends the next 27 chapters explaining His divine redemptive plan to them, to assure them and comfort them.

However when tasked to speak comfort to Jerusalem, to cry unto them, Isaiah was confounded. In Isaiah 40:6, God told him to cry to them, meaning to proclaim these words of comfort to them. But Isaiah asked what he should cry about. The answer came loud and clear, *“All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.”* (Isaiah 40:6-8) It is true, that men are weak and frail, for they are like grass that withers, and their goodness like the flower that fades. No word of man can really comfort a person. Yes, our words of encouragement might soothe a sorrowful and anxious spirit momentarily, but he can experience no true peace if they are but words from our own wisdom. In comparison to weak and frail men, we have the Word of God. That was the source of all true comfort that Isaiah could give to the people. If it was just based on the words of Isaiah himself, he knew there was nothing that he could really say to encourage the people. But the Word of God is true, perfect, and endures forever. Every promise that God gives will certainly be fulfilled, and it is with God’s Word that Isaiah then brings the prophecies to God’s people.

Likewise for us, when we are down and discouraged, or when the people around us need comfort, we must always turn to the Word of God. It is a timeless balm that will always soothe a grieving spirit, for it is backed by our Almighty God who loves us, and will always fulfil His promises.

Thought: Man may fail, but God never will.

Prayer: Lord, help me to always find comfort in Thee and Thy Word.

WHAT IS JEREMIAH ALL ABOUT?

Jeremiah is most famously known as the ‘weeping prophet’ (Jeremiah 9:1, 13:17, 14:17), for his ministry was indeed a very heart-wrenching and tragic one. Like the other prophets, he passionately implored backslidden Judah to repent and return to the Lord, lest He judges them. His ministry spanned a period of about 50 years, and took place during the reign of the last 5 kings of Judah. It was a sad period of time for Judah, for despite Jeremiah’s impassioned pleas, they refused to listen to the Word of God, and were subsequently judged for it.

Jeremiah’s whole lifetime was a tragic one. He had the Word of God with him. He knew the truth, and tirelessly and boldly preached before kings, leaders and the people. His message was to backsliding Judah. He warned that if they persisted in their sin, they would surely be punished, like how the Lord punished Israel before them. He exhorted them to return to the Lord, who was as a loving husband longing for His wife’s return. However, few people took heed of his message. Instead, he was much abused, derided, mocked, and harshly persecuted. They plotted against him to kill him (Jeremiah 11:18-21), and even his own family rejected him (Jeremiah 12:6); prophets and priests mocked his prophecies and sought to shut him up (Jer 23, 28), and King Jehoiakim even cut up and burnt his writings (Jeremiah 36). For all his efforts, he was rewarded with arrest and imprisonment (Jeremiah 20, 26, 37), and thrown into a dungeon where he “*sunk in the mire*” (Jeremiah 38).

Eventually Jeremiah saw his own prophecies being fulfilled before his very eyes, as he witnessed the fall of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 39) and all the atrocities that were committed. But his ministry did not end there, for he himself was forced to flee to Egypt (Jeremiah 44-45). He continued to prophesy there, warning them that Egypt was certainly not a safe refuge for them, but that they ought to repent and return to the Lord.

Throughout his whole ministry, few, if any at all, believed his warnings and took heed of them. Yet despite all that Jeremiah continued to obey the Lord and do His will. In the eyes of the world, he might have been a failure, but in the eyes of God, he was a great success, for he heeded the call of God, and faithfully obeyed all the days of his life.

Thought: Am I a success or failure in the eyes of God?

Prayer: Lord, help me to be a faithful servant of Thee.

CAN TEENS PREACH?

You may think that at your age, you are ‘just a teen’, there is little that you can do for the Lord. Many use their youth as an excuse, thinking that only ‘older people’ are the ones who can serve the Lord and preach the gospel. Instead, they spend their time and energy caring about themselves, seeking fun, leisure and enjoyment. They immerse ourselves in their studies, or spend time with friends, entertainments, and hobbies. They have boundless energy, but yet little of it is spent serving the Lord.

When Jeremiah was first called to be a prophet, he too was but ‘a child’. He said *“Ah, Lord GOD! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child”* (Jeremiah 1:6). He would have been perhaps in his teens as well, or at most in his twenties. He too had the same fears and concerns that perhaps many of you have. However, the Lord’s reply to him is a reply to us as well: *“Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee”* (Jeremiah 1:7-8). He was told not to fear man, but to take comfort in the presence of God with Him. It was not his own words that he was to speak, but only the Words of God. God Himself would be the one telling him what to speak, for He assured Jeremiah *“I have put my words in thy mouth”* (Jeremiah 1:9). Thus armed with this commission, Jeremiah would begin his most difficult ministry that would last for 50 years until his death. Yes, there was a lot of cause to fear, but Jeremiah never faltered even when faced with raging kings, for he knew that the Lord was with Him, and he was simply a vessel sent by God, speaking forth the words of God.

We might never have the same dramatic calling that Jeremiah received, nor be tasked with the difficult mission that he had. Yet the Lord does call all of us to be witnesses and testimonies for Him. We have been saved, not so we can waste our lives away, but so we have more time to serve Him. As teens, this is a prime period in your life when you can interact freely with your peers, to influence them and share the gospel with them. They are at an age where they are seeking for the truth. As Jeremiah could preach to Judah, we too can bring the good news of salvation to the friends and loved ones around us. We can never be too young to be a witness for God!

Thought: I am never too young to preach!

Prayer: Lord, grant me the courage and boldness to preach the gospel!

WHAT IS LAMENTATIONS ALL ABOUT?

It was indeed a sad day in the history of Judah. Her capital Jerusalem was laid desolate, her temple destroyed and her walls in ruins. Her people had suffered the terrible devastation of an extended siege, followed by the sudden invasion of the Babylonians who ravaged the land and murdered the people. The great city that once thrived with the people of God and the glorious worship of the true and living God was now a miserable shell of its former glory. All the survivors of the invasion were carried away captive to Babylon, and the city was now sitting solitary. She is as a widow weeping and mourning for the loss of her loved one.

For this, Jeremiah the weeping prophet was weeping. He lamented over the tragedy that Judah had suffered. He speaks on behalf of the nation, and cries *“for these things I weep; mine eye runneth down with water”* (Lamentations 1:16). He felt abandoned by God, bereft of comfort, for the enemies of Judah had swept through them and made them desolate. And so he cried unto the Lord, to come, behold their sorrow and hear the distresses of His people, to show mercy and comfort them.

But yet amidst the sorrow, Jeremiah knows that the judgment of the Lord is justified. God had every right to send these afflictions upon them, for they had sinned despite the repeated warnings from God. He acknowledged that *“the LORD hath afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions”* (Lamentations 1:5), and that *“the LORD is righteous; for I (Judah) have rebelled against his commandment”* (Lamentations 1:18). Thus whilst he sorrowed for the affliction that they were going through, his lamentation was more so for the sins and transgressions that they had so wantonly committed.

Furthermore, Jeremiah’s concern was for the glory of the Lord. The enemies of Jerusalem were prospering. They had magnified themselves and were mocking her. And so in the final chapter, Lamentations 5, Jeremiah calls upon the Lord to remember them, to see the reproach that has come upon them. He pleads for the Lord to turn back to them, that they too will turn back to the Lord. Indeed, it is a terrible thing to experience the wrath of God. Daily we ought to thank God for His mercies and grace, that he has withheld punishment from us, and instead bestowed blessings.

Thought: It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed!

Prayer: Lord I thank You for Your mercies and grace upon my life. Help me never to take it for granted and rebel against You like Jerusalem.

IS GOD YOUR PORTION?

Since most part of the book of Lamentations is, well, Jeremiah's lamentations over the destruction of Jerusalem, it is easy to understand how the tone of the whole book does seem rather bleak. However, amidst all the sorrow and sadness comes a passage that speaks of a remarkable hope and positivity. Yes, God in His divine wrath and perfect justice has seen fit to bring about all this devastation upon Judah, but that does not mean that all hope is gone and God is no longer faithful. We see how Jeremiah in Lamentations 3 exhibits a steadfast faith and trust in the Lord, as he finds hope in recalling the mercies of God. Though he is indeed facing terrible afflictions, and he feels like his "*strength and hope is perished from the LORD*" (Lamentations 3:18), he was humbled to remember that no matter what, God's compassions will never fail, and it was only of the Lord's mercies that he was not consumed (Lamentations 3:22). Thus he breaks into a stunning exaltation of God's compassion and faithfulness, that "*they are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness*" (Lamentations 3:23). For the rest of the chapter, his tone changes from one of despair and despondency to one of hope and expectation.

