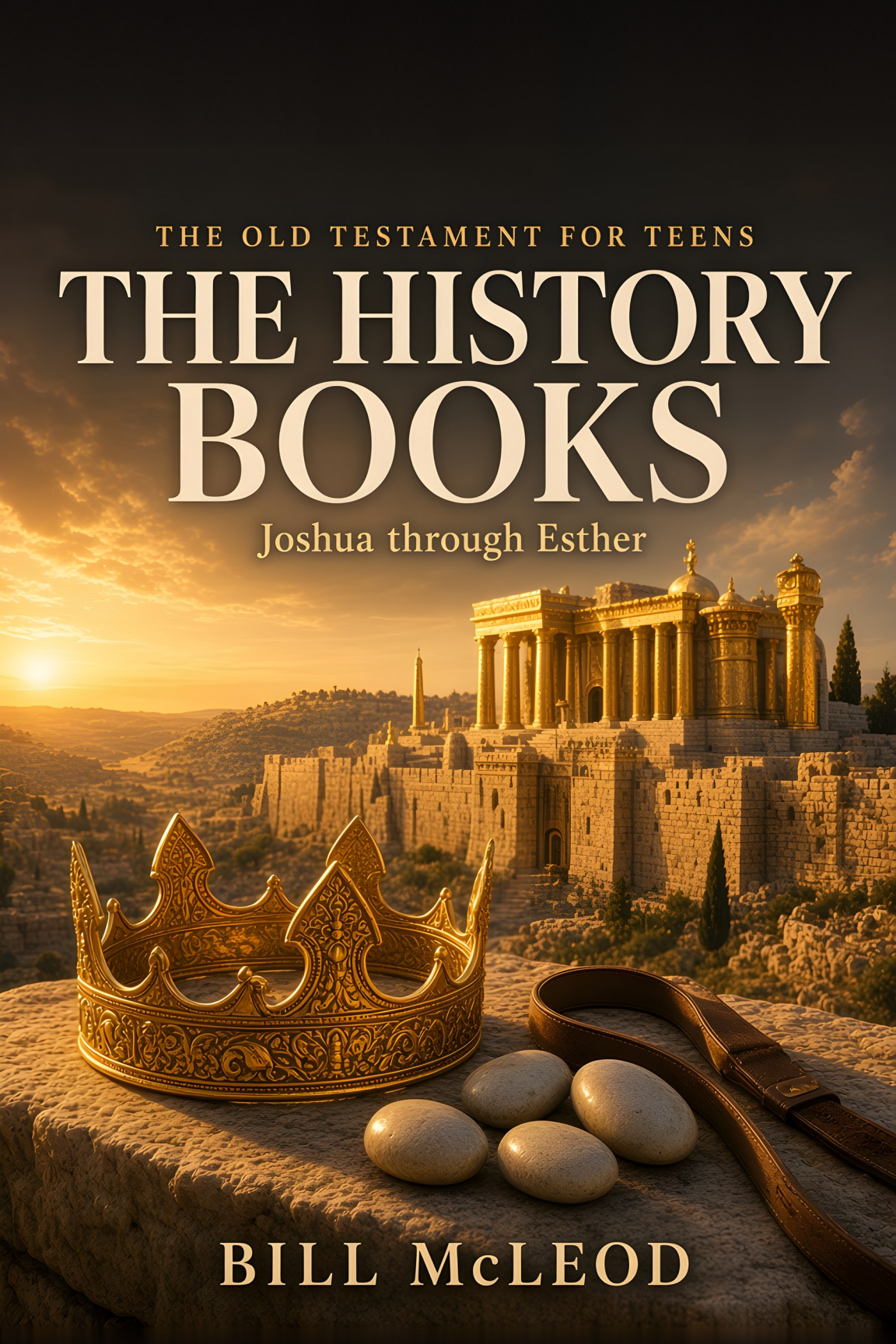
THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

THE HISTORY BOOKS

Joshua through Esther



BILL McLEOD

THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

The King Who Brings Us Home

Joshua, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Brings Us Home: The Book of Joshua, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

Copyright © 2026 Bill McLeod. All rights reserved.

Published by Papa Bill Books.

Scripture quotations are from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, which is in the public domain.

All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” You probably know a song about Joshua and the battle of Jericho, where the walls came tumbling down. Maybe you colored a picture of it in Sunday school. That’s where most people’s knowledge of Joshua stops.

But the book of Joshua is far more than one battle. It’s the story of a new leader stepping into the biggest shoes in Israel’s history. It’s about a woman with a bad reputation who risked everything to trust God, a river that stopped flowing, a soldier who stole and lied and brought disaster on everyone, a clever trick that worked, a promise kept even when it hurt, a day when the sun stood still, and an eighty-five-year-old man who asked for the hardest mountain in the land. It ends with one of the most famous challenges ever spoken: choose today whom you will serve.

Joshua also contains some of the hardest passages in the Bible, accounts of war and destruction that trouble thoughtful readers, and should. We won’t skip them. We’ll look at them honestly, with the main ways Christians have understood them.

After forty years in the wilderness, Israel is finally going home. Grab your sandals. It’s time to cross the Jordan.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Joshua in nine chapters: Joshua’s commission (Joshua 1), Rahab and the spies (2), crossing the Jordan

(3–5), Jericho (6), Achan and Ai (7–8), the Gibeonites (9), the day the sun stood still and the southern and northern campaigns (10–12), the dividing of the land (13–22), and Joshua's farewell (23–24). The long lists of boundaries and towns are summarized briefly.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Joshua is, where it fits, and the world it came from. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as when the conquest happened, what archaeology shows, how to understand the commands to destroy the Canaanites, and what happened when the sun stood still, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Joshua in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the sixth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Joshua raises questions teens will ask. I've presented the main views fairly on the date of the conquest (early, around 1400 BC, and late, in the 1200s BC), on the archaeology of Jericho and Ai, on the main scholarly models of how Israel came to live in Canaan (military conquest, gradual settlement, and internal emergence), on the long day of Joshua 10 (a literal miracle, an extended darkness or eclipse, or poetic language), and on Rahab's lie. I'd encourage you to share your own church's view with your teen, and to explain why other Christians see it differently.

Joshua describes war, including the destruction of whole cities under the command known as herem. These passages are handled carefully and age-appropriately, without graphic detail. A hard-passage box presents the main Christian readings fairly and states clearly that these accounts are never a model for violence, prejudice, or hatred toward any people today. Real Talk boxes address courage, integrity, keeping promises, and fear, and point

readers to trusted adults and, where relevant, the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament connects Joshua with Jesus, who bears the same name (Yehoshua, the LORD saves), and with the rest God promises His people in Hebrews 4, while acknowledging that Jewish readers read Joshua in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will meet in Joshua a God who keeps every promise and calls them to serve Him with courage.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

A Name Worth Knowing

Joshua's original name was Hoshea, which means salvation. Moses renamed him Joshua (Numbers 13:16), in Hebrew Yehoshua, which means the LORD saves. Later, the name was shortened to Yeshua. When it was written in Greek, it became Iesous, which comes into English as Jesus. So Joshua and Jesus have the same name. That's not an accident the New Testament ignores. The angel told Joseph to name Mary's son Jesus, "for it is he who shall save his people from their sins."

Who Was Joshua?

Joshua first appears in Exodus 17, leading Israel's army against the Amalekites while Moses prayed on a hill. He was Moses' assistant for forty years. He went partway up Mount Sinai with him, guarded the tent of meeting, and was one of the twelve spies, one of only two who trusted God. By the time the book of Joshua begins, he's probably around eighty years old, and he's been preparing for this moment his whole life.

Where It Fits

Joshua is the first of the books that Jewish tradition calls the Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Christians often call them the Historical Books. They tell Israel's story from entering the land to being exiled from it, and they measure that story by the covenant in Deuteronomy. Joshua picks up right where

Deuteronomy ends, with Moses dead and Israel camped across the Jordan from Jericho.

Who Wrote Joshua?

The book doesn't name its author. Jewish tradition says Joshua wrote most of it, with the account of his death added by others. The book mentions that Joshua wrote words in the book of the law (Joshua 24:26). The phrase to this day appears often, suggesting some time had passed between the events and the writing. Many scholars think Joshua was compiled and edited much later, as part of a larger history running from Deuteronomy through Kings. Christians with different views agree that Joshua is God's Word.

When Did It Happen?

Christians and scholars disagree about the date. The early date, based on 1 Kings 6:1, places the exodus around 1446 BC and the conquest around 1406 BC. The late date places the exodus in the 1200s BC and the conquest a generation later, around 1230–1200 BC. An Egyptian inscription from about 1208 BC, the Merneptah Stele, mentions Israel as a people already living in Canaan. We'll look at what archaeology says in chapter 4.

The World of Canaan

Canaan in this era wasn't a single nation. It was a patchwork of small city-states, each with its own king and walled town, often fighting one another and loosely under Egyptian control. Letters found at Amarna in Egypt, from the 1300s BC, show Canaanite kings begging Pharaoh for help against each other and against raiders called the Habiru. Canaanite religion worshiped gods like Baal, the

storm god, and included practices the Bible condemns, including child sacrifice.

Hard Passages

Joshua describes war, and some of it is hard to read. Including an event in the Bible doesn't make it a model for us, and Christians read every part of the Old Testament through Jesus. We'll face the hardest passages honestly in chapter 4. If anything you read brings up fear or pain, especially if you've experienced violence, talk to a trusted adult, like a parent, pastor, or school counselor.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Joshua 1): Be strong and courageous.

Chapter 2 (Joshua 2): Rahab and the spies.

Chapter 3 (Joshua 3–5): Crossing the Jordan.

Chapter 4 (Joshua 6): The walls of Jericho.

Chapter 5 (Joshua 7–8): Achan and Ai.

Chapter 6 (Joshua 9): The Gibeonite trick.

Chapter 7 (Joshua 10–12): The day the sun stood still.

Chapter 8 (Joshua 13–22): Dividing the land.

Chapter 9 (Joshua 23–24): Choose today.

Contents

Setting the Scene 7

1 Be Strong and Courageous *1* 11

2 Rahab and the Spies *2* 16

3 Stones by the River *3–5* 22

4 The Walls of Jericho *6* 27

5 Achan and Ai *7–8* 32

6 The Gibeonite Trick *9* 37

7 The Day the Sun Stood Still *10–12* 41

8 Dividing the Land *13–22* 46

9 Choose Today *23–24* 51

Where This Points 57

CHAPTER 1

Be Strong and Courageous

Joshua 1

"Now after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' servant." That's how the book begins, with a funeral and a handoff. For forty years, Moses had been the only leader most Israelites had ever known. He had faced down Pharaoh, split the sea, met God on the mountain, and carried the people through the desert. Now he's gone. And God's first words to Joshua are blunt. "Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore arise, go across this Jordan."

Imagine being Joshua. You've been the assistant your whole adult life. You've watched the greatest prophet in history up close. Now everyone is looking at you. The people are camped on the east bank of the Jordan River, which is flooding. Across the river are walled cities, trained armies, and the giants your generation was terrified of forty years ago. And God says, go.

> **REAL TALK** **Following a Legend**
>
> Maybe you know what it's like to follow someone impressive: an older sibling who was a star athlete, a parent everyone admires, a team captain who just graduated, a friend who seems to do everything right. People compare you. You compare yourself. Notice that God never asked Joshua to become Moses. He asked Joshua to trust Him. "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you."

> Your job isn't to be someone else. It's to be faithful with what God gives you, and to know He's with you too.

God gives Joshua three promises. First, the land. "I have given you every place that the sole of your foot will tread on, as I told Moses." God describes its borders, from the desert in the south to Lebanon in the north, from the Euphrates River to the Mediterranean Sea. Second, victory. "No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life." Third, and most important, His presence. "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not fail you nor forsake you."

Then God says the same thing three times in four verses. "Be strong and courageous." And then, "Only be strong and very courageous." And finally, "Haven't I commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Don't be afraid. Don't be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."

Why say it three times? Maybe because Joshua needed to hear it three times. Courage isn't something you feel once and then have forever. It's something you have to choose again and again. And notice where the courage comes from. Not from Joshua's experience, his army, or his own strength. It comes from God's presence. Joshua can be brave because God is with him wherever he goes.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Strong and Courageous**
>
> The phrase be strong and courageous appears again and again around Joshua. Moses said it to him in front of all Israel (Deuteronomy 31:7). God says it here, three times. The people say it back to him at the end of this chapter. Joshua later says it to his own officers (Joshua 10:25). Then, centuries later, King David says it to his son Solomon before he builds the temple (1

> Chronicles 22:13). It's what leaders in Israel said when they passed the baton. Courage was meant to be handed on.

There's one more part of God's charge, and it's easy to skip. Joshua's courage is connected to God's word. "Be careful to observe to do according to all the law which Moses my servant commanded you. Don't turn from it to the right hand or to the left." And, "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night." To meditate in Hebrew means to murmur or mutter, like someone reading out loud under their breath. Joshua was to keep God's word so close that it was always on his lips.

> **REAL TALK** **What Courage Looks Like**
>
> Courage isn't the same as not being scared. If Joshua wasn't scared, God wouldn't have had to keep telling him not to be. Courage is doing the right thing even when you're afraid. For you, it might look like standing up for a kid who's being bullied, telling the truth when lying would be easier, saying no when your friends are pressuring you, talking to your parents about something hard, or telling someone you're a Christian. It might look like getting help for anxiety or depression, which takes real courage. You don't have to feel brave. You just have to take the next step, knowing God goes with you.

It's worth noticing what God doesn't promise Joshua. He doesn't promise that it will be easy, or that there won't be battles, setbacks, or losses. There will be all of those. He promises His presence in the middle of them. That's often how God works. He doesn't always remove the hard thing in front of you. He goes into it with you. The same promise, I will not fail you nor forsake you, shows up again in Hebrews 13:5, spoken to ordinary Christians facing ordinary struggles. It was never just for generals.

Joshua acts immediately. He tells the officers to get the people ready, because in three days they'll cross the Jordan. Then he turns to the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh, who had already received land east of the river. He reminds them of their promise to Moses: their fighting men would cross over and fight alongside their brothers until everyone had their land.

Their answer is the best thing a new leader could hear. "All that you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go." They promise to follow Joshua as they followed Moses. And then they say the words God has been saying all chapter long: "Only be strong and courageous." The people encourage their leader. That's what healthy communities do.

REAL TALK **Encourage Your Leaders**

The tribes didn't just say they'd follow Joshua. They encouraged him. Leaders need that. Your pastor, youth leader, coach, teacher, and parents carry more than you might realize, and they rarely hear thank you. When was the last time you encouraged one of them? A short note, a text, or a few words after practice or church can mean more than you'd guess. The courage God gives is often passed along through people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Meditate Day and Night**

Joshua 1:8 sounds a lot like Psalm 1, which describes the blessed person whose delight is in God's law and who meditates on it day and night, like a tree planted by streams of water. In both places, success isn't about wealth or fame. It's about a life rooted in God's word, which produces good fruit. If you've never had a regular habit of reading Scripture, Joshua 1 is a good place to start. Try reading one short passage each day, and carry one phrase with you, repeating it under your breath like Joshua did.

KEY VERSE

Haven't I commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Don't be afraid. Don't be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.

Joshua 1:9 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God told Joshua to be strong and courageous three times?
2. Have you ever had to follow someone impressive? How did it feel?
3. Where do you need courage right now? What would it look like to take the next step?
4. How is courage connected to knowing God's word?

TRY THIS *Memorize Joshua 1:9. Write it on a card and put it where you'll see it before something scary this week, like a test, a game, or a hard conversation. Say it out loud before you go in.*

CHAPTER 2

Rahab and the Spies

Joshua 2

Before crossing the river, Joshua sends two spies to scout out the land, especially the city of Jericho. Jericho sat just west of the Jordan, near the Dead Sea, guarding the main route into the hill country. It was an oasis city, full of palm trees and springs, with strong walls. If Israel was going to enter Canaan, Jericho was the front door.

The spies end up at the house of a woman named Rahab. The Bible is blunt about her: she's a prostitute. Her house is built into the city wall. Some think the spies went there because it was a place where strangers could come and go without raising suspicion. But someone spots them anyway, and the king of Jericho sends soldiers to Rahab's door, demanding that she hand them over.

Rahab makes a decision that changes her life. She hides the spies on her roof under stalks of flax drying in the sun. Then she tells the soldiers that, yes, the men had come, but she didn't know where they were from, and they'd left at dusk, when the city gate was shut. Hurry, she says, you might still catch them. The soldiers race off toward the Jordan, and the gate is shut behind them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Rahab's House in the Wall**

Many ancient cities had houses built into or on top of their walls. At Jericho, archaeologists have found evidence of a mudbrick wall standing on top of a stone retaining wall, with houses built against it. That fits the description of Rahab's house being part of the wall. Whether these remains date to Joshua's time is debated, as we'll see in chapter 4. Flax was a plant used to make linen. After harvesting, the stalks were laid out on flat roofs to dry, making a perfect hiding place.

Then Rahab goes up to the roof and tells the spies something astonishing. "I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us." The whole city has heard what God did. "For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you, when you came out of Egypt." They've heard about the defeat of Sihon and Og. "As soon as we had heard it, our hearts melted, and there wasn't any more spirit in any man, because of you: for the LORD your God, he is God in heaven above, and on earth beneath."

Do you see what's happening? Forty years earlier, Israel's spies came back terrified of the Canaanites. Now it turns out the Canaanites were terrified of Israel the whole time. And Rahab, a pagan woman with a bad reputation, makes one of the clearest statements of faith in the Old Testament. She uses almost the same words Moses used in Deuteronomy 4:39. The LORD is God in heaven above and on earth beneath.

REAL TALK **Nobody Is Too Far Gone**

Rahab was a Canaanite, an enemy of Israel. She was a prostitute, someone most people in her city probably looked down on, and most religious people would have written off. And she's the one who believed. God didn't wait for her to clean up her life before He welcomed her. She trusted Him first, and He changed everything. If you think you've done too much, or that your past or

your family's reputation disqualifies you from God's love, Rahab's story is for you. And if you've ever written someone else off as too far gone, Rahab's story is for you too.

Rahab asks the spies for a promise. "Now therefore, please swear to me by the LORD, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with my father's house, and give me a true sign." She asks them to save her parents, her brothers and sisters, and all their families. The spies agree, as long as she doesn't betray them. She lets them down through her window with a rope. They tell her to tie a scarlet cord in that same window, and to gather her whole family inside her house when Israel attacks. Anyone inside would be safe. "She said, 'Let it be as you have said.' She sent them away, and they departed. Then she tied the scarlet line in the window."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Scarlet Cord**

Many Christian writers, going back to the early church, have seen the scarlet cord in Rahab's window as a picture of something bigger. On the first Passover, the blood of a lamb on the doorframe protected everyone inside the house from death. Here, a red cord in the window protects everyone inside Rahab's house. Both point to the safety found in the blood of Jesus. Whether or not the writer of Joshua meant that connection, it's a powerful picture: everyone who gathered under that sign was saved, no matter who they were.

Think about how much courage this took. If the king had found out, Rahab would have been executed as a traitor. She was betting her life, and her family's lives, on a God she had only heard about, and on the word of two foreign spies. She had no Bible, no church, no Christian friends. All she had was a report of what God had done, and she decided to trust it. Faith often starts like that: hearing about what God has done for others, and deciding to stake your own life on it.

The spies hide in the hills for three days, then return to Joshua with a very different report from the one their parents' generation brought. "Truly the LORD has delivered all the land into our hands. Moreover, all the inhabitants of the land melt away before us."

REAL TALK **Was Rahab Wrong to Lie?**

Rahab lied to the soldiers to save the spies' lives. Was that wrong? Christians have disagreed about this for centuries. Some, like Augustine, said lying is always wrong, and that God blessed Rahab's faith and kindness despite her lie, not because of it. Others say that protecting innocent lives from people who want to kill them is a different situation, like the Hebrew midwives who misled Pharaoh to save babies (Exodus 1), or people who hid Jewish families from the Nazis during World War II and lied to the soldiers at the door. Many Christians think that kind of deception, to protect life from murderers, isn't the same as ordinary lying. Notice that the New Testament praises Rahab's faith and her actions in hiding the spies (Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25), but never specifically praises the lie. What every view agrees on is this: Rahab's story is not permission to lie whenever it's convenient. If you're ever in a situation where someone is in danger, the right move is to get help from a trusted adult or call 911.

There's another lesson in this chapter, and it's about fear. Forty years earlier, Israel's spies came back saying, we were like grasshoppers in their sight. They were sure the Canaanites saw them as tiny and weak. Rahab reveals that the opposite was true: the Canaanites had been terrified of Israel the whole time. Fear lies. It tells you that everyone else is stronger, more confident, more put together than you are. It tells you that people are judging you, laughing at you, or looking down on you. Often, the people you're afraid of are just as scared as you are. The question isn't how big your problems look. It's how big your God is.

Rahab's story doesn't end here. When Jericho falls, the spies bring out Rahab and her whole family. "But Rahab the prostitute, her father's household, and all that she had, Joshua saved alive. She lives in the middle of Israel to this day." She married an Israelite named Salmon. Their son was Boaz, who married Ruth. Their great-grandson was King David. And fourteen hundred years later, when Matthew wrote out the family tree of Jesus, he included her by name. "Salmon became the father of Boaz by Rahab." A Canaanite prostitute who trusted God became an ancestor of the Messiah.

The New Testament remembers her twice more. Hebrews lists her in its hall of faith, right alongside Abraham and Moses. "By faith Rahab the prostitute didn't perish with those who were disobedient, having received the spies in peace." And James uses her as an example of faith that acts. "Wasn't Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?" Her faith wasn't just words. She risked her life for it.

KEY VERSE

As soon as we had heard it, our hearts melted, and there wasn't any more spirit in any man, because of you: for the LORD your God, he is God in heaven above, and on earth beneath.

Joshua 2:11 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God chose to save Rahab, of all the people in Jericho?
2. How do you think about Rahab's lie? Which view makes the most sense to you?
3. Have you ever written someone off as too far gone? What does Rahab's story say about that?
4. Rahab's faith led her to act. What's one way your faith could lead to action this week?

TRY THIS *Read Matthew 1:1–16. Find the four women named in Jesus' family tree besides Mary. Look up one of their stories, and write down what it tells you about the kind of people God welcomes.*

CHAPTER 3

Stones by the River

Joshua 3–5

Early in the morning, Israel moves to the edge of the Jordan River and camps there for three days. It's harvest time, in the spring, and the river is flooding over its banks with snowmelt from Mount Hermon far to the north. Crossing would be dangerous for a few strong men, let alone a whole nation with children, elderly people, and flocks of animals.

Joshua gives the instructions. When the people see the priests carrying the ark of the covenant, they're to follow it, keeping a distance of about two thousand cubits, about half a mile, so everyone can see it. Then he says, "Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you."

Here's the hard part. The priests have to go first, carrying the ark, and step right into the flooded river. The water won't stop until their feet are in it. God says that when the priests' feet "rest in the waters of the Jordan, that the waters of the Jordan will be cut off." Faith has to get its feet wet.

> REAL TALK **Getting Your Feet Wet**
>
> Sometimes God asks you to take a step before you see how it's going to work. The priests had to walk into a flooding river before the water stopped. You might face something similar: apologizing first, before you know how the other person will react; signing up to serve before you feel ready; telling the

truth about something you've hidden; reaching out for help before you know what will happen. Trusting God often means stepping in before the water parts. It doesn't mean doing reckless or dangerous things and expecting Him to bail you out. It means obeying what He's clearly asked, even when you can't see the outcome yet.

And it happens. The moment the priests' feet touch the water, the river stops flowing. The water piles up far upstream, at a town called Adam, and the part flowing down toward the Dead Sea is completely cut off. The priests stand on dry ground in the middle of the riverbed while the whole nation crosses over. It's the Red Sea all over again, for a new generation who were too young to remember the first time.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Jordan Stops**

The town of Adam is usually identified with Tell ed-Damiyeh, about twenty miles upstream from Jericho, where the Jordan runs between high clay banks. There are historical records of landslides there blocking the river. In 1267, an Arab historian recorded that the banks collapsed and dammed the Jordan for several hours, and in 1927 an earthquake caused another collapse that stopped the river for about twenty-one hours. Some Christians think God may have used a natural event like this, timed perfectly. Others think the crossing was a miracle with no natural cause. Both agree that the timing, the moment the priests stepped in, was God's doing.

When everyone has crossed, God tells Joshua to choose twelve men, one from each tribe. Each one is to pick up a stone from the middle of the riverbed, right where the priests are standing, and carry it to the camp. Joshua sets up the twelve stones at Gilgal as a memorial. Then he explains why. Someday, "when your children ask in the future, saying, 'What do you mean by these stones?'" the answer will be, "Israel came over this Jordan on dry land." The stones are for the next generation. "That all the peoples of the earth may know

that the LORD's hand is mighty, and that you may fear the LORD your God forever."

Once the priests carry the ark up out of the riverbed, the Jordan comes rushing back, overflowing its banks again. The news spreads, and the kings of Canaan lose their nerve.

> **REAL TALK** **Your Memorial Stones**
>
> Israel built a pile of stones so they'd never forget what God had done. What are your memorial stones? They might be a journal where you write down answered prayers, a photo from a mission trip or camp where God became real to you, a Bible with notes in the margins, or a rock you keep on your desk from a day that mattered. Faith grows when you remember. And memorials aren't just for you. They give you a chance to tell your story when someone asks, what's that? Somebody younger than you might need to hear it.

Chapter 5 records two important moments at Gilgal, before any battles. First, God tells Joshua to circumcise all the men who were born in the wilderness, because that sign of the covenant hadn't been practiced during the forty years. It's a strange thing to do right next to enemy territory; the men would be in pain and unable to fight for several days. But God's people needed to belong to Him before they fought for Him. Afterward, God says, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." The name Gilgal sounds like the Hebrew word for rolling.

Second, they celebrate Passover, the first one in the promised land. The next day, they eat food grown in Canaan, roasted grain and unleavened bread. And something ends. "The manna ceased on the next day, after they had eaten of the produce of the land." For forty years, bread had fallen from heaven every morning. Now it stops. God's way of providing has changed. Instead of miracle bread, they'll eat from fields and vineyards. It's a sign they've arrived.

REAL TALK **When Things Change**

The manna stopped. That might have felt scary. It was all the younger Israelites had ever known. Sometimes God's provision changes too. A season of your life ends: you move, a friend group drifts apart, you graduate, a parent changes jobs, a youth leader moves away. The things that carried you before aren't there anymore. That's hard, and it's okay to grieve it. But it doesn't mean God has stopped caring for you. It might mean He's leading you into something new. If a big change is overwhelming you, talk about it with someone you trust.

The chapter ends with one of the most mysterious encounters in the Bible. Joshua is near Jericho, maybe scouting it out, when he sees a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword. Joshua walks up and asks the obvious question. "Are you for us, or for our enemies?" The answer is surprising. "No; but I have come now as commander of the LORD's army." Joshua falls on his face and worships. And the commander says, "Take off your sandals, for the place on which you stand is holy." It's exactly what God said to Moses at the burning bush.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Commander of the Army**

Who was this commander? Some interpreters think he was an angel, perhaps Michael, who is described as a leader of God's armies (Daniel 10:13; Revelation 12:7). Many Christians, going back to the early church, think he was a pre-incarnate appearance of the Son of God, partly because Joshua worships him and isn't corrected, unlike angels elsewhere who refuse worship (Revelation 22:8–9). Either way, his answer is the point. Joshua asked whether God was on Israel's side. The commander said, in effect, that's the wrong question. The real question is whether Joshua is on God's side.

KEY VERSE

that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD's hand is mighty, and that you may fear the LORD your God forever.

Joshua 4:24 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God made the priests step into the river before it stopped?
2. What are some memorial stones in your life or your family's story?
3. The manna stopped when Israel entered the land. What changes are you facing, and how can you trust God in them?
4. Why do you think the commander answered Joshua's question with No?

TRY THIS *Find a small stone and write on it, or on a piece of paper under it, one thing God has done for you. Keep it somewhere visible. When someone asks about it, tell them the story.*

CHAPTER 4

The Walls of Jericho

Joshua 6

Jericho is shut up tight. Nobody goes in or out. And God gives Joshua the strangest battle plan in military history. "Behold, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and the mighty men of valor." Notice the tense: I have given. It's already done. All Israel has to do is obey.

Here's the plan. For six days, the army is to march around the city once a day, in silence. In the middle of the procession, seven priests carry seven ram's horn trumpets, blowing them as they walk, with the ark of the covenant behind them. On the seventh day, they're to march around the city seven times. Then the priests will give a long blast on the horns, the people will shout, and "the city wall will fall down flat."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Seven?**
>
> The number seven appears all over this chapter: seven priests, seven trumpets, seven days, seven times around the city on the seventh day. In the Bible, seven is the number of completeness, connected with the seven days of creation and the Sabbath. The ram's horn, called a shofar, was blown on holy days and at the Jubilee, the year of liberty. The march around Jericho was less like a military operation and more like a worship service. The ark, the symbol of God's presence, was at the center. The message was clear: this victory belongs to God.

Imagine being one of the soldiers. Day after day you march around the walls in silence, while the people of Jericho stare down at you, maybe laughing, maybe terrified. No siege ramps. No battering rams. Just walking and trumpets. It must have felt ridiculous. But they obey.

On the seventh day, they march around seven times. At the seventh time, Joshua tells the people, "Shout, for the LORD has given you the city!" Then it happens. "So the people shouted and the priests blew the trumpets. When the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted with a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight in front of him, and they took the city." Hebrews puts it simply: "By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days."

> **REAL TALK** **When Obedience Looks Silly**
>
> Marching around a city and shouting isn't how anyone wins a war. The Israelites must have felt foolish. Sometimes following God can feel that way too. Praying before a meal at the school cafeteria, saying no to a party everyone's going to, waiting for marriage when your friends think it's ridiculous, forgiving someone who doesn't deserve it, or giving money away when you could spend it on yourself. These things might not make sense to people around you. But God's ways often look foolish before they look wise (1 Corinthians 1:25). Obedience is trusting that He knows something you don't.

Then comes the hard part of the story. The Israelites devote the city to the LORD, the herem we talked about in Deuteronomy. "They utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, both young and old, and ox, sheep, and donkey, with the edge of the sword." Only Rahab and her family are spared, brought out by the two spies. The silver, gold, bronze, and iron go into the LORD's

treasury. Everything else is burned, and Joshua pronounces a curse on anyone who rebuilds the city.