We ask, how could Jeremiah find such hope in the midst of all his troubles? The answer comes in Lamentations 3:24, where he says "*The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him*". What he means here is that for him, God is enough, sufficient for all his needs. He desires nothing more than for God to be his allotment, his inheritance. When God is with him, and he is assured of His faithfulness, he is comforted. In this, Jeremiah shows his deep faith and devotion to God, for though he is faced with all these sore trials and calamities, though he sees Jerusalem laid waste, he knows that God's portion for him is always the best, and there can be no better thing than to hope in the Lord. God is always gracious, and will never punish too much, but also show mercy in withholding punishment. He knows that the best thing he can do at this point of time is to wait quietly upon the Lord for His salvation. He is content to know that God is in control, and there is no better place to be than in His care.

Do we have such faith in the Lord? When faced with a myriad of trials and difficulties, are we too able to declare that the Lord is our portion, and that we can trust fully in His will?

Thought: Thou my everlasting portion, more than friend or life to me.

Prayer: Lord, help me to be content in Thy everlasting portion.

WHAT IS EZEKIEL ALL ABOUT?

Whilst the prophet Jeremiah was preaching in Jerusalem warning against the Babylonian invasion that would destroy the city and bring the people into captivity, Ezekiel was a young man who had already been taken captive together with King Jehoiachin during the second wave of captivity. Thus, his whole ministry was set in the Babylonian Empire, as he ministered to his fellow captives, pronouncing to them the judgments of God.

Like his fellow prophets, Ezekiel was a faithful man of God, called to a difficult ministry. His calling can be seen in Ezekiel 1-3, where God told him *“I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that hat rebelled against me...I do send thee unto them; and thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God”* (Ezekiel 2:3-4). He was to go before a people who had rejected God, and proclaim God’s words to them. It was going to be a frightening task that required courage, for many would not listen to him. His message would be a bitter one, of *“lamentations, and mourning, and woe”* (Ezekiel 2:10), but yet it would be sweet in his mouth, as he experienced when he ate the roll (Ezekiel 3:1-3). This was because they were the words of God that he would bring, and though it would seem initially very hard to stomach, they were the wonderful words of truth, and promises eternal life. Though it pronounced judgment, it was with the desire that they repent and return to the Lord, and that was certainly something sweet!

The message that Ezekiel brought can be divided into three main sections. The first, from chapters 1-24, was given prior to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Though they had already been defeated and sent into exile, the common perception amongst the people was that it was but a temporary setback, and they would soon be returned home. However, Ezekiel’s message for them was that unless they repent, Jerusalem would surely be destroyed as judgment for their sin. True enough, in chapter 33, Ezekiel received news that Jerusalem had indeed fallen, and so the last section of the book focuses more on encouragement for Israel in light of the future restoration that was promised. Much of the prophecy focuses on the rebuilding of the nation and the temple, and reinstating of true worship. The middle section from chapter 25-32 deals with God’s judgments upon the other nations, for God is a just God who will always deal with sin.

Thought: God’s word is always sweet!

Prayer: Lord, may I always be humble before Thy Word, and obedient to Thy call.

WHAT IS A WATCHMAN?

Early on in his ministry, Ezekiel was called by God to be a watchman. His commission from God was for him to *"hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me"* (Ezekiel 3:17). This is something he fulfilled to the letter, for he faithfully delivered God's Word to them, not only through his words, but also through his actions in the many object lessons that he performed for them.

Now in chapter 33, Ezekiel was once again commissioned to be a watchman, to warn them again to repent, for now Jerusalem had already fallen. Here we see a short description of what a watchman was like. The word *'watchman'* literally carries the idea of one who would 'lean forward, that is to peer into the distance'. He was to be like a forward scout, standing atop a high tower. He was to be constantly on the lookout, watching for enemies approaching, to see what sort of threat they posed. Whilst on duty, he had to be vigilant, alert and awake, set on high ground with a commanding view of the areas around him. When he sees the enemy approaching, his duty is then to warn. He is to blow the trumpet and sound the alarm. He is to rouse the people and tell them of the impending danger. If he does do so and the people respond, then all is well. If the people hear but do not take heed, then he is not to be blamed, for he had done his job. However, if he were to be derelict in his duty, and the enemy comes unawares and destroys the city, then their blood is on his hands. That is the critical nature of his job, for a single slack watchman who is sleeping on the job could cause the fall of the city.

As a watchman for Israel, Ezekiel's job was to sound the warning of Israel's impending judgment from the hand of God. He was to chastise them of their sins and warn of the punishment that God would bring to them. They might not listen, but on his part he was to tirelessly preach and warn, so that when judgment comes, they would have no excuse.

We too are called to be watchmen – vigilant, alert and ready to tell of the Lord's coming. Our friends and family around us are in danger, but they are yet unaware. Will you do your part and sound the alarm?

Thought: A watchman must open his eyes to watch, and open his mouth to warn.

Prayer: Lord may You help me to be a watchman to my loved ones.

WHAT IS DANIEL ALL ABOUT?

Like Ezekiel, Daniel was another prophet whose ministry took place during the exile in Babylon. However, unlike Ezekiel, he did not live and serve amongst his own countrymen, but spent most of his life in the court of the king (first of Babylon and then later Persia), serving the royal palace.

The book of Daniel is unique amongst the prophetic books as it contains quite a few narrative portions, and the prophetic passages are woven into the historical account of what was happening at that point of time. The message of Daniel is also different, in that the emphasis is not so much on preaching, whereby present sins are rebuked and God’s judgment is declared. Instead, Daniel’s prophecies are primarily of visions, dreams and interpretation of dreams that look forward into the future, even till the last days, of the events surrounding the second coming of Christ.

There are two main thrusts of the prophecies of Daniel. The first from Daniel 2-7 describes the course of the history of the world, seen through Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (Daniel 2) and also Daniel’s own dream in Daniel 7. It depicts the rise and fall of the various empires of the world, ending with the Roman Empire and the future end time revived Roman Empire that would be the kingdom of the Antichrist. The second group of prophecies would be from chapters 8-12, which deal more specifically with Israel’s future. The prophecies predict both their short term and long term futures, as it looks not only to Israel’s release from captivity, but also to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, and even to the events of the last days and the specific timing of the Great Tribulation, the seventieth week of Daniel’s vision of 70 weeks (Daniel 9:24-25).

Through this whole book, the theme of God’s sovereignty is unmistakable. He is all-powerful, ruling over kings and empires, and knows all things, even the end from the beginning. As Daniel proclaimed, *“blessed be the name of God for ever and ever: for wisdom and might are his: and he changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings, and setteth up kings: he giveth wisdom unto the wise, and knowledge to them that know understanding: he revealeth the deep and secret things: he knoweth what is in the darkness, and the light dwelleth with him”* (Daniel 2:20-22).

Thought: He’s got the whole world in His hands.

Prayer: Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever: for wisdom and might are His.

DO YOU DARE TO BE A DANIEL?

Daniel was but a young man when he was brought into captivity. He was one of the youths handpicked for their beauty, ability, intelligence and knowledge (Daniel 1:3). They were to be brought up in the palace of King Nebuchadnezzar and tutored in the ways of the Babylonians. It was like they had received the top scholarship of the land, and granted the special privilege of being housed in the palace, enjoy all the luxuries it would offer, and be trained by the top wise men of the land. Despite all this glitz and glamour that Daniel was surrounded by, he purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with any of the sinful indulgences that they offered him. Even at that young age, he knew the God he was to serve and obey, and was determined that he would maintain his testimony in this foreign land.

Through the course of his ministry, he served under 4 kings (Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius and Cyrus) of three empires (Babylon, Medes and Persians). He went from being a youth undergoing training in the king's palace, to becoming the ruler of Babylon and chief of the governors (Daniel 2:48), to the third highest ranked ruler in the kingdom (Daniel 5:29), and finally to the first of three presidents who presided over the princes of the kingdom (Daniel 6:1-2). Basically he became the second in command over the entire realm, similar to the position Joseph had in Egypt (Genesis 41:40-43). Yet amidst all these promotions he never compromised in his testimony and walk with God. He attained these positions through his excellent testimony and uprightness of character.

In fact, so blameless was his testimony that the only fault that his detractors could lay upon him, was that he was ‘too faithful’ to God (Daniel 6:4-5). They concluded that the only way they could get at him, was blame him for his obedience to God's law. They instituted a law which forbid anyone from asking a petition from anyone except the king – in other words, no one was allowed to pray to any god. Daniel refused to compromise, and so he prayed as usual, refusing to yield to his enemies. As a result, he was thrown into the lion's den. As we read this amazing testimony of Daniel, we ask if we too would have the courage to stand up for the Lord, no matter what.

Thought: Have I purposed in my heart to always be faithful to God?

Prayer: Lord, grant me the courage to dare to be like Daniel to stand firm against the many wiles of the devil.

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF HOSEA ABOUT?

Hosea is the first in the list of the Minor Prophets, and began his prophecy with a rather interesting, though rather disturbing personal testimony. He was commanded by the Lord to marry a prostitute (whore), a woman who was known for her promiscuity. She was not a chaste virgin wife that one would expect a man of God to take for a wife, but was a loose woman, who would be prone to return to her old sins. True enough, after she conceived and bore three children (perhaps who were not even of Hosea's seed), she deserted him and played the harlot, and went after other men. Instead of casting her aside in anger and disgust, Hosea lovingly provided for her through her unfaithful times, and even went to the streets to buy her back after she had probably sold herself back into prostitution. After this, he still lovingly implored her to remain with him and be faithful to him.

As we read of this heart wrenching story, it would also sicken us to think of the terrible way that Gomer treated her faithful and loving husband. But realise that all these happened for a specific reason – to show to unfaithful Israel how terrible their sin was. Gomer was representative of Israel, *“for the land hath committed great whoredom, departing from the Lord”*. In rebelling against God and worshipping other idols, they had become unfaithful to God and scorned the loving relationship He had established with them. Yet God was as the patient and loving Hosea, willing to forgive them, and even going all way out to woo them back to Himself, if only they would be faithful once again and abide with the Lord.

Against this backdrop of Hosea's tragic personal life, the rest of the prophecy was directed at idolatrous Israel. They were sternly rebuked for their many sins and commanded to repent and turn back to the Lord. God warns them that if they were to persist in their wicked ways, then judgment would come upon them. But that was not His desire, for He reminded them of the love that he had for them, and simply wanted their obedience. The promise for them was that if they would return and seek the Lord and fear Him, then the Lord would be merciful to them and restore them back to Himself. *“Who is wise, and he shall understand these things? Prudent, and he shall know them? For the ways of the LORD are right, and the just shall walk in them: but the transgressors shall fall therein”* (Hosea 14:9).

Thought: God's love is wonderfully and graciously unconditional.

Prayer: Lord may You help me to appreciate the depths of God's love.

ARE WE COMMITTING SPIRITUAL ADULTERY?

Throughout the book of Hosea, Israel was described as one who was *“committing adultery”* (Hosea 4:2), who *“play the harlot”* (Hosea 4:15) and had *“committed whoredom continually”* (Hosea 4:18). They were no better than adulterous Gomer who had spurned the love of Hosea and went after other men. God was indeed appalled by their godlessness, immorality and extreme wickedness that they exhibited. Their priests had not been doing their job, for the Word of God was not taught, They were setting a terrible example for the people to follow. They had forgotten all the laws of God, put Him aside completely, and were thus to be rejected by Him.

So we ask, what does Israel’s spiritual adultery have to do with us? We do not worship idols like them, and have not sinned the same way that they have sinned. Well, we realise that spiritual adultery can take on many forms. The basic idea behind it is when we have become unfaithful in our relationship with God, and seek after the idols of the world. It begins with dissatisfaction with our present relationship with God. We look at the world and perhaps think that there is something better that they can offer. We lose interest in Christ and distance ourselves from Him, and other passions, hobbies or pursuits take His place of eminence in our lives. As that happens, we grow cold in our affection for God, and wane in our devotion to Him. It may be a slow gradual process, or a sudden turning away. Either way, when something or someone else takes God’s place as first place in our lives, we have broken the first commandment, and committed spiritual adultery against God. These are idols in our heart that would most certainly lead us down the pathways of sin. As God is no longer pre-eminent in our lives, we soon forget the laws of God and no longer strive for holiness. We stop guarding ourselves against sin and the wiles of the devil, and easily give in to the temptations that abound around us. Before we know it, we have become like wicked Israel, committing whoredom with the world, and playing the harlot with sin.

Dear teen, you must fiercely guard your relationship with God and Christ, and never let anything or anyone come in between. You may not realise it, but even seemingly innocent things like family, school, friends or hobbies can become a snare to us, and turn us away from God.

Thought: Is my relationship to God the most important thing in my life?

Prayer: Lord, help me always to be faithful to Thee and Thee alone.

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF JOEL ALL ABOUT?

The book of Joel is set against the backdrop of a recent locust invasion that had left the whole land of Israel desolate. Everyone was affected by it, such that there was a time of national mourning, weeping and lamenting. So terrible was the calamity that the priests did not even have enough provision to make offerings and sacrifices in the temple. Their land had become desolate, and as a result the people were made desolate as well.

In the context of this recent calamity Joel chapter 2 warns of a far greater calamity that is to come. It is as if he is saying, ‘you think what you have suffered is bad? Well think again because something far worse is coming; the day of the Lord!’ He warned that if they do not repent and turn from their evil ways, the Lord’s judgment will come, and it will be something far more terrible than they had ever experienced. Whilst the prophecy was directed at Israel, the fulfilment of it would actually only come at the second return of Christ, for the language that we see in chapter 2 speaks of tribulation judgment, for it is the great and terrible day of the Lord (2:11).

And so the main exhortation for them comes in Joel 2:12-13 where they were exhorted to turn to God with full repentance, and seek the mercies of God. They were to call for a national assembly, and together come before God to weep and plead for mercy. Then amongst these pronouncements of judgment, we see God’s promise of blessing. As they repented, God promised deliverance. The prophecy again looks far to the future and speaks of the millennial blessings that would follow after the judgment. God promises of a time in the future where He will pour down His blessings upon the people, to bring vengeance upon their enemies, and Israel shall know that He is their Lord (Joel 3:17).

Indeed, it is a simple message of sin, judgment, repentance and blessings. A simple exhortation, yet so hard to follow! As we meditate on the book of Joel, we do well to take heed of the warnings – if we think there are certain trials in this life that are too hard to bear, think again for it is nothing compared to the wrath of God that would pour down upon those who sin and rebel against Him! But if we do repent and obey, He will be quick to bless and deliver us.

Thought: God is always just and fair.

Prayer: Lord help me to always be sensitive to sin and quick to repent.

WHAT IS THE DAY OF THE LORD?

As one of the earliest written prophecies, the Book of Joel was the first book to develop the idea of the impending ‘*day of the Lord*’, and how it is a terrible calamitous event in the future that will bring judgment and destruction to all who were against the Lord.

We see this idea being mentioned a total of 5 times in this book (1:15, 2:2, 11, 31, 3:14). Basically it means the Lord’s day, or Jehovah’s day. It describes a period of time in the future where God will bring about wrath and judgment upon the Earth. Oftentimes (but not always) it refers to the time of the great tribulation as described in detail in passages like Matthew 24 and the whole book of Revelation. It is a terrible time of suffering, where there will be massive global upheavals in every aspect of life. It will be a time of great judgment upon the Earth, whereby God will pour down His wrath upon those who have rebelled against Him and refused to accept Jesus as their saviour.

Specifically in the book of Joel, it is always prophetic, warning that the day is near and coming (Joel 1:15), and then a description of how it will be like when it does eventually come (Joel 2:1-11). Reading through these 11 verses, it very clearly points to the future judgment of the Great Tribulation, of a massive invading army that would be unlike anything they have seen before. It is described with a great number of analogies, whereby they are like horses and horsemen, their sound is like chariots and the flame of fire, and they shall run like mighty men – it almost seems as if the prophet is grasping for words to describe this out of the world scene that is laid before him. Quite probably these are things that man has never seen before, and therefore the prophet Joel did not have the vocabulary to fully explain what he was seeing. No matter what it was, it was definitely a very terrifying sight, for he concluded by saying that it was indeed ‘*great and very terrible, and who can abide it?*’ (Joel 2:11).

As Christians, we have the assurance that we would not have to face this, “*for God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Thessalonians 5:9). However, we have friends and loved ones who do not have this assurance. What are you doing about it?

Thought: Am I saved from the day of the Lord?

Prayer: Thank You Lord for salvation so rich and so free! Help me then to spread this good news of deliverance to all around me.

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF AMOS ABOUT?

Amos' prophetic ministry was during a time of relative peace and prosperity in Israel. Yet though they were physically and materially well off, spiritually they were bankrupt. They had completely forsaken God and were thoroughly wicked in all their ways. They oppressed the poor, performed abominable worship and were proud in their ways. Thus Amos was sent to bring the message of sin and judgment to them.