REAL TALK **The Hardest Passages**

Reading that whole cities were destroyed, including women and children, is deeply troubling, and it should be. Christians have wrestled with these passages for centuries, and you should know the main ways they've been understood. First, the judgment view: God, who gives all life, has the right to judge, and He did so here against Canaanite societies that had become deeply corrupt, practicing things like child sacrifice; He had waited four hundred years (Genesis 15:16), and He later judged Israel just as severely for the same sins. Second, the hyperbole view: many scholars point out that ancient war reports from Egypt, Assyria, and Moab routinely used sweeping, exaggerated language about total destruction; the book of Joshua itself says Joshua destroyed all the people in certain areas, and then later says many of the same peoples were still there (Joshua 15:63; Judges 1). On this view, the language describes decisive victory, mainly against fortified military towns, rather than literally killing everyone. Third, some Christians say honestly that they don't fully understand these passages, that they hold them in tension with what they know of God in Jesus, and that it's okay to lament and ask hard questions about them, as many psalms and prophets did. Whatever view you take, every Christian tradition agrees on this: these commands were for one unique moment in history, they were never a general command to anyone else, and they can never be used to justify violence, war, racism, or hatred toward any people today. Jesus taught His followers to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (Matthew 5:44). If these passages trouble you, keep asking. Talk with a pastor or youth leader. And if you've experienced violence or war in your own life, or feel frightened by what you read, please talk to a trusted adult.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jericho and Archaeology**

What does archaeology say about Jericho? It's complicated, and scholars disagree. In the 1930s, archaeologist John Garstang excavated the site and found collapsed walls and a burned city, which he dated to about 1400 BC,

fitting the early date of the conquest. In the 1950s, Kathleen Kenyon re-dated the destruction to about 1550 BC, much too early for either biblical date, and concluded the city was mostly abandoned in Joshua's time. In the 1990s, Bryant Wood re-examined the pottery and argued for Garstang's date again, about 1400 BC; most archaeologists did not accept his conclusions, and an Italian-Palestinian team later supported Kenyon's dating. Supporters of the late date say erosion may have washed away the remains of the city from the 1200s BC. So Christians hold different views: some think the evidence fits the early date, some think the later city has been lost to erosion, and some think the account is told with a theological purpose more than as a detailed military report. The finds include something striking either way: a fallen mudbrick wall, and storage jars full of burned grain, suggesting a short siege and a city that wasn't looted for food, just as Joshua 6 describes.

Notice too what the people of Jericho had. They had heard the same reports Rahab heard: the Red Sea, Sihon and Og, the Jordan drying up. Their hearts melted with fear. But only Rahab and her family turned to Israel's God. Everyone else shut the gates and hoped the walls would hold. The same news led to very different responses. That's still true. Two people can hear the same message about Jesus, and one shuts the gate while the other ties a scarlet cord in the window. God's mercy was available to anyone in Jericho who turned to Him. Rahab is proof.

REAL TALK **Walls in Your Life**

Jericho's walls looked unbeatable. Maybe you're facing something that feels the same way: a habit you can't break, a family situation that never seems to change, a relationship that's broken, anxiety or depression that won't lift, a subject at school that feels impossible. God doesn't always knock down walls overnight. Sometimes He asks you to keep walking around them, day after day, in faithful obedience, before anything changes. And sometimes He uses people, counselors, doctors, teachers, pastors, and friends, as part of the way

> He brings walls down. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Asking is part of the march.

The chapter ends with a simple summary. "So the LORD was with Joshua; and his fame was in all the land." God had kept His promise to be with Joshua as He was with Moses. And centuries later, the curse came true: when a man named Hiel rebuilt Jericho in the days of King Ahab, he lost his oldest and youngest sons (1 Kings 16:34).

KEY VERSE

So the people shouted and the priests blew the trumpets. When the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted with a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight in front of him, and they took the city.

Joshua 6:20 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God gave such an unusual battle plan for Jericho?
2. When has obeying God felt silly or uncomfortable to you?
3. Which way of understanding the destruction of Jericho makes the most sense to you? What questions do you still have?
4. What does Rahab's rescue, in the middle of Jericho's destruction, tell you about God?

TRY THIS *Write down your hardest question about the book of Joshua. Take it to a pastor, youth leader, or parent this week and ask them what they think. Listen to their answer, and keep thinking about it.*

CHAPTER 5

Achan and Ai

Joshua 7–8

After Jericho, Israel is riding high. The next target is Ai, a small town in the hills west of Jericho. The scouts come back confident. Don't send the whole army, they say. Two or three thousand men can take it. So Joshua sends about three thousand. And they get routed. The men of Ai chase them down the hill and kill about thirty-six of them. "The hearts of the people melted," the book says, the same phrase used for the Canaanites in chapter 2.

Joshua is devastated. He tears his clothes and falls on his face before the ark until evening, along with the elders, putting dust on their heads. He prays one of the most honest prayers in the Bible: why did You ever bring us across the Jordan, just to hand us over to the Amorites? If only we'd stayed on the other side! What will happen to Your great name?

God's answer is direct. Get up. "Israel has sinned. Yes, they have even transgressed my covenant which I commanded them. Yes, they have even taken some of the devoted things, and have also stolen, and also deceived. They have even put it among their own stuff." At Jericho, everything was devoted to God. Someone took some of it and hid it. The book had already told us, at the start of chapter 7: "Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things."

REAL TALK **Hidden Sin**

Achan probably thought nobody would ever know. He took a few things, buried them under his tent, and went on with life. But hidden sin doesn't stay hidden, and it never stays small. It affected the whole community: men died in battle because of what he did in secret. Sin works like that today too. A secret habit, like stealing, lying, cheating, porn, or self-harm, might feel private, but it affects your relationships, your peace, and the people around you. The good news is that confession brings freedom. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us the sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." If you're carrying something hidden, tell God. Then tell a trusted adult. If it's something that's hurting you, like self-harm, please reach out today; you can call or text 988 any time.

The next morning, the tribes come forward one by one, probably by casting lots. Judah is chosen. Then the clan of Zerah. Then Zabdi's family. Then Achan. Joshua speaks to him gently. "My son, please give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and make confession to him. Tell me now what you have done! Don't hide it from me!"

Achan confesses. "I have truly sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel, and this is what I have done. When I saw among the plunder a beautiful Babylonian robe, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, then I coveted them and took them. Behold, they are hidden in the ground in the middle of my tent." Notice the pattern: I saw, I coveted, I took, I hid. It's the same pattern as Eve in the garden, who saw the fruit, desired it, took it, and then hid from God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Punishment of Achan**

Achan and his family were stoned and burned in the Valley of Achor, which means trouble. It's a hard ending, and readers have asked why his family died too. Some interpreters think his family must have known about the stolen goods, since they were buried in the middle of the family tent. Others note

that in the ancient world, the family was often treated as a single unit. Elsewhere, Deuteronomy 24:16 says children are not to be put to death for their parents' sins. Christians don't carry out punishments like this today, and the New Testament gives the church a very different approach: confession, forgiveness, and restoration. The prophet Hosea later promised that God would make the Valley of Achor a door of hope (Hosea 2:15). Even the valley of trouble wasn't the end of the story.

REAL TALK **See, Want, Take, Hide**

Achan's sin followed four steps: he saw, he wanted, he took, he hid. Temptation often works the same way for you. You see something, whether it's on a screen, in a store, or in someone else's life. You start wanting it. You take it, or do it. Then you hide it. The best place to stop is early, at the seeing and wanting stage. That might mean unfollowing accounts that make you jealous, not going places you know will tempt you, or telling a friend what you're struggling with so they can help. And if you've already reached the hiding stage, the way out is the same as it was for Achan: bring it into the light.

Notice how Joshua treated Achan, even in that terrible moment. He called him my son. He urged him to give glory to God by telling the truth. Confession, in the Bible, isn't just admitting you were caught. It's agreeing with God about what's true, and that honors Him. Achan's sin had consequences that couldn't be undone. But his confession was still the right thing to do. Telling the truth won't always make the consequences go away. It does bring you back into the light, where healing can begin.

With the sin dealt with, God speaks to Joshua with the same words He used at the start. "Don't be afraid, and don't be dismayed. Take all the warriors with you, and arise, go up to Ai." This time Joshua uses strategy. He sets an ambush behind the city, then leads the main army in a fake retreat, just like the first defeat. The men of Ai

chase them out, leaving the city empty. Joshua raises his javelin toward Ai, the ambush rushes in and sets the city on fire, and the men of Ai are trapped between the two Israelite forces.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Where Was Ai?**
>
> The name Ai means the ruin, and its location is debated. Archaeologists long identified it with a site called et-Tell, but excavations there found that it was abandoned from about 2400 BC until after 1200 BC, so there would have been no city for Joshua to conquer. Some scholars conclude that the story explains how an ancient ruin got its name. Others argue that et-Tell is the wrong site; excavations at a nearby site called Khirbet el-Maqatir have found a small fortress from around 1400 BC, which some believe fits the early date. Still others suggest Ai was a small military outpost near the ancient ruin. This is one of the big puzzles of biblical archaeology, and Christians hold different views.

After the victory at Ai, Joshua does something surprising. Instead of pushing on to the next battle, he leads the whole nation north to Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, near Shechem, just as Moses had commanded. He builds an altar, writes a copy of the law on stones, and reads the whole thing aloud. “There was not a word of all that Moses commanded which Joshua didn’t read before all the assembly of Israel, with the women, the little ones, and the foreigners who were among them.” In the middle of a war, God’s people stop to listen to God’s word. Everybody, including children and foreigners, gets to hear it.

KEY VERSE

The LORD said to Joshua, "Don't be afraid, and don't be dismayed. Take all the warriors with you, and arise, go up to Ai. Behold, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, with his people, his city, and his land.

Joshua 8:1 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the Israelites were overconfident at Ai?
2. How does one person's hidden sin affect a whole community? Can you think of an example?
3. Where do you see the pattern of see, want, take, hide in your own life?
4. Why do you think Joshua stopped to read the law to everyone right after the victory?

TRY THIS *Read Psalm 32, a psalm about the relief of confession. If there's something you've been hiding, write a prayer of confession to God, and then talk to a trusted adult about it.*

CHAPTER 6

The Gibeonite Trick

Joshua 9

After Jericho and Ai, the kings of Canaan band together to fight Israel. But one group of people tries something different. The Gibeonites lived in a group of towns in the hills north of Jerusalem, not far from Ai. They know they're next, and they know they can't win a fight. So they come up with a plan.

"They also resorted to a ruse." They load their donkeys with worn-out sacks and old, cracked wineskins. They put on patched sandals and old clothes. They pack dry, moldy bread. Then they walk into the Israelite camp at Gilgal and say, "We have come from a far country. Now therefore make a covenant with us." They explain that they've heard about the LORD and all He did in Egypt and to Sihon and Og, and they want to be Israel's servants.

The Israelites are suspicious. Maybe you live near us, they say. But the Gibeonites point to their bread, which was warm when they left home, and now look at it. And their wineskins were new, and look at them now. The Israelite leaders check out the evidence. "The men sampled their provisions, and didn't ask counsel from the LORD's mouth." That's the key mistake. They trusted what they could see and didn't ask God. "Joshua made peace with them, and made a covenant with them, to let them live. The princes of the congregation swore to them."

REAL TALK **Ask Before You Decide**

The Israelites made a big decision based on how things looked, without praying about it. It's an easy mistake. You see a deal online that looks great, a new friend who seems perfect, an opportunity that seems too good to pass up, and you jump in. Some things really are what they seem. Others are moldy bread in disguise. Before making big decisions, take time to pray, think, and ask wise people you trust. And be especially careful online, where people can pretend to be anyone. If someone you've met online is pressuring you to meet, send photos, or keep secrets, that's a warning sign. Tell a trusted adult.

Three days later, the truth comes out. The Gibeonites live just a few miles away. The Israelites march to their towns, and the whole congregation grumbles against the leaders. But the leaders refuse to break their promise. "We have sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel. Now therefore we may not touch them." They had made an oath in God's name, and they would keep it, even though they'd been tricked.

REAL TALK **Keeping Promises**

Here's what's amazing about this story: the promise was made under false pretenses, and Israel kept it anyway. They had every excuse to back out. But they had sworn by God's name, and God's people keep their word. Psalm 15 describes the kind of person who can dwell with God as someone "who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and doesn't change." Jesus said, "let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No.'" How seriously do you take your promises? To show up, to keep a secret that's safe to keep, to finish a project, to be loyal to a friend? Integrity means your word means something. One important exception: if you've promised to keep a secret about someone being hurt or in danger, that's a promise you should break, and tell a trusted adult right away.

Think about how this story connects to the rest of Joshua. Rahab was a Canaanite who was spared because she trusted Israel's God.

The Gibeonites were Canaanites who were spared because they feared Israel's God and asked for mercy, even if they went about it the wrong way. Both times, people from the nations Israel was supposed to destroy ended up living among God's people. The book that contains the hardest war passages in the Bible also keeps showing that God's mercy was available to anyone who turned to Him.

Joshua calls the Gibeonites in and asks why they deceived Israel. Their answer is honest at last: we were afraid for our lives, because we heard that God had commanded you to destroy everyone in the land. We're in your hands. Do what seems right to you. Joshua spares them, and makes them woodcutters and water carriers for the community and for the altar of the LORD.

That could sound like a punishment, and in a way it was. But think about where it put them: serving at God's altar, near His presence, for generations. Like Rahab, the Gibeonites were Canaanites who recognized that Israel's God was the true God, and they ended up living among His people. Centuries later, after the exile, people from Gibeon helped rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 3:7).

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Promise That Lasted**

The promise to the Gibeonites lasted for centuries. In 2 Samuel 21, during the reign of King David, Israel suffered a three-year famine. When David asked God why, the answer was that Saul had killed Gibeonites, breaking the oath Joshua's generation had made. "It is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he put the Gibeonites to death." God took that promise seriously for four hundred years. When God's people make a promise in His name, it matters to Him, long after everyone else has forgotten.

REAL TALK **Fear and Honesty**

The Gibeonites lied because they were afraid. Fear can push people to do things they normally wouldn't: lie to parents about where they were, cheat on a test because they're terrified of failing, hide a mistake because they're scared of getting in trouble. But the Gibeonites' story shows something hopeful too. When they finally told the truth, they were spared. Honesty usually turns out better than we expect, even when it's hard. If you're afraid to tell the truth about something, especially because you're scared of how someone will react, think about who you could talk to first: a parent, school counselor, youth leader, or another trusted adult. And if you're afraid of someone at home, that's something to tell a trusted adult about right away.

KEY VERSE

But all the princes said to all the congregation, "We have sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel. Now therefore we may not touch them.

Joshua 9:19 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the Israelites didn't ask God before making a covenant with the Gibeonites?
2. What's a decision you're facing that you should pray about before you decide?
3. Is it ever right to break a promise? When?
4. What does the story of the Gibeonites say about God's mercy to outsiders?

TRY THIS *Make a list of promises you've made recently, big or small. Is there one you haven't kept? Go keep it this week, or if you can't, apologize and make it right.*

CHAPTER 7

The Day the Sun Stood Still

Joshua 10–12

When the king of Jerusalem, Adoni-Zedek, hears that Gibeon has made peace with Israel, he panics. Gibeon was a large, important city with strong warriors. So he gathers four other Amorite kings, from Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Eglon, and their armies surround Gibeon to punish it. The Gibeonites send an urgent message to Joshua at Gilgal: don't abandon your servants! Come quickly and save us!

Here's where Israel's promise gets tested. They had been tricked into the treaty. They could have let the Amorites do the dirty work. Instead, Joshua marches his army all night, uphill, about twenty miles, to defend the people who had deceived him. God tells him, "Don't fear them, for I have delivered them into your hands. Not a man of them will stand before you." Israel attacks at dawn, catching the Amorites by surprise. As the enemy flees down the pass toward Beth Horon, God sends a storm of huge hailstones, and the book says more died from the hail than from the sword.

Then comes one of the most famous and debated moments in the Bible. "Then Joshua spoke to the LORD in the day when the LORD delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel. He said in the sight of Israel, 'Sun, stand still on Gibeon! You, moon, stop in the valley of Aijalon!'" And it happened. "The sun stood still, and the

moon stayed, until the nation had avenged themselves of their enemies. Isn't this written in the book of Jashar? The sun stayed in the middle of the sky, and didn't hurry to go down about a whole day."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Book of Jashar**

Joshua 10:13 quotes from the book of Jashar, which means the book of the upright one. It was apparently a collection of ancient poems or songs about Israel's heroes. It's mentioned again in 2 Samuel 1:18, where David's lament for Saul and Jonathan is said to be written in it. The book itself has been lost. Its mention here is interesting for two reasons: it shows that the writer of Joshua used older sources, and it suggests that Joshua's words, Sun, stand still, may come from a poem.

What actually happened? Christians have understood it in several ways. Some take it literally: God miraculously stopped or slowed the earth's rotation, or made the light of the sun linger, giving Israel extra daylight to finish the battle. God created the universe, they reason, so He can certainly do this. Others think the Hebrew word translated stand still can also mean be silent or stop, and suggest Joshua was asking for the sun's heat to stop, through cloud cover from the hailstorm, so his exhausted army could keep fighting; or that a rare event like an eclipse was involved. Still others note that the words come from a poem in the book of Jashar, and read them as poetic language for an astonishing victory, the way Deborah's song says the stars fought from heaven (Judges 5:20), or Habakkuk says, "The sun and moon stood still in the sky at the light of your arrows." Faithful Christians hold each of these views.

Whatever happened in the sky, the writer wants us to notice something even more amazing. "There was no day like that before it or after it, that the LORD listened to the voice of a man; for the LORD

fought for Israel." The miracle isn't just about the sun. It's that God listened to a human being's prayer.

> **REAL TALK** **Bold Prayers**
>
> Joshua prayed one of the boldest prayers in the Bible. He didn't ask for a little help. He asked God to stop the sun. You might feel like your prayers should be small and polite, or that God is too busy to care about your problems. But the Bible shows people bringing big requests to God again and again. Jesus told His followers to ask, seek, and knock (Matthew 7:7). That doesn't mean God gives us whatever we want, like a vending machine. But it does mean He listens. What's the boldest thing you could ask God for? Bring it to Him, and trust Him with the answer.

The five kings flee and hide in a cave at Makkedah. Joshua has the cave sealed with large stones while the army chases down the rest of the enemy. Afterward, he brings the kings out and has his commanders put their feet on the kings' necks, a common ancient sign of total victory. Then he says to them, "Don't be afraid, nor be dismayed. Be strong and courageous, for the LORD will do this to all your enemies against whom you fight." The words God spoke to Joshua in chapter 1, Joshua now passes on to his officers.

The rest of chapter 10 summarizes a campaign through the southern part of Canaan, taking cities like Lachish, Hebron, and Debir. Chapter 11 describes a campaign in the north, where Jabin, king of the powerful city of Hazor, gathers a huge army with horses and chariots by the waters of Merom. God again tells Joshua not to be afraid, and Israel wins. Joshua burns Hazor, the biggest city in Canaan. Chapter 12 lists thirty-one kings defeated by Israel.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **How Did Israel Come to Canaan?**
>
> Scholars have proposed several models for how Israel came to live in Canaan. The conquest model, closest to a straightforward reading of Joshua, says

Israel entered from outside and won a series of military campaigns. Supporters point to destruction layers at sites like Hazor, which was burned in the 1200s BC, possibly by Israel. The settlement model says Israel's tribes moved into the hill country gradually and mostly peacefully over a long time, with occasional conflict. The emergence model says Israel developed mostly from within Canaanite society, perhaps as people who left the cities and settled in hundreds of small new villages in the hills around 1200 BC. Archaeologists have found exactly those villages, with a distinctive style of four-room houses and, notably, no pig bones, which fits Israelite food laws. Many evangelical scholars think the reality was a combination: a real entrance from outside and key battles, as Joshua describes, followed by a long, gradual process of settlement, as Judges describes. The book of Joshua itself says that "there remains yet very much land to be possessed."

REAL TALK **War and Violence Today**

Reading chapter after chapter of battles can be hard, especially if you've seen war on the news, or if violence is part of your own life or your family's story. Here's what's important to remember. Israel's wars in Joshua were a one-time chapter in history, not a pattern for today. The New Testament never calls Christians to fight for God with weapons, and Jesus told Peter to put away his sword. The Bible looks forward to a day when nations will beat their swords into plowshares and won't learn war anymore (Isaiah 2:4). If you're struggling with fear about war, violence in your neighborhood, or something that's happened to you, please talk to a trusted adult, like a parent, school counselor, or pastor. If you or someone else is in danger, call 911.

The section ends with a summary that sounds final. "So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD spoke to Moses." But even here, the book is honest that it took a long time. Joshua made war against these kings for many years, and there was still land left to take. The victories were real. So was the unfinished work.

KEY VERSE

There was no day like that before it or after it, that the LORD listened to the voice of a man; for the LORD fought for Israel.

Joshua 10:14 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Joshua defended the Gibeonites even though they had tricked him?
2. Which view of the sun standing still makes the most sense to you, and why?
3. What's a bold prayer you could bring to God?
4. How should Christians think about the wars in Joshua today?

TRY THIS *Write down one bold prayer request in a journal, with today's date. Pray about it every day for a month. At the end of the month, write down what happened, and what you learned.*

CHAPTER 8

Dividing the Land

Joshua 13–22

The second half of Joshua is mostly about real estate. Chapters 13–21 describe how the land was divided among the twelve tribes, with long lists of borders and towns. It might be tempting to skip them. But for Israel, these lists were like the deed to a house. Every family could point to a town and say: that's ours. God promised it, and God gave it.

The section opens with Joshua getting old. "Now Joshua was old and well advanced in years. The LORD said to him, 'You are old and advanced in years, and there remains yet very much land to be possessed.'" Then God has Joshua divide the land anyway, by lot, trusting that God would finish what He started.

Right at the start comes one of the best stories in the book. Caleb, from the tribe of Judah, comes to Joshua. Caleb and Joshua were the only two spies who trusted God forty-five years earlier. Now Caleb reminds Joshua of that day. "I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the LORD sent me from Kadesh Barnea to spy out the land. I brought him word again as it was in my heart. Nevertheless, my brothers who went up with me made the heart of the people melt; but I wholly followed the LORD my God."

Then he says something incredible. “Now, behold, I am eighty-five years old, today. As yet I am as strong today as I was in the day that Moses sent me.” And what does he want? A nice, quiet retirement spot? No. He wants the hardest piece of land in Canaan. “Now therefore give me this hill country, of which the LORD spoke in that day; for you heard in that day how the Anakim were there, and great and fortified cities.” Caleb asks for the very mountain where the giants lived, the ones who had terrified the other spies. “It may be that the LORD will be with me, and I shall drive them out, as the LORD said.”

Joshua blesses him and gives him Hebron. “Therefore Hebron became the inheritance of Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite to this day, because he followed the LORD, the God of Israel wholeheartedly.”

REAL TALK **Faith That Lasts**

Caleb was faithful at forty, and he was still faithful at eighty-five. He spent forty-five years watching other people’s unbelief cost him, wandering in a desert because of a decision he voted against. He could have gotten bitter. Instead, he got bolder. That kind of faith doesn’t happen overnight. It’s built over a lifetime, one decision at a time. The choices you’re making now, about what you believe, who you follow, and what kind of person you’re becoming, are shaping who you’ll be at eighty-five. What kind of faith do you want to have then? Start building it now.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Caleb the Kenizzite**

Here’s a detail that’s easy to miss. Caleb is called a Kenizzite. The Kenizzites were a non-Israelite people listed among the nations living in Canaan in Abraham’s day (Genesis 15:19). Many scholars think Caleb’s family was originally from outside Israel and was adopted into the tribe of Judah. If so, then one of the greatest heroes of faith in the Old Testament, the man who

wholly followed the LORD, was an outsider who became an insider, like Rahab. God's people were never meant to be defined by bloodline alone, but by faith.

The tribes receive their land one by one. Judah gets a large area in the south. Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, get the center. The daughters of Zelophehad, whose courage we saw in Numbers, come to Joshua and remind him of Moses' command, and they receive their inheritance. The remaining seven tribes are slow to claim their land, and Joshua scolds them. "How long will you neglect to go in to possess the land?" He sends men to survey it, and divides the rest by lot at Shiloh, where the tabernacle is set up. Joshua himself is the last to receive a town, Timnath Serah in the hill country of Ephraim. The leader takes his share last.

REAL TALK **Don't Neglect What God Gives**

Seven tribes were slow to take what God had already given them. It's a strange problem: having a gift and not using it. You might do the same thing with your own gifts: a talent you never develop, an opportunity you never take, a calling you keep putting off, or even a relationship with God you never really pursue. Joshua's question is a good one to ask yourself. How long will you wait? What has God given you that you haven't stepped into yet?

Chapter 20 sets up the cities of refuge that Moses commanded, six towns spread across the land, three on each side of the Jordan. God tells Joshua, "Assign the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you by Moses, that the man slayer who kills any person accidentally or unintentionally may flee there." Anyone who caused a death by accident could run there for protection from a family member seeking revenge, until a fair trial could be held. The cities were for everyone, "for all the children of Israel, and for the alien who lives among them." In a world where revenge was common, God built in a place for mercy and justice.

Chapter 21 gives forty-eight towns to the Levites, scattered among all the tribes, so that the teachers of God's law would live everywhere. Then comes one of the most beautiful summaries in the Bible. "So the LORD gave to Israel all the land which he swore to give to their fathers. They possessed it, and lived in it. The LORD gave them rest all around." And then: "Nothing failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass."

Chapter 22 tells a tense story. The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh have kept their promise, fighting alongside the others for years. Joshua sends them home across the Jordan with a blessing. But on the way, they build a huge altar by the river. The other tribes are horrified; they think it's a rival altar for worshiping other gods, and they nearly go to war. A delegation led by Phinehas the priest goes to confront them. It turns out the eastern tribes built it as a witness, so that their children would always remember they belonged to the LORD too, even though they lived across the river. Civil war is avoided because people talked before they fought.

> **REAL TALK** **Talk Before You Fight**
>
> The western tribes almost went to war over a misunderstanding. They saw the altar and assumed the worst. Thankfully, they sent people to ask questions first. How often do you assume the worst about someone? A text that seems rude, a friend who didn't invite you, a parent who seems unfair. Before you react, ask. You might find out there's a completely different story. Assuming the worst breaks friendships, families, and churches. Asking questions can save them.

KEY VERSE

Nothing failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass.

Joshua 21:45 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What do you admire most about Caleb at eighty-five?
2. What kind of faith do you want to have when you're old? What could you do now to build it?
3. What has God given you that you haven't stepped into yet?
4. When have you assumed the worst about someone and been wrong?

TRY THIS *Interview an older Christian you respect, someone over sixty if possible. Ask them how they've stayed faithful, what their hardest moments were, and what advice they'd give you. Write down what they say.*

CHAPTER 9

Choose Today

Joshua 23–24

Joshua is now about 110 years old. Like Moses before him, he gathers the people for a farewell. In chapter 23, he speaks to the leaders. He reminds them of everything God has done, and tells them to stay faithful. "Therefore be very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses." Notice the word courageous again. The courage Joshua needed to fight battles, they now need to stay faithful. "But hold fast to the LORD your God, as you have done to this day." And, "Take good heed therefore to yourselves, that you love the LORD your God."

He's honest about the danger. Canaanites still live in the land. If Israel intermarries with them and starts worshiping their gods, those nations will become a trap for them, like a whip on their backs and thorns in their eyes. Then he says something that echoes the closing summary of chapter 21. "Behold, today I am going the way of all the earth. You know in all your hearts and in all your souls that not one thing has failed of all the good things which the LORD your God spoke concerning you."

> **REAL TALK** **Finishing Well**
>
> Joshua had been faithful for more than a century, and he finished well. Not everyone does. The Bible is full of people who started strong and ended badly, like Saul, Solomon, and Samson. It's easy to think faith is only about

> the beginning: the moment you first trust Jesus, or the big decision at camp. But following God is a long race (Hebrews 12:1). What will help you keep going when the excitement fades? Friends who share your faith, a regular habit of prayer and Scripture, a church community, people older than you who can mentor you, and honesty about your struggles. Faith that finishes well is built a day at a time.

In chapter 24, Joshua gathers all the tribes at Shechem for a covenant renewal ceremony. Shechem is where God first promised the land to Abraham (Genesis 12:6–7). Joshua speaks for God and retells Israel's whole story, starting at the very beginning. "Your fathers lived of old time beyond the River, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor. They served other gods." Israel's own ancestors were idol-worshipers when God called them. Then God led Abraham to Canaan, gave him Isaac, then Jacob and Esau. He sent Moses and Aaron, struck Egypt, brought Israel through the sea, fed them in the wilderness, defeated the Amorites, turned Balaam's curse into a blessing, and brought them across the Jordan. Then God says, "I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and cities which you didn't build, and you live in them. You eat of vineyards and olive groves which you didn't plant."

Then Joshua makes his challenge. "Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in truth. Put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River, in Egypt; and serve the LORD. If it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose today whom you will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Covenant at Shechem**

Joshua 24 follows the same treaty pattern we saw in Deuteronomy. It names the great King, recounts His history with the people, states the requirements, calls witnesses, and writes everything down. Joshua even sets up a large stone under an oak tree as a witness. Archaeologists at Shechem have found a large temple and standing stones from this era, though whether any is connected to Joshua 24 is debated. Shechem was in the center of the land, near Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, and it became an important gathering place for the tribes.

Notice what Joshua is asking. He's not saying, choose between serving God and serving nobody. He assumes everybody serves something. The choice is who or what. The gods of their ancestors, the gods of their neighbors, or the LORD. And Joshua doesn't wait to see what the crowd does before making his own choice. As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

REAL TALK **Whom Will You Serve?**

Everyone serves something. It might not be a statue of Baal, but it could be popularity, money, success, a relationship, your appearance, your phone, your own comfort, or what other people think of you. Whatever you live for, whatever you'd sacrifice anything to get or keep, that's what you serve. Joshua's challenge is as real for you today as it was for Israel. You can't choose for your parents, your friends, or your youth group. But you can choose for yourself. What would it look like to say, as for me, I will serve the LORD? And what would you need to put away to say it honestly?

The people answer quickly. "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD, to serve other gods." But Joshua surprises them. "You can't serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God." He's not trying to discourage them. He's making sure they understand what they're promising. This isn't a casual commitment. When they insist, he tells them that they're witnesses against

themselves, and to throw away their foreign gods. Three times they say it. Finally, "We will serve the LORD our God, and we will listen to his voice." Joshua writes down the covenant and sets up the stone as a witness.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Joshua's Warning**

Why did Joshua tell the people they couldn't serve the LORD? Some think he was testing their sincerity, like a coach asking whether you really want to be on the team. Others think he was being honest about human weakness: on their own, without new hearts, they would fail, as the book of Judges goes on to show. Moses had said the same thing in Deuteronomy 31. Either way, the warning points forward. Israel needed more than good intentions. They needed God to change their hearts, which the prophets later promised and the New Testament says happens through Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

It's worth noticing that Joshua's challenge is about his house, not just himself. He takes responsibility for his family's faith. If you're a teenager, you're not in charge of your house yet. But you're part of it, and you have more influence than you think. Your younger siblings watch what you do. Your parents notice how you talk about God. Your friends see whether your faith is real. And someday you may have a house of your own. The choices you make now are already shaping the kind of home you'll build.

Then the book ends with three burials. "After these things, Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died, being one hundred ten years old." He's buried in his own land at Timnath Serah. Joseph's bones, which Israel had carried all the way from Egypt, are finally buried at Shechem, fulfilling a promise from Genesis 50. And Eleazar, Aaron's son, the high priest, is buried in the hill country of Ephraim.

Joseph's bones are a quiet but powerful detail. Four hundred years earlier, Joseph had made his family promise to carry his bones out of Egypt when God brought them home (Genesis 50:25). Moses took them when Israel left Egypt (Exodus 13:19). For forty years they traveled through the wilderness. Now, finally, they're laid to rest in the land. Genesis ended with a coffin in Egypt and a promise. Joshua ends with that promise kept. God's promises sometimes take centuries, but they don't fail.