From Amos 1-2, the message began with God's pronouncement of woe upon the nations surrounding Israel. God explained each of the judgments in turn, that it was because of some sin or other that they had committed. God's message was clear – enough was enough, the time for punishment had come. Finally, in Amos 2:6, the focus comes upon Israel that they too had transgressed like the other nations, and will have to face punishment. But more so for them, for they had received so many blessings from the hand of God. They were without excuse, they fully deserved what they were getting. In chapter 3, God explains to them that His punishment for them was fully justified. Everything has a cause and effect, and just as a lion would not roar unless it had its prey, the Lord would not punish unless they had sinned. Israel was to receive the punishment for their sins, as would be elaborated in the subsequent chapters, and God warned them that He Himself would be the cause of it. Their lives of comfort and luxury would soon be taken away from them, unless they return to God and seek Him (Amos 5). From Amos 7-9 a series of visions are revealed to Amos to illustrate the judgments that will come upon them, to show the extent of God's wrath upon their sin, but that amidst it all, God was just and merciful. He had given them multiple chances, but since they refused to repent, and having been measured against the plumb line of God's standards, they had fallen short, and justice had to be served.

As Christians, we must understand that everything happens for a reason, and nothing happens by chance. God is a God of law and order. He does not do anything without a good reason. He is not a sadistic or an irresponsible God who does things in excess without cause. All his judgments are true and righteous. His punishments are never too much or too little, but always just right.

Thought: Our sins caused the effect of Christ's sufferings and death on the cross.

Prayer: Lord help me see the seriousness of sin and its consequences.

ARE YOU PREPARED TO MEET YOUR GOD?

Have you ever been caught by surprise and been extremely unprepared for something that you should have been prepared for? Perhaps your teacher had informed the class about an upcoming test that was very important, but you had completely forgotten about it. Imagine the feeling you get when you come into class and see everyone frantically trying to cram the last bits of information, and you on the other hand had just spent the weekend playing away. There and then, as you realised what was happening, a sense of dread and deep regret overwhelmed you. You were unprepared, but it was too late!

Israel was about to face that deep sense of regret and fear, as they were unprepared to meet their God. In fact, they had completely forgotten about God in their lives, and were lost in their sins and idolatry. God had sent them so many warnings in the past, through famine, drought, pestilences and invasion. But despite all that, they refused to turn back to God. Now God was warning them that they had better prepare themselves to meet their God!

The phrase *“prepare to meet thy God”* can be either a good thing or a terrifying thing to different people. If you are a good sincere and earnest Christian who loves the Lord, it would be a joyous and exciting thing to prepare to meet God. We prepare to meet our God all the time, as we come before His throne of grace in prayer; as we set a time to read and meditate on His Word; as we even prepare ourselves on Saturday night and Sunday morning to come to His house to worship Him. In each instance, we prepare ourselves to meet our God. Our whole life in fact, is a preparation towards the day that we will one day come face to face with our Lord and our God, our Creator and Saviour. It is an exciting and glorious day that we all look forward to.

However, if we are like Israel, having ignored all the loving chastisements from God; if you are living in sin, and have not yet been forgiven of them; if your relationship with God is not yet reconciled; if you are still an enemy of God, unsaved and destined for judgment, then it is a terrifying thing. This phrase would strike fear to those who are as yet unready, who are yet unsaved. Dear teen, are you prepared?

Thought: Are we excited or afraid to meet our God?

Prayer: O Lord, help me to repent of my sins and be ready to meet You when the Lord Jesus Christ returns!

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF OBADIAH ABOUT?

The book of Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament, with only one chapter. It is also unique in that the nation prophesied against is not Israel or Judah, but against the Edomites.

The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob. Edom means 'red', which was his nickname because when he was born he came out "red, all over like a hairy garment" (Genesis 25:25), and also because he sold his birthright for a bowl of red pottage (Genesis 25:30). He later married a daughter of Ishmael, the son of Abraham, and his descendants became the Edomites, living in the land of Edom (Genesis 36).

The two nations of Israel and Edom were supposed to have been brothers, as Jacob (Israel) and Esau were brothers. However Edom had committed a foul travesty against Judah, in the day that they were invaded and carried captive. Instead of coming to their brother's aid, Edom joined in the fight against them, rejoiced when their city was plundered and spoke proudly against them. It was a terrible betrayal on their part, and therefore God's judgment against them was that *"For thy violence against thy brother Jacob shame shall cover thee, and thou shalt be cut off for ever"* (Obadiah 1:10), *"and there shall not be any remaining of the house of Esau; for the Lord hath spoken it"* (Obadiah 1:18). They would be completely destroyed as a nation, never to be heard of again.

On the other hand, for the house of Jacob, who are God's chosen people, there shall be deliverance for them. This is God's promise and encouragement to them at the close of this short book, from verses 17-21. Despite the captivity that they would face, and having suffered at the hands of the Edomites, God's comfort for them was that whilst Edom would be judged, Judah would one day be restored to their land. This is the care that God shows to His children, to His chosen ones. As believers, we too can rest in the comfort of God, to know that though men might oppress and persecute us, God is always in control. He knows exactly what happens to us, and has told us *"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord"* (Romans 12:19).

Thought: God's vengeance is always the best.

Prayer: Thank Thee Lord for Thy wonderful care upon Thy children.

ARE YOU A PROUD PERSON?

The Edomites were a proud people. From a human standpoint, there were many things for them to be proud about. Their capital was a place known as 'Sela', which means rock, which is modern day Petra in Jordan. It was a very naturally defensible fortress, with only a single narrow entrance with steep sheer rock cliffs on either side. The Bible describes this place as *"the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high"* (Obadiah 1:3). The Edomites took pride in the fact that their city was like an impregnable fortress, and thought that no one would ever be able to defeat them. In verse 7, we see that they had men in their confederacy, which describes an alliance that they had with some other nations. That further bolstered their confidence, thinking that if they were to come under attack, they would have allies who would be quick to come to their defence. They also took pride in their wise men (v. 8) and mighty men (v. 9), looking to them for help and security.

Because of their sin, God's judgment on them was that each of these securities would be confounded. No matter how strong their city was, the Lord says *"thence will I bring thee down"* (v. 4). They would be ravaged completely, far worse than a house that was robbed or a vineyard harvested of its grapes, for the Lord will search them out, even their hidden things (v. 6). Their allies will deceive them and turn against them in betrayal (v. 7), and their wise men and mighty men will be destroyed and dismayed (v. 8-9). Basically, all that they clung dearly to, all that they were proud of, were removed one by one from them till they were left with nothing. They were puffed up with a false sense of security, and God's judgment upon them was that all the causes of their pride would be destroyed.

May this be a warning to all of us, who are proud and boast of achievements that are not even our own. Do we have a false sense of security in our abilities and talents, though they were given to us by God? Do we like to boast about our scholastic or sporting results, or perhaps take pride in the fact that we live in a certain house or attend a certain school? Realise that all we have are given by God. Pride is a terrible sin for it is taking credit for things that are God's and robs Him of His glory. When we get puffed up in pride, we no longer acknowledge God or rely on Him.

Thought: All that I am and have is only by the grace of God.

Prayer: Lord, help me to be humble and glorify You with all I have.

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF JONAH ABOUT?

We all know the story of Jonah and the big fish. It is a common story that we have all heard countless of times. However, have we really read the book in detail? Have we really asked what lessons God wants us to learn from this book?

Of all the Minor Prophets, the book of Jonah is probably the easiest to understand, and most commonly preached from. The basic storyline is easy to follow, as it is about the prophet Jonah who tried to flee from doing God’s will, but was strictly chastised by God through a huge storm, being cast overboard and swallowed by a big fish. In the midst of his suffering, he prayed to God for deliverance, and God answered. Thereafter, he obeyed the Lord, went to Nineveh and preached judgment unto them. However, we see that his obedience was but in word and not in spirit, for he was sorely displeased with the result of his preaching. The whole city actually repented, and God’s judgment was withheld. In response, he left the city in a fit of anger, and asked the Lord to take his life from him, and let him die.

Behind these events, there are lessons that we can learn from this rather simple story. We see that indeed salvation is of the Lord. It is not up to us to decide, and neither should we be caught up in our prejudices and biases. It is entirely God’s prerogative as to who He would save. Whoever He wants to save will certainly be saved. Whosoever will repent and turn to God will certainly receive His eternal salvation. It is the free gift of God and solely His doing. He is the God of the whole world, and not just of ‘good people’ whom we think deserve salvation. None of us deserve salvation. We do not have the right to be upset and angry if God saves someone whom we think does not deserve to be saved.

Jonah’s sin is not just that he tried to run away from God’s calling, but was more with regard to his hatred for the Assyrians. He hated them so much that he refused to bring the gospel to them. Even when they repented and became fellow children of God, he was still so filled with hatred that God had to teach him a lesson to help him realise that God’s mercy and grace was to all, and not just the Jews.