The book gives Joshua the title that was given to Moses: the servant of the LORD. And it gives one last summary of his life. "Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua." His faith shaped a whole generation. But the next book, Judges, opens with a generation that didn't know the LORD. Faith has to be chosen again by every generation. Including yours.

KEY VERSE

If it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose today whom you will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

Joshua 24:15 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What gods do people serve today? Which ones pull at you most?
2. Why do you think Joshua told the people they couldn't serve the LORD?
3. What would it mean for you to say, as for me, I will serve the LORD?
4. How can you help make sure your faith lasts beyond your teen years?

TRY THIS *Write your own covenant with God: what you're choosing, what you're putting away, and who will help you keep it. Sign and date it, and show it to someone you trust. Then put it somewhere you'll see it, like Joshua's stone.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Joshua ends with Israel in the land, and a beautiful summary: not one of God's good promises had failed. But the book also hints that the story isn't over. Canaanites still live in the land. The people promise to serve God, but Joshua warns that they won't be able to keep it up on their own. The next book, Judges, shows how right he was. Joshua gave Israel a home, but not lasting rest.

Jewish readers treasure Joshua as the story of God's faithfulness in bringing Israel into the land He promised Abraham. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, saw in Joshua a preview of someone greater. The letter to the Hebrews says, "For if Joshua had given them rest, he would not have spoken afterward of another day. There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God." A second Joshua, with the very same name, came to bring that rest. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest."

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He keeps every promise He makes. Like Rahab, you're not too far outside to be brought in.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all chosen other gods.

Joshua told Israel to put away their idols. The Bible says all of us have turned from God to serve other things.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. Achan's hidden sin brought disaster. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus saves.

That's what His name means. Jesus, the greater Joshua, died on the cross for our sins and rose again, to bring us into God's rest.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Israel received a land they didn't build. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Choose today.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I've served other things instead of You, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. Thank You for keeping every promise. Thank You that Jesus, whose name means the LORD saves, died for me and rose again. I'm turning to You. Forgive me, and bring me into Your rest. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Today I choose You. As for me, I will serve the LORD. Give me courage to follow You wherever You lead. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Joshua 1, 2, and 24, then read Hebrews 3–4 and 11, and watch how the story of Joshua points to Jesus.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Set up a stone. Israel built a memorial so they'd never forget what God did. Write down the date and what you've decided today, and keep it where you'll see it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Joshua was written so that God's people would remember that He keeps His promises. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Joshua is right, the choice is still in front of you, and the God who brought Israel home wants to bring you home too.

Nothing failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass.

Joshua 21:45 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF JUDGES

The King Who Never Gives Up

Judges, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Never Gives Up: The Book of Judges, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

Copyright © 2026 Bill McLeod. All rights reserved.

Published by Papa Bill Books.

Scripture quotations are from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, which is in the public domain.

All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” You may know a few stories from Judges. Gideon and his fleece. Samson and his hair. Maybe Deborah, if your church was good about telling the stories of women in the Bible. But you probably don’t know how dark and strange this book really is.

Judges is the Bible’s most honest book about what happens when people stop listening to God. It covers about three hundred years after Joshua, and it’s not a pretty picture. Israel turns away from God again and again. Each time, they get crushed by enemies. Each time, they cry out for help. And each time, God sends a rescuer, called a judge. But the rescuers get worse as the book goes on: brave at first, then hesitant, then reckless, then downright scary. By the end, Israel has sunk so low that it looks like the nations God drove out of the land.

So why read it? Because Judges is painfully realistic about human nature, including yours and mine. It shows how easy it is to drift, how quickly one generation can forget God, and what happens when everyone does what seems right to them. But it’s also a book about a God who never gives up on His people. Over and over, when they cry out, He answers. Even when they don’t deserve it. Especially when they don’t deserve it.

Fair warning: some of these stories are hard. We’ll handle them honestly and carefully. Let’s go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Judges in nine chapters: the downward cycle (Judges 1–2), Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar (3), Deborah, Barak, and Jael (4–5), Gideon (6–7), Gideon's drift and Abimelech (8–9), Jephthah (10–12), Samson's birth and early life (13–15), Samson and Delilah (16), and Israel's rock bottom (17–21). The darkest stories at the end are summarized briefly and without graphic detail.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Judges is, where it fits, and the world it came from. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as what happened to Jephthah's daughter and whether Gideon was right to test God with a fleece, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. Judges includes violence and abuse. When it does, you'll find a box with a safety note. This book quotes Judges in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the seventh book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Judges raises questions teens will ask. I've presented the main views fairly on Gideon's fleece (whether it models seeking guidance or shows weak faith), and on Jephthah's vow, including the view that he literally sacrificed his daughter and the view that he dedicated her to lifelong celibate service at the tabernacle. Either way, the book notes that the text never endorses his vow, and that God's law forbids child sacrifice. I'd encourage you to share your own church's view with your teen, and to explain why other Christians see it differently.

Judges contains some of the most violent and disturbing material in the Bible, including Ehud's assassination of Eglon, Jael's killing of Sisera, and, in chapters 17–21, the abuse and death of the Levite's concubine and the civil war that follows. These are handled carefully and age-appropriately, without graphic detail and without glorifying violence. The final chapter explains that the author included these stories as a warning of how far people fall without

God, and includes a clear safety box on abuse and sexual violence, pointing readers to trusted adults, RAINN (1-800-656-4673), Childhelp (1-800-422-4453), and 911. Other Real Talk boxes address peer pressure, insecurity, anger, revenge, and dating, and point to 988 where relevant.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees the flawed judges, and Israel's longing for a true king, fulfilled in Jesus, while acknowledging that Jewish readers read Judges in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see in Judges both the danger of drifting from God and the faithfulness of a God who never gives up on His people.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What's a Judge?

When you hear judge, you probably picture someone in a black robe in a courtroom. Some of Israel's judges, like Deborah, did settle disputes. But most were more like rescuers or military leaders, people God raised up to save Israel from enemies. The Hebrew word shophet can mean ruler, leader, or deliverer. The book calls them saviors too. There are twelve judges in the book, some with long stories and some with only a sentence or two.

Where It Fits

Judges comes right after Joshua. Joshua ends with Israel promising to serve the LORD. Judges opens with Joshua's death and shows how quickly that promise falls apart. The book covers the time between the conquest and the rise of Israel's kings, roughly the 1300s to the 1000s BC on the early dating, or the 1200s to the 1000s BC on the late dating. The book of Ruth takes place during this same period, and 1 Samuel picks up the story at the end of it.

The Cycle

Judges follows a pattern that repeats like a broken record. First, Israel does evil in the LORD's sight and worships other gods. Second, God hands them over to an enemy. Third, they cry out to God. Fourth, God raises up a judge who rescues them. Fifth, the land has rest, until the judge dies, and it starts all over again. But it's not

really a circle. It's a downward spiral. Each time around, things get worse.

Who Wrote Judges?

The book doesn't name its author. Jewish tradition says Samuel wrote it. The repeated phrase in those days there was no king in Israel suggests it was written after Israel had kings, looking back on the days before them. Many scholars think Judges was compiled from older stories and edited as part of a larger history running from Deuteronomy through Kings. Christians with different views agree that Judges is God's Word.

The World of the Judges

Israel in this era wasn't a unified nation. It was a loose group of tribes, each mostly looking after itself, scattered through the hill country. Around them were the Canaanites, who still controlled many cities, and other peoples who attacked them: the Moabites, Midianites, Ammonites, and especially the Philistines, who had iron weapons and powerful cities on the coast. The Canaanite religion, with its worship of Baal and Asherah, promised rain and good harvests, and it pulled at Israel constantly.

Hard Stories and Safety Notes

Judges includes violence, war, a terrible vow, and abuse. Including a story in the Bible doesn't mean God approves of what happens in it. Often the writer is showing us how wrong things have gone. When we come to these stories, you'll find a safety box. Here's what they say: abuse and violence are always wrong, it's never the victim's fault, and if something like it is happening to you or someone you know, tell a trusted adult. In the United States you can

call 911 in an emergency, call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453, or call the RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Judges 1–2): The downward spiral.

Chapter 2 (Judges 3): Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar.

Chapter 3 (Judges 4–5): Deborah, Barak, and Jael.

Chapter 4 (Judges 6–7): Gideon and the three hundred.

Chapter 5 (Judges 8–9): Gideon's drift and the bramble king.

Chapter 6 (Judges 10–12): Jephthah's vow.

Chapter 7 (Judges 13–15): Samson the strong.

Chapter 8 (Judges 16): Samson and Delilah.

Chapter 9 (Judges 17–21): No king in Israel.

Contents

Setting the Scene 7

1 The Downward Spiral *1–2* 11

2 The Left-Handed Rescuer *3* 16

3 Deborah, Barak, and Jael *4–5* 21

4 Gideon and the Three Hundred *6–7* 26

5 Gideon's Drift and the Bramble King *8–9* 32

6 Jephthah's Rash Vow *10–12* 37

7 Samson the Strong *13–15* 42

8 Samson and Delilah *16* 47

9 No King in Israel *17–21* 52

Where This Points 57

CHAPTER 1

The Downward Spiral

Judges 1–2

Judges opens with a question that sounds hopeful. "After the death of Joshua, the children of Israel asked of the LORD, saying, 'Who should go up for us first against the Canaanites, to fight against them?'" God answers: Judah. And at first, things go well. Judah wins battles. Caleb, now an old man, offers his daughter Achsah in marriage to whoever captures the town of Debir, and his nephew Othniel takes it. Achsah, by the way, is a great minor character; she boldly asks her father for springs of water to go with her land, and gets them.

But then chapter 1 turns into a long list of failures. Tribe after tribe doesn't finish the job. Benjamin doesn't drive out the people of Jerusalem. Manasseh, Ephraim, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan all leave Canaanites living among them. "When Israel had grown strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, and didn't utterly drive them out." They made the Canaanites work for them instead. It looked like a good deal. It turned out to be a disaster.

> **REAL TALK** **Halfway Obedience**
>
> Israel didn't completely reject God. They obeyed partway. They took some land, made some compromises, and settled for less than what God had told them to do. Halfway obedience is still disobedience, and it usually leads to bigger problems later. It might look like quitting a bad habit except on

weekends, being honest except when it's inconvenient, or following Jesus except when your friends are around. The things you tolerate today can become the things that trap you tomorrow. Is there an area of your life where you're obeying God halfway?

In chapter 2, the angel of the LORD comes to Israel and confronts them. God had kept His promises. He had told them not to make covenants with the people of the land and to tear down their altars. They didn't listen. So God says He won't drive those nations out; instead, they'll be thorns in Israel's sides, and their gods will be a trap. The people weep, and they name the place Bokim, which means weepers. But their tears don't last.

Then comes one of the saddest verses in the Bible. Joshua's generation had seen God's miracles. "The people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua." But "after all that generation were gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who didn't know the LORD, nor the work which he had done for Israel."

REAL TALK **The Generation That Didn't Know**

How does a whole generation forget God in a single lifetime? Probably the same way it happens today. Parents assume their kids will just pick up their faith. Kids hear the stories but never make them their own. Life gets comfortable, other things crowd in, and nobody notices the drift until it's too late. You might be in the generation right now that decides whether faith continues in your family. That's a big responsibility, but it's also a big opportunity. Ask your parents and grandparents how they came to know God. Ask questions. Make your faith your own. The stories of what God has done aren't just your parents' stories. They can be yours too.

Notice that the problem began with forgetting. The new generation didn't know the LORD, nor the work He had done. They had heard

about the exodus, the wilderness, and Jericho, maybe. But those stories never became their own. Faith that's only borrowed from your parents usually doesn't survive the pressure of the culture around you. It has to be personal. That doesn't mean you have to have a dramatic experience. It means you need to know God for yourself, through His word, through prayer, and through walking with Him day by day.

The rest of chapter 2 is a preview of the whole book. It lays out the cycle that's going to repeat over and over. First, "the children of Israel did that which was evil in the LORD's sight, and served the Baals." They abandoned God and followed the gods of the nations around them. Second, God was angry and handed them over to raiders and enemies. Third, they were in terrible distress. Fourth, "the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them." And God did it out of compassion: "for it grieved the LORD because of their groaning by reason of those who oppressed them and troubled them." Fifth, the judge died, and things got worse. "But when the judge was dead, they turned back, and dealt more corruptly than their fathers."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Baal and Asherah**

Baal was the most important god of the Canaanites, a storm god believed to bring rain and make crops grow. In a land where everything depended on rain, worshiping Baal must have seemed practical, like buying insurance. Asherah was a mother goddess, often worshiped with wooden poles or trees set up near altars. Canaanite worship sometimes included practices the Bible condemns, including ritual prostitution and, in some cases, child sacrifice. Archaeologists have found many small statues of Baal and Asherah throughout ancient Israel, showing just how common it was for Israelites to mix the worship of these gods with the worship of the LORD.

REAL TALK **Modern Baals**

Nobody you know probably bows down to a statue of Baal. But the temptation behind Baal worship is still around. Baal promised what people wanted most: rain, food, security, success. Today, people look for those things in money, popularity, appearance, achievement, relationships, or even their phones. None of those things are evil. But when they become what you trust to make your life work, they become your Baal. The question isn't whether you have idols. It's which ones. What do you look to for security when you're scared? What would you be devastated to lose?

There's one more thing to notice in this chapter. God left some of the nations in the land for a reason. Judges 3 explains that He used them to test Israel, and to teach the new generation, who had never fought, how to trust Him in battle. The enemies weren't just a punishment. They were also a classroom. That's often true of the hard things in your life too. God doesn't cause every difficulty, but He can use the struggles you face, the people who oppose you, and the temptations that pull at you to teach you to depend on Him. The question is whether you'll learn the lesson or repeat the cycle.

So Judges isn't just a collection of hero stories. It's a story about a pattern, and it's one you might recognize. You mess up, things fall apart, you cry out to God, He helps you, and then you slowly drift away again. The good news is that God's patience in Judges is astonishing. The bad news is that the spiral keeps going down. Judges wants you to see where it leads, so you can break the cycle.

KEY VERSE

When the LORD raised up judges for them, then the LORD was with the judge, and saved them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for it grieved the LORD because of their groaning by reason of those who oppressed them and troubled them.

Judges 2:18 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Israel settled for halfway obedience?
2. How could a whole generation grow up without knowing God? What could prevent that?
3. Do you recognize the cycle of Judges in your own life? Where?
4. What are the modern Baals that pull at you?

TRY THIS *Ask a parent, grandparent, or older Christian to tell you the story of how they came to know God. Write it down. Then write a paragraph about where you are in your own story.*

CHAPTER 2

The Left-Handed Rescuer

Judges 3

Chapter 3 introduces the first three judges, and they're a great place to start.

The first is Othniel, Caleb's nephew, the one who captured Debir in chapter 1. The cycle begins: Israel does evil, forgets God, and serves the Baals and the Asherahs. God hands them over to a king from Mesopotamia for eight years. "When the children of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a savior to the children of Israel, who saved them, even Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother." Then: "The LORD's Spirit came on him, and he judged Israel." Othniel wins, and the land has rest for forty years. His story is short and clean, a model of what a judge should be. It's the last time anything in Judges is that simple.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Spirit of the LORD**
>
> In Judges, the phrase the LORD's Spirit came on him appears several times, with Othniel, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. It describes God's power coming on a person for a specific task, usually a battle or a rescue. It didn't mean the person was perfect or even especially godly; Samson and Jephthah certainly weren't. In the Old Testament, the Spirit usually came on certain people for certain jobs, and could leave. Joel later prophesied a day when God would pour out His Spirit on all His people, young and old, men and women (Joel 2:28–29), and Peter said that happened at Pentecost (Acts 2).

Then Israel does evil again, and God strengthens Eglon, king of Moab, against them. Eglon takes the city of palms, Jericho, and rules Israel for eighteen years. When they cry out, God raises up a surprising rescuer. "Ehud the son of Gera, the Benjamite, a left-handed man." That detail matters. In the ancient world, being left-handed was unusual and often seen as a weakness. Ironically, the name Benjamin means son of the right hand.

Ehud is chosen to bring Israel's tribute payment to Eglon. Before he goes, he makes a short double-edged sword and straps it to his right thigh under his clothes. A guard checking for weapons would search the left side, where a right-handed man would carry a sword. Nobody expected the lefty.

> **REAL TALK** **Different Is Not Less**
>
> Ehud was different. Left-handed people were often viewed with suspicion in the ancient world, and that hasn't completely disappeared; some kids today still get teased for being left-handed, or for anything that makes them stand out. But God used the very thing that made Ehud different. Paul wrote, "God chose the weak things of the world that he might put to shame the things that are strong." Maybe you feel different from everybody else, because of how you look, how you learn, a disability, where your family is from, or what you're into. You're not less. God made you on purpose, and He can use the very things that make you unique.

Ehud presents the tribute, leaves, and then turns back. He tells the king he has a secret message for him, and Eglon sends all his attendants out of the room. Ehud says, I have a message from God for you, and then he kills the king with his hidden sword. The Bible tells the story in a way that's darkly comic in places: Eglon was very fat, the servants think the king is using the toilet and wait outside the locked door until they're embarrassed, and Ehud escapes while they're waiting. Then Ehud rallies Israel, and they defeat Moab. "So

Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. Then the land had rest eighty years."

> **REAL TALK** **Is Ehud's Story Okay?**
>
> Ehud's story is told with gritty humor, the way ancient people told stories about defeating cruel tyrants. Eglon had oppressed Israel for eighteen years, and the original audience would have cheered when he fell, a bit like people celebrating the end of a dictator. But it's important to be clear: the Bible is describing a specific act of war in a violent era, not giving anyone permission to hurt someone they think is evil. Judges records many things it doesn't recommend. Violence is never a way to solve problems at school, at home, or online. If you're being bullied or oppressed, or feel so angry you might hurt someone, talk to a trusted adult right away. If you or anyone else is in danger, call 911.

Notice the pattern in Ehud's story. God raised up a savior when the people cried out. He used an unlikely person with an unexpected weapon. And the victory was followed by eighty years of peace, the longest rest in the whole book. Those eighty years probably meant that two or three generations grew up without war. It's a glimpse of what God wanted for His people all along: not constant crisis, but peace, safety, and rest. Sadly, it didn't last, because the people forgot the God who gave it to them.

The chapter ends with a single verse about the third judge. "After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who struck six hundred men of the Philistines with an ox goad. He also saved Israel." An ox goad was a long stick with a pointed metal tip, used for driving cattle. Shamgar fought with the tool he had. He's mentioned again in the Song of Deborah, which describes how in his days the roads were empty, because travelers were afraid to use them. Interestingly, his name, son of Anath, may connect him to a Canaanite goddess,

which might mean he wasn't even an Israelite. God used whoever He chose, with whatever was in their hands.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Minor Judges**

Shamgar is the first of several judges who get only a verse or two: Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon also appear briefly, in chapters 10 and 12. We know almost nothing about them except how long they led, and some quirky details, like Jair having thirty sons who rode thirty donkeys, and Abdon having forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode seventy donkeys. Their stories remind us that not every faithful person gets a famous story. Many people serve God quietly, and they still matter to Him.

REAL TALK **Crying Out**

In every story in this chapter, the turning point is the same: the people cried to the LORD. They didn't fix themselves. They didn't come up with a plan. They admitted they were in trouble and asked God for help. That's often the hardest step, especially if you're used to handling things on your own or don't want anyone to know you're struggling. But God responds to honest cries for help. If you're in a hard place right now, you can cry out to Him, in your own words, right now. And it's okay to cry out to people too: a parent, a friend, a counselor. Asking for help is how rescue begins.

KEY VERSE

When the children of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a savior to the children of Israel, who saved them, even Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother.

Judges 3:9 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Othniel's story is so short and simple compared with the later judges?
2. Ehud's difference became his advantage. How could something that makes you different become a strength?
3. How should Christians read violent stories like Ehud's?
4. Shamgar used what was in his hands. What's in your hands that God could use?

TRY THIS *Make a list of five things that make you different from most people you know. Next to each one, write a way God could use it.*

CHAPTER 3

Deborah, Barak, and Jael

Judges 4–5

After Ehud dies, Israel does evil again, and God hands them over to Jabin, a Canaanite king who rules from Hazor. His army commander, Sisera, has nine hundred iron chariots, the ancient equivalent of tanks, and he cruelly oppresses Israel for twenty years.

Then we meet one of the most remarkable leaders in the Old Testament. "Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, judged Israel at that time. She lived under Deborah's palm tree between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment." She's a prophet, a judge, and the leader of Israel, settling disputes for the whole nation under a palm tree that's named after her.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Deborah the Leader**
>
> Deborah is the only judge in the book described as settling legal cases, and the only one also called a prophet. She's one of several women in the Old Testament called prophets, along with Miriam, Huldah, and others. Christians today have different views about the roles of women and men in church leadership, and those conversations deserve care and respect. But all agree on this: God called Deborah to lead Israel at a crucial moment, and He used her powerfully. Her story shows that God's calling isn't limited by what people expect.

Deborah summons a man named Barak and gives him God's command: take ten thousand men to Mount Tabor, and God will draw Sisera and his chariots to the Kishon River and hand them over to you. Barak's answer isn't exactly heroic. "If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." Deborah agrees, but with a twist. "I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the journey that you take won't be for your honor; for the LORD will sell Sisera into a woman's hand." You might assume she means herself. She doesn't.

> **REAL TALK** **Needing Someone With You**
>
> Barak wouldn't go without Deborah. Some readers see that as weak faith. Others see it as wisdom: he knew God was speaking through her, and he wanted the prophet with him. Either way, it's okay to need people. Sometimes you need someone to go with you: to the doctor, to a hard conversation, to youth group for the first time, or to talk to a counselor. Asking for support isn't a sign that you don't trust God. Often it's how He helps you. Notice that Barak still made it into Hebrews 11's list of people of faith.

On the day of battle, Deborah tells Barak, "Go; for this is the day in which the LORD has delivered Sisera into your hand. Hasn't the LORD gone out before you?" Barak charges down Mount Tabor with ten thousand men, and God throws Sisera's army into a panic. The song in chapter 5 suggests that a sudden storm turned the river into a flood and the valley into mud, so the iron chariots got stuck. Sisera jumps out of his chariot and runs away on foot.

He runs to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. Her clan had made peace with King Jabin, so Sisera thinks he's safe. Jael invites him in, covers him with a blanket, and gives him milk when he asks for water. He tells her to stand at the entrance and say no one is there if anyone asks. Then he falls asleep, exhausted. While

he sleeps, Jael takes a tent peg and a hammer and kills him. When Barak arrives, chasing Sisera, Jael shows him the enemy commander, dead in her tent. Deborah's prophecy has come true: the honor went to a woman.

> **REAL TALK** **Jael and Violence**
>
> Jael's story is hard to read. She broke the ancient rules of hospitality by killing a guest in her tent. Deborah's song praises her as most blessed of women, because she ended the life of a commander who had cruelly oppressed Israel for twenty years, and in that era her act was seen as part of the war. Some readers also point out that Sisera's army had a reputation for taking women as captives (Judges 5:30), so Jael may have been protecting herself and others. But the Bible isn't telling us that deceiving and killing someone is a good way to handle an enemy. It's recording a brutal moment in a brutal war. Jesus calls His followers to a different way: to love enemies and to seek peace. If you're ever afraid of someone, or feel trapped with someone dangerous, get help from a trusted adult or call 911.

It's worth pausing on how many unexpected people God uses in this story. Deborah, a woman, leads the nation. Barak, a hesitant general, wins the battle. Jael, a foreign woman from a clan that had made peace with the enemy, finishes it. Even the weather fights for Israel. Nobody in the story is the kind of hero ancient people expected, a mighty king with a powerful army. That's the point. The victory belongs to God, and He chooses whoever He wants to accomplish it, including the people others overlook.

Chapter 5 is the Song of Deborah, one of the oldest poems in the Bible. Many scholars think it may date to soon after the battle. It retells the story in poetry, full of energy and emotion. "Hear, you kings! Give ear, you princes! I, even I, will sing to the LORD." It describes how bad things were before: roads were empty, villages were abandoned. "The rulers ceased in Israel. They ceased until I,

Deborah, arose; Until I arose a mother in Israel." It praises the tribes that came to fight, and scolds those that stayed home. It describes the battle as if all creation joined in. "From the sky the stars fought. From their courses, they fought against Sisera."

The song ends with a heartbreaking picture: Sisera's mother, looking out her window, wondering why her son's chariot is so late, while her ladies-in-waiting assure her he's just dividing the plunder. It's a reminder that every war leaves grieving families on both sides. Then the final line: "So let all your enemies perish, LORD, but let those who love him be as the sun when it rises in its strength."

BACKGROUND CHECK **An Ancient Song**

The Song of Deborah is written in very old Hebrew, with unusual words and grammar similar to other ancient Near Eastern poetry. Many scholars, even skeptical ones, think it may be one of the oldest texts in the Bible, possibly from the 1100s BC. It's an important source for historians studying early Israel, because it names ten tribes and describes them as a loose alliance, some of which came to help and some of which didn't. Songs like this were probably sung for generations before being written down, the way communities today pass down stories through music.

REAL TALK **Showing Up**

The Song of Deborah calls out the tribes that didn't show up for the battle. Reuben had great discussions but stayed with the sheep. Dan stayed by the ships. Asher sat by the seashore. Meanwhile, Zebulun and Naphtali risked their lives. It's easy to talk about doing the right thing and never actually do it. When a friend needs help, when your church needs volunteers, when someone at school needs someone to stand with them, are you the one who shows up, or the one who has great discussions and stays home?

KEY VERSE

So let all your enemies perish, LORD, but let those who love him be as the sun when it rises in its strength.

Judges 5:31 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What do you admire about Deborah as a leader?
2. Was Barak's request for Deborah to come with him weak faith or wisdom? Why?
3. How should Christians understand the violence in Jael's story?
4. When have you stayed home when you should have shown up?

TRY THIS *Write a short song, poem, or rap about something God has done for you or your family, like Deborah did. Share it with someone, even if it feels awkward.*

CHAPTER 4

Gideon and the Three Hundred

Judges 6–7

The cycle turns again. "The children of Israel did that which was evil in the LORD's sight, so the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years." The Midianites were desert raiders. Every harvest season, they swept in with their camels, so many that they couldn't be counted, like a swarm of locusts. They stripped the fields, took the livestock, and left nothing to eat. Israelites hid in caves and mountain strongholds. "Israel was brought very low because of Midian; and the children of Israel cried to the LORD."

This time, before sending a rescuer, God sends a prophet to remind them why this is happening: I brought you out of Egypt, I told you not to worship the gods of the Amorites, and you didn't listen. Then the angel of the LORD shows up in the most unlikely place. "His son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites." Normally you'd thresh wheat on an open hilltop, where the wind could blow away the chaff. Gideon is doing it in a pit, hiding.

And the angel greets him with words that must have sounded like a joke. "The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!" Gideon's answer is honest and a little bitter. "Oh, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? Where are all his wondrous works which our fathers told us of?"

REAL TALK **Where Is God?**

Gideon asked the question a lot of people ask: if God is real and good, why is life so hard? He'd heard the stories of the exodus, but he'd never seen God do anything like that. Maybe you've felt the same way, especially if you've been through something painful: a divorce, a death, an illness, bullying, or loneliness. Notice that God didn't scold Gideon for asking. He answered by calling him to be part of the solution. Honest questions aren't the opposite of faith. They're often where real faith begins. Bring your hard questions to God, and to people you trust.

God doesn't answer the why question directly. Instead, He says, "Go in this your might, and save Israel from the hand of Midian. Haven't I sent you?" And Gideon says what lots of people say when God calls them. "O Lord, how shall I save Israel? Behold, my family is the poorest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." God's answer is the same one He gave Moses and Joshua. "Surely I will be with you."

REAL TALK **Mighty Man of Valor?**

God called Gideon a mighty man of valor while he was hiding in a winepress. God saw something in Gideon that Gideon couldn't see in himself. You might feel like the least important person in your family, your school, or your friend group. You might think you're the last person God would use. That's exactly the kind of person God loves to choose. He doesn't call the qualified; He qualifies the called. What God says about you is more true than what you feel about yourself.

Gideon asks for a sign, and when the angel touches his offering with a staff, fire springs from the rock and consumes it. Terrified, Gideon builds an altar and calls it "The LORD is Peace." Then God gives him his first assignment, and it's close to home. Tear down your father's altar to Baal and the Asherah pole beside it, and build an altar to the LORD. Gideon obeys, but he does it at night, because he's afraid of

his family and the townspeople. The next morning, the town is furious and wants to kill him. His father, Joash, defends him in a clever way: if Baal is a god, let him defend himself. So Gideon gets a nickname, Jerub-Baal, which means let Baal contend.

Then the Midianites gather in the Valley of Jezreel, and "the LORD's Spirit came on Gideon." He blows a trumpet and summons the tribes. But he's still unsure. So he asks God for a sign. "If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have spoken, behold, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I'll know." The next morning, the fleece is so wet he wrings out a bowl full of water, and the ground is dry. But that's not enough. Gideon asks again. "Don't let your anger be kindled against me, and I will speak but this once. Please let me make a trial just this once with the fleece. Let it now be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew." And "God did so that night."

REAL TALK **Putting Out a Fleece**

Some Christians talk about putting out a fleece, asking God for a sign to help them make a decision. Is that a good idea? Christians see Gideon's fleece in different ways. Some think it shows weak faith; God had already told Gideon clearly what He would do, and Gideon was testing Him rather than trusting Him. Deuteronomy says, "You shall not tempt the LORD your God," and Jesus quoted that when the devil tempted Him. Others see it as a sincere, humble request from a frightened man, and note that God graciously answered without rebuking him. Either way, there's a difference between testing God and seeking wisdom. Testing God is demanding proof before you'll obey what He's already made clear. Seeking wisdom is asking for guidance when you honestly don't know what to do. For that, God gives us better tools than fleeces: Scripture, prayer, the Holy Spirit, and wise counsel from other believers. "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

Gideon gathers thirty-two thousand men. They're facing an army that's like locusts in number. And God says something surprising: you have too many. "The people who are with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel brag against me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'" So Gideon tells anyone who's afraid to go home. Twenty-two thousand leave. Ten thousand remain. Still too many. God has Gideon take the men down to the water to drink. Most kneel down and drink directly from the water. Three hundred scoop up water with their hands and lap it like dogs. "I will save you by the three hundred men who lapped."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why the Lappers?**

Why did God choose the men who lapped water from their hands? Some interpreters think it showed alertness: they could watch for danger while drinking, instead of putting their faces down in the water. Others think it was simply a random way to cut the army down, with no special meaning; the point was that God would win with a tiny force. Either way, the lesson is clear. The victory would belong to God, not to Israel's numbers. Three hundred against an army too big to count.

That night, God tells Gideon to attack. But He knows Gideon is still afraid, so He gives him one more encouragement. Sneak down to the enemy camp with your servant and listen. Gideon overhears a Midianite soldier telling a friend about a dream: a round loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp and knocked a tent flat. His friend says, that's the sword of Gideon! God has given Midian into his hand. Gideon worships right there, then runs back to his men and says, get up!

The battle plan is as strange as Jericho's. Gideon divides the three hundred into three groups and gives each man a trumpet and an empty clay jar with a torch inside. In the middle of the night, they

surround the enemy camp. At Gideon's signal, "The three companies blew the trumpets, broke the pitchers, and held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands with which to blow; and they shouted, 'The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!'" The sudden noise and light throw the camp into panic. In the confusion, the Midianites turn their swords on each other and flee.

REAL TALK **Fewer Is Fine**

God cut Gideon's army from thirty-two thousand to three hundred, so everyone would know the victory was His. Sometimes God works the same way in your life. You might feel like you don't have enough: enough friends, enough talent, enough money, enough confidence. Paul said God told him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." When you're weak, God's strength shows up more clearly. That doesn't mean you shouldn't prepare or work hard. It means you don't have to wait until you feel strong enough to obey.

KEY VERSE

The LORD said to Gideon, "I will save you by the three hundred men who lapped, and deliver the Midianites into your hand. Let all the other people go, each to his own place."

Judges 7:7 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Gideon asked, if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened? Have you ever asked a question like that?
2. Why do you think God called Gideon a mighty man of valor when he was hiding?
3. What's the difference between testing God and seeking wisdom? Which have you done?
4. Why do you think God wanted to win with only three hundred men?

TRY THIS *Write down a decision you're facing. Instead of asking for a sign, use James 1:5: pray for wisdom, look for what Scripture says, and ask two wise people for advice. Write down what you learn.*

CHAPTER 5

Gideon's Drift and the Bramble King

Judges 8–9

After the victory, Gideon chases the fleeing Midianite kings across the Jordan. His exhausted men ask the towns of Succoth and Penuel for bread, and the town leaders mock them and refuse. After Gideon captures the kings, he comes back and punishes both towns harshly. The humble farmer from the winepress is starting to change.

Gideon's victory is remembered for centuries. The psalms and prophets refer back to the day of Midian as a picture of God rescuing His people against impossible odds (Psalm 83:9–11; Isaiah 9:4). Isaiah even uses it in his famous prophecy of the coming king: the day of Midian is mentioned just before the words a child is born to us. The God who broke the yoke of Midian through three hundred men would one day break every yoke through one child.

Then the people offer him something huge. "Rule over us, both you, your son, and your son's son also; for you have saved us out of the hand of Midian." They want him to be king and start a dynasty. And Gideon gives the right answer. "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you. The LORD shall rule over you."

It's a great moment. But then Gideon asks for something. He asks each man to give him a gold earring from the plunder. They pile up about forty-three pounds of gold, along with other treasures. And Gideon makes an ephod, a priestly garment, and puts it in his hometown. "Then all Israel played the prostitute with it there; and it became a snare to Gideon and to his house."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Gideon's Ephod**

An ephod was a special garment worn by the high priest, connected with asking God for guidance. We don't know exactly why Gideon made one. Maybe he wanted a way to keep hearing from God, after his experiences with signs and the fleece. Maybe he meant it as a memorial of the victory. But it wasn't at the tabernacle, it wasn't authorized by God, and the people began worshiping it as an idol. Whatever Gideon intended, it led Israel away from God. It's a sad echo of Aaron's golden calf, which was also made from the people's gold earrings (Exodus 32).

REAL TALK **Drifting After a Win**

Gideon's biggest danger came after his biggest victory. He said the right things about God ruling, but he started living like a king anyway. He took the gold, made the ephod, had many wives, and even named one of his sons Abimelech, which means my father is king. Drifting doesn't usually happen after a failure. It often happens after success. You make the team, get the grades, win the award, get the attention, and slowly start trusting yourself instead of God. The best protection is to stay humble, stay grateful, and keep the people around you who will tell you the truth.

Gideon has seventy sons from his many wives, plus one more son, Abimelech, by a concubine from Shechem. As soon as Gideon dies, Israel goes right back to worshiping Baal. "The children of Israel didn't remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them out of the hand of all their enemies on every side." And Abimelech grabs for the power his father turned down.

Abimelech goes to his mother's relatives in Shechem and asks, which is better: to be ruled by seventy men, or by one? And remember, I'm your relative. They give him money from the temple of Baal, and he hires reckless men to follow him. Then he goes to his father's house and murders his seventy half-brothers. Only the youngest, Jotham, escapes by hiding. The people of Shechem crown Abimelech king.

Then Jotham does something brave. He climbs Mount Gerizim, right above Shechem, and shouts down a fable to the people. It's one of the only fables in the Bible. "The trees set out to anoint a king over themselves. They said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.'" But the olive tree says, should I give up my oil, which honors gods and people, just to sway over the trees? So they ask the fig tree, which says, should I give up my sweet fruit? Then the vine, which says, should I give up my wine, which cheers gods and people? Finally, they ask the bramble, a thornbush. And the bramble says, "If in truth you anoint me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade; and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jotham's Fable**

The point of Jotham's fable is sharp. The good trees, the olive, fig, and vine, are too busy being useful to want to rule. The only one who wants the job is the bramble, a worthless thornbush that offers no shade and catches fire easily, spreading destruction. That's Abimelech: useless, dangerous, and hungry for power. Jotham warns that if the people have acted wrongly, fire will come out of Abimelech and destroy them, and fire will come out of them and destroy Abimelech. Then Jotham runs for his life.

REAL TALK **Who Wants Power?**

Jotham's fable has a lesson for any group: be careful about people who want power too badly. The best leaders are often busy serving and aren't grabbing

for position. The worst often want the title more than the work. That's true in student government, sports teams, friend groups, and even churches. It's also a question for you. Why do you want to lead? To serve others, or to be noticed? Jesus said the greatest among His followers would be the servant of all, and He showed it: "even as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jotham's warning comes true. After three years, God sends a spirit of conflict between Abimelech and the people of Shechem. They turn on him, and he destroys their city and burns a tower where a thousand people are hiding. Then he attacks the town of Thebez. When he goes up to burn its tower, a woman drops a millstone from the top and cracks his skull. Mortally wounded and embarrassed that a woman has defeated him, he orders his armor-bearer to finish him off. "Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech, which he did to his father in killing his seventy brothers." The bramble king burned out.

SAFETY NOTE **Violence in Families**

Abimelech murdered his own brothers to get power. Violence in families is still real today. If someone in your family is threatening you, hurting you, or making you feel unsafe, it's never your fault, and you don't have to keep it a secret. Tell a trusted adult, like a teacher, school counselor, pastor, or relative. In the United States you can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453. If you're in danger right now, call 911.

KEY VERSE

Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you. The LORD shall rule over you."

Judges 8:23 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Gideon said the right words but drifted anyway. Why do you think that happened?
2. Why can success be more dangerous to faith than failure?
3. What's the point of Jotham's fable? Can you think of a modern example?
4. Why do you want to lead, or not lead? What would make you a good leader?

TRY THIS *Write your own fable, like Jotham's, about a lesson you've learned. Use animals, plants, or objects as the characters. Share it with a friend or sibling.*

CHAPTER 6

Jephthah's Rash Vow

Judges 10–12

After two minor judges, Tola and Jair, the cycle hits a new low. "The children of Israel again did that which was evil in the LORD's sight, and served the Baals, the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines." They aren't just worshiping one false god anymore. They're collecting them. God hands them over to the Philistines and the Ammonites, who crush them for eighteen years.

When Israel cries out this time, God's response is startling. Didn't I rescue you from the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, and more? Yet you've abandoned Me. Go and cry out to the gods you've chosen. Let them save you. The people answer, "We have sinned! Do to us whatever seems good to you; only deliver us, please, today." And they actually throw away their foreign gods. Then comes one of the most moving lines in Judges. "They put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD; and his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel."

> **REAL TALK** **God's Grief**
>
> Judges 10:16 shows us God's heart. Even after Israel had abandoned Him over and over, He couldn't bear to watch them suffer. That doesn't mean God is weak or that He doesn't care about sin. It means His love goes deeper than His anger. If you've been running from God, you might think He's just waiting

to punish you. The truth is, He grieves your suffering, and He's waiting for you to come back. You don't have to clean yourself up first. Just turn around.

This exchange between God and Israel is unusual. God's first answer sounds like a refusal: go to your other gods. But it works like a test. Would Israel actually turn from their idols, or just ask for help and keep them? This time, they don't just say sorry. They get rid of the foreign gods and start serving the LORD. Real repentance isn't only saying the right words. It's turning around and changing what you do. And when they do, God's heart is moved.

The Ammonite army gathers to attack the region of Gilead, east of the Jordan, and the leaders of Gilead are desperate for a commander. They think of Jephthah. "Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor. He was the son of a prostitute." His half-brothers had driven him out of the family so he wouldn't share their inheritance. He'd gone to live in the land of Tob, where a gang of rough men gathered around him. Now the same people who rejected him come begging for help. Jephthah asks the obvious question: didn't you hate me and drive me out? Why come to me now that you're in trouble? But he agrees to lead them, on the condition that he becomes their head.

REAL TALK **Rejected by Family**

Jephthah was rejected by his own brothers because of who his mother was. That kind of rejection leaves deep wounds. Maybe you've felt it: left out because of your family situation, treated differently than your siblings, or rejected because of something you couldn't control. God used Jephthah anyway. And the story shows something else: pain from rejection can shape us in ways that aren't healthy, like always needing to prove ourselves. If you're carrying hurt from family rejection, talk to someone you trust. A counselor, pastor, or trusted adult can help you heal. You're not defined by who rejected you.

Jephthah starts with diplomacy. He sends messengers to the Ammonite king with a detailed history lesson, explaining that Israel took this land from the Amorites three hundred years earlier, not from Ammon. The king ignores him. Then "the LORD's Spirit came on Jephthah," and he prepares for battle. And then he does something no one asked him to do. "Jephthah vowed a vow to the LORD, and said, 'If you will indeed deliver the children of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be, that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, it shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.'"

God gives Israel a decisive victory. Jephthah comes home. And the first one out the door to meet him, dancing with tambourines, is his daughter, his only child. "When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said, 'Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are one of those who trouble me; for I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I can't go back.'"

His daughter responds with remarkable courage. She tells him to do what he promised, but asks for two months to go to the mountains with her friends "and bewail my virginity." She does. Then, "at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed. She was a virgin. It became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went yearly to celebrate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year."

> **REAL TALK** **What Happened to Jephthah's Daughter?**
>
> This is one of the hardest stories in the Bible, and Christians and Jewish readers have understood it in two main ways. The first view is that Jephthah literally sacrificed his daughter as a burnt offering, as his vow said. Supporters

note that the vow specifically mentions a burnt offering, that the text says he did according to his vow, and that the story fits the dark direction of Judges, where Israel is becoming like the Canaanites, who practiced child sacrifice. The second view is that Jephthah dedicated his daughter to lifelong service to God at the tabernacle, where she would never marry or have children. Supporters note that the Hebrew can be read as it shall be the LORD's, or I will offer it up, that her mourning focuses on her virginity rather than her death, that the text emphasizes she was a virgin, and that women served at the entrance of the tabernacle (Exodus 38:8; 1 Samuel 2:22). Both views agree on what matters most. The text never says God wanted or approved of Jephthah's vow. God never asked for it. God's law clearly forbids child sacrifice, which He calls detestable (Leviticus 18:21; Deuteronomy 12:31), and He provided ways to be released from a rash vow (Leviticus 27). Jephthah's vow was a terrible mistake by a man who didn't know God's word well enough. Hebrews 11 commends his faith in fighting for Israel, not this vow.

REAL TALK **Rash Promises**

Jephthah made a promise to God that he didn't need to make, without thinking about what it could cost. Maybe you've made a rash promise too: to God, to a friend, or to yourself, in a moment of fear or excitement. Ecclesiastes says, "It is better that you should not vow, than that you should vow and not pay." God doesn't need you to bargain with Him. He's not a vending machine you have to bribe. If you've made a promise that would require you to do something wrong or harmful, don't keep it. Talk to a pastor or trusted adult. Keeping a promise is never more important than doing what's right.

Jephthah's story ends badly too. The tribe of Ephraim is angry that he didn't invite them to the battle, and they threaten to burn his house down. Jephthah fights them, and his men guard the crossings of the Jordan. When fleeing Ephraimites try to cross, they're told to say the word Shibboleth. Ephraimites pronounced it Sibboleth, and the slip gave them away. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites die. Israel

is now fighting itself. Jephthah judges Israel for six years, then dies. Three more minor judges, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon, follow.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Shibboleth**

The word shibboleth means an ear of grain, or a stream. The Ephraimites' accent gave them away when they couldn't pronounce the sh sound. Today, shibboleth has become an English word meaning a password, a custom, or a way of speaking that shows which group someone belongs to. It's a sad origin for a word. It came from a moment when Israelites were using accents to identify and kill other Israelites. Judges is showing how far things have fallen: the tribes of God's people are turning on each other.

KEY VERSE

They put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD; and his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel.

Judges 10:16 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What does Judges 10:16 tell you about God's heart?
2. How do you think Jephthah's rejection by his family shaped him?
3. Which view of Jephthah's daughter seems more convincing to you, and why? What do both views agree on?
4. Have you ever made a rash promise? What happened?

TRY THIS *Read Leviticus 27:1–8 and Deuteronomy 12:31. Write a paragraph about what Jephthah could have done differently if he had known God's word better.*

CHAPTER 7

Samson the Strong

Judges 13–15

The cycle turns one more time. Israel does evil, and God hands them over to the Philistines for forty years. But this time, something is different. Israel doesn't even cry out. They seem to have gotten used to being ruled by the Philistines. God sends a rescuer anyway, before anyone asks.

The story begins with a couple from the tribe of Dan, Manoah and his wife, who can't have children. The Bible never tells us her name. The angel of the LORD appears to her with a promise. "See now, you are barren and childless; but you shall conceive and bear a son." But there are special instructions. She must not drink wine or eat anything unclean, "for, behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son. No razor shall come on his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb. He shall begin to save Israel out of the hand of the Philistines."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Nazirite Vow**
>
> A Nazirite was someone set apart to God in a special way, described in Numbers 6. A Nazirite didn't drink wine or eat anything from grapes, didn't cut his hair, and didn't touch dead bodies. Usually it was a voluntary vow for a limited time. Samson was different. He was a Nazirite from birth to death, chosen by God before he was born, like Samuel and possibly John the

Baptist. His uncut hair was the visible sign of his dedication to God. As we'll see, Samson broke almost every part of the vow.

Manoah wants to hear the message for himself, and the angel returns. Manoah asks his name, and the angel answers, "Why do you ask about my name, since it is incomprehensible?" Other translations say it is wonderful, the same word used for the coming king in Isaiah 9:6, whose name would be called Wonderful Counselor. When Manoah offers a sacrifice, the angel rises toward heaven in the flame. Manoah panics, sure they'll die because they've seen God, but his wife calmly points out that if God wanted to kill them, He wouldn't have accepted their offering or told them all this. She's the sensible one.

"The woman bore a son and named him Samson. The child grew, and the LORD blessed him. The LORD's Spirit began to move him." Samson's name probably comes from the Hebrew word for sun, which is interesting, because he'll end his life in darkness.

REAL TALK **Set Apart From the Start**

Samson was set apart for God before he was born. In a sense, every Christian is too. Paul says God chose us before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), and David says God knit him together in his mother's womb (Psalm 139:13). You didn't happen by accident. God made you with a purpose, and He wants your whole life to belong to Him. That's a privilege. It's also a responsibility. Samson's story shows what happens when someone with an amazing calling treats it carelessly.

As a young man, Samson goes down to the Philistine town of Timnah and sees a Philistine woman. He comes home and tells his parents, get her for me as my wife. They're horrified. Isn't there a woman among our own people? Why do you have to marry one of the uncircumcised Philistines? But Samson insists, she looks right to

me. That phrase, right in his eyes, will echo all the way to the end of the book. The narrator adds a surprising note: this was from the LORD, who was looking for an opportunity to confront the Philistines. God was working even through Samson's selfish choices.

On the way to Timnah, a young lion attacks Samson. "The LORD's Spirit came mightily on him, and he tore him as he would have torn a young goat with his bare hands, but he didn't tell his father or his mother what he had done." Later, he finds bees and honey in the lion's carcass, scoops some out, eats it, and gives some to his parents, without telling them where it came from. As a Nazirite, he wasn't supposed to touch a dead body. Samson didn't seem to care.

At the wedding feast, a seven-day party, Samson tells the thirty Philistine groomsmen a riddle about the lion and the honey, with a bet of thirty sets of clothes. They can't solve it, so they threaten to burn his new wife and her family unless she gets the answer. She cries and nags him for days until he tells her, and she tells them. Samson is furious. "The LORD's Spirit came mightily on him, and he went down to Ashkelon and struck thirty men of them." He takes their clothes to pay the bet, and storms home.

REAL TALK **Strength Without Self-Control**

Samson had incredible physical strength, but almost no self-control. He did what he wanted, when he wanted, with whoever he wanted, and he lashed out whenever he was angry. That's a dangerous combination. Strength isn't just about muscles. It's also about how you handle your emotions, your desires, and your anger. Proverbs says someone who controls their temper is better than a mighty warrior (Proverbs 16:32). If anger is a problem for you, if you find yourself exploding, breaking things, or hurting people, that's worth talking to a trusted adult or counselor about. Learning to handle anger is real strength.

The cycle of revenge escalates. When Samson comes back for his wife, her father has given her to someone else. In revenge, Samson catches three hundred foxes, ties torches to their tails, and sets the Philistines' grain fields, vineyards, and olive groves on fire. The Philistines retaliate by burning his wife and her father to death. Samson retaliates by slaughtering many of them. The Philistines come after Judah to capture him. And here's a sad detail: three thousand men of Judah come to tie Samson up and hand him over to the Philistines, saying, don't you know the Philistines rule over us? Israel has become so used to oppression that they'd rather hand over their own rescuer than fight.

Samson lets them tie him up. But when the Philistines come shouting toward him, the Spirit comes on him, and the ropes melt off his arms like burned flax. "He found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, put out his hand, took it, and struck a thousand men with it." Then he makes up a little song about it. "With the jawbone of a donkey, heaps on heaps; with the jawbone of a donkey I have struck a thousand men." Notice what's missing: God. Samson takes all the credit. Afterward he's desperately thirsty and cries out to God, and God splits open a hollow place in the ground, and water comes out. Samson judges Israel for twenty years.

REAL TALK **The Revenge Cycle**

Samson's story is a cycle of revenge. They cheated him, so he struck back. They struck back harder, so he struck back harder. Nobody ever won. You've probably seen the same thing in smaller ways: a rude comment leads to a meaner one, a fight in the group chat gets worse and worse, or two friend groups keep getting back at each other. Revenge never ends until someone decides to stop. Paul wrote, don't repay evil for evil, and leave room for God to judge (Romans 12:17–19). Breaking the cycle doesn't mean letting people

hurt you. If someone is threatening or bullying you, tell a trusted adult. But it does mean refusing to keep the fight going.

KEY VERSE

The woman bore a son and named him Samson. The child grew, and the LORD blessed him.

Judges 13:24 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God sent Samson even though Israel didn't cry out for help?
2. Samson said the Philistine woman looked right in his eyes. How do you decide what's right for you?
3. What's the difference between physical strength and real strength?
4. Where have you seen a cycle of revenge? How could it be broken?

TRY THIS *The next time someone does something that makes you want to get back at them, try doing the opposite: say something kind, or simply walk away. Write down what happened.*

CHAPTER 8

Samson and Delilah

Judges 16

Samson's last story is his most famous. It begins with him spending the night with a prostitute in the Philistine city of Gaza. The men of the city surround the town gate to ambush him at dawn. But Samson gets up at midnight, rips the doors of the city gate right out of the wall, posts and all, and carries them almost forty miles to a hill near Hebron. It's an incredible feat of strength. It's also a picture of a man who uses his gifts for himself, not for God's purposes.

"It came to pass afterward that he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah." It's the only time the Bible says Samson loved a woman. And it's the only time the woman is named. The Philistine rulers come to Delilah and offer her an enormous bribe, eleven hundred pieces of silver from each of them, if she'll find out the secret of his strength. So Delilah asks him directly. "Please tell me where your great strength lies, and what you might be bound to afflict you."

Samson lies. Tie me with seven fresh bowstrings, he says. She does, with Philistines hidden in the room, and shouts that the Philistines are coming. He snaps them like thread. Then he says, use new ropes. Same result. Then he says, weave my hair into the loom. He gets up and pulls the whole loom with him. Each time, Delilah's intentions are obvious. Each time, Samson keeps coming back.

REAL TALK **Red Flags**

Delilah tried to hand Samson over to his enemies three times. Three times! Anyone watching would have said, Samson, get out of there. But he stayed. In relationships, red flags are warning signs that someone doesn't have your best interests at heart: they pressure you, manipulate you, guilt-trip you, try to control you, ask you to prove your love by doing something you don't want to do, or keep you away from friends and family. Feelings can make you ignore red flags. If someone you're dating is manipulating or hurting you, that's not love. Talk to a trusted adult. In the United States you can also contact the love is respect dating abuse helpline at 1-866-331-9474, or text LOVEIS to 22522.

Delilah turns up the pressure. "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me these three times, and have not told me where your great strength lies." She nags him day after day, until he's sick to death of it. Finally, "he told her all his heart and said to her, 'No razor has ever come on my head; for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If I am shaved, then my strength will go from me and I will become weak, and be like any other man.'"

Delilah knows he's finally telling the truth. She calls the Philistine rulers, and they bring the money. "She made him sleep on her knees; and she called for a man and shaved off the seven locks of his head; and she began to afflict him, and his strength went from him." Then she shouts one last time. "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" He wakes up and thinks, "I will go out as at other times, and shake myself free." Then comes one of the saddest sentences in the Bible. "But he didn't know that the LORD had departed from him."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Was It the Hair?**

Was Samson's strength really in his hair? Not exactly. His strength came from the Spirit of the LORD, as the book keeps telling us. His hair was the sign of his Nazirite vow, the last part of his dedication to God he hadn't broken. He'd already broken the rules about dead bodies and drinking at his wedding feast. When he gave up the secret of his hair, he gave up the last sign of his commitment to God. The strength didn't leave because of a haircut. It left because God did.

REAL TALK **Not Knowing God Has Left**

Samson didn't realize God had left him. He'd been compromising for so long that he couldn't tell the difference anymore. That can happen slowly to anyone. You start skipping prayer, then church, then reading the Bible. You make little compromises that don't seem like a big deal. You assume everything's fine because nothing bad has happened yet. Then one day you realize you've drifted further than you ever meant to. The good news is that it's never too late to come back. But it's much easier not to drift that far in the first place. What are the warning lights in your spiritual life?

"The Philistines laid hold on him and put out his eyes; and they brought him down to Gaza and bound him with fetters of bronze; and he ground at the mill in the prison." The man who did what was right in his own eyes loses his eyes. The man who carried off Gaza's gates is now a prisoner in Gaza, doing slave work. Then comes a quiet verse that changes everything. "However, the hair of his head began to grow again after he was shaved."

The Philistines throw a huge party in the temple of their god Dagon to celebrate capturing Samson. They bring him out to entertain them, mocking him. Thousands of people are on the roof watching. Samson asks the servant leading him to let him lean on the central pillars holding up the building. Then he prays, maybe for the first time in a long time. "Lord GOD, remember me, please, and

strengthen me, please, only this once, God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes."

Even his last prayer is about personal revenge. But God answers. "Samson said, 'Let me die with the Philistines!' He bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell on the lords, and on all the people who were in it." His family comes and buries him. He judged Israel for twenty years, but he never finished the job. The angel had said he would begin to save Israel from the Philistines, and that's all he did: begin. It would be King David who finally defeated them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Samson in Hebrews 11**

It may surprise you that Hebrews 11, the Bible's list of heroes of faith, includes Samson. "What more shall I say? For the time would fail me if I told of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets." It says they "from weakness were made strong." Samson's life was full of selfishness, lust, anger, and broken promises. But at the end, blind and humiliated, he turned to God and trusted Him. Hebrews 11 isn't a list of perfect people. It's a list of flawed people who trusted a perfect God. That's encouraging. God can use you too, flaws and all. But Samson's story is also a warning. Imagine what his life could have been if he'd trusted God sooner.

SAFETY NOTE **Despair and Hope**

At the end of his life, Samson said, let me die. If you ever feel so hopeless or ashamed that you think about ending your life, please know you are not alone and you are not too far gone. God's love for you hasn't run out. Talk to a trusted adult right away, like a parent, school counselor, or pastor. In the United States you can call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. If you're in immediate danger, call 911. Samson's hair began to grow again. Hope can grow again too.

KEY VERSE

Samson called to the LORD, and said, "Lord GOD, remember me, please, and strengthen me, please, only this once, God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes."

Judges 16:28 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Samson kept going back to Delilah, even after she betrayed him?
2. What are some red flags in relationships? How would you help a friend who's ignoring them?
3. How can someone drift so far from God that they don't notice He's gone?
4. What does it mean to you that Samson is listed in Hebrews 11?

TRY THIS *Make a list of warning lights for your spiritual life, signs that you're starting to drift. Share it with a trusted friend, and ask them to check in with you if they see any of them.*

CHAPTER 9

No King in Israel

Judges 17–21

The last five chapters of Judges are different from the rest of the book. There are no more judges. No more rescues. Instead, there are two stories that show how far Israel has fallen. They're framed by a sentence repeated four times, twice in its full form. "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did that which was right in his own eyes."

The first story, in chapters 17–18, is about a man named Micah from the hill country of Ephraim. He steals eleven hundred pieces of silver from his mother. When he confesses and gives it back, she uses some of it to make an idol for him. Micah sets up a little shrine in his house, with an ephod and household gods, and appoints one of his sons as priest. Then a wandering young Levite comes by, a member of the tribe that was supposed to teach God's law. Micah hires him as his personal priest for ten pieces of silver a year, plus clothes and food, and says, now I know the LORD will be good to me, since I have a Levite as my priest. He thinks religion is something he can buy.

Then the tribe of Dan, still looking for land of their own, sends scouts north. They stop at Micah's house, see the shrine, and later come back with six hundred armed men. They steal Micah's idols and offer his Levite a better job: be the priest for a whole tribe

instead of one household. The Levite happily accepts. When Micah chases them, crying, you've taken my gods that I made, they threaten him, and he goes home. The Danites attack a peaceful, unsuspecting town called Laish, burn it, rebuild it, rename it Dan, and set up Micah's idol there. And we find out who the Levite was: a grandson of Moses.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Rock-Bottom Religion**
>
> The story of Micah shows how confused Israel's worship had become. Micah used stolen money to make an idol, in direct violation of the Ten Commandments, and thought God would bless him for it. The Levite sold his services to the highest bidder. The tribe of Dan stole a false religion and made it their own. And a descendant of Moses himself led it. Later, Dan became one of the two places where King Jeroboam set up golden calves (1 Kings 12:29). The writer wants us to see that when everyone does what's right in their own eyes, even religion becomes something people shape to fit what they want.

The second story, in chapters 19–21, is the darkest in the Bible. A Levite and his concubine, a secondary wife, are traveling home and stop for the night in the town of Gibeah, in the tribe of Benjamin. An old man takes them in. That night, men of the town surround the house and demand the Levite be brought out to them, with violent intentions. Instead, the Levite forces his concubine out of the house, and the men of the town brutally abuse her through the night. In the morning, she is found dead at the door. The Levite takes her body home and sends a horrifying message to all the tribes of Israel, calling them to respond. "Such a deed has not been done or seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt to this day! Consider it, take counsel, and speak."

> **SAFETY NOTE** **Abuse and Sexual Violence**
>
> What happened to the Levite's concubine was horribly wrong. The men who abused her were wrong. The Levite, who forced her outside to protect

himself, was wrong. The old man, who offered women to the crowd, was wrong. The Bible tells this story to show how evil people can become, not to excuse any of it. If you have ever been touched in a sexual way you didn't want, pressured, threatened, assaulted, or abused, by anyone, including someone you know, a family member, or someone you're dating, it is never your fault. You did not cause it, and you don't have to carry it alone or keep it secret. Please tell a trusted adult, like a parent, teacher, school counselor, pastor, doctor, or relative. If the first person doesn't help, tell someone else. In the United States you can call the RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673 or chat at rainn.org, any time. If you're under eighteen, you can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453. If you are in danger right now, call 911. God sees what happened to you, He grieves it, and He is on your side.

The other tribes gather at Mizpah and demand that Benjamin hand over the men of Gibeah. Benjamin refuses and defends them. The result is a civil war. After two defeats, the other tribes win and nearly wipe out the tribe of Benjamin, leaving only six hundred men alive. Then, regretting that a whole tribe might disappear, but having vowed not to let their daughters marry Benjaminites, the Israelites make things worse. They attack the town of Jabesh Gilead, which hadn't joined the war, and later let the Benjaminites take young women from a festival at Shiloh by force, to be their wives. Every solution creates new victims. The book ends with the verdict. "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did that which was right in his own eyes."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Is This in the Bible?**

Why would the Bible include stories this dark? Because the writer is making a point. These last chapters deliberately echo earlier stories. The scene at Gibeah mirrors the story of Sodom in Genesis 19, with one terrible difference: this time, the town is Israelite. Israel, who was supposed to be different from the nations God drove out, has become just like them, or worse. The Bible

doesn't hide the worst of human behavior, even among God's own people. It tells the truth about what we're capable of when we push God out of our lives. These chapters are a rock-bottom warning, a picture of a society without God's rule, where everyone follows their own heart and the most vulnerable suffer most. Notice too who gets hurt: women, again and again. The book that began with Achsah boldly asking for springs and Deborah leading the nation ends with women being abused and taken. The decline is measured in how the vulnerable are treated.

REAL TALK **Right in Your Own Eyes**

Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. That might sound like freedom. Follow your heart. Do what feels right. Live your truth. But Judges shows where that leads when it's cut off from God: idolatry, violence, abuse, and chaos. Proverbs says, "There is a way which seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." This doesn't mean your feelings don't matter. It means your heart needs a King, someone wiser and better than you, to follow. The question isn't whether you'll follow something. It's whether you'll follow your own eyes or God's word.

Judges doesn't end with hope. It ends with a longing. Israel needs a king. The next books, 1 and 2 Samuel, tell how Israel got kings: first Saul, who failed, and then David, a king after God's own heart, who was also deeply flawed. The longing for a true King, one who would rule with justice, protect the vulnerable, and change hearts, kept growing. And the New Testament says that King has come.

KEY VERSE

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did that which was right in his own eyes.

Judges 21:25 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What does the story of Micah's idol show about how people can twist religion?
2. Why do you think the writer of Judges included such dark stories at the end?
3. What does it mean today to do what's right in your own eyes? Where do you see it?
4. How does Judges make you long for a true King?

TRY THIS *Read Ruth 1–4, a story set in the same dark time. Write down how Ruth and Boaz did what was right in God's eyes instead of their own, and how their story points to King David, and to Jesus.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Judges ends at rock bottom, with one sentence repeated like a verdict: there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Israel needed a king, but not just any king. The judges were brave, but they were also fearful, proud, rash, and reckless. Even the best of them couldn't change the people's hearts. And the next books show that Israel's human kings would fail too.