Thought: My salvation is purely from the mercy and grace of God.

Prayer: Lord, may I never be prejudiced against anyone, but always be ready and willing to share the good news of salvation to all.

DO WE RUN AWAY FROM GOD’S CALL?

The call that came from God to Jonah was clear and undeniable. He was to “go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me (God)” (Jonah 1:2). As a prophet of God, his duty was to humbly obey. He was to go where God would send him, to speak whatever God wants him to speak. However, he did the exact opposite. He got on the boat to go towards Tarshish, the furthest place he knew from where God wanted him to go! He did so thinking he could flee from the presence of God.

Why did he want to flee so much? It was because of his great hatred and prejudice against the Assyrians in Nineveh. They were the enemies of the people of Israel, and were a cruel and wicked people. Jonah knew that God was a gracious and merciful God, and would be able to save even the people of Nineveh! For Jonah, the thought of preaching to them and bringing the gospel of salvation to them was unthinkable! He did not want God to spare them from judgment, for by his own reckoning he felt that they deserved the worst punishment God could give them. Thus he took matters and judgments into his own hands and bought passage to Tarshish, thinking he could run away from God’s call.

We all know what happened after that. We might be able to run physically, but we can never leave the presence of God. God’s promise is that He will never leave us nor forsake us, and will always be with us. God Himself was the one who sent the great storm upon the ship (Jonah 1:4), and ordered it such that the lot fell upon Jonah (Jonah 1:7), and prepared the great fish to swallow him up (Jonah 1:17). There was indeed no running away, for God was with him every step of the way, showing His power and bringing Jonah back to Himself to obey His will.

When God wants us to serve Him, He will make sure that we do. When He has a task set for us, we must always be quick to obey, and not run away like Jonah did. Indeed, it is a great privilege to serve the Lord. If God makes it clear to us that we are to serve Him in some way or another, we must be quick to avail ourselves and fulfil His will.

Thought: You may run but you cannot hide (from God)!

Prayer: Lord, may You give me a ready and willing heart to serve You in every and any way possible.

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF MICAH ABOUT?

It was a period of great spiritual and moral declension in both Israel and Judah. They were worshipping idols (1:7), oppressing the poor (2:2), proud of their sins (2:3), and even had lying prophets who encouraged these immoral and depraved activities (2:11). Like his contemporaries Hosea and Isaiah, and also Amos who came slightly after him, Micah arose as a champion for the poor oppressed people, preaching fearlessly against the social injustice of his time. He preached a message calling for righteousness and morality, and called for the people to repent and turn to the Lord. He warned them tirelessly of the fierce wrath of God who is against these people and judgments that would come their way if they did not change their ways. At the same time, he also brought with him a great message of hope, where restoration is promised.

There are three main sections in the book of Micah (chapters 1-2, 3-5, 6-7), each of them follows the same general pattern and presents the arguments in a lawsuit terminology. It is as if God is charging His people in court for the sins that they had committed. In each of the sections, their sins are denounced and judgment is proclaimed. Because of their crimes, punishment is decreed and inevitable. Yet at the end of each section, there is a promise of deliverance and restoration, whereby God in his mercy and grace will comfort and assure them that there would come a day where all the remnants of Israel will gather together once again, to acknowledge the Lord as their God.

In the midst of the second section, we see a wonderful promise of a ruler in Israel that would come forth, and be born in Bethlehem Ephrathah (Micah 5:2). This was a clear prophecy that spoke of the coming Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ! He would be a ruler who would rule with the strength of the Lord (5:4), and would win a great victory over the Assyrian (5:5-9). This would certainly be a message of great comfort and hope to the people of God, and an encouragement for them to turn from their sins and repent.

Dear Teen, how is your relationship with the Lord? If you were to stand before Him in a courtroom, with Him as the judge and you as the accused, what would your verdict be?

Thought: Am I guilty as charged?

Prayer: Lord I thank You for Your mercy and grace that has given me my deliverance from sin through the Lord Jesus Christ!

WHAT DOES GOD REQUIRE OF YOU?

The scene is set in the courtroom. God has called upon Israel to stand trial, with God as the judge and prosecutor, Israel as the defendant, the accused. The mountains and the hills were the silent witnesses, and Israel was called to ‘*contend before the mountains*’, to state their case, to see if they had anything to say in defence for all the sins that they had committed against God, especially in light of all that God had done for them.

The Lord’s case is presented from verses 3-5, where He asked them in what way has He wronged them, such that they seem to have been offended and have turned away from God. He reminded them of his past goodness to them, in saving them from bondage in the land of Egypt, and then guiding them through the wilderness with the help of Moses, Aaron and Miriam. He also preserved them through the incident with Balaam and Balak whereby Israel was not even aware of the threat that came against them. From Shittim unto Gilgal, God brought them across the River Jordan into the Promised Land. All these were just some of the ways in which God had sovereignly guided and cared for His people, showing his righteousness. Yet they were rebellious, ungrateful, and continued to sin against the Lord.

How then shall we respond to all that we know God has done for us? What can we do to thank God? Israel’s confused reply was that maybe the Lord wants burnt offerings and sacrifices. They thought maybe if they brought thousands of rams, or ten thousands of rivers of oil, or even sacrifice their firstborn child, God would be appeased. They were sorely mistaken. It was not all these physical gifts that God was looking for, it was not through all these acts that God would be pleased. The simple requirements of God are seen in Micah’s response to them in Micah 6:8 *“He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”*. All God desires is the simple heart of obedience. It is simply to do all things right and well, in a just manner, to show mercy and love to your fellow neighbours, and to walk humbly before your God. God is not one who demands great sacrifices and extracts heavy duties upon His people. He just wants us to walk with Him in simple faith and obedience, to love Him and to obey His commandments.

Thought: Obedience is better than sacrifice.

Prayer: Lord, help me to do what is good, and fulfil Thy pleasure.

“The Lord will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserveth wrath for his enemies”

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF NAHUM ABOUT?

The prophecy of Nahum came more than a hundred years after Jonah had preached to the city of Nineveh and the people repented and turned to the Lord, and they were spared from sure destruction. However, now, many years later, they had again descended into their wickedness and immorality, and again God sent His message of rebuke and judgment upon them.

The message of Nahum is clear and very straightforward. It has very direct prophetic announcements of judgment against Assyria and her capital Nineveh for its cruel and wicked atrocities and idolatrous ways. God was telling them that He will bring down His vengeance and wrath upon them, and nothing would be able to stand before Him. He was not being unreasonable or cruel in His judgments, for Assyria thoroughly deserved what they would receive. Their sins are clearly highlighted in Nahum 3, for they were a “bloody city! Full of lies and robbery”. They were engaged in all manner of sin, of prostitution, witchcrafts. Because of that, their city will certainly be destroyed, as is described in Nahum 2. All this will happen, because God is a just and righteous God. He *“will not at all acquit the wicked”* (Nahum 1:3).

Historically we know that God’s prophecy for them certainly came true. Less than 50 years after Nahum’s prophecy was given, the Assyrian Empire was overtaken by the combined armies of the Medes and the Babylonians. Despite being a great and mighty city, Nineveh was overrun in 612 BC, an event that was well documented in archaeological finds, but very soon became forgotten in the annuals of history.

Indeed, it is a fearsome thing to incur the wrath of God, and to be listed as His enemy. Because God is perfect and holy, He cannot tolerate sin. There will come a day where all the unbelievers of the world will be judged by God. There will be no excuse; no one will be spared, for before the thrice holy God we are but wretched sinners. It is only through the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ that we can be spared, and have the hope of salvation!

Thought: Wickedness can never be tolerated.

Prayer: Lord I thank You for Your mercy and grace in giving us the Lord Jesus Christ, and helping us to have faith in the Gospel.

HOW IS JUDGMENT A COMFORT TO GOD'S PEOPLE?

Whilst most of the prophecy was directed against the sins of Nahum and describing the judgment that would follow, there comes a small section at the end of chapter one that addresses afflicted Judah. As the Lord decrees that the Assyrians will be cut off, He turns to Judah and with a calm quite voice assures them *"though I have afflicted thee, I will afflict thee no more"* (Nahum 1:12). These were to them 'good tidings', and a message of peace (Nahum 1:15).

Up to the point of the prophecy, the Assyrians had seemed to be the unstoppable superpower of the region. They had conquered much of the known world, including Judah's northern neighbour Israel. Her borders extended all the way south into Egypt, and Judah was but a tiny struggling island of independence in the midst of Assyrian domination and cruelty. Judah was frightened, oppressed and suffering. Therefore, when Nahum came to preach the message of judgment upon Assyria, it came as a great comfort to them. In fact, even the prophet's name 'Nahum' means 'consoler' or 'comforter'. It came as an assurance that God knew their situation, and knew of the wickedness that Assyria was doing. He promised *"now will I break his yoke from off thee, and will burst thy bonds in sunder"* (Nahum 1:13). As a nation and people they will be wiped out, and their false gods cut off and destroyed.

Judah on the other hand, was to be obedient to God once again, to keep their feasts and perform their vows. They were to renew their allegiance to God, as they did in the time of King Hezekiah. They were to learn from the example of the Nineveh, of how the Lord does not tolerate sin, and would judge them harshly if they did.

The same assurance of God comes to us, that as His children, He will always watch over us and protect us. He may send trials and difficulties for a season, but these are done in love, to chastise us for sin or try our faith that we may grow in the Lord. But always remember that no matter what wicked and sinful things man may do to us, the Lord is the perfect judge who will always exercise His perfect justice.

Thought: *"The Lord is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him."* (Nahum 1:7)

Prayer: Lord may I be comforted by Thy strength and justice.

WHAT IS HABAKKUK ALL ABOUT?

Habakkuk was indignant. He looked at all the sins of Judah and was grieved. He cried out unto God but it seemed that God was not listening. He asked *“O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear!”* (Habakkuk 1:2). He questioned God and asked why He allowed such flagrant disobedience against the law and not send His judgment. As a prophet he had tried his utmost best in calling the people to repentance, and was frustrated with their lack of response, and therefore he came complaining to God.

When the Lord’s reply came (Habakkuk 1:5-11), it was something unexpected. In fact, it came as a shock to him. God told him that the Chaldeans would be raised by Him and used as His instrument of judgment upon Jerusalem. They would march through the breadth of the land and conquer all with their fierce and mighty armies. With this reply, Habakkuk was even more incensed (1:12-17). He was appalled that the Lord would use the Babylonians who were wicked and more sinful than Judah to judge them. He was perplexed. He simply could not understand why God would allow such things to happen!

God’s second response came in chapter 2:4-20. He first chastised Habakkuk for his pride, and explained that *“the just shall live by his faith”* (Habakkuk 2:4). Those who are just and righteous, those who obey God, their duty is not to question God or tell Him what to do. We are simply to trust in Him, wait upon His will, and believe that God’s judgments are always perfect. God promised that the Babylonians too will face their judgment, and will be destroyed. Just as they had spoiled many nations, they shall be spoiled in return and it will be great woe to their lands.

But through all these we see the patience of God in dealing with His servants. He understood Habakkuk’s confusion. Although Habakkuk did sin in questioning God in the way that He did, and was rebuked for his pride, God was longsuffering and patient in responding to his questions and revealing His mighty will to Him. As His children, God wants us to go to Him in the midst of our problems, and find solace in Him. His way is always perfect, and by faith we are to trust in Him.

Thought: Do you live by faith?

Prayer: Lord I thank You for Your love and patience in dealing with an ignorant, proud and rebellious sinner like me.

DO YOU EVER QUESTION GOD?

Sometimes we look at injustices and evil around us and we have the tendency to respond like how Habakkuk did. He questioned God, not once but twice! He tried to tell God what to do, thinking that he knew how to rule the nations and could judge on behalf of God. Each time, he even had these undertones of a challenge that he made against God, where he took a self-righteous attitude in his cries against God. He accused God of inactivity, for he complained that he had cried for a long time, but God was not hearing, neither was he saving (Habakkuk 1:2). In his second accusation of God, he had an attitude of haughty expectation, that he would stand upon the watchtower and watch and wait for the Lord's reply.

Habakkuk thought he was right, and that he had every right to seek an explanation from the Lord. However, when he finally understood God's response in chapter 2, and saw things from God's perspective, he came to his senses, and praised God for what He had done. If you examine Habakkuk 2 closely, you realise that God never really did answer his question directly, and neither is He obliged to answer our queries and accusations against Him. But what Habakkuk received was a call for him to be humble and allow God to carry out His wise plans, and that the just are simply to live by faith, trusting and believing that God knows what is best. The Lord ends the reply in chapter 2 with the simple statement *"The Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him"*. Indeed that is what we should do when faced with the perplexities of life – to keep silent before God who reigns supreme from His holy temple.

Thus when Habakkuk finally came to his senses in chapter 3, he humbly accepted God's will and asked for help and mercy for the people. He received a vision of the glory and power of God (3:3-15), where we see glimpses of God parting rivers, moving mountains, stopping the sun and moon and working other great interventions in helping His people. In response to all he saw, Habakkuk trembled. He finally acknowledged that indeed God is good, and he will rejoice in Him the God of his salvation. No matter what happens, he is assured that Lord is his strength, and that he can trust in God alone in all things. Dear teen, is that your confidence as well? Are we sometimes tempted to question God when things don't go our way? Realise that God's way is always the best, and we are simply to have faith.

Thought: God's way is always the best way.

Prayer: Lord, help me to always trust in You, come what may.

WHAT IS ZEPHANIAH ALL ABOUT?

The Lord was angry. Judah had been wicked, for they had turned back from the Lord, not sought Him, nor inquired for him (Zephaniah 1:6). The day of the Lord was at hand, and Zephaniah was the prophet sent to warn the people of it. It was not an easy job, neither was it a pleasant message that he had to deliver, but as God’s prophet that was his role to play. He was to bring the God’s Word to the people and preach it as it was given to him.

Zephaniah prophesied during the time of Josiah, King of Judah. It was actually a time of revival in Jerusalem, for Josiah was a king that sought the Lord and did much to bring about reform in Judah. However all his efforts were a case of too little too late, for the long years of the previous reigns of the two wicked kings Manasseh and Amon had thrown the nation so deeply into idolatry and immorality that it was difficult to recover from. The repentance that was observed in the people during the reign of Josiah was at most skin deep, and would only delay, but not prevent the coming judgment upon them, as was prophesied to Josiah *“Thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the curses that are written in the book which they have read before the king of Judah: Because they have forsaken me, and have burned incense unto other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore my wrath shall be poured out upon this place, and shall not be quenched.”* (2 Chronicles 34:24-25)

Thus the message of Zephaniah was clear: the day of the Lord is at hand, judgment is coming soon because of their sin. The call was for them to seek the Lord (Zephaniah 2:3). But like many other prophecies, it does end with a glimmer of hope, for restoration and deliverance is promised in chapter 3 as an encouragement for the oppressed people. And so we see it repeated again and again. Sin, desolation and judgment, repentance, then deliverance and blessing – this seems to be the constant cycle that Israel was going through. They would fall into idolatry and sin, and then God would send judgments, but also prophets to warn them. In response, they would repent and turn back to the Lord, and straightaway, God would be ready and willing to bless them once again! Dear teen, is that a description of your spiritual life as well?

Thought: Is my spiritual life like a roller coaster?

Prayer: Lord help me to stay close to You always!

WHAT SINS DO GOD HATE?

There were many sins that Judah was guilty of. Manasseh (though he did repent later on in his life) was one of the most wicked kings ever to rule in Judah. Through his long and evil reign of 55 years (2 Chronicles 33:1) he did evil in the sight of the Lord, and *"made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err, and to do worse than the heathen, whom the LORD had destroyed before the children of Israel."* (2 Chronicles 33:9). Manasseh's influence extended past his reign, through the two years of his equally wicked son Amon, and continuing into the reign of his grandson Josiah. In his rebuke, Zephaniah denounced Judah for many sins, all of which added up to the judgment that they were to face. Zephaniah 3:2 gives us a short but very telling description of just some of the sins they were guilty of.

They *'obeyed not the voice'* of God, describing their disobedience to the Word of God. They had cast it aside and lived the way they liked. They did not see God as an authority in their lives at all.

They *'received not correction'*, showing their defiance to God's rebuke, for God had sent numerous prophets to them but they refused to listen. Instead they persecuted the prophets and even put them to death.

They also *'trusted not in the Lord'*, showing their lack of dependence on Him. Despite all that God had done for them in the past, they turned away from God, went after idols and trusted in their alliances and themselves.

Finally because of all these sins, they *'drew not near to her God'*. They were far from God, distant from the true and living God who loved them. They ran away from every effort that the gracious and merciful God made to draw near to them, and thus had to be heavily chastised by Him.

Dear teen, does this rebuke sound like a description of your relationship with God? Israel was like a rebellious son who refused the love and tender affection of a parent, and had to be punished for it. Is this the way you are living your life, refusing to obey the voice of God, rejecting those who would try to correct you, not relying in the Lord and distancing yourself from Him?

Thought: Do I commit the very sins that God hates?

Prayer: Lord, I have disobeyed You, I repent and seek Your forgiveness.