Jewish readers treasure Judges as a sobering story of God's faithfulness to Israel even in its worst days. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, saw in the judges a preview of a greater Rescuer. Hebrews lists Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah among people of faith, not because they were perfect, but because they trusted God, and "from weakness were made strong." The true King they all pointed to is Jesus. Unlike Samson, He used His strength to save others, not Himself. Unlike Gideon, He never drifted. And unlike every judge, He didn't just rescue His people for a while. He came "to give his life as a ransom for many."

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. Like Israel in Judges, when you cry out, He hears.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all done what's right in our own eyes.

Israel kept turning away from God to follow their own way. The Bible says all of us have done the same.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. Judges shows how destructive sin is. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the true Judge and King.

The judges rescued Israel for a while. Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again, to rescue us forever.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Israel never deserved rescue. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Cry out and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've done what seemed right in my own eyes instead of following You. I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You for never giving up on me. Thank You that Jesus, the true King, gave His life for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm crying out to You now. Forgive me and rescue me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. Keep me from drifting, and give me courage to follow You. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Judges 2, 6–7, and 16, then read Ruth, a story of faithfulness from the same dark era, and Hebrews 11.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Don't drift. Israel forgot God within a generation. Build habits that keep you close: daily prayer, Scripture, church, and friends who follow Jesus.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Judges was written so that God's people would see where life without Him leads. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Judges is right, the God who answered Israel's cries again and again is still listening, and He has never given up on you.

They put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD; and his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel.

Judges 10:16 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF RUTH

The King Who Redeems

Ruth, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Redeems: The Book of Ruth, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

Copyright © 2026 Bill McLeod. All rights reserved.

Published by Papa Bill Books.

Scripture quotations are from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, which is in the public domain.

All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” Maybe you know a little about Ruth already. It’s the short book with the woman who said, “Where you go, I will go,” the one people sometimes read at weddings. Maybe you’ve heard it called a love story. It is, sort of. But it’s a lot more than that.

Ruth is a story about grief, loyalty, hard work, kindness, and an outsider who finds a home. It happens during the darkest era in Israel’s history, the time of the judges, when everyone did whatever seemed right to them. If you just read Judges, you know how ugly that time was. Then you open Ruth, and it’s like someone turned on a light. No battles. No villains. Just ordinary people in a small town choosing to be faithful and kind, while God quietly works behind the scenes.

And here’s the twist: this little story about a widow from Moab turns out to be one of the most important links in the whole Bible. By the last page, you’ll see that Ruth’s great-grandson is King David, and that her family line leads all the way to Jesus. God was writing something huge through people who had no idea.

It’s only four chapters. Let’s go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Ruth in four chapters, one for each chapter of the Bible book: Naomi’s loss and Ruth’s loyalty (Ruth 1),

Ruth gleaning in the field of Boaz (Ruth 2), the night at the threshing floor (Ruth 3), and the redeemer at the city gate and the family line that leads to David (Ruth 4).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Ruth is, where it fits, and the world it came from. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as exactly what was going on at the threshing floor in chapter 3 and when the book was written, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Ruth in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the eighth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Ruth is gentler than Judges, but it raises real questions. The scene at the threshing floor in chapter 3 is explained in its cultural context, as a bold request for marriage and protection, and I've noted fairly that scholars read some of its language differently, without being sensational. Boaz's protection of Ruth in the fields opens a conversation about harassment, with a safety box encouraging readers to tell a trusted adult. Naomi's grief opens a conversation about loss and being honest with God, with a box that mentions the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees Boaz the kinsman-redeemer, and Bethlehem, the House of Bread, pointing to Jesus, while acknowledging that Jewish readers treasure Ruth in their own rich ways, including reading it at the festival of Shavuot. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World

English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see in Ruth a God who notices the grieving, welcomes the outsider, and redeems what looks lost.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

A Light in a Dark Time

Ruth opens with these words: “In the days when the judges judged.” That one phrase sets the stage. The book of Judges ends with Israel at rock bottom, with idols, civil war, and terrible violence, and the verdict that everyone did what was right in their own eyes. Ruth happens in that same era. But instead of a nation falling apart, it shows a few ordinary people doing what is right in God’s eyes. It’s proof that even in the darkest times, God hasn’t left, and faithfulness is still possible.

Where It Fits

In Christian Bibles, Ruth comes right after Judges and right before 1 Samuel, which tells the story of Israel’s first kings, Saul and David. That’s on purpose. Ruth is a bridge. It starts in the time of the judges and ends with the name David. In the Hebrew Bible, Ruth is placed among the Writings, often right after Proverbs 31, the poem about a woman of strength and character, and Jewish communities read it every year at Shavuot, the harvest festival Christians know as Pentecost.

Who Wrote Ruth?

The book doesn’t name its author. Jewish tradition says Samuel wrote it. The genealogy at the end, which stops with David, suggests it was written during or after David’s reign. Some scholars date it later, after the exile, and read it partly as a gentle answer to people

who wanted to exclude foreigners from God's people. Others see it as an older story written down in the time of the kings. Either way, Christians agree it is God's Word, and that its main point is clear: God's kindness reaches further than people expect.

Bethlehem and Moab

The story moves between two places. Bethlehem was a small farming town in Judah, about six miles south of where Jerusalem would later be. Its name means House of Bread, which makes it ironic that the story begins with a famine there. Moab was a nation east of the Dead Sea. Israel and Moab had a long, bitter history. Genesis traces the Moabites back to Lot. Moab's king hired Balaam to curse Israel in Numbers, Moabite women led Israel into idol worship, and in Judges, Moab ruled Israel for eighteen years until Ehud. For an Israelite, a Moabite was the last person you'd expect to be a hero.

Widows and Redeemers

In the ancient world, a widow without sons was in serious danger. Women usually couldn't own land or earn much money on their own, so losing your husband and sons could mean losing everything. God's law had protections built in. Farmers had to leave some of the harvest for the poor, the foreigner, and the widow to gather. And a close relative, called a kinsman-redeemer, was expected to rescue family members in trouble: buying back land they'd had to sell, and sometimes marrying a widow to carry on her husband's family name. Ruth's whole story depends on these laws.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Ruth 1): Empty.

Chapter 2 (Ruth 2): The field of Boaz.

Chapter 3 (Ruth 3): The threshing floor.

Chapter 4 (Ruth 4): The redeemer at the gate.

Contents

Setting the Scene 7

1 Empty *1* 11

2 The Field of Boaz *2* 18

3 The Threshing Floor *3* 24

4 The Redeemer at the Gate *4* 30

Where This Points 36

CHAPTER 1

Empty

Ruth 1

Ruth opens with a sentence that should make you a little nervous if you just finished Judges: “In the days when the judges judged, there was a famine in the land.” The days of the judges were the days of the downward spiral, when Israel kept forgetting God, enemies kept invading, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes. And now, on top of all that, there’s no food.

The famine hits Bethlehem, a little farming town in the hills of Judah. That’s ironic, because Bethlehem means House of Bread. The House of Bread has no bread. So a man named Elimelech makes a hard decision. He takes his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, and moves to Moab, across the Dead Sea, where there’s food.

That might sound like a reasonable choice. People still move to find work and feed their families. But for an Israelite, moving to Moab was a big deal. Elimelech’s name means My God Is King, and he’s leaving the land God promised His people to live among people who worshiped a different god. The story doesn’t stop to scold him. It just tells us what happened next, and it isn’t good.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Moab?**

Israel and Moab had a long and messy history. Genesis traces the Moabites back to Lot, Abraham's nephew, in one of the most uncomfortable stories in the Bible: "The firstborn bore a son, and named him Moab." Centuries later, when Israel came out of Egypt, Moab's king Balak was so afraid of them that he hired the prophet Balaam to curse them. Moabite women led Israel into idol worship at Peor. The law even said a Moabite couldn't enter the LORD's assembly. And in Judges 3, the king of Moab ruled Israel for eighteen years until Ehud the left-handed judge stopped him. So when the book of Ruth calls its hero "Ruth the Moabitess" again and again, original readers would have raised their eyebrows. A Moabite? Really?

First, Elimelech dies. Naomi is left a widow in a foreign country with two sons. Then the sons marry Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other named Ruth. For about ten years, life goes on. Then both sons die too. The writer sums up Naomi's situation in one heavy sentence: "the woman was bereaved of her two children and of her husband."

It's hard to overstate how devastating that was. Naomi has lost the three people she loved most. But in her world, she has also lost her protection, her income, and her future. A widow without sons had no one to provide for her, no one to inherit the family land, and no one to carry on the family name. Naomi is grieving, broke, far from home, and getting older. She has two daughters-in-law who are also widows, and they're foreigners in Israel's eyes. That's the whole household: three widows and nothing else.

Then Naomi hears news from home. The famine is over. She heard "how the LORD had visited his people in giving them bread." There's bread in the House of Bread again. So she decides to go back.

At first, Orpah and Ruth start the journey with her. But somewhere on the road, Naomi stops and tells them to turn around. "Go, return each of you to her mother's house," she says, and she prays that the LORD will "deal kindly" with them, the way they had been kind to her and to her sons. She wants them to find rest, a new husband, a new home, and a future in Moab.

The young women cry and refuse. "No, but we will return with you to your people." So Naomi argues harder. She points out that she's too old to have more sons for them to marry, and even if she somehow did, would they wait twenty years for those babies to grow up? Her conclusion is painful: "the LORD's hand has gone out against me." She honestly believes God is against her, and she doesn't want them to share her bad luck.

Notice that Naomi still believes in God. She prays for her daughters-in-law in the LORD's name. She just can't see His kindness anywhere in her own life right now. That's what grief often feels like. You don't stop believing God exists. You just wonder whether He's on your side.

They cry again. Then Orpah kisses Naomi goodbye and heads home. And honestly, that's not a bad choice. Orpah isn't the villain. She does what Naomi tells her to do, and what most people would do. She goes back to her family, her country, and her chances. But Ruth "stayed with her." The Hebrew word means she clung to her, the same word Genesis uses for a husband holding tight to his wife.

Naomi tries one more time. "Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her god. Follow your sister-in-law." And that's when Ruth says one of the most famous things anyone says in the whole Old Testament:

"Don't urge me to leave you, and to return from following you, for where you go, I will go; and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried."

Then she makes it a vow, in the name of Israel's God: "May the LORD do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me."

Think about what Ruth is giving up. Her country. Her family. Her language and culture. Her gods. Any realistic chance of getting remarried, because who in Israel would marry a poor Moabite widow? She is choosing a future with a bitter old woman who has nothing to offer her. And she isn't just choosing Naomi. She's choosing Naomi's God. She calls Him by His name, the LORD, and puts her whole life in His hands.

People read these words at weddings, and that's beautiful, but remember who said them first: a young widow to her grieving mother-in-law. This is the kind of love the Hebrew word hesed describes. It's hard to translate. It means loyal love, kindness, faithfulness, sticking with someone when you don't have to. It's one of the most important words in the book of Ruth, and it's one of the main ways the Old Testament describes God Himself.

When Naomi sees that Ruth won't budge, she stops arguing. The two women walk the rest of the way to Bethlehem together, probably in silence.

REAL TALK **What Real Loyalty Looks Like**

Ruth's loyalty is impressive because it cost her something. Anybody can be a friend when things are fun. It's harder to stick with someone when they're sad, angry, difficult, or going through something that makes everyone else uncomfortable. Think about the people in your life who are hurting. A friend whose parents are divorcing. A classmate whose grandparent died. Someone

> who just got dumped and won't stop talking about it. Loyalty doesn't mean you have to fix their problems. Ruth couldn't fix Naomi's. It means you show up and stay. Sometimes the most powerful thing you can tell someone is simply that you're not going anywhere.

When they arrive, the whole town is buzzing. The women of Bethlehem recognize her and ask, "Is this Naomi?" It's been more than ten years. She left with a husband and two sons. She comes back with a foreign daughter-in-law and nothing else. Grief has probably aged her too.

Naomi's answer is raw. "Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me." Naomi means pleasant. Mara means bitter. She's saying, my name doesn't fit anymore. My life isn't pleasant. It's bitter. And she doesn't hide who she thinks is responsible: "I went out full, and the LORD has brought me home again empty."

There are a few things to notice here. First, Naomi isn't exactly right. She didn't go out full. She left during a famine, which is the reason they went to Moab in the first place. And she doesn't come home empty. Ruth is standing right next to her. When you're grieving, it's easy to see the past as better than it was, and to miss the good things still in front of you.

Second, and this is important, the Bible doesn't scold Naomi for saying it. Nobody tells her to cheer up or stop complaining. God doesn't strike her down for being honest. The book just lets her say it. The Bible is full of people who were brutally honest with God about their pain, from Job to Jeremiah to the psalms, which include whole songs of complaint. God can handle your honesty. In fact, being honest with Him about how you feel is a form of faith. You only complain to someone you believe is listening.

> **REAL TALK** **When You Feel Like Mara**
>
> Maybe you know what Naomi felt like. Maybe someone you love has died, or your family has fallen apart, or life just feels bitter. If so, here's what Ruth 1 shows: you're allowed to be honest. You can tell God exactly how you feel, even if it's angry or confused. "The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves those who have a crushed spirit." But don't carry it alone. Talk to a parent, a pastor, a counselor, or another adult you trust. Grief is normal, but if the heaviness won't lift, or you start thinking about hurting yourself or that life isn't worth living, please reach out right away. In the United States, you can call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. You are not too much, and your story isn't over.

The chapter ends with a sentence that seems small but is full of hope. Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem "in the beginning of barley harvest." The famine is over. The fields are full. And in the fields, although Naomi doesn't know it yet, God has already prepared something good.

That's a pattern you'll see through this whole book. God almost never shows up in Ruth with a miracle or a voice from heaven. There are no plagues, no angels, no parting seas. Instead, He works quietly through ordinary things: a harvest, a field, a kind man, a loyal woman, a family law. If you've ever felt like God is silent in your life, Ruth is a good book for you. Silent doesn't mean absent.

KEY VERSE

Ruth said, "Don't urge me to leave you, and to return from following you, for where you go, I will go; and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me."

Ruth 1:16–17 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Orpah went home and Ruth stayed. Do you think Orpah did anything wrong? Why does the story make Ruth the hero?
2. Naomi said she went out full and came back empty. What did she miss about her own situation?
3. Is it okay to tell God you're angry or bitter? What do Naomi's words, and the fact that the Bible records them, suggest?
4. Who in your life needs someone to stick with them right now, the way Ruth stuck with Naomi?

TRY THIS *This week, reach out to someone who is going through something hard. Don't try to fix it. Just let them know you're there, and then follow through.*

CHAPTER 2

The Field of Boaz

Ruth 2

Chapter 2 opens by introducing a new character before he even shows up. Naomi has a relative on her late husband's side, "a mighty man of wealth, of the family of Elimelech, and his name was Boaz." The Hebrew phrase translated mighty man can describe a warrior, but here it probably means a man of strength, standing, and character. Hold on to that name. Naomi doesn't seem to be thinking about him at all.

Ruth, meanwhile, isn't waiting around. She's a young widow in a foreign town with a grieving mother-in-law and no food, so she comes up with a plan. "Let me now go to the field, and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I find favor." Naomi's whole answer is three words: "Go, my daughter." She's still in the bitter, quiet stage of grief. Ruth is the one taking initiative.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Gleaning Laws**
>
> Gleaning was God's welfare program for the poor, built right into Israel's farming laws. When farmers harvested their fields, they weren't supposed to get every last stalk. Leviticus says, "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest." Whatever fell or was left behind belonged to people who needed it: "You shall leave them for the poor and for the foreigner. I am the LORD your God." Deuteronomy adds that if a farmer forgot

> a whole bundle, he shouldn't go back for it. "It shall be for the foreigner, for the fatherless, and for the widow." Ruth was a foreigner and a widow, so the law was written for exactly someone like her. But gleaning wasn't charity you just received. You had to work for it, all day, bent over in the sun, picking up what the harvesters missed. It protected both the poor person's survival and their dignity.

Then comes one of the best lines in the book. Ruth goes out to glean, "and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz." She happened to. Of all the fields around Bethlehem, she just happened to pick the one owned by her dead father-in-law's relative. The writer is having a little fun here. He wants you to notice the coincidence and smile, because in the Bible, coincidences like this are rarely just coincidences.

Christians call this providence: God's quiet guidance of ordinary events. Ruth didn't hear a voice telling her which field to choose. She just went to work. But God was steering her steps the whole time. That's how He usually works in your life too. You probably won't get a sign in the sky. But looking back, you may see that the class you got stuck in, the friend you met by accident, or the job you almost didn't take was part of something bigger.

And then, "Behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem." He walks up to his workers and greets them: "May the LORD be with you." They answer, "May the LORD bless you." That's a quick glimpse into what kind of boss he is. In an era when everyone did what was right in their own eyes, here is a man whose workplace runs on blessing and respect.

Boaz immediately notices Ruth and asks his foreman, "Whose young lady is this?" The foreman explains that she's "the Moabite lady who came back with Naomi" and that she's been working hard since early morning with only a short break.

What Boaz does next tells you a lot about him. He goes straight to Ruth and tells her to stay in his field with his young women workers. He makes sure she can drink from the water jars his workers fill. And he adds something important: "Haven't I commanded the young men not to touch you?"

That line is a reminder of how dangerous it was for Ruth to be out there. She was a poor foreign woman alone in the fields, surrounded by men she didn't know, in a lawless time. Later in the chapter, Naomi says it's good for Ruth to stay with Boaz's young women "that they not harm you in any other field." In other fields, she could have been harassed, mistreated, or worse, and no one would have stopped it. Boaz uses his power to protect her. He doesn't wait for something bad to happen. He sets the rules ahead of time.

> **SAFETY NOTE** **Nobody Gets to Treat You That Way**
>
> Ruth was vulnerable in the fields, and Boaz made sure no one would bother her. Sadly, harassment still happens: unwanted touching, comments about someone's body, pressure to send pictures, following someone, or messages that won't stop. It happens at school, at work, online, and even at church. If it's happening to you, it is not your fault, and you don't have to just put up with it. Tell a trusted adult, like a parent, a teacher, a school counselor, a coach, or a manager. Keep screenshots or notes if you can. If you are ever in danger, call 911. And if you see it happening to someone else, be like Boaz. Use whatever influence you have to stop it and to protect the person being targeted.

Ruth is stunned. She bows to the ground and asks, "Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take knowledge of me, since I am a foreigner?" She knows she's an outsider. She expects to be ignored at best.

Boaz explains that he's heard all about her: how she stayed with Naomi after her husband died and left her own father and mother and homeland to come to a people she didn't know. Then he gives her a blessing that's one of the most beautiful lines in the book: "May the LORD repay your work, and a full reward be given to you from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."

Under whose wings. It's a picture of a mother bird spreading her wings over her chicks. Ruth has come to Israel to take shelter under the protection of Israel's God. Boaz sees it. Keep this image in your mind, because it's going to come back in chapter 3 in a surprising way.

Ruth answers that he has comforted her and "spoken kindly" to her, even though she isn't even one of his servants. Then Boaz invites her to lunch. "Come here, and eat some bread, and dip your morsel in the vinegar." The vinegar was probably a sour wine sauce, something like a dip. He personally hands her roasted grain. She eats until she is full and has leftovers. For a woman who has been living on almost nothing, that's huge.

But Boaz isn't done. When Ruth goes back to work, he quietly tells his workers to let her glean even among the bundles, the part normally off-limits, and to drop extra stalks on purpose for her to find. And he tells them not to embarrass or scold her. He's generous in a way that protects her dignity. She doesn't have to beg. She just finds more than she expected.

> **REAL TALK** **Kindness That Protects Dignity**
>
> Boaz could have just handed Ruth a bag of grain. Instead, he made sure she could earn it, and he made sure nobody humiliated her. That's a thoughtful kind of kindness. When you help someone, how you do it matters. Do you

> make them feel small, or do you make them feel respected? Do you post about it, or do it quietly? Sometimes the best help is the kind that lets the other person keep their dignity. Think about the kid who can't afford the field trip, or the new student who doesn't know anyone. How could you help in a way that doesn't put them on the spot?

By evening, Ruth has gathered and beaten out about an ephah of barley. Scholars estimate that's somewhere around thirty pounds, maybe more. That's an enormous amount for one day of gleaning, probably enough to feed the two women for a couple of weeks. She carries it home and gives Naomi the leftovers from lunch too.

Naomi's eyes must have gone wide. "Where have you gleaned today? Where have you worked? Blessed be he who noticed you." When Ruth tells her the man's name is Boaz, something wakes up in Naomi. For the first time in the whole story, she sounds hopeful. "May he be blessed by the LORD, who has not abandoned his kindness to the living and to the dead." The word for kindness there is hesed, that same loyal love from chapter 1. A few days ago, Naomi said the LORD had brought her home empty. Now she's saying He hasn't abandoned His kindness after all.

Then she drops the big news: "The man is a close relative to us, one of our near kinsmen." The Hebrew word is go'el, which means redeemer. A go'el was a family member with the right, and the responsibility, to rescue relatives in trouble. Naomi suddenly sees a possibility that hadn't occurred to her.

Ruth works in Boaz's fields through the end of barley harvest and wheat harvest, roughly seven weeks, from about April to June. And through all of it, she goes home to Naomi every night. Ruth's loyalty didn't stop with a speech on the road. It showed up in long days of hard, sweaty, ordinary work.

KEY VERSE

May the LORD repay your work, and a full reward be given to you from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

Ruth 2:12 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Ruth "happened" to choose Boaz's field. Can you think of a time something that seemed like a coincidence turned out to matter a lot?
2. What specific things did Boaz do to protect Ruth? What does that tell you about how people with power should treat people without it?
3. Why do you think the gleaning laws required poor people to work for their food instead of just giving it to them?
4. Naomi starts to change in this chapter. What changed her, and what does that say about how God helps people through grief?

TRY THIS *Do one act of kindness this week in a way that protects the other person's dignity: quietly, without making a big deal of it, and without telling anyone.*

CHAPTER 3

The Threshing Floor

Ruth 3

Weeks go by. The harvest is ending, and with it, Ruth's daily trips to Boaz's field. Gleaning could keep two widows alive for a season, but it wasn't a future. What happens when the harvest is over? Naomi, who started this story bitter and empty, now starts thinking about Ruth's future instead of her own pain. "My daughter, shall I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you?"

Rest is the same word Naomi used back in chapter 1, when she prayed that her daughters-in-law would find rest in the house of a husband. Back then, she thought it would only happen in Moab. Now she sees a possibility in Bethlehem. Boaz is a relative, a potential redeemer. And Naomi has a plan.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **What's a Threshing Floor?**
>
> After grain was cut, it had to be separated from the stalks and husks. Farmers did this on a threshing floor, a flat, hard area of packed earth or rock, usually on a hill or open space where the wind blew. First they beat or trampled the stalks to loosen the grain. Then, in the evening, when the breeze picked up, they winnowed it: tossing the mix into the air with a pitchfork so the light chaff blew away and the heavy grain fell back down. It was hard work, and at the end of harvest it was also a time of celebration, with food and drink. The owner often slept right there next to the grain pile to protect it from thieves.

Naomi tells Ruth that Boaz will be winnowing barley that night. Her instructions are specific: “wash yourself, anoint yourself, get dressed, and go down to the threshing floor.” Anointing meant putting on perfumed oil, sort of the ancient version of a shower and nice cologne. Getting dressed may mean putting on her best clothes, or it may mean taking off her widow’s clothes, signaling that her time of mourning is over. Ruth is supposed to wait until Boaz has finished eating and drinking and has gone to sleep, then quietly “uncover his feet, and lie down.” Then, Naomi says, “he will tell you what to do.”

Ruth’s answer is simple: “All that you say, I will do.” She goes to the threshing floor and follows the plan. When Boaz has eaten and his “heart was merry,” meaning he was relaxed and happy after a good harvest, he lies down by the grain pile. Ruth slips in softly, uncovers his feet, and lies down.

Then, at midnight, Boaz wakes up with a start. Maybe his feet are cold. He rolls over, and there’s a woman lying at his feet in the dark. You can almost hear him gasp. “Who are you?”

Ruth’s answer is the heart of the whole chapter: “I am Ruth your servant. Therefore spread the corner of your garment over your servant; for you are a near kinsman.”

That might sound strange to us, but in her culture, it was clear. Spreading the corner of a garment over a woman was a way of saying, I will marry you and protect you. The prophet Ezekiel later uses the same picture to describe God taking Israel as His bride. And here’s the beautiful part: the Hebrew word for corner is the same word Boaz used in chapter 2 for wings. Boaz prayed that Ruth would find refuge under God’s wings. Now Ruth is asking Boaz to be

the answer to his own prayer. Spread your wings over me. Be the one who protects me.

Notice too that Ruth goes off script. Naomi said Boaz would tell Ruth what to do. Instead, Ruth tells Boaz what to do. She asks him directly to marry her, and she names the reason: you are a redeemer. She's not just asking for a husband. She's asking him to take responsibility for Naomi's family too.

> **REAL TALK** **What Was Really Going On?**
>
> Let's be honest: some people read this scene as romantic, and some read it as sexual. So what was happening? Most scholars, Jewish and Christian, read it as a bold but honorable marriage proposal in the customs of the time. The text says she uncovered his feet, and the next morning Boaz protects her reputation and arranges a public, legal marriage. Some scholars point out that the Hebrew words for feet and for lying down can sometimes carry hints of something more, and they think the writer is creating suspense: will these two do the right thing in a risky situation? Even those readers usually agree on the bottom line. Nothing in the text says they slept together, and everything Boaz does afterward shows he acted with integrity. In a book set in the days of the judges, when men took what they wanted, Boaz is a man who doesn't. Ruth's request was risky and unusual, but the story treats both of them as people of character. This isn't a model for modern dating. It's a picture of two people choosing to do things the right way when they easily could have done the wrong thing.

Boaz's response tells you everything about him. He doesn't take advantage of her. He blesses her. "You are blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have shown more kindness in the latter end than at the beginning, because you didn't follow young men, whether poor or rich." Kindness again is hesed, loyal love. Her first act of hesed was sticking with Naomi. This second one is even greater, because she could have chosen a young husband for herself. Instead she

asked an older relative who could redeem Naomi's family line. Boaz is probably quite a bit older than she is. He's honored that she chose him.

Then he reassures her: "Now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do to you all that you say; for all the city of my people knows that you are a worthy woman." Worthy woman is a big phrase. It's the same phrase used in Proverbs 31, the famous poem that asks, "Who can find a worthy woman?" Remember that Boaz was called a man of strength and standing in chapter 2. Now Ruth gets the matching title. The poor Moabite widow and the rich Israelite landowner are equals in character.

> **REAL TALK** **Your Reputation Gets Around**
>
> "All the city of my people knows." Ruth had only been in Bethlehem a couple of months, and she was a foreigner, which meant people were probably watching her closely. But they saw her loyalty to Naomi and her hard work in the fields every day, and the whole town knew what kind of person she was. Your character gets around too. People notice how you treat your parents, how you work when nobody's checking, and how you talk about others when they're not around. Reputation isn't built by one big moment. It's built by small, faithful choices, day after day. What would people in your school say about you if your name came up?

But there's a complication. "Now it is true that I am a near kinsman. However, there is a kinsman nearer than I." There's another relative with a closer claim. Boaz could have ignored that rule and just married Ruth. But he wants to do things right, publicly and legally. So he promises that in the morning he'll settle it. If the closer relative wants to redeem, fine. If not, "I will do the duty of a kinsman for you, as the LORD lives."

He tells Ruth to stay until morning, probably because it wasn't safe for a woman to walk through the dark alone. Before sunrise, while it's still too dark to recognize anyone, she gets up to leave, and Boaz says, "Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor." He's protecting her reputation. People love to gossip, and a woman leaving a threshing floor at dawn could start rumors that weren't true.

Then he does something generous. He has her hold out her shawl and pours six measures of barley into it, a heavy load. When Ruth gets home, Naomi asks, "How did it go, my daughter?" Ruth tells her everything, and adds that Boaz said, "Don't go empty to your mother-in-law."

Don't go empty. Remember Naomi's bitter words in chapter 1? I went out full, and the LORD has brought me home again empty. Now a man is sending her a message, through a shawl full of barley: you won't stay empty. The emptiness is ending.

Naomi knows Boaz well enough to know what will happen next. "Wait, my daughter, until you know what will happen; for the man will not rest until he has settled this today." Naomi was looking for rest for Ruth. Now Boaz won't rest until Ruth has it.

> **SAFETY NOTE** **Doing Things the Right Way**
>
> Ruth and Boaz were adults in a culture very different from ours, and the book makes clear they acted with integrity. Today, though, being alone at night with someone, especially someone older, in a private place where there's drinking, can be risky. Nobody should pressure you into a situation like that, and nobody should take advantage of you if you're in one. If someone ever pushes you physically or sexually, or tries to get you alone in a way that feels wrong, it's not your fault, and you can say no and leave. Tell a trusted adult. In the United States, the RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline is 1-800-656-

4673, and in an emergency call 911. Be the kind of person, like Boaz, who protects others instead of taking advantage of them.

KEY VERSE

Now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do to you all that you say; for all the city of my people knows that you are a worthy woman.

Ruth 3:11 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Ruth asked Boaz to "spread the corner of your garment" over her, the same word as wings in chapter 2. How was Boaz the answer to his own prayer?
2. What choices did Boaz make in this chapter that show his character? What could he have done instead?
3. Why do you think Ruth went beyond Naomi's instructions and spoke up for herself?
4. Ruth's reputation was built in just a few weeks. What small, everyday choices build a reputation today?

TRY THIS *Pick one ordinary task this week, like a chore, homework, or a job, and do it faithfully and well, even if nobody notices.*

CHAPTER 4

The Redeemer at the Gate

Ruth 4

Naomi was right. Boaz doesn't waste a second. "Now Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there." In ancient towns, the city gate wasn't just a door. It was the town square, the courtroom, and the business office all in one. Elders sat there to settle disputes and witness deals. If you wanted something to be official, you did it at the gate in front of everyone.

And as if on cue, the closer relative walks by. Boaz calls out to him. The Hebrew phrase Boaz uses is a little bit funny. It's something like, hey, you, so-and-so. The writer never tells us this man's name, and that may be the point. You'll see why in a minute.

Boaz gathers ten of the town's elders as witnesses and lays out the situation. "Naomi, who has come back out of the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land, which was our brother Elimelech's." Naomi apparently had rights to the family land, but as a poor widow she had no way to work it. The closest relative had first right to buy it, keeping it in the family. Would he redeem it?

The man says, "I will redeem it." Of course he would. Buying land was a good investment, and with Elimelech's sons dead, the land would eventually be his family's for good.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Kinsman-Redeemer**

The Hebrew word go'el means redeemer, and it's one of the richest words in the Old Testament. In Israel, a go'el was a close male relative with the responsibility to rescue family members in trouble. If a relative had to sell land because of poverty, the go'el bought it back so it stayed in the family. If a relative was sold into slavery because of debt, the go'el paid to set him free. A related law said that if a man died without children, his brother should marry the widow so the dead man's name and inheritance would continue. Ruth's situation doesn't fit any one law perfectly, but Boaz brings these duties together: buying the land and marrying the widow. Later in the Bible, God calls Himself Israel's Redeemer, the one who buys back His people from slavery and exile. When the New Testament talks about Jesus redeeming us, this is the picture behind it.