WHAT IS HAGGAI ALL ABOUT?

The last three prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, are known as the ‘post-exilic’ prophets, meaning that they were the prophets who ministered in Israel after they had returned from the exile in Babylon. They preached in Israel in the time of Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah mainly to encourage them in their service to the Lord, and to rebuke them when they went wayward.

Haggai and Zechariah were contemporaries who returned together with Zerubbabel in the first return in 536 B.C (Ezra 1-6). Their messages are both clearly dated, and are also given mention of in the book of Ezra (Ezra 5-6). Together with Zerubbabel and Jeshua the high priests, they served as the leaders and spiritual guides to the Jews returning from the exile. Therefore, in order to understand Haggai and Zechariah well, it is important to know what happens in Ezra 1-6 to understand the context.

Haggai’s main purpose was to call the people into action, to put God first, and stop their procrastination. When they first returned, the people of Israel sought the Lord, and laid the foundations of the temple to much fanfare and celebration (Ezra 3). They were genuinely pleased to see that the temple of the Lord was to be built in Jerusalem once again. However, they were soon faced with opposition of various kinds (Ezra 4), and as a result, the work stopped for more than 15 years. It is at this moment that Haggai stepped in to command the people to return to the work! God’s message to them was to *“be strong, and work: for I am with you”* (Haggai 2:4). They were rebuked for their spiritual apathy, and commanded to consider their ways and return to the Lord. The encouragement to them in Haggai 2 was that though the glory of this present temple paled in comparison to the magnificent temple that Solomon had built, nonetheless its glory will be far greater, for the Lord Jesus Christ would come and walk in the midst of it. Thus they were to cleanse their hands and engage in the work, and God would bless them.

It is heartening to note that the ministry of Haggai did bear fruits, for we read in Ezra 5-6 that after their preaching, the people really did rise up to build the house of God, and completed it in 4 years!

Thought: Do I need to be goaded into action for the Lord?

Prayer: Lord help me to be strong, and do the work!

HAVE YOU CONSIDERED YOUR WAYS?

God’s authoritative call came thundering to the people of Israel through the prophet Haggai, *“Consider your ways!”* This call came to them twice (Haggai 1:5, 7), urging them to really pause and take stock of how they were living their lives. They were to reflect on their priorities, and see if they had sinned against the Lord.

The problem that Israel was facing at that point of time is not a unique one. In fact, many professing Christians share the same attitude as them in this day and age. Their problem was one of apathy. They had become lukewarm in their relationship with God. Their priorities had shifted such that God and His glory was no longer important in their life, and they cared only for their own personal comforts and their own luxuries in life. They procrastinated and said *“the time is not come, the time that the Lord’s house should be built”* (Haggai 1:2). They lived in ceiled houses (houses with ceilings) whilst the house of God lay in waste. They just ignored the half-built temple, and concentrated on sowing their fields and making lives comfortable for themselves. And so before they knew it, more than 10 years had passed, and the temple of the Lord was just left as it was.

Therefore, the Lord’s command to them was to *“consider your ways!”* They were to examine their lives and consider their priorities. They were told that unless they placed God first once again and start serving Him, all else that they did would be for nought. They were to shake off their spiritual apathy and lethargy, and go labour for the Lord! They were to serve Him, for the pleasure and glory of the Lord. That was to be their motivation.

Dear teen, what are your priorities? Have you taken a step back recently to examine your life, to search your heart to see if you have allowed other things in your life to take priority over God? Are you serving as you ought to? Do you desire the pleasure and glory of God in your life, or have you become slack and spiritually lacklustre in your walk with God? Perhaps it is time we returned to build up our spiritual house of the Lord, and focused on the things of eternity, and not the things of this world.

Thought: Is God number one in my life?

Prayer: Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

WHAT IS ZECHARIAH ALL ABOUT?

The prophet Zechariah prophesied at the same time as the prophet Haggai, and generally addressed the same problems and issues that they were facing then. Both of them preached in order to rouse the people from their indifference and challenge them to resume the building of the temple. However, whilst Haggai directly addressed the problem head on, and commanded the people to consider their ways and serve God, Zechariah's message took a different approach. He did begin his writings with a simple call for them to repent and turn to the Lord, and a warning for them not to be as their fathers who refused to listen to God's commands. But from there, he moved on to a series of visions which he received from the Lord.

Collectively these visions were all aimed at encouraging the people in the situation that they were facing. Some of the visions would describe the present or the near future, such as the first vision of the man upon the house amongst the myrtle trees (1:8). This describes the angel of the Lord, the pre-incarnate Christ who was going through the nations and finding them presently at rest in peace, whilst Israel was still lying in ruins, as *“myrtle trees that were in the bottom (hollow)”* (Zechariah 1:11). Thus the assurance to them was that *“I am jealous for Jerusalem with a great jealousy”* (Zechariah 1:14), and *“sore displeased with the heathen”* (Zechariah 1:15). Therefore the Lord promises to return to Jerusalem with mercies, and will build up the house of the Lord, that His cities shall prosper and the Lord shall comfort Jerusalem once again. Likewise the vision of the 4 horns and 4 carpenters (Zechariah 1:18-21) describes the fact that God will deliver Judah and Israel by destroying the horns (Gentile nations) that scattered them.

Further visions through the book will look further into the future as prosperity and purification of Judah and Jerusalem is promised, all which culminates in the coming of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. Of all the Minor prophets, the book of Zechariah is one of the longest (second only to Hosea), and contains the most apocalyptic and messianic material. The visions may be difficult to interpret, but do have amazing prophecies with regards to both the first and second coming of Christ. We would do well to study this book carefully to unearth the wonderful gems therein!

Thought: A picture (vision) is worth a thousand words.

Prayer: Lord, grant me the wisdom to understand Your word, especially the parts that are more obscure and difficult.

WHAT DOES ZECHARIAH SAY OF CHRIST?

In Zechariah 9:9-17, we read of an amazing prophecy concerning both the first and second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The daughters of Zion and Jerusalem are called to rejoice greatly, for the King comes, who is just and has salvation. He would come humbly, riding upon a colt, the foal of an ass. The vision then moves on to describe how this King will be a mighty conqueror whose *“dominion shall be from sea even to sea, and from the river even to the ends of the earth”* (Zechariah 9:10). He shall lead the people, both of Ephraim (Israel) and Judah, and will march forth over their enemies in victory. *“And the Lord their God shall save them in that day as the flock of his people: and they shall be as the stones of a crown, lifted up as an ensign (standard or banner) upon his land”*.

From the perspective of the Jews who were receiving this prophecy, it is easy to see how they might have merged the two prophecies together, and assumed that there would be only one coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. They would have seen the humble King who brings salvation to them to also be the one who would at that time conquer all their enemies and establish His kingdom on Earth. For us, we have the benefit of the complete revelation of God. We have both the Old and New Testaments to guide us in understanding Scriptures. We know that Zechariah 9:9 was certainly fulfilled at Jesus' first coming, for he entered into Jerusalem as a humble servant seated upon a colt of an ass, as a great multitude spread their garments and waved branches shouting *“Hosanna”*, welcoming Him as King. (Matthew 21:5-9). However, what happened next was not what they expected. Instead of sitting upon the throne and ridding them of the foreign rulers, Jesus was tried before the Roman authorities and put to death!

Therefore we realise that Zechariah 9:10-17 was a prophecy of the second coming of Christ, where he will come as the conquering judge who would vanquish his enemies at the battle of Armageddon and establish an earthly kingdom, ruling from Jerusalem. Nonetheless, this was a prophecy of great comfort and encouragement to Israel then, for they were small and weak, and faced with numerous oppositions. Likewise, these prophecies can be of great encouragement to us as well, as we look forward in hope to the coming reign of the King of kings, and Lord of Lords!

Thought: Does the Second Coming of Christ comfort me?

Prayer: *“Even so, come, Lord Jesus”* (Revelation 22:20)

WHAT IS MALACHI ALL ABOUT?

Like Haggai and Zechariah, Malachi was a prophet whose ministry was to the people who had returned from the exile, but his ministry probably came much later in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Whilst their message encouraged the people to be diligent in the building of the temple, Malachi's message was a rebuke to them for forsaking the offerings of the temple, and in turn, their relationship with God.

The message of Malachi begins with a simple declaration from the Lord, *"I have loved you"* (Malachi 1:2). With that direct statement, He reveals the sinful selfish hearts of the people, who despite all that God had done for them, still refused to run to Him and reciprocate that love. Instead they doubted God's faithfulness, and said *"wherein hast thou loved us?"* God then affirms his love to them, by reminding them of His love for Jacob and preservation of them, and also the judgments upon their enemies Edom. Despite this love for them, the people yet despised the name of the Lord. Their problem was in their worship of the Lord, for they were bringing the blind, lame and sick animals to God for their offerings. In so doing they showed contempt to the worship of God. This was indeed a grave insult to God, for whilst they were supposed to have given their best to the Lord, they were giving their left-overs, their own rejects, and thought that it would be enough for God. Therefore, to them the Lord declared *"but cursed be the deceiver, which hath in his flock a male, and voweth, and sacrificeth unto the Lord a corrupt (blemished) thing: for I am a great King, saith the LORD of hosts, and my name is dreadful among the heathen."* (Malachi 1:14). Therefore, the prophecy comes to them to rebuke them for the many ways in which they had shown a grave disrespect and lack of regard for the Lord, and of the judgments that would come their way. Chapter 2 describes the various ways in which they had turned away from God, showing contempt for His covenant and disobeying the law. They blatantly denied their wrongdoings, feigning innocence for their crimes. Therefore, they would be judged.

Dear teen, are there areas in your life where you have not showed respect unto the Lord, and instead impudently denied any sin or wrongdoing? May we heed the warnings of the book of Malachi.

Thought: Have I honoured the Lord as my Father? (Malachi 1:6)

Prayer: O Lord, help me to always give You the best in my life.

DO YOU ROB GOD?

In Malachi 3:8, Israel was charged with the grave offence of having robbed God. The accusation is clearly stated: *“Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me”*. The thought of stealing from God, or robbing something from Him that is not ours is simply ludicrous isn't it? Who in his right might would try such a thing! But God was certainly serious when He made such an allegation. The people's reaction was to ask, *“wherein have we robbed thee?”* They were puzzled, and did not understand what God meant. The answer comes directly: *“in tithes and offerings”*. They had robbed God by not giving their best, in not giving what was required of them in their tithes and offerings. They had not given to God what was due to him, and therefore God says that they were *“cursed with a curse”* (Malachi 3:9).

We realise that in many ways, we too rob God of what is rightfully His. God made us, and gave us all that we have. He made this whole world for us to enjoy, and granted us salvation so rich and so free that we can have eternal life. Daily He bestows us His rich grace and countless blessings. In return, what do we have to offer? Do we see this debt of gratitude that we owe to the Lord?

The Lord lovingly asks us to give of our lives as a living sacrifice to Him, to love, honour and obey Him. He gave us His commandments to follow and asked that we do our part to share His gospel. Have we done so? In many ways we rob God when we do not do our part in service to Him. We are so caught up with seeking after our ambition or enjoying the pleasure of this life. We do not give God the glory due to His name, nor give Him the rightful position of high priority in our lives. We do not lay our all upon the altar nor offer our whole lives as a sacrifice for Him. Instead we spend all our time, energy and resources on chasing after the things of the world, and only give the lousy remnants to Him. We rob God when we exhaust ourselves in the pursuit of the world's sinful pleasures and temptations, and then have only a quick minute of devotion and prayer at night, too tired to even finish our prayers; we rob God when we spend all our time on our fun and studies, and say we are too busy to serve Him; we rob God when we spend all our pocket money on frivolous and unnecessary things and do not have enough to give our tithes in church. In so many other ways, we rob God. Dear teen, are you guilty of any of these?

Thought: How many commandments do I break when I rob God?

Prayer: Lord help me to never sin by robbing from You.

CAN YOU SUMMARIZE OT HISTORY?

God's plan is always perfect. Following the history of the Old Testament, it might not be so readily evident. But we know that God is perfect in wisdom and always in control. He ordered every single event through the history of time for His specific reasons and purposes.

Stephen's sermon in Acts 7 gives us a very wonderful and succinct summary of the whole history of the Old Testament from Abraham till Jesus. It begins with Abraham, the father of nations. He was called by God to leave home and journey to Canaan. For God promised to use him to form a great nation from whom all would be blessed. Out of Abraham's grandson Jacob would be 12 sons who would be the father of the 12 tribes of Israel. Through Joseph, God led this family to Egypt, where they stayed for 400 years, in which time they multiplied from just 75 souls to a host of more than 2 million people! Moses was then called by God to lead them out of bondage in Egypt, and enter into the Promised Land. However, because of his sin, Moses was not allowed to enter in, and the mantle of leadership was passed on to Joshua, who led the conquest of the land, thereby forming the nation. The next 400 years was the period of the judges, where Israel had no king and every man did that which was right in his own eyes. The first king of Israel would be Saul, followed by David and Solomon, whose reigns led the nation to its most glorious and influential period. Solomon's backsliding led to the kingdom being divided, where it became the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Israel lasted only about 200 years before God judged them with the Assyrians and destroyed them, whilst Judah lasted another 136 years before they were taken captive by the Babylonians and Jerusalem was destroyed. After 70 years of captivity, Zerubbabel and later Ezra and Nehemiah led groups of Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and occupy the land once again. The story of the Old Testament ends here, for it would be about 400 years of silence before the time of the gospels, where Jesus Christ is born to die for the salvation of man. Thus we see God working quietly behind the scenes, ensuring that the conditions would be perfect for Jesus to come in the fullness of time. As we put it all together in our minds, we can but marvel at the amazing way in which everything was ordered perfectly by God, all to lead up to the birth of our Saviour!

Thought: God planned it all even before the foundation of the world!

Prayer: Lord I thank You for Your wonderful plan of redemption.

WHAT ARE WE TO DO WITH ALL WE HAVE LEARNT?

There is much that we have gone through in the past three months, and we are nearing the end of this short study into the Old Testament. We have raced through all 39 books of the Old Testament, and read many portions of it. There have been many wonderful lessons gleaned from these Scriptures. We have also gained a lot of important information about various parts and aspects of God's Word. The question we ask now is, what are we going to do about it? How are we going to put all that we have learnt into practice?

In Isaiah 59:21, the Lord was speaking to Israel, assuring them of the covenants and promises that He had given to them. He was comforting Israel who was afflicted, and confirmed that His Word is true, and His promises are eternal. He sees and knows the plight of His people, and will certainly save them and grant them redemption. Whilst this verse was an assurance to them, it was also an instruction that they were to be guardians and custodians to the promises of God, such that the Word which He has placed in their mouths was not to depart out of them. They were to pass it on to their seed from henceforth and for ever.

Likewise, we have received the many covenants and promises from the Lord. His Words have been given to us, placed in our mouths. Our duty is to ensure that these words do not depart from our mouth, and that we will internalize them and apply them in our lives. The words of God are to be precious to our mouths, pleasant on our lips and constantly be on our tongue. They would be the subject of our daily meditation, just as the Lord commanded Joshua in Joshua 1:8: *"This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success"*. Furthermore, we are to pass on this Word from generation to generation, that it will be in the mouth of our seed and those after them as well. The instruction here is for the sharing of God's Word to others, that they too will have it in their mouths. Will you do your part to share what you have learnt with others?

Thought: Is the Word of God in my mouth?

Prayer: Lord may You help me never to forget or forsake Your Word.

DO YOU ENJOY THE OLD TESTAMENT?

Now we have come to the end of our brief study on what the Old Testament is all about. I hope you have enjoyed going through these wonderful books, these eternal words of life, for they are the very words of God to us!

The question we want to ask ourselves today is this: Do we love the law of God? Do we love to read His Word, to meditate on His Scriptures? In the passage we read the Psalmist declares his great love for the Word of God, rejoicing as one who finds great spoil, and praising God throughout the day because of it. He assures us, *“great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them”* (Psalm 119:165). Indeed, we will do well to truly love the law, to find delight and joy in the reading and studying of it, for it would be our protection. For ‘nothing to offend’ means that you will not be easily stumbled, not easily fall into sin, or be discouraged by difficulties and problems in your life. That is the power that the Word of God would have in our lives!

This short survey of the Old Testament is just the very beginning. We have but lightly scratched the surface of the depths and wonders that the Word of God has to offer. To really understand the Bible and to receive all that it has to offer requires a lifetime of careful and diligent study. The Psalmist was a true student of God’s Word, for he said that *“it is my meditation all the day”* (Psalm 119:97). This meant that he was one who read and studied God’s Word daily, pondered over it and endeavoured to understand every single bit of it throughout the day!

The only way to truly enjoy the Old Testament, and the whole Bible, is to love God. If we love God, and desire to have a close relationship with Him, then we would naturally love His Word, cherish it, read it, learn it, memorise it, apply it in our lives and defend it with our lives.

Thought: Jesus said *“If ye love me, keep my commandments”* (John 14:15)

Prayer: Lord, I thank You for guiding me through this study of the Old Testament. May You help me to love You more, and in turn to love Thy Word more every day of my life.

Notes

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