Then Boaz adds the fine print. "On the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must buy it also from Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, to raise up the name of the dead on his inheritance." In other words, the land comes with a wife. And if Ruth has a son, that son would legally count as Elimelech's family, and the land would go to him, not to the redeemer's own children.

Suddenly the deal doesn't look so good. The man backs out fast. "I can't redeem it for myself, lest I endanger my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption for yourself; for I can't redeem it." He's protecting his own family's future. That isn't evil. But it's the opposite of what Ruth did in chapter 1, and the opposite of what Boaz is about to do. Ruth gave up her future for Naomi's. This man won't risk his for theirs. Maybe that's why the writer never gives his name. He wanted to protect his name, and the story forgot it. Boaz and Ruth were willing to give themselves away, and we're still talking about them three thousand years later.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Sandal**

The writer pauses to explain an old custom, because even by the time he wrote, readers might not have known it. "Now this was the custom in former time in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning exchanging, to confirm all things: a man took off his sandal, and gave it to his neighbor." Handing over a sandal was like signing a contract. It may have symbolized the right to walk on the land. Deuteronomy describes a harsher version of the custom: if a brother refused to marry his brother's widow, she would pull off his sandal in front of the elders and spit in his face, publicly shaming him. In Ruth there's no spitting and no shame. The man simply hands over his sandal and steps aside. It's a quiet transfer of rights, and it makes Boaz the redeemer.

So the man says, "Buy it for yourself," and takes off his sandal. Boaz turns to the elders and the crowd and makes it official. "You are witnesses today," he says, that he has bought everything that belonged to Elimelech and his sons from Naomi. And he adds that he is taking Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, to be his wife, "to raise up the name of the dead on his inheritance."

The people at the gate respond with joy. "We are witnesses." Then they pray a blessing over the marriage. They ask the LORD to make Ruth like Rachel and Leah, the two wives of Jacob who "built the house of Israel," and to make Boaz's family like the family of Perez, the son Tamar bore to Judah. That's a remarkable prayer. Rachel and Leah were the mothers of Israel's tribes. And Tamar, like Ruth, was an outsider who acted boldly to keep a family line alive when the men around her failed to do the right thing. The town isn't just tolerating Ruth the Moabitess. They're placing her alongside the great mothers of Israel.

The next verse moves fast. Boaz marries Ruth, "and the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she bore a son." Remember that Ruth was married to Mahlon for about ten years in Moab without having

children. Now the writer makes clear that this baby is a gift from God.

> **REAL TALK** **God Welcomes Outsiders**
>
> Ruth the Moabitess. The book uses that title again and again, so we never forget she's an outsider. The law said a Moabite couldn't enter the LORD's assembly. Yet Ruth, who chose Israel's God, is welcomed into Israel's family, honored at the city gate, and becomes the great-grandmother of its greatest king. That doesn't mean God's law was wrong. It shows that God's heart was always bigger than the borders. From the beginning, He promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through his family. Maybe you feel like an outsider: at school, at church, in your own family, or with God. Maybe you think your background, your mistakes, or where you come from disqualifies you. Ruth's story says otherwise. And it's a challenge too. Who are the outsiders around you, and how can you welcome them the way Bethlehem welcomed Ruth?

Then the spotlight turns back to Naomi. The women of Bethlehem, the same women who asked, "Is this Naomi?" in chapter 1, gather around her and praise God: "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you today without a near kinsman." They say this baby will be "a restorer of life" for her and will take care of her in her old age. And they say something about Ruth that would have been shocking in that culture. Ruth, "who loves you," is "better to you than seven sons."

Seven sons was the ancient picture of the perfect family. Naomi had lost her two sons and thought she had nothing. The women are telling her: you were never empty. This Moabite daughter-in-law who loves you has been worth more than seven sons all along.

Then comes one of the sweetest scenes in the Bible. "Naomi took the child, laid him in her bosom, and became nurse to him." The woman who called herself Mara, bitter, is holding a baby in her lap.

She went out full and came home empty. Now she is full again, not with what she lost, but with something new. The women even say, "A son is born to Naomi." They name him Obed, which means servant or worker.

And then, in the very last line of the story, the writer drops the bombshell. Obed "is the father of Jesse, the father of David."

David. The shepherd boy who killed Goliath. The greatest king Israel ever had. The man after God's own heart. Ruth, the Moabite widow, is his great-grandmother. Naomi's family line, which looked dead in chapter 1, leads to the throne of Israel.

The book closes with a short family tree, from Perez, the son of Judah and Tamar, through Boaz, down to "Jesse, and Jesse became the father of David." It's ten generations. After the chaos of Judges, where there was no king in Israel, this genealogy ends with the name of a king. The answer to the darkness of the judges was already growing quietly in a Bethlehem family, through a foreign widow's loyalty and a farmer's integrity.

And the line doesn't stop with David. About a thousand years later, Matthew opens the New Testament with the family tree of Jesus. And right there, in the list of names, are these words: "Boaz became the father of Obed by Ruth." Matthew includes only a few women in his list, and every one is surprising. Tamar. Rahab, the Canaanite from Jericho. Ruth, the Moabite. And the wife of Uriah, Bathsheba. Outsiders, foreigners, women with complicated stories. Matthew wants you to see from the first page that Jesus came from a family full of people God wasn't supposed to welcome, and that He came for people just like them.

KEY VERSE

The women, her neighbors, gave him a name, saying, "A son is born to Naomi". They named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Ruth 4:17 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. The closer relative wouldn't risk his own inheritance. Is it wrong to protect your own future? How is he different from Ruth and Boaz?
2. Why do you think the people of Bethlehem compared Ruth to Rachel, Leah, and Tamar?
3. Naomi went from Mara to holding Obed. What does her story say to someone who feels empty right now?
4. Matthew included Ruth and other outsiders in Jesus' family tree. Why do you think that matters?

TRY THIS *Read Matthew 1:1–6 and find every name you recognize from the Old Testament. Then pick one outsider in your world and welcome them this week.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Ruth begins with an empty woman in an empty town and ends with a baby in Naomi's arms and the name of a king. Along the way, a man named Boaz does something no one else would do. He pays the price to redeem a family that had lost everything, and he brings a foreigner into the people of God.

Jewish readers treasure Ruth as a story of loyal love and of God's care for the widow and the stranger. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, saw in it a preview of something greater. Matthew puts Ruth right into the family tree of Jesus: "Boaz became the father of Obed by Ruth." Centuries later, another child was born in Bethlehem, the House of Bread, who said, "I am the bread of life." Like Boaz, Jesus is our close relative, because He became human. Like Boaz, He paid the price to buy us back. Paul says God sent His Son "that he might redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as children." And like Ruth, outsiders are welcomed in: "you who once were far off are made near in the blood of Christ."

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. Like Ruth, you are not too far outside for Him to notice you.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all gone our own way.

Like Israel in the days of the judges, all of us have done what seemed right to us instead of following God.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever. We can't buy ourselves back.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the true Redeemer.

Boaz paid to redeem one family. Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again, to redeem everyone who trusts Him.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Ruth didn't earn her place in Boaz's family. It was a gift. Salvation is a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Take refuge under His wings.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've gone my own way instead of following You. I've sinned against You, and I can't buy myself back. Thank You for noticing me when I felt far away. Thank You that Jesus, my Redeemer, paid the price for me on the cross, and that You raised Him from the dead. I want to come under Your wings. Forgive me and bring me into Your family. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. Wherever You go, I will go. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read all four chapters of Ruth in one sitting. It takes about fifteen minutes. Then read Matthew 1 and Luke 2.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Be a Boaz. Look for the person on the edge, the new kid, the one grieving, the outsider, and be kind to them on purpose.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Naomi was honest with God too. Keep asking. Keep reading. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Ruth is right, the God who noticed a grieving widow and a foreigner gleaning in a field notices you, and He is still in the business of redeeming what looks lost.

May the LORD repay your work, and a full reward be given to you from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

Ruth 2:12 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF 1 SAMUEL

The King After God's Heart

1 Samuel, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King After God's Heart: The Book of 1 Samuel, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

Copyright © 2026 Bill McLeod. All rights reserved.

Published by Papa Bill Books.

Scripture quotations are from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, which is in the public domain.

All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” You probably know at least one story from 1 Samuel. A shepherd boy, a sling, five smooth stones, and a giant who never saw it coming. Maybe you’ve heard sermons about beating the giants in your life. Maybe you’ve even rolled your eyes at them.

But David and Goliath is just one chapter in a much bigger, messier, more surprising book. 1 Samuel is the story of how Israel got its first kings. It’s full of drama: a woman who prays so hard the priest thinks she’s drunk, a boy who hears God calling his name in the middle of the night, a sacred box that knocks over a pagan idol, a tall, handsome king who falls apart, a best friendship that costs a prince his throne, a fugitive who refuses to kill his enemy, a wise woman who talks an angry warrior out of murder, and a midnight visit to a medium.

Underneath all of it is one big question: what kind of leader does God want? Israel wanted a king who looked the part. God wanted a king with the right heart. That question still matters, for the leaders you follow and for the kind of person you’re becoming.

Let’s go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through 1 Samuel in ten chapters: Hannah and Eli’s house (1 Samuel 1–2), the call of Samuel (3), the ark captured and

returned (4–7), Israel's demand for a king and the rise of Saul (8–12), Saul's downfall (13–15), David anointed (16), David and Goliath (17), David, Jonathan, and Saul's jealousy (18–23), David's mercy and Abigail's wisdom (24–27), and Saul's last night and death (28–31).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book 1 Samuel is, where it fits, and the world it came from. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as what to make of the command to destroy the Amalekites, how tall Goliath really was, and whether it was really Samuel who appeared at Endor, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes 1 Samuel in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the ninth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

1 Samuel raises real questions. I've presented the main views fairly on the command concerning the Amalekites (with reference to the herem passages in Deuteronomy and Joshua), on Goliath's height in the Masoretic Text compared with the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint, on the evil spirit that troubled Saul, and on whether the figure at Endor was really Samuel. I'd encourage you to share your own church's view with your teen, and to explain why other Christians see it differently.

Some material is heavy. Eli's sons abused their position as priests. Saul's dark moods and violent jealousy lead him to throw a spear at his own son. And the book ends with Saul taking his own life on Mount Gilboa. These are handled with compassion and without graphic detail. Real Talk and Safety boxes address mental health and dark moods (encouraging readers to talk to a trusted adult or a doctor), leaders who misuse power, family anger, revenge, jealousy,

and friendship, and point readers to the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and to Childhelp (1-800-422-4453) where relevant.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees David, the anointed king from Bethlehem, pointing to Jesus the Messiah, the Anointed One, while acknowledging that Jewish readers treasure 1 Samuel in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see in 1 Samuel a God who looks at the heart, and who keeps His promises even when His people's leaders fail.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Kind of Book Is This?

1 Samuel is history told as a story, with real people, real places, and a lot of drama. It's named after Samuel, the prophet who anointed Israel's first two kings, although Samuel dies before the book ends. In the Hebrew Bible, 1 and 2 Samuel were originally one book. It was split in two later, probably because it was too long to fit on one scroll.

Where It Fits

1 Samuel picks up right where Judges and Ruth leave off. Judges ends with the words there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes. Ruth ends with the name David. 1 Samuel tells how Israel moved from the chaotic days of the judges to a kingdom, roughly around 1100 to 1010 BC. Samuel is the last of the judges, Saul is the first king, and David is the king God chooses to replace him. 2 Samuel continues David's story.

Who Wrote It?

The book doesn't name its author. Jewish tradition says Samuel wrote the first part, and the prophets Nathan and Gad finished it, and 1 Chronicles mentions records kept by all three. Since Samuel's death is recorded in chapter 25, someone else at least completed it. Many scholars think the book was put together from older sources, like a story of the ark and a story of David's rise, and edited as part

of a larger history running from Deuteronomy through Kings. Christians with different views agree that it is God's Word.

The World of 1 Samuel

Israel was a loose group of tribes with no capital, no standing army, and no king. Their worship center was at Shiloh, where the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant were kept. Their biggest threat was the Philistines, a powerful people who lived in five cities along the coast and had the technology to make iron weapons. Israel was outgunned. That's the background to almost every story in this book: a small, struggling people trying to survive, and asking who would save them.

Three Big Characters

Samuel is the prophet, priest, and judge who bridges the old era and the new. Saul is the king the people wanted, tall, handsome, and impressive, who starts well and falls apart. David is the king God wanted, a shepherd boy with a heart for God, who spends most of this book running for his life. Watching how these three respond to God is the key to the whole book.

Hard Stories and Safety Notes

1 Samuel includes war, abuse of power, violent jealousy, mental anguish, and the death by suicide of Israel's first king. Including a story in the Bible doesn't mean God approves of everything in it. When we come to these stories, you'll find a box with a safety note. Here's what they say: you are not alone, dark feelings can get better with help, and it's never weak to ask for help. Talk to a trusted adult or a doctor. If you are ever thinking about suicide, in the United

States you can call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time. In an emergency, call 911.

The Map

Chapter 1 (1 Samuel 1–2): Hannah's prayer.

Chapter 2 (1 Samuel 3): Speak, LORD.

Chapter 3 (1 Samuel 4–7): The glory departs.

Chapter 4 (1 Samuel 8–12): A king like all the nations.

Chapter 5 (1 Samuel 13–15): Saul's downfall.

Chapter 6 (1 Samuel 16): The shepherd boy.

Chapter 7 (1 Samuel 17): David and Goliath.

Chapter 8 (1 Samuel 18–23): Friends and enemies.

Chapter 9 (1 Samuel 24–27): Mercy and wisdom.

Chapter 10 (1 Samuel 28–31): Saul's last night.

Contents

Setting the Scene 7

1 Hannah's Prayer *1–2* 11

2 Speak, LORD *3* 17

3 The Glory Departs *4–7* 23

4 A King Like All the Nations *8–12* 29

5 Saul's Downfall *13–15* 35

6 The Shepherd Boy *16* 41

7 David and Goliath *17* 47

8 Friends and Enemies *18–23* 54

9 Mercy and Wisdom *24–27* 61

10 Saul's Last Night *28–31* 68

Where This Points 74

CHAPTER 1

Hannah's Prayer

1 Samuel 1–2

The story of Israel's first kings doesn't begin in a palace or on a battlefield. It begins in a family that's hurting. A man named Elkanah has two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah has children. Hannah has none. And every year, when the family travels to the tabernacle at Shiloh to worship, Peninnah makes sure Hannah feels it. The Bible says she provoked her "severely," mocking her until she cried and couldn't eat.

Elkanah loves Hannah. He gives her a double portion of the sacrifice meal, and he tries to comfort her. "Am I not better to you than ten sons?" he asks. It's sweet, but it kind of misses the point. Hannah's pain isn't something a husband's love can fix.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Two Wives?**

The Bible records that some men in ancient Israel had more than one wife, but it never presents that as God's plan. From Genesis on, God's design was one man and one woman. And every time the Bible tells a story about a family with multiple wives, it's a story about jealousy, rivalry, and pain: Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah, and now Hannah and Peninnah. The Bible doesn't always stop to say this is wrong. It just shows you what happens. In Hannah's world, not being able to have children also brought shame. People often assumed it meant God was displeased with you. So Hannah wasn't just sad. She felt rejected, by people and maybe by God.

One year at Shiloh, after the meal, Hannah goes to the tabernacle alone. "She was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly." She makes God a promise: if He gives her a son, she will give him back to the LORD for his whole life, and no razor will ever touch his head, the sign of a Nazirite, like Samson.

Eli, the old priest, is sitting by the doorpost watching her. Her lips are moving, but no sound is coming out, because she's praying silently. In that culture, people usually prayed out loud. So Eli jumps to a conclusion: she must be drunk. "How long will you be drunk? Get rid of your wine!"

Imagine pouring your heart out to God and having a religious leader accuse you of being drunk. Hannah doesn't storm off. She answers honestly: "No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit. I have not been drinking wine or strong drink, but I poured out my soul before the LORD." Eli realizes his mistake and blesses her. "Go in peace; and may the God of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of him."

And something changes in Hannah before anything changes in her situation. She goes back, eats, and "her facial expression wasn't sad any more." She doesn't have a baby yet. She doesn't have a guarantee. But she has given her pain to God, and she's walking away lighter.

> **REAL TALK** **Pouring Out Your Soul**
>
> Hannah's prayer wasn't polite or polished. She cried. She bargained. She didn't use fancy words. She just poured out her soul. That's what prayer can look like when you're hurting. You don't have to pray in a certain voice or with certain words. You can tell God exactly what hurts and exactly what you want. And notice that Hannah was misunderstood by the person who should have understood her best. If you've ever opened up and been brushed off or

> judged, you're not alone. Don't let it stop you from talking to God, and don't stop looking for people who will really listen.

God answers. Hannah has a son and names him Samuel, "Because I have asked him of the LORD." The name probably sounds like the Hebrew words for heard by God or asked of God. Every time she says his name, she remembers that God heard her.

Then Hannah keeps her promise, which might be the hardest part of the whole story. When Samuel is old enough to stop nursing, probably around three years old, she brings him to Shiloh and gives him to Eli to raise in the tabernacle. "I prayed for this child, and the LORD has given me my petition which I asked of him. Therefore I have also given him to the LORD."

That doesn't mean Hannah abandoned him. Chapter 2 says she made him a little robe every year and brought it when the family came to worship. You can picture her sewing a slightly bigger robe each year, thinking about how much he'd grown. Later, God blessed her with three more sons and two daughters.

When she gives Samuel to the LORD, Hannah sings. Her song is one of the great poems of the Bible. "My heart exults in the LORD!" she begins. And then: "There is no one as holy as the LORD, for there is no one besides you, nor is there any rock like our God."

The song turns the world upside down. God breaks the bows of the mighty and gives strength to the weak. The full go hungry, and the hungry are satisfied. The woman who couldn't have children now has many. "He raises up the poor out of the dust. He lifts up the needy from the dunghill to make them sit with princes." That's the theme of the whole book of 1 Samuel. God lifts up the lowly and brings down the proud. And at the very end of her song, Hannah

mentions something that doesn't exist yet in Israel: a king, God's anointed one.

A thousand years later, another young woman would sing a song very much like this one. When Mary found out she would be the mother of Jesus, she sang that God "has put down princes from their thrones, and has exalted the lowly." Mary knew Hannah's song. She saw that God was doing it again.

Then the story takes a dark turn. "Now the sons of Eli were wicked men. They didn't know the LORD." Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are priests at the tabernacle, and they're using their position to take whatever they want. When people bring sacrifices, the priests' servants grab the best meat before it's offered to God, and threaten people who object. "The sin of the young men was very great before the LORD; for the men despised the LORD's offering." Worse, they're sleeping with the women who served at the entrance of the tabernacle.

Eli hears about it. He's old, and he gives them a lecture. But "they didn't listen to the voice of their father." And Eli doesn't remove them. He lets them keep serving as priests. Later God says Eli honored his sons more than Him, because Eli and his family were getting fat off the stolen meat too.

SAFETY NOTE **When Leaders Misuse Their Power**

Hophni and Phinehas were religious leaders, and they used their position to take advantage of people, including women. Sadly, this still happens, sometimes even in churches, youth groups, schools, or teams. A leader having authority doesn't make it okay for them to pressure you, touch you, ask for secrets, or make you feel unsafe. If a leader, coach, teacher, or anyone else ever does something that feels wrong, it is not your fault, and you don't have to keep it secret. Tell a parent or another trusted adult. If that person

> doesn't help, tell someone else. In the United States, you can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453, and in an emergency, call 911. God takes the abuse of power seriously, and so should we.

In the middle of this mess, the writer keeps cutting back to Samuel, like a camera switching scenes. Eli's sons are corrupt, but "The child Samuel grew on, and increased in favor both with the LORD and also with men." Luke uses almost the same words about Jesus as a boy. A new kind of leader is quietly growing up in the middle of a broken system.

It's worth asking why the writer gives us so much detail about Eli's sons. Part of the reason is to set up what's coming: the priesthood at Shiloh is rotten, and God is about to do something new. But there's also a warning in it. Hophni and Phinehas grew up in the tabernacle. They were surrounded by sacrifices, prayers, and holy things their whole lives. And yet "They didn't know the LORD." Being close to religious things isn't the same as knowing God. You can grow up in church, go to youth group every week, and know all the answers, and still never have a real relationship with Him. Samuel grew up in exactly the same place as Eli's sons, but he turned out completely different. The difference wasn't where they were. It was what was in their hearts.

The chapter ends with a warning. A prophet comes to Eli with a message from God: "those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me will be cursed." Eli's family will lose the priesthood, and both of his sons will die on the same day. God will raise up a faithful priest instead.

KEY VERSE

There is no one as holy as the LORD, for there is no one besides you, nor is there any rock like our God.

1 Samuel 2:2 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Hannah was mocked by Peninnah and misunderstood by Eli. How did she respond? What can you learn from her?
2. Hannah's face wasn't sad anymore even before she got pregnant. What changed?
3. Hannah's song says God lifts up the lowly and brings down the proud. Where have you seen that happen?
4. Eli knew his sons were doing wrong but didn't stop them. Why is it so hard to confront people we love?

TRY THIS *Find a quiet place this week and pour out your soul to God, honestly, about something that hurts. Don't worry about the words.*

CHAPTER 2

Speak, LORD

1 Samuel 3

Chapter 3 opens with a sad line: "The LORD's word was rare in those days. There were not many visions, then." God seemed quiet. The priests were corrupt, and the people weren't listening anyway. It had been a long time since anyone heard from God.

Samuel is still a boy, maybe around twelve, though the Bible doesn't say exactly. He serves in the tabernacle under Eli, who is now old and nearly blind. One night, Samuel is lying down near the ark of God, and the lamp of God, the oil lamp that burned in the tabernacle through the night, hasn't gone out yet. That little detail is a picture of Israel. The light is flickering, but it hasn't gone out.

Then, "The LORD called Samuel. He said, 'Here I am.'" Samuel jumps up and runs to Eli. "Here I am; for you called me." Eli says he didn't call and sends him back to bed. It happens again. Samuel runs to Eli again. Eli sends him back again.

The writer explains why Samuel is confused. Samuel didn't yet know the LORD, and the LORD's word hadn't yet been revealed to him. He's grown up in the tabernacle. He knows all the rituals. But he's never personally heard God. That's a little like a lot of kids who grow up in church. You can know all the songs, all the stories, and all the right answers and still not know God for yourself.

The third time, Eli finally figures it out. Give him credit. He may have failed as a father, but here he points Samuel in the right direction. "Go, lie down. It shall be, if he calls you, that you shall say, 'Speak, LORD; for your servant hears.'"

So Samuel goes back and lies down. And "The LORD came, and stood, and called as at other times, 'Samuel! Samuel!'" God calls him by name, twice. Samuel answers, "Speak; for your servant hears." Interestingly, he leaves out the word LORD. Maybe he was too nervous. Maybe he wasn't sure yet who was talking. But he's listening.

> **REAL TALK** **How Does God Speak Today?**
>
> Most people never hear God's voice out loud the way Samuel did. So how does God speak now? Christians believe the main way is through the Bible. Hebrews 1 says that God spoke in many ways in the past, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, Jesus. When you read Scripture, you're hearing God's word. Many Christians also believe God guides through prayer, the inner nudges of the Holy Spirit, the wise counsel of other believers, and the circumstances He arranges. Christians differ on how much to expect impressions or dreams today, but they agree on this: anything that claims to be from God has to line up with what He's already said in Scripture. The best way to learn to recognize God's voice is the way Samuel did. Show up, listen, and say, "Speak; for your servant hears."

What God tells Samuel is not a cute message for a kid. It's a hard one. God says He's about to do something in Israel that will make everyone's ears tingle. He's going to carry out His judgment on Eli's family, "because his sons brought a curse on themselves, and he didn't restrain them." The first message God gives Samuel is bad news about the man who raised him.

Samuel lies there until morning. Then he gets up and opens the doors of the tabernacle like he does every day, and he's afraid to tell Eli what he heard. Who would want to deliver that message?

But Eli calls him over and insists. Tell me everything. Don't hide anything. So Samuel does. "Samuel told him every bit, and hid nothing from him." Eli's response is surprisingly calm: "It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him." Some readers see this as humble acceptance. Others see it as tired resignation, a man who's given up on changing. Maybe it's both.

> **REAL TALK** **Telling the Hard Truth**
>
> Samuel had to tell someone he loved something they didn't want to hear. That's one of the hardest things anyone ever has to do. Maybe you've been in that spot: a friend making a dangerous choice, a family member who needs to hear something hard, or a situation where telling the truth will cost you. Samuel's example shows that honesty, said with respect, is a form of love. But be wise. You don't have to carry heavy truths alone. If someone is in danger, or if you know something serious, talk to a trusted adult. Telling the truth isn't snitching when someone could get hurt.

Think about what it took for Samuel to keep serving after that night. He still had to work for Eli every day. He still had to watch Hophni and Phinehas misbehave. He knew judgment was coming, and he couldn't do anything to stop it. But he kept showing up, opening the doors, and listening for God. Faithfulness often looks like that. Not a dramatic moment, but a long string of ordinary days doing the right thing in a place that isn't easy.

The chapter ends with Samuel growing up. "Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground." That means everything Samuel said in God's name came true. People all over Israel, from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the

south, recognize that Samuel is a real prophet of the LORD. God keeps appearing to him at Shiloh and speaking to him through His word.

Remember how the chapter started? God's word was rare. Now God is speaking again, and He's speaking through a kid who learned to listen.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Prophet, Priest, and Judge**
>
> Samuel ends up wearing three hats, more than almost anyone else in the Old Testament. He's a prophet, someone who speaks God's word to the people. He also offers sacrifices and leads worship like a priest, although he wasn't from Aaron's family, which has led to some discussion among scholars; he was from the tribe of Levi, according to 1 Chronicles. And he's the last of the judges, leading Israel and settling disputes, traveling in a circuit around the country every year. In a way, Samuel stands at the hinge of Israel's history. He'll be the one to anoint both of Israel's first kings.

There's one more detail worth noticing. Eli asked Samuel to tell him everything, and Samuel did. Then Eli accepted it, but he didn't seem to change anything. He didn't remove his sons. He didn't repent publicly. He didn't plead with God the way Moses or Abraham did when they heard about coming judgment. Hearing God's word is the first step, but it isn't the last. James, in the New Testament, says that someone who hears the word but doesn't do it is like a person who looks in a mirror, walks away, and immediately forgets what he looks like. Samuel heard and obeyed. Eli heard and shrugged. The difference between them wasn't how much they knew. It was what they did with what they knew.

It's also worth noticing how patient God was with Samuel. He called four times. He didn't get frustrated when Samuel ran to the wrong person. He didn't give up when Samuel didn't recognize His voice. If

you feel like you don't know how to hear God, or you've missed Him before, take heart. He's patient with learners.

You don't have to be an adult for God to use you. Samuel was a kid when God first spoke to him, and the message he carried changed the course of a nation. Paul would later tell his young friend Timothy not to let anyone look down on him because he was young. God has always been willing to speak to young people who are ready to listen.

> **REAL TALK** **Here I Am**
>
> Three times in this chapter, Samuel says the same two words: here I am. He says it to Eli, and finally he says it to God. It's the same answer Abraham gave when God called him, and Moses at the burning bush, and Isaiah when God asked who would go for Him. It's a simple way of saying, I'm available. I'm listening. Use me. You don't have to have your life figured out to say it. You don't need to know what God will ask. Samuel certainly didn't. You just need to be willing. Some of the most important moments in a life of faith start with nothing more complicated than a young person saying to God, here I am.

KEY VERSE

The LORD came, and stood, and called as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak; for your servant hears."

1 Samuel 3:10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Samuel grew up in the tabernacle but didn't yet know the LORD. Can someone grow up in church and still not know God personally? What's the difference?
2. Eli failed as a father but helped Samuel hear God. What does that say about how God can use imperfect people?
3. Have you ever had to tell someone a hard truth? How did it go?
4. What helps you hear God more clearly? What makes it harder?

TRY THIS *Before you read your Bible this week, pray Samuel's prayer: "Speak; for your servant hears." Then write down one thing you sense God saying through what you read.*

CHAPTER 3

The Glory Departs

1 Samuel 4–7

War breaks out between Israel and the Philistines, and Israel loses about four thousand men. The elders are shocked. "Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines?" It's a good question. But instead of asking God, praying, or repenting, they come up with a plan. "Let's get the ark of the LORD's covenant out of Shiloh and bring it to us, that it may come among us and save us out of the hand of our enemies."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Ark of the Covenant**
>
> The ark was a wooden chest covered in gold, about four feet long, built in the days of Moses. On its lid were two golden cherubim, angel-like figures with outstretched wings. Inside were the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. The ark was the most sacred object in Israel, kept in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle, where God said He would meet with His people. It was a sign of His presence and His covenant. Yes, it's the same ark from the Indiana Jones movie, but the real ark wasn't a magical weapon. It belonged to God, and He couldn't be controlled.

Notice the wording. They said "it" may save us. Not He. They're treating the ark like a lucky charm, as if God's presence could be packed up and carried into battle to guarantee a win. They want God's power without God Himself.

When the ark arrives in the camp, with Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas carrying it, the Israelites shout so loudly the ground shakes. The Philistines hear it and panic. A god has come into their camp! These are the gods who struck Egypt with plagues! But instead of running, they decide to fight harder.

And Israel loses again, much worse this time. Thirty thousand soldiers die. Hophni and Phinehas are killed, just as God had warned. And "God's ark was taken."

A messenger runs back to Shiloh with dirt on his head, a sign of mourning. Eli is ninety-eight years old and blind, sitting by the road, worried about the ark. When the messenger tells him the news, his sons' death and the ark's capture, Eli falls backward off his seat, breaks his neck, and dies. He had led Israel for forty years.

The news hits one more person. Phinehas's wife is pregnant and goes into labor when she hears it. As she is dying in childbirth, she names her son Ichabod, which means something like no glory or where is the glory? "The glory has departed from Israel; for God's ark has been taken."

It's one of the saddest moments in the book. Israel had treated God like a tool, and now it felt like He was gone.

> **REAL TALK** **God Isn't a Good-Luck Charm**
>
> Israel brought the ark into battle like a magic object. People still do this. We wear a cross for good luck, pray only before a big test, or go to church hoping it'll make things go our way, without actually caring what God wants. That's not faith. It's superstition. God isn't a vending machine or a rabbit's foot. He's a person, and He wants a relationship with you, not just a role in your plans. Ask yourself honestly: do I want God, or do I just want what God can do for me?

But here's the thing. The ark may be captured, but God isn't.

The Philistines carry the ark to Ashdod, one of their five cities, and put it in the temple of their god Dagon, right next to his statue. In the ancient world, that was like hanging a trophy on the wall. Our god beat your god.

The next morning, the people of Ashdod walk into the temple, and "Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the LORD's ark." Their god is lying face down, like a servant bowing before a king. So they pick him up and put him back in his place. Imagine having to help your god stand up.

The next morning, Dagon is down again, and this time his head and hands have broken off and are lying on the threshold. "Only Dagon's torso was intact." The writer is clearly enjoying this. The Philistines thought they'd captured Israel's God. Instead, Israel's God is knocking their god over in his own house.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Was Dagon?**
>
> Dagon was a major god of the Philistines and other peoples in the region. He was probably a god of grain and crops; the Hebrew word for grain, dagan, sounds like his name. An older idea that Dagon was half fish has mostly been abandoned by scholars. Samson pulled down a temple of Dagon in Judges 16, and now Dagon falls again. In both stories, the message is the same. The God of Israel isn't one god among many. He is the only true God, and idols can't stand before Him.

Then things get much worse for the Philistines. A plague of tumors breaks out in Ashdod. They send the ark to Gath, and the plague follows it. They send it to Ekron, and the people there scream, "Send the ark of the God of Israel away, and let it go again to its own place, that it not kill us and our people." The ark becomes the ultimate hot potato. Nobody wants it.

After seven months, the Philistines' priests come up with a plan. They put the ark on a new cart pulled by two cows that have just had calves, along with a guilt offering of gold. Normally, mother cows would refuse to leave their calves. If the cows head straight for Israel anyway, the Philistines will know it was really Israel's God who struck them. The cows walk straight down the road to the Israelite town of Beth Shemesh, mooing the whole way, without turning right or left.

The people of Beth Shemesh are thrilled at first. But some of them look into the ark, treating it carelessly, and many die. Their response echoes the Philistines': "Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?" God's holiness is not something to play around with. Finally, the ark is taken to the town of Kiriath Jearim, where it stays for twenty years.

Take a step back and look at what happened. Israel lost the ark because they treated God like a tool. The Philistines lost the battle with the ark because they treated Him like a trophy. The people of Beth Shemesh got in trouble because they treated Him like a curiosity. In every case, people were trying to handle God on their own terms. And in every case, God showed that He isn't something to be used, displayed, or poked at. He's the holy King of the universe. But notice too that He wasn't trying to stay away. He brought the ark home Himself, without any Israelite soldier lifting a finger. God was not lost. He was making a point, and then He came back to His people.

Those twenty years give Israel time to think. Eventually, the people start mourning and longing for the LORD. Samuel speaks to them: "If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you, and direct your

hearts to the LORD, and serve him only." This time they listen. They get rid of their idols, gather at Mizpah, fast, confess their sin, and Samuel prays for them.

The Philistines hear Israel is gathered and attack. The Israelites are terrified and beg Samuel to keep praying. He offers a sacrifice and cries out to God, and God thunders with a loud voice against the Philistines, throwing them into confusion. Israel wins.

Then Samuel does something simple. "Then Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer, saying, 'The LORD helped us until now.'" Ebenezer means stone of help. If you've ever sung the old hymn Come Thou Fount and wondered what it means to raise your Ebenezer, this is it. It's a marker that says, God brought me this far.

KEY VERSE

Then Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer, saying, "The LORD helped us until now."

1 Samuel 7:12 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the Israelites brought the ark into battle instead of asking God what to do?
2. In what ways do people today treat God like a good-luck charm?
3. What does the story of Dagon falling say about God, even when it looks like He's lost?
4. What would be an Ebenezer in your life, a moment you can look back on and say God helped you?

TRY THIS *Write down three times God has helped you, and keep the list somewhere you'll see it. That's your Ebenezer.*

CHAPTER 4

A King Like All the Nations

1 Samuel 8–12

Years pass, and Samuel gets old. He appoints his sons, Joel and Abijah, as judges. And history repeats itself. Just like Eli's sons, Samuel's sons are corrupt. They take bribes and twist justice. Samuel was a great prophet, but it seems he wasn't any better than Eli at passing his faith on to his kids.

So the elders of Israel come to Samuel at his home in Ramah with a demand. "Behold, you are old, and your sons don't walk in your ways. Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations."

On the surface, that sounds reasonable. Samuel's sons really were a problem. Israel really did need stable leadership. And Deuteronomy had even said that someday Israel might ask for a king. But listen to the last part of their request: like all the nations. Israel was supposed to be different from all the nations. They were God's people, and He was their King. Now they want to fit in.

Samuel is upset. He takes it personally. But when he prays about it, God says something that puts it in perspective: "they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me as the king over them." This isn't really about Samuel. It's about God. The people want a king they can see, a king who looks impressive, a king who will march

out in front of the army, more than they want to trust the invisible King who has rescued them again and again.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Was Having a King Wrong?**
>
> This is a question scholars and Christians discuss. Deuteronomy 17 anticipated it: "When you have come to the land which the LORD your God gives you, and possess it and dwell in it, and say, 'I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,'" then Israel should set over themselves a king "whom the LORD your God chooses." The same passage warned that the king shouldn't pile up horses, wives, or money, and should read God's law every day. So the idea of a king wasn't automatically wrong. Many readers think the problem in 1 Samuel 8 was the people's motive: they wanted a king to replace their trust in God instead of a king who would lead them in trusting God. Others think the book has mixed feelings about kingship as a whole. Either way, God doesn't abandon His people when they make this choice. He works through it, and eventually He will give them a king after His own heart.

God tells Samuel to give the people what they want, but to warn them first. So Samuel describes what a king will actually do. "He will take your sons and appoint them as his servants, for his chariots and to be his horsemen." He'll take your daughters to cook and bake for him. He'll take your best fields and vineyards. He'll take a tenth of your harvest and your flocks. He'll take your servants and your donkeys. Notice the word take, over and over. And one day, Samuel says, you'll cry out because of the king you chose, and God won't answer you.

The people don't care. "No, but we will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles." There it is again. Like all the nations.

REAL TALK **Wanting to Be Like Everyone Else**

Israel wanted a king because everyone else had one. That pull to fit in is incredibly strong, especially when you're a teenager. Everyone else has a phone, goes to that party, watches that show, dates, swears, vapes, or posts that kind of picture. And being different can feel lonely. But God never called His people to blend in. He called them to be different in the best way: kinder, more honest, more faithful, more free. That doesn't mean everything popular is bad. It means asking, before I do this, am I doing it because it's right, or just because everyone else is? And what am I giving up to fit in?

Now meet Saul. Chapter 9 introduces him like a movie star. He's the son of a wealthy man from the tribe of Benjamin, "an impressive young man; and there was not among the children of Israel a more handsome person than he. From his shoulders and upward he was taller than any of the people." If Israel wanted a king who looked like a king, here he is.

But the way Saul meets Samuel is almost comical. His father's donkeys have wandered off, and Saul and a servant spend days searching for them without any luck. Saul is ready to give up, but the servant suggests asking the local prophet. So the future king of Israel ends up at Samuel's door because he lost some donkeys.

God had already told Samuel that the man He chose would show up. Samuel invites Saul to a special meal, gives him the best portion, and hints at what's coming. Saul is confused. "Am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? And my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin?" At this point, Saul is humble. He doesn't think he's anything special.

The next morning, Samuel takes Saul aside and anoints him privately, pouring oil on his head. "Hasn't the LORD anointed you to be prince over his inheritance?" Samuel gives him three signs that

will happen on his way home, and they all come true. God's Spirit comes on Saul, and he prophesies with a group of prophets. The writer says God "gave him another heart." Saul's start is full of promise.

Then Samuel gathers the whole nation at Mizpah to choose the king publicly by casting lots, a way of asking God to make the choice. The lot falls to the tribe of Benjamin, then to Saul's family, then to Saul himself. But when they call his name, nobody can find him. They have to ask God where he is, and the LORD answers, "Behold, he has hidden himself among the baggage." The tallest man in Israel is hiding behind the suitcases.

Some readers see that as humility. Others see it as fear, or a lack of confidence that will cause problems later. Either way, it's hard not to feel for him. When they drag him out, he stands head and shoulders above everyone, and Samuel announces, "Do you see him whom the LORD has chosen, that there is no one like him among all the people?" The people shout, "Long live the king!"

Not everyone is impressed. "But certain worthless fellows said, 'How could this man save us?'" Saul doesn't fight back. "But he held his peace." So far, so good.

Saul's first real test comes quickly. The Ammonites surround the Israelite town of Jabesh Gilead and threaten to gouge out the right eye of every man there. When Saul hears about it, he's out in the field plowing with his oxen. "God's Spirit came mightily on Saul when he heard those words, and his anger burned hot." He rallies the tribes, leads a surprise attack at dawn, and rescues the city. The people are so excited that some want to kill the men who doubted Saul, but Saul refuses. "No man shall be put to death today; for

today the LORD has rescued Israel." It's Saul at his best: brave, generous, and giving God the credit.

Remember Jabesh Gilead. It will show up again at the very end of the book.

> **REAL TALK** **A Great Start Isn't Enough**
>
> Saul's early days are honestly impressive. He's humble. He's brave. He's filled with God's Spirit. He shows mercy to his critics. If the story ended in chapter 11, he'd be a hero. But a great start doesn't guarantee a great finish. Plenty of people start strong in faith, sports, school, or relationships and then drift. What matters is not just how you begin, but whether you keep following God when the pressure is on and nobody is cheering. Watch what happens to Saul in the next chapters. It's a warning for all of us.

In chapter 12, Samuel gives a farewell speech. He's not retiring from being a prophet, but he's handing over leadership to the king. He asks the people to testify whether he ever cheated or oppressed anyone, and they say no. Then he reminds them of everything God has done, from Egypt to the judges, and confronts them: asking for a king was a sin. To prove it, he prays, and God sends thunder and rain during the wheat harvest, when rain almost never fell.

The people are terrified and ask Samuel to pray for them. And Samuel gives them one of the most gracious answers in the book. Yes, you did wrong. But don't turn away from the LORD now. Serve Him with all your heart. "For the LORD will not forsake his people for his great name's sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you a people for himself." And Samuel adds a promise of his own: "far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you." Even when people reject him, Samuel won't stop praying for them.

That's a good picture of God's grace. Israel made a bad choice. God didn't abandon them. He worked with them right where they were.

KEY VERSE

Only fear the LORD, and serve him in truth with all your heart; for consider what great things he has done for you.

1 Samuel 12:24 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Israel wanted a king "like all the nations"? Was their reason good or bad?
2. In what areas of your life do you feel the most pressure to be like everyone else?
3. Saul hid among the baggage. Was that humility, fear, or something else? Why do you think so?
4. Samuel said he would never stop praying for the people, even after they rejected him. Who is someone you could keep praying for?

TRY THIS *Name one way you've been trying to fit in that isn't good for you. Ask God for the courage to be different in that area this week.*

CHAPTER 5

Saul's Downfall

1 Samuel 13–15

Saul has been king for a while, and the Philistines are gathering for war, with chariots, horsemen, and soldiers "as the sand which is on the seashore." Saul's army is small, and many of his men are so terrified they hide in caves, holes, and rocks or run across the Jordan River.

Samuel had told Saul to wait for him at Gilgal for seven days. Samuel would come and offer a sacrifice and give Saul God's instructions before the battle. So Saul waits. "He stayed seven days, according to the time set by Samuel; but Samuel didn't come to Gilgal, and the people were scattering from him."

Put yourself in Saul's place. The enemy is massing. Your soldiers are leaving every hour. The prophet is late. So Saul takes matters into his own hands. "Bring the burnt offering to me here, and the peace offerings." He offers the sacrifice himself.

And just as he finishes, Samuel shows up. "What have you done?"

Saul's answer is a list of excuses. The people were scattering. You were late. The Philistines were gathering. "I forced myself therefore, and offered the burnt offering." It sounds almost noble, like he didn't want to do it but had no choice.

Samuel isn't buying it. "You have done foolishly. You have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God." If Saul had obeyed, God would have established his kingdom forever. "But now your kingdom will not continue. The LORD has sought for himself a man after his own heart."

> **REAL TALK** **Was That Really So Bad?**
>
> At first, Saul's punishment can seem harsh. He waited seven days. He offered a sacrifice to God, not to an idol. Why is that such a big deal? A few things are going on. First, Saul wasn't a priest, and he knew that offering the sacrifice wasn't his job. Second, God had given a clear instruction through His prophet, and Saul decided his own judgment was better. Third, and maybe most important, Saul was using the sacrifice like a tool, something he had to do to get God on his side before the battle, instead of trusting God to come through. The issue wasn't just a broken rule. It was a heart that panicked and grabbed control. Impatience often reveals what we really trust.

Meanwhile, Saul's son Jonathan is a completely different kind of person. While the army sits frozen, Jonathan and his armor bearer sneak toward a Philistine outpost on a cliff. Jonathan's reasoning is pure faith: "It may be that the LORD will work for us, for there is no restraint on the LORD to save by many or by few." Two men against a garrison. God sends an earthquake, the Philistines panic, and Israel wins a huge victory.

But Saul nearly ruins it. He had made his soldiers swear not to eat anything until evening, so they're exhausted and starving. Jonathan, who didn't hear the oath, eats some honey. When Saul finds out, he's ready to execute his own son, until the army refuses to let him. The soldiers save Jonathan's life. It's a pattern: Saul making rash, religious-sounding decisions that hurt the people around him.

Think about how different father and son are. Saul sits under a pomegranate tree with six hundred soldiers, waiting. Jonathan climbs a cliff with one friend and trusts God to show up. Saul makes a foolish vow that hurts his own army. Jonathan acts in faith and rescues it. It's almost as if the writer wants you to see what kind of king Jonathan might have been, and to feel the sadness of what's coming. Jonathan will turn out to be one of the most faithful and selfless people in the whole book, and he'll never wear the crown.

Then comes Saul's second big test. Samuel brings him a command from God: go and destroy the Amalekites completely. God says, "I remember what Amalek did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way when he came up out of Egypt." Saul is to "utterly destroy all that they have," people and animals alike.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Hard Command About Amalek**

This is one of the most troubling commands in the Bible, and it's okay to say so. The word for utterly destroy is the Hebrew herem, the same idea we saw in Deuteronomy and Joshua, where certain cities, like Jericho, were to be "devoted" to the LORD and completely destroyed. The Amalekites had attacked Israel right after the exodus, targeting the weakest people at the back: "all who were feeble behind you, when you were faint and weary." Exodus and Deuteronomy record God's promise that He would one day judge Amalek for it. Christians have understood this in several ways. Some see it as God's unique judgment on a people with a long history of brutal violence, carried out at one moment in history and never to be repeated. Some point out that ancient war reports often used sweeping, exaggerated language, and that Amalekites still appear later in 1 Samuel, suggesting the words weren't meant to be read with modern literalness. Others admit they don't fully understand it, and trust that God, who is perfectly just and merciful, sees what we can't, while noting that the New Testament calls Christians to love their enemies. All agree on this: these commands were tied to a specific time

> and place, and they never give anyone permission to commit violence in God's name today.

Saul attacks the Amalekites and wins. But "Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, of the cattle, of the fat calves, of the lambs, and all that was good." They destroy everything that's worthless and keep everything that's valuable. Saul obeys exactly as far as it's convenient for him.

God tells Samuel, "It grieves me that I have set up Saul to be king, for he has turned back from following me." Samuel is so upset that he cries out to the LORD all night.

The next morning, Samuel finds out that Saul has gone to Carmel to set up a monument in his own honor. When Samuel finally catches up with him, Saul greets him cheerfully. "You are blessed by the LORD! I have performed the commandment of the LORD."

Samuel's reply is one of the best comebacks in the Bible. "Then what does this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the cattle which I hear mean?"

Busted. And still Saul makes excuses. The soldiers did it. They saved the best animals to sacrifice to the LORD your God. Notice: your God. And notice that he blames the people again.

Samuel's answer is the heart of the whole section. "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the LORD's voice? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams." God doesn't want religious performances from people who won't listen to Him. He wants hearts that obey. Hosea and Jesus would later say the same thing: "For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice."

Then Samuel delivers the verdict. "Because you have rejected the LORD's word, he has also rejected you from being king."

Now Saul says, "I have sinned." But watch what he asks for next. He begs Samuel to come with him and honor him in front of the elders and the people. Even his confession is about his image. When Samuel turns to leave, Saul grabs the edge of his robe, and it tears. Samuel says the LORD has torn the kingdom from Saul today and given it to someone better.

> **REAL TALK** **Partial Obedience and Excuses**
>
> Saul's story is a case study in how not to respond when you've done wrong. He obeyed partway and called it obedience. He blamed other people. He used religious language to cover selfish choices. And when he finally admitted it, he was more worried about his reputation than about God. Compare that with someone who simply says: I was wrong. No excuses. I'm sorry. That's harder, but it's the way back. If you notice yourself saying "but" a lot after you've messed up, that might be a sign you're explaining instead of owning it. God isn't looking for perfect people. He's looking for honest ones.

Notice the difference between Saul's response and the response of another king we'll meet in 2 Samuel. When David later commits a terrible sin and the prophet Nathan confronts him, David doesn't blame anyone else or ask to keep up appearances. He simply says he has sinned against the LORD, and he writes Psalm 51, one of the most honest prayers of repentance ever written. Both kings sinned. Both were confronted by a prophet. Both said the words I have sinned. But one was sorry he got caught and worried about his image, and the other was broken over what he had done to God. That's the difference between regret and real repentance.

The chapter ends with deep sadness. "Samuel came no more to see Saul until the day of his death, but Samuel mourned for Saul. The

LORD grieved that he had made Saul king over Israel." Even in judgment, there's grief. God takes no pleasure in Saul's fall.

KEY VERSE

Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the LORD's voice? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.

1 Samuel 15:22 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Saul offered the sacrifice because he was afraid and impatient. When does impatience push you to make bad choices?
2. Compare Jonathan's faith in chapter 14 with Saul's fear in chapter 13. What made the difference?
3. What does "to obey is better than sacrifice" look like in your life? Are there ways you do religious things without really listening to God?
4. Saul kept making excuses. Why is it so hard to just say you were wrong?

TRY THIS *The next time you mess up this week, practice owning it with no excuses: I was wrong, and I'm sorry. See what happens.*

CHAPTER 6

The Shepherd Boy

1 Samuel 16

God doesn't let Samuel stay sad forever. "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go. I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided a king for myself among his sons."

Bethlehem. If you read the book of Ruth, you know this town. Jesse is the grandson of Boaz and Ruth the Moabitess.

Samuel is afraid. If Saul hears that he's anointing a new king, Saul will kill him. So God tells him to take a heifer and say he's come to offer a sacrifice, which is true. When Samuel arrives, the elders of Bethlehem come out trembling, wondering what they've done wrong. Samuel reassures them and invites Jesse and his sons to the sacrifice.

Then comes a kind of royal audition. Jesse's oldest son, Eliab, walks in, and Samuel is immediately impressed. Surely this is the one! Eliab must have been tall and good-looking, the kind of guy who looked like a king. Samuel is making the same mistake Israel made with Saul.

And God stops him. "But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Don't look on his face, or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for

I don't see as man sees. For man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.'"

That's one of the most important sentences in the Bible, and it's especially important if you live in a world of filters, followers, and first impressions. People judge by looks, height, clothes, popularity, talent, and how many likes you get. God doesn't. He looks at the heart: what you love, what you trust, who you are when nobody's watching.

> **REAL TALK** **God Looks at the Heart**
>
> It's hard to overstate how much pressure there is to look a certain way. Social media makes it worse. You can spend hours comparing yourself to edited pictures of people who don't even look like that in real life. 1 Samuel 16:7 is God's answer to all of it. He isn't impressed by the things that impress people, and He isn't unimpressed by the things people overlook. That doesn't mean your body doesn't matter; God made it and cares about it. But your worth doesn't come from how you look. And it cuts both ways. If God looks at the heart, then I should stop judging other people by how they look too. If you're struggling with how you see yourself, or with eating, or with anxiety about your looks, please talk to a parent, a counselor, or a doctor. You don't have to fight that alone.

So Jesse brings out his second son, Abinadab. No. Then Shammah. No. Seven sons walk past Samuel, and God says no to every one. Samuel is puzzled. "Are all your children here?"

Jesse's answer is almost an afterthought. "There remains yet the youngest. Behold, he is keeping the sheep." Jesse didn't even bother to invite him. The youngest son, the one who smells like sheep, isn't even considered. In that culture, the youngest child had the lowest status in the family.

Samuel insists. "Send and get him, for we will not sit down until he comes here." The whole party waits for the kid nobody thought of.

When David walks in, the writer tells us he was "ruddy, with a handsome face and good appearance." Ruddy probably means he had a reddish, healthy complexion, maybe red hair. So he wasn't unattractive. But he was young and small compared with his brothers, and nobody expected him. "The LORD said, 'Arise! Anoint him, for this is he.'"

Samuel pours the oil on David's head in front of his brothers. "Then the LORD's Spirit came mightily on David from that day forward." And then Samuel simply goes home. No crown. No palace. No announcement. David goes back to the sheep.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Anointed**
>
> Anointing meant pouring oil on someone's head, usually olive oil mixed with spices. It was a sign that God had chosen and set apart that person for a special role. Priests were anointed, and so were kings. The Hebrew word for an anointed person is mashiach, which is where we get Messiah. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, that word became christos, which is where we get Christ. So when the New Testament calls Jesus the Christ, it's saying He is the Anointed One, the ultimate King that David's anointing pointed toward. In 1 Samuel, David is anointed years before he actually becomes king. He'll spend a long time waiting, hiding, and trusting God before the promise comes true.

Meanwhile, back at the palace, something is wrong with Saul. "Now the LORD's Spirit departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD troubled him." The word troubled can also mean terrified or tormented. Saul is struggling with what sounds like terrible fear, anger, and dark moods.

BACKGROUND CHECK **An Evil Spirit from the LORD?**

This phrase surprises a lot of readers. Did God send something evil to Saul? Christians read it in a few ways. Some understand it as an actual evil spirit that God allowed to torment Saul after Saul rejected Him, much as God allowed Satan to test Job. Others note that the Hebrew word for evil can also mean harmful or distressing, and read it as a troubling spirit, a deep inner torment, that God permitted as a consequence of Saul's choices. Still others see a description, in ancient language, of something like severe depression, anxiety, or paranoia, which the writer understood as being under God's control. All these views agree that the Bible teaches God is sovereign even over evil, and that He is never the author of sin. What's clear is that Saul was suffering, and his suffering got worse when he refused to turn back to God.

Saul's servants have an idea. Music might help. They suggest finding someone who can play the harp, which was probably more like a small lyre. One of them knows just the guy: "a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skillful in playing, a mighty man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a handsome person; and the LORD is with him."

So the shepherd boy who has just been secretly anointed as the next king is brought into the palace to play music for the current king. The irony is thick. Saul likes David so much that he makes him his armor bearer. And "When the spirit from God was on Saul, David took the harp and played with his hand; so Saul was refreshed and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him."

SAFETY NOTE **When the Darkness Won't Lift**

Whatever was happening inside Saul, it was real, and it was painful. Many people today know what it's like to feel trapped in dark moods, anxiety, anger, or despair. If that's you, you're not weak, and you're not alone. Music, like David's harp, can genuinely help; so can rest, exercise, time outdoors, and good friends. But sometimes those things aren't enough, and that's okay.

> Depression and anxiety are real conditions, and getting help from a doctor or counselor is a wise, brave step, not a lack of faith. Please talk to a parent or another trusted adult about how you're feeling. And if you ever have thoughts of hurting yourself or that life isn't worth living, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time in the United States. Help is real, and things can get better.

David probably wrote some of his first songs during these years. Many of the psalms are attributed to him, including the most famous one: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall lack nothing." The boy who learned to care for sheep and to sing to God in the fields is being prepared, quietly, to shepherd a nation.

KEY VERSE

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Don't look on his face, or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for I don't see as man sees. For man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

1 Samuel 16:7 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think even Samuel, a great prophet, was impressed by Eliab's appearance?
2. What are the main ways people judge each other by outward appearance at your school?
3. David was anointed and then went back to watching sheep. What do you think he learned in the waiting?
4. Saul found some relief through music. What helps you when you're struggling? Who could you talk to when it isn't enough?

TRY THIS *This week, make a point of noticing and encouraging someone who is usually overlooked, the way Samuel waited for David.*

CHAPTER 7

David and Goliath

1 Samuel 17

It's probably the most famous fight in history. Even people who have never opened a Bible know what a David-and-Goliath story is. But the real story is better, and stranger, than the version on motivational posters.

The Philistines and Israel are camped on two hills facing each other, with the Valley of Elah in between. Every day, a champion walks out from the Philistine camp, "named Goliath of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span." He wears a bronze helmet and a coat of armor that weighs about 125 pounds. His spear has an iron point that weighs about 15 pounds. A shield bearer walks in front of him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Tall Was Goliath?**

A cubit was about eighteen inches, the length from your elbow to your fingertip, and a span was about nine inches. So six cubits and a span is roughly nine feet nine inches. That's the reading of the Masoretic Text, the standard Hebrew text most English Bibles follow. But some ancient manuscripts say something different. The oldest Hebrew copy of this passage, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation, both say four cubits and a span, about six feet nine inches. The first-century historian Josephus agrees with four. Scholars debate which reading is original; some think a copyist's eye slipped to the number six elsewhere in the passage, while others defend the Masoretic number. Here's the thing: even at six foot nine, in an age when the average man was probably

> around five foot three, Goliath would have been a giant, a professional killer in heavy armor. Either way, the point of the story doesn't change.

Goliath shouts a challenge across the valley. Why line up a whole army? Send one man to fight me. If he wins, we'll be your servants. If I win, you'll be ours. He mocks Israel's army and dares them to fight. "When Saul and all Israel heard those words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid." And Goliath does this every morning and every evening, for forty days.

Remember that Saul was the tallest man in Israel. If anyone should have gone out to face the giant, it was the king who was head and shoulders above everyone. The people had asked for a king to go out before them and fight their battles. Now their king is hiding in his tent.

Then David shows up. He isn't there to fight. His three oldest brothers are in Saul's army, and his father sends him with food for them and some cheese for their commander. Basically, David is the delivery boy.

He arrives just as Goliath steps out to shout his challenge. David watches the Israelite soldiers run away in fear. And he's not scared. He's offended. "For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?"

That's the key to the whole story. Everyone else is looking at Goliath and seeing how big he is. David is looking at God and seeing how big He is. Goliath isn't just insulting Israel's army. He's insulting Israel's God.

His oldest brother, Eliab, hears him and gets angry. "Why have you come down? With whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your pride and the evil of your heart." If you

have older siblings, you might recognize the tone. Remember that Eliab is the one Samuel thought should be king. Maybe he's jealous. Maybe he's embarrassed that his little brother has more courage than he does. David answers the way younger siblings have answered for all of history: What did I do now? Can't I even talk?

Word gets back to Saul, and David is brought to him. "Let no man's heart fail because of him. Your servant will go and fight with this Philistine."

Saul is not impressed. "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are but a youth, and he a man of war from his youth."

So David tells him about his job. When a lion or a bear came and grabbed a lamb from the flock, David went after it, rescued the lamb, and when the animal turned on him, grabbed it by its beard and killed it. "Your servant struck both the lion and the bear. This uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God."

And then he gives God the credit: "The LORD, who delivered me out of the paw of the lion and out of the paw of the bear, will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine."

David's confidence isn't in himself. It's in God's track record. He's done this before, not because he's tough, but because God was with him. Saul, out of options, says, "Go! The LORD will be with you."

Saul tries to dress David in his own armor: bronze helmet, coat of mail, and sword. David tries walking around in it and can barely move. It doesn't fit, and he's never trained with it. So he takes it all off. That's a picture of something bigger. David can't fight Saul's

way. He has to fight God's way, with what God has already given him.

"He took his staff in his hand, and chose for himself five smooth stones out of the brook, and put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag which he had. His sling was in his hand; and he came near to the Philistine."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Just a Little Sling?**

In pictures, David's sling often looks like a toy. It wasn't. A shepherd's sling was a long strip of leather or woven cloth with a pouch in the middle. Spinning it and releasing one end could launch a smooth stone the size of an egg at around a hundred miles an hour, with deadly accuracy. Armies had whole units of slingers; Judges 20 mentions seven hundred left-handed slingers from Benjamin who could hit a hair without missing. So David wasn't helpless. But he was a teenage shepherd with a ranged weapon facing a trained, armored warrior, and he had never fought a battle. Humanly speaking, he should have lost.

When Goliath sees who's coming, he's insulted. "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" He curses David by his gods and threatens to feed his body to the birds and animals.

David's answer is one of the great speeches of the Bible. "You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD of Armies, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied." He says that God will hand Goliath over to him that day, so that all the earth may know there is a God in Israel, and so that everyone gathered there will know "that the LORD doesn't save with sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's."

The battle is the LORD's. That's the point.

Then it all happens fast. Goliath moves in. David runs toward him, not away. He reaches into his bag, takes out a stone, slings it, and it

strikes Goliath in the forehead. "The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the earth." Remember Dagon falling on his face before the ark? Now Goliath, the champion of the Philistines, falls on his face before the servant of the LORD.

"So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him; but there was no sword in David's hand." David finishes the fight with Goliath's own sword. When the Philistines see their champion is dead, they run, and Israel chases them all the way back to their cities.

> **REAL TALK** **It's Not Mainly About Your Giants**
>
> You've probably heard sermons about facing the giants in your life: fear, a hard class, an addiction, a bully. There's some truth there. God does help us face hard things, and David's courage is worth copying. But if that's all you take away, you miss the main point. In this story, you're probably not David. You're more like the terrified Israelite soldiers, unable to win on your own. David is the one who steps forward to fight on behalf of his people, and his victory becomes their victory. Christians see this as a preview of Jesus, the Son of David, who faced our biggest enemies, sin and death, alone, and won the battle for us. So the first lesson of 1 Samuel 17 isn't be brave like David. It's that God is faithful, and the battle belongs to Him. Courage comes from trusting that.

It's also worth noticing what happens to the rest of the army. As long as Goliath was standing, the soldiers of Israel were frozen with fear. They had the same weapons and the same training after the giant fell as they had before. What changed was that someone had won the battle for them. Once Goliath was down, they found their courage, chased the Philistines, and shared in the victory. That's a picture of how the New Testament describes what Jesus has done. Christians don't find courage by pretending to be strong enough on

their own. They find it by trusting that the decisive battle has already been won, and then following their King into the fight.

One more thing. David didn't go out to fight because he wanted to be famous. He went because Goliath was insulting God and terrifying God's people. Courage that comes from caring about God's name and about other people is very different from courage that's really about proving yourself. The first kind lasts. The second kind usually runs out the moment nobody is watching.

After the battle, Saul asks his general, Abner, whose son this young man is. That's a little strange, since David had already been playing music for Saul. Scholars offer several explanations. Saul may have known David as a musician but not known his family, which mattered because he had promised to reward the giant-killer's family. Or the book may be weaving together different accounts of how David came to Saul's court. Either way, David stands before the king holding Goliath's head and introduces himself simply: I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite.

A shepherd from Bethlehem has done what the tallest king in Israel wouldn't. Nobody will forget it, least of all Saul.

KEY VERSE

David said, "The LORD, who delivered me out of the paw of the lion and out of the paw of the bear, will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine." Saul said to David, "Go! The LORD will be with you."

1 Samuel 17:37 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Everyone else saw how big Goliath was. David saw how big God was. What's the difference in how they responded?
2. David's confidence came from what God had done for him before. What has God done in your life that could give you courage now?
3. Why do you think David refused to wear Saul's armor? Are there ways you try to be someone you're not?
4. How does seeing Jesus as the one who fights for us change the way you read this story?

TRY THIS *Think of something you're afraid of right now. Write down one way God has been faithful to you before, and pray about your fear with that in mind.*

CHAPTER 8

Friends and Enemies

1 Samuel 18–23

Right after the battle, something beautiful happens. “When he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.”

Jonathan is Saul’s oldest son, the crown prince, the one who should be the next king. He’s also a hero in his own right, the one who climbed a cliff and attacked a Philistine outpost with only his armor bearer. If anyone had reason to see David as a threat, it was Jonathan. Instead, he becomes David’s best friend.

“Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul.” A covenant was a serious, binding promise of loyalty. And Jonathan seals it with an incredible gift: he gives David his own robe, his armor, his sword, his bow, and his belt. In that culture, the prince’s robe and weapons were symbols of his position. Jonathan is basically handing David his future. He seems to understand, before almost anyone else, that God has chosen David to be king, and he’s okay with it.

> REAL TALK **What Makes a Real Friend?**
>
> David and Jonathan’s friendship is one of the great friendships in all of literature. Jonathan was loyal when it cost him. He protected David from his own father. He was happy for David’s success instead of jealous of it. And he kept pointing David to God. Some modern readers have suggested their

relationship was romantic; most scholars and Christian traditions read it as a deep covenant friendship, described in the language of loyalty that ancient people used for allies and brothers. Either way, it shows what real friendship can look like. Ask yourself: Do my friends make me better or worse? Do they celebrate when I win, or compete with me? Do they point me toward God? And what kind of friend am I to them? Everybody needs a Jonathan, and everybody can be one.

Saul, on the other hand, is about to become David's worst enemy. David keeps succeeding at everything Saul sends him to do. When the army comes home from battle, women come out of the towns dancing and singing. "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands."

That song lands like a punch. "Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him." He does the math. They've given David ten thousands and me only thousands. "What can he have more but the kingdom?" And then one of the most chilling sentences in the book: "Saul watched David from that day and forward." Jealousy has gotten into Saul's heart, and it's going to eat him alive.

REAL TALK **The Poison of Jealousy**

Saul had everything: a throne, a palace, an army, and a son like Jonathan. But one song about someone else being better made him miserable. That's what jealousy does. It takes your eyes off everything you've been given and fixes them on what someone else has. Social media can feed it constantly: their grades, their friends, their relationship, their body, their followers. The cure isn't pretending you don't feel it. It's naming it, talking to God about it, and practicing gratitude for what He's given you. One of the best ways to fight jealousy is to do what Jonathan did: celebrate the other person's success out loud. It's hard. It's also freeing.

The next day, the dark mood comes on Saul again. David is playing the harp, as usual, and Saul has a spear in his hand. He throws it, trying to pin David to the wall. David dodges it. Twice.

From then on, Saul keeps trying to get rid of David. He makes him a commander and sends him into dangerous battles, hoping the Philistines will kill him. It backfires. "David behaved himself wisely in all his ways; and the LORD was with him." The more Saul tries to bring David down, the more everyone loves him. "Saul was afraid of David, because the LORD was with him, and had departed from Saul."

Saul offers David his daughter Michal in marriage, but asks for a bride price of a hundred dead Philistines, hoping David will die trying. David brings back two hundred. Michal genuinely loves David, which makes Saul even more afraid.

Eventually Saul stops pretending. He orders Jonathan and his servants to kill David. Jonathan talks his father out of it for a while, but the spear comes out again. "Saul sought to pin David to the wall with the spear, but he slipped away out of Saul's presence." Then Saul sends men to David's house to kill him in the morning, and Michal helps David escape through a window. She puts a household idol in the bed, covered with goat's hair, to buy him time.

David runs to Jonathan, desperate. "There is but a step between me and death," he says. Jonathan can hardly believe his father would really kill David, so they make a plan. David will skip the king's feast, and Jonathan will see how Saul reacts. Then Jonathan will go out to the field and shoot arrows, and the words he shouts to his servant boy will tell David whether it's safe.

At the feast, Saul explodes. He curses Jonathan and insults his mother. As long as David lives, he says, you'll never be king. Bring him here, because he must die. When Jonathan asks why, Saul throws his spear at his own son.

> **SAFETY NOTE** **When a Parent's Anger Turns Dangerous**
>
> Saul's anger at Jonathan went from cruel words to an attempt to hurt him. If someone in your home screams at you, insults you, threatens you, or hurts you, that is not okay, and it is not your fault. You don't have to handle it alone or keep it secret to protect them. Tell a trusted adult, like a relative, a teacher, a school counselor, a coach, or a pastor. In the United States, you can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453, any time. If you are in danger right now, call 911. Jonathan honored his father but refused to go along with his violence. You can love someone and still get help.

The next morning, Jonathan goes to the field and shoots the arrows. The signal is clear: run. After the servant boy leaves, the two friends meet one last time. They kiss each other and cry, "and David wept the most." Jonathan says, "Go in peace, because we have both sworn in the LORD's name." Their promise will reach even to their children.

Jonathan's choice is worth thinking about. He could have sided with his father. It would have been easier, safer, and better for his own future. Instead, he chose what was right, even though it cost him the throne and put him in danger. But he also didn't abandon his father. He kept serving Saul and, in the end, fought and died beside him. Loyalty to God and loyalty to family sometimes pull in different directions, and Jonathan found a way to honor both without going along with evil. That's a hard balance, and if you're living with a parent or relative who is making bad choices, you may know exactly how hard it is. You don't have to figure it out alone. Talk with an adult you trust.

From here on, David is a fugitive. He's hungry, alone, and terrified. He goes to the priests at Nob, who give him holy bread and Goliath's sword. He runs to the Philistine city of Gath, of all places, and when they recognize him, he pretends to be insane, scribbling on the doors and drooling on his beard, to escape. Many of David's psalms, full of fear, tears, and trust, come from this time.

Notice that even when David was desperate, he never stopped praying. The titles of several psalms connect them to these years on the run. Psalm 34, for example, is linked to the day he pretended to be insane at Gath, and it says that the LORD is near to the brokenhearted. Psalm 57 and Psalm 142 are linked to his time hiding in a cave. They're full of fear and tears, but they keep coming back to trust. David didn't pretend to be fine. He told God exactly how scared he was, and then he chose to trust Him anyway.

Then David hides in a cave called Adullam. And people start showing up. "Everyone who was in distress, everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered themselves to him; and he became captain over them." About four hundred men. David's first army is a group of misfits, people in trouble, people in debt, and people with nothing left to lose. And David becomes their leader.

It's worth noticing what kind of leader David becomes in that cave. He doesn't recruit the strong and successful. He takes in people nobody else wants, and he turns them into the mighty men who will later be famous for their courage. Centuries later, Jesus would do something similar, gathering fishermen, tax collectors, and people with messy pasts and turning them into the leaders of His church. If you feel like you don't fit anywhere, or you've made a mess of things, that's exactly the kind of person God has always been willing

to work with. The cave of Adullam was a hiding place, but it became a training ground.

The darkest moment of these chapters comes when Saul learns that the priests at Nob helped David. In a rage, he orders the priests killed. When his own soldiers refuse to lift a hand against the LORD's priests, a foreigner named Doeg carries out the massacre. Only one priest, Abiathar, escapes and runs to David. David is heartbroken, and blames himself. Saul, who once refused to destroy the Amalekites as God commanded, now destroys God's own priests. That's how far jealousy has taken him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Never Alone**
>
> Even on the run, David isn't left alone. Prophets and priests join him. Mighty men gather to him. And in chapter 23, when Saul is hunting David in the wilderness day after day, Jonathan finds a way to sneak out to see him. "Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David into the woods, and strengthened his hand in God." Notice that Jonathan doesn't just cheer David up. He strengthens him in God. "Don't be afraid," he says. "You will be king over Israel, and I will be next to you." It's the last time they will ever see each other.

KEY VERSE

Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David into the woods, and strengthened his hand in God.

1 Samuel 23:16 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Jonathan gave David his robe and weapons, symbols of his future as king. Why do you think he was willing to do that?
2. Saul's jealousy started with one song. What small things can stir up jealousy in your life, and how can you fight it?
3. What does it mean to strengthen someone's hand in God? Who has done that for you?
4. David's first followers were people in distress and debt. What does that tell you about the kind of people God welcomes?

TRY THIS *Text or tell a friend one specific thing you're thankful for about them, and one way you've seen God at work in their life.*

CHAPTER 9

Mercy and Wisdom

1 Samuel 24–27

Saul is hunting David in the wilderness near En Gedi, a rocky area full of caves near the Dead Sea, with three thousand of his best soldiers. Along the way, Saul needs a bathroom break. He goes into a cave "to relieve himself." And as it turns out, David and his men are hiding in the very back of that same cave.

You can imagine the whispered excitement. David's men nudge him. This is it! This is the day the LORD told you about! God has handed your enemy over to you. Do whatever you want with him.

David creeps forward in the dark and cuts off a corner of Saul's robe without him noticing. But as soon as he's back, "David's heart struck him because he had cut off Saul's skirt." Even that small act felt wrong. He tells his men, "The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD's anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, since he is the LORD's anointed." He refuses to let them attack.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The LORD's Anointed**

Why wouldn't David kill Saul? Saul was trying to murder him, after all, and God had already chosen David to be king. But David knew that Saul had also been anointed by God. Saul's position came from God, and David believed that only God had the right to remove him. David wasn't going to grab the throne by violence. He would wait for God to give it to him in God's way and God's time. That doesn't mean leaders can never be challenged or held

accountable; the prophets confronted kings all the time, and the Bible never tells anyone to stay in a dangerous situation. David himself ran away from Saul. But it does mean David refused to take revenge into his own hands.

After Saul leaves the cave, David steps out and calls after him. "My lord the king!" He bows to the ground and holds up the piece of the robe. Look. I could have killed you. "Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you." And then he says the thing that defines David in this part of the story: "May the LORD judge between me and you, and may the LORD avenge me of you; but my hand will not be on you."

For a moment, Saul seems to break. "Is that your voice, my son David?" He cries out loud. "You are more righteous than I; for you have done good to me, whereas I have done evil to you." He even admits that David will be king someday. It's a moving scene. But it doesn't last.

REAL TALK **Revenge**

When someone hurts you, revenge can feel like justice. It can even feel like God is handing you the opportunity, the way David's men said. Maybe it's posting something about the person, spreading what you know, turning their friends against them, or hitting back. David's answer was hard and right: let God judge. Paul says the same thing in the New Testament: "Don't seek revenge yourselves, beloved, but give place to God's wrath." That doesn't mean pretending what they did was okay, and it doesn't mean you have to stay close to someone who is hurting you. David kept his distance from Saul. It means refusing to become cruel yourself. If someone is harming you, tell a trusted adult and let them help. Getting help isn't revenge. It's wisdom.

In chapter 25, we learn that Samuel has died. All Israel gathers to mourn him. The last great judge is gone. And right after that, David almost makes the worst mistake of his life so far.

There's a rich man named Nabal who has thousands of sheep and goats near the town of Carmel. "This woman was intelligent and had a beautiful face; but the man was surly and evil in his doings." That's how the writer introduces Nabal and his wife, Abigail. Nabal's name means fool, and he lives up to it.

David and his men have been protecting Nabal's shepherds out in the wilderness, guarding them from raiders. Now it's sheep-shearing time, a festival with lots of food, and David sends ten young men to politely ask Nabal for whatever he can spare.

Nabal insults them. "Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants who break away from their masters these days." In other words, David's just a runaway nobody. Nabal sends them away with nothing.

When David hears, he loses it. "Every man put on his sword!" He takes four hundred men and sets off to kill Nabal and every male in his household. The man who wouldn't kill Saul in the cave is about to murder a whole family over an insult. Even good people can snap.

One of Nabal's servants runs to Abigail and tells her everything. David's men were good to us, he says. They protected us day and night. Now disaster is coming, and "he is such a worthless fellow that one can't speak to him." Even Nabal's own servants know you can't reason with him.

Abigail doesn't waste a second. She quickly gathers two hundred loaves of bread, wine, five sheep ready to cook, grain, a hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs, loads it all on donkeys, and rides out to meet David. She doesn't tell her husband.

When she sees David coming down the mountain with four hundred angry, armed men, she gets off her donkey and bows to the ground. "On me, my lord, on me be the blame!" Then she gives one of the wisest speeches in the Bible.

She doesn't make excuses for Nabal. "As his name is, so is he. Nabal is his name, and folly is with him." She offers the gifts. And then she reminds David who he is. God is going to make you a lasting dynasty, she says, because you fight the LORD's battles. Someday, when you're king, you don't want this on your conscience: "that you have shed blood without cause, or that my lord has avenged himself."

She's not just stopping a massacre. She's protecting David from himself.

David hears it. "Blessed is the LORD, the God of Israel, who sent you today to meet me!" And then: "Blessed is your discretion, and blessed are you, who have kept me today from blood guiltiness, and from avenging myself with my own hand." He accepts her gifts and sends her home in peace.

REAL TALK **Be an Abigail**

Abigail was brave, quick, humble, and wise. She stepped into the middle of an explosive situation and calmed it down, not with weapons, but with words and generosity. She spoke truth to a powerful, angry man, respectfully but clearly. And David, to his credit, listened. Most of us will be both David and Abigail at different times. Sometimes you'll be the one so angry you're about to do something you'll regret, and you'll need someone to talk you down. Will you listen? And sometimes you'll be the one who sees a friend about to explode, about to send that text, throw that punch, or post that video, and you'll have the chance to step in. Proverbs says a gentle answer turns away wrath. A few wise words at the right moment can save a lot of pain. If a situation could turn violent, though, get an adult involved right away.

When Abigail gets home, Nabal is throwing a party like a king and is very drunk, so she waits until morning to tell him what happened. When he hears it, "his heart died within him," and he becomes like a stone. Many readers think he had a stroke or heart attack. About ten days later, the LORD strikes him and he dies. When David hears, he praises God for keeping him from evil, and asks Abigail to marry him. She agrees.

Some readers are uncomfortable with how this story ends, with David marrying Abigail right after her husband's death. It helps to remember that in that world, a widow with no protection was in real danger, and marriage to a powerful man was a way of providing safety for her and her household. The text doesn't present it as a romance so much as the honoring of a remarkable woman who had saved David from himself. The Bible also records that David married several women during these years, which, like the polygamy we saw in Hannah's family, will bring him serious trouble later. The Bible often tells us what happened without approving of everything that happened.

What's clear is that Abigail is one of the wisest people in the whole book. She saw what was coming, acted quickly, spoke humbly and honestly, and reminded a future king of his calling at the very moment he was about to forget it. In a book full of powerful men making terrible decisions, she stands out.

In chapter 26, David gets a second chance to kill Saul. Saul is hunting him again, and one night David and his nephew Abishai sneak into Saul's camp while everyone, even the guards, is in a deep sleep sent by the LORD. Saul's spear is stuck in the ground next to his head. Abishai whispers, let me pin him to the ground with one thrust. I won't need a second.

David says no again. “Don’t destroy him, for who can stretch out his hand against the LORD’s anointed, and be guiltless?” Instead, they take Saul’s spear and water jug and slip away. From a safe distance on the next hill, David calls out and mocks Saul’s general Abner for not protecting the king. Then he holds up the spear.

Saul again admits his sin. “I have sinned. Return, my son David; for I will no more do you harm.” He adds, “Behold, I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly.” Played the fool. That’s exactly what Saul has done. But David has learned that Saul’s words can’t be trusted. They part ways, and they never see each other again.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Running to the Enemy**
>
> By chapter 27, David is worn out. “I will now perish one day by the hand of Saul,” he says to himself. So he takes his six hundred men and their families and goes to live among the Philistines, working for Achish, the king of Gath. Achish gives him a town called Ziklag. David spends about a year and four months there, raiding Israel’s enemies while telling Achish he’s raiding Israel. It’s a strange, morally messy chapter. The Bible doesn’t hold David up as a perfect example here. It shows a tired, frightened man making his own plans to survive. Even heroes of faith have seasons when they’re running on empty.

KEY VERSE

Blessed is your discretion, and blessed are you, who have kept me today from blood guiltiness, and from avenging myself with my own hand.

1 Samuel 25:33 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. David's men said God had handed Saul over to him. How can people use God's name to justify what they already want to do?
2. Why do you think David refused to kill Saul but was ready to kill Nabal? What does that tell you about anger?
3. What made Abigail's words so effective? How could you use words like hers in a tense situation?
4. Have you ever been talked out of something you would have regretted? Who did it, and how?

TRY THIS *The next time you're really angry this week, wait before you act. Pray, take a walk, or talk to someone wise before you say or do anything.*

CHAPTER 10

Saul's Last Night

1 Samuel 28–31

The Philistines gather a huge army to attack Israel, and Saul is terrified. "When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly." The tall king who once rescued Jabesh Gilead now can't stop shaking.

He tries to ask God what to do. But "the LORD didn't answer him by dreams, by Urim, or by prophets." Samuel, the one person who always told Saul the truth, is dead. And God is silent.

So Saul does something desperate. Years earlier, he had obeyed God's law and driven the mediums and spiritists out of the land. Now he asks his servants to find one. "Seek for me a woman who has a familiar spirit, that I may go to her and inquire of her." His servants know just where to look: there's a medium at Endor.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Mediums Were Forbidden**
>
> God's law strictly forbade any attempt to contact the dead or get secret knowledge through spirits. Deuteronomy lists the forbidden practices: no one who "uses divination, one who tells fortunes, or an enchanter, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or someone who consults with a familiar spirit, or a wizard, or a necromancer." A necromancer is someone who tries to talk to the dead. The reason was simple. God's people were supposed to seek guidance from God alone. Today, Christians generally apply this to things like séances, Ouija boards, psychics, tarot cards, and spirit-contacting games. Some people treat

these as harmless fun. The Bible treats them as spiritually dangerous, because they open a door that God has told us to keep shut. If you've been involved in something like this and it's left you scared, talk to a pastor or another trusted Christian adult.

Saul disguises himself and goes to Endor at night with two of his men. He asks the woman to call up a spirit for him. She's suspicious. Doesn't he know what King Saul has done to people like her? Saul swears by the LORD, ironically, that she won't be punished. "Whom shall I bring up to you?" she asks. "Bring Samuel up for me."

What happens next surprises everyone, including the medium. "When the woman saw Samuel, she cried with a loud voice." She suddenly realizes who her customer is. "Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul!" Saul tells her not to be afraid and asks what she sees. "I see a god coming up out of the earth," she says, and describes an old man wrapped in a robe. Saul recognizes Samuel and bows to the ground.

The figure speaks: "Why have you disturbed me, to bring me up?" Saul pours out his fear. The Philistines are attacking. "God has departed from me, and answers me no more." The answer he gets is devastating. The LORD has torn the kingdom from you and given it to David, because you didn't obey Him about Amalek. Tomorrow Israel will fall to the Philistines, "and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me."

REAL TALK **Was It Really Samuel?**

Christians have debated this scene for centuries, and sincere believers land in different places. Many readers, ancient and modern, think it really was Samuel, sent by God, not summoned by the medium. They point out that the text calls him Samuel several times, that the woman seems shocked, as if this had never actually happened before, and that his message is a true prophecy

that comes to pass. A second view, held by some early church writers and by Reformers including Martin Luther and John Calvin, is that it was a demon or evil spirit impersonating Samuel, since God would not let a forbidden practice bring back a prophet. A third view suggests the medium was a fraud who used trickery and Saul's own fear, though that view struggles to explain her surprise and the accurate prophecy. All three views agree on the important things: Saul was wrong to go to a medium, the experience brought him no comfort, and the Bible's warning against contacting the dead still stands.

Saul collapses full length on the ground. He hasn't eaten all day or all night, and he's terrified. The medium and his servants beg him to eat something, and finally he does. Then he walks out into the dark toward his last battle.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Meanwhile, at Ziklag**

While Saul is at Endor, David is in his own crisis. The Philistine commanders don't trust him, so they send him home before the battle. When David and his men get back to Ziklag, they find it burned and their wives and children taken captive by Amalekite raiders. His men are so grief-stricken that they talk about stoning him. "But David strengthened himself in the LORD his God." He asks God what to do, pursues the raiders, rescues every person, and shares the plunder even with the men too exhausted to fight. Both Saul and David face terror and loss in these chapters. One runs to a medium. The other runs to God.

The battle happens on Mount Gilboa. "The men of Israel fled from before the Philistines, and fell down slain on Mount Gilboa." The Philistines close in on Saul and his sons. Jonathan is killed, along with two of his brothers. Saul is badly wounded by archers. Afraid of being captured and tortured by the Philistines, he asks his armor bearer to kill him. When the armor bearer refuses, terrified, Saul takes his own life. His armor bearer dies with him. "So Saul died

with his three sons, his armor bearer, and all his men that same day together."

It's one of the saddest endings in the Bible. The king who started with so much promise dies alone in defeat and despair. Jonathan, the loyal friend who never did anything to deserve it, dies beside his father.

> **SAFETY NOTE** **If You're Thinking About Suicide**
>
> Saul's story ends in despair, and it's okay to feel the weight of that. If you have ever thought about ending your life, please hear this: you matter, and your story is not over. The feelings that make suicide seem like the only way out are real, but they are not the truth about your future. They can change, and help is available. Please tell someone today: a parent, a counselor, a pastor, a doctor, or another trusted adult. In the United States, you can call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night, and someone will listen. If you are in immediate danger, call 911. And if you've lost someone to suicide, it is not your fault, and you don't have to carry that grief alone. God is near to the brokenhearted.

It's important to read this part of the story with compassion. Saul was badly wounded, surrounded, exhausted, and terrified. He had been carrying dark moods for years. He had lost the prophet who guided him. He felt that God had gone silent. None of that makes his choice right, and the Bible doesn't hold it up as an example. But the text doesn't mock him either. It tells the story with sadness. And it's worth remembering that Saul's despair grew over many years, as he kept choosing fear, jealousy, and isolation instead of turning back to God and letting others help him. One of the most important lessons of his life is that we were never meant to carry darkness alone.

When the Philistines find Saul's body, they treat it with contempt and hang it on the wall of the town of Beth Shan. But then

something happens that shows not everything about Saul's life was lost.

Remember Jabesh Gilead? It was the town Saul rescued in his very first battle, back in chapter 11, when he was still brave and humble and full of God's Spirit. "When the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men arose, went all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth Shan." They bring the bodies home, bury their bones under a tamarisk tree, and fast for seven days.

Decades later, they still remembered what Saul had done for them. They risked their lives to give him the dignity of a burial. It's a reminder that even a life that ends in tragedy is not only defined by its ending.

The book of 1 Chronicles gives a sober summary: "So Saul died for his trespass which he committed against the LORD." He didn't keep God's word, and he consulted a medium instead of seeking the LORD. But 2 Samuel opens with David's lament for both of them. David, who had every reason to hate Saul, writes a song that says, "Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives. In their death, they were not divided." He doesn't celebrate. He grieves.

1 Samuel began with Hannah's song about God lifting up the lowly and bringing down the proud. It ends with that song coming true. The proud king who wanted to be like all the nations has fallen. The shepherd boy, who has spent years running, hiding, and waiting, is about to become king. And God, who looks at the heart, has kept every one of His promises.

KEY VERSE

David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because the souls of all the people were grieved, every man for his sons and for his daughters; but David strengthened himself in the LORD his God.

1 Samuel 30:6 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. When God was silent, Saul went to a medium. What are some ways people today look for answers in the wrong places?
2. Which view of the Endor story do you find most convincing, and why?
3. Both Saul and David faced terror and loss in these chapters. What made the difference in how they responded?
4. The people of Jabesh Gilead remembered Saul's kindness for decades. Who has shown you kindness that you want to remember?

TRY THIS *Write down the 988 number in your phone, even if you don't need it, so you'll have it for yourself or a friend. Then tell one person this week how much they matter to you.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

1 Samuel begins with a barren woman singing that God lifts up the lowly, and it ends with a proud king dead on a mountain. In between, God sets aside the king who looked the part and chooses a shepherd boy from Bethlehem. The word for what Samuel did to David is anointed, pouring oil on his head. In Hebrew, the anointed one is mashiach, which gives us the word Messiah. In Greek, it's christos, which gives us the word Christ.

Jewish readers treasure 1 Samuel as the story of how God gave Israel its greatest king, and many still pray for the coming of a son of David. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, believed that promise came true in Jesus. Matthew's very first line calls Him "Jesus Christ, the son of David." Paul reminded his listeners that God called David "a man after my heart, who will do all my will." And Mary, pregnant with Jesus, sang a song that sounds a lot like Hannah's: "He has put down princes from their thrones, and has exalted the lowly." Like David, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, anointed by God's Spirit, and rejected by the powerful. But where David spared his enemy, Jesus died for His enemies. And where David's kingdom eventually fell, Jesus' kingdom will never end.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. He looks at the heart, and He knows yours completely.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all rejected God as King.

Israel told God they wanted a different king. The Bible says all of us have tried to run our own lives instead of letting Him lead.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. Saul's story shows how sin destroys. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the true Anointed King.

David fought Goliath for his people. Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again, defeating sin and death for everyone who trusts Him.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

David was chosen not because he was the biggest or the oldest. Salvation isn't a reward for being impressive. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Make Him your King.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've wanted to run my own life instead of letting You be my King. I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You that You look at the heart, and that You love me anyway. Thank You that Jesus, the true Anointed King, gave His life for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. Speak, Lord, for I'm listening. Forgive me and change my heart. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 1 Samuel 3, 16, and 17, then read Psalm 23, written by the shepherd who became king, and Luke 1.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Find a Jonathan. Look for a friend who will strengthen your faith, and be that kind of friend for someone else.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Samuel didn't recognize God's voice the first three times either. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if 1 Samuel is right, the God who looked past the tall king and chose the shepherd boy is looking at your heart right now, and He is still calling.

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Don't look on his face, or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for I don't see as man sees. For man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

1 Samuel 16:7 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

The King Who Keeps His Promise

2 Samuel, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Keeps His Promise: The Book of 2 Samuel, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

Copyright © 2026 Bill McLeod. All rights reserved.

Published by Papa Bill Books.

Scripture quotations are from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, which is in the public domain.

All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” At the end of 1 Samuel, David was the hero: the shepherd boy who beat Goliath, the loyal friend of Jonathan, the fugitive who refused to kill his enemy. If the story ended there, David would be the perfect Bible hero.

2 Samuel is where the story gets real. David finally becomes king, and for a while, everything goes right. He unites the nation, captures Jerusalem, brings the ark home, and receives one of the most important promises in the whole Bible. Then, at the height of his power, he does something terrible. And the rest of the book shows the consequences ripping through his family and his kingdom: violence, betrayal, rebellion, and grief.

So why read it? Because 2 Samuel is brutally honest about what power can do to a person, even a person who loves God. It shows what real repentance looks like. And it shows that God keeps His promises even when the people He makes them to fail badly. In the middle of all the mess, God promises David a King whose throne will last forever. The rest of the Bible is the story of how He kept that promise.

Fair warning: some of these stories are hard. We’ll handle them honestly and carefully. Let’s go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through 2 Samuel in nine chapters: David's lament and the civil war (2 Samuel 1–4), David crowned, Jerusalem captured, and the ark brought home (5–6), God's covenant with David (7), David's kindness to Mephibosheth (8–10), David, Bathsheba, and Uriah (11), Nathan's confrontation and David's repentance (12), Amnon, Tamar, and Absalom (13–14), Absalom's rebellion (15–19), and David's last words, his mighty men, and the census (20–24).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book 2 Samuel is, where it fits, and the world it came from. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as why Uzzah died, and how to put together 2 Samuel 24, which says the LORD moved David to take a census, with 1 Chronicles 21, which says Satan did, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. 2 Samuel includes sexual violence, murder, and suicide. When it does, you'll find a box with a safety note. This book quotes 2 Samuel in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the tenth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

2 Samuel contains some of the most difficult material in the Old Testament. David's taking of Bathsheba is presented honestly as an abuse of royal power, not as a romance, and the book is clear that the text places the blame on David. Amnon's rape of his half-sister Tamar is summarized briefly and without graphic detail, naming it as a crime and calling out David's failure to act. Both chapters include clear safety boxes that point readers to trusted adults, RAINN (1-800-656-4673), Childhelp (1-800-422-4453), and 911. Ahithophel's death by suicide is handled with compassion, with a box pointing readers to the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

The book also presents fairly the main views on Uzzah's death and the holiness of God, and on the relationship between 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1. A box on Mephibosheth addresses disability, dignity, and belonging. I'd encourage you to share your own church's views with your teen, and to explain why other Christians see things differently.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees God's covenant with David fulfilled in Jesus, the Son of David, while acknowledging that Jewish readers treasure 2 Samuel in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see in 2 Samuel both the danger of power without accountability and the faithfulness of a God who keeps His promises.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Kind of Book Is This?

2 Samuel is history told as a story. It was originally the second half of one book with 1 Samuel. It covers David's reign as king, about forty years, roughly 1010 to 970 BC. It's one of the most carefully written stories in the ancient world, full of vivid scenes, sharp dialogue, and characters who feel like real people. It doesn't flatter its hero. It tells the truth about him.

Where It Fits

1 Samuel ended with Saul and Jonathan dead on Mount Gilboa and David, the anointed king, still waiting. 2 Samuel tells how David finally became king, first over his own tribe of Judah and then over all Israel, and what happened during his reign. 1 Kings picks up the story with David's old age and the reign of his son Solomon. 1 Chronicles tells many of the same stories from a different angle.

Who Wrote It?

The book doesn't name its author. Jewish tradition says the prophets Nathan and Gad finished what Samuel began. Many scholars think chapters 9–20 and the first chapters of 1 Kings come from an early, eyewitness-style account sometimes called the Succession Narrative, because it asks who will take David's throne. Like 1 Samuel, the book was probably edited as part of a larger history running from Deuteronomy through Kings. Christians with different views agree that it is God's Word.

The World of 2 Samuel

When the book opens, Israel is divided and defeated. The Philistines have just crushed Saul's army. The tribes don't trust each other. Jerusalem is still a Canaanite fortress owned by the Jebusites. By the middle of the book, David has united the tribes, made Jerusalem his capital, defeated the Philistines, and built a small empire. Kings in that world had almost unlimited power. They could take whatever and whoever they wanted. That background matters for understanding what David does in chapter 11, and why it was so wrong.

Hard Stories and Safety Notes

2 Samuel includes war, murder, sexual violence, family abuse, and suicide. Including a story in the Bible doesn't mean God approves of what happens in it. Often the writer is showing us how badly things have gone wrong. When we come to these stories, you'll find a safety box. Here's what they say: abuse and sexual violence are always wrong, it's never the victim's fault, and if something like it is happening to you or someone you know, tell a trusted adult. In the United States you can call 911 in an emergency, call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453, call the RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673, or call or text 988 if you are thinking about suicide.

The Map

Chapter 1 (2 Samuel 1–4): How the mighty have fallen.

Chapter 2 (2 Samuel 5–6): King of all Israel.

Chapter 3 (2 Samuel 7): A house forever.

Chapter 4 (2 Samuel 8–10): A seat at the king's table.

Chapter 5 (2 Samuel 11): The king who took.

Chapter 6 (2 Samuel 12): You are the man.

Chapter 7 (2 Samuel 13–14): Tamar and Absalom.

Chapter 8 (2 Samuel 15–19): My son, my son.

Chapter 9 (2 Samuel 20–24): The last words of David.

Contents

Setting the Scene 7

1 How the Mighty Have Fallen *1–4* 11

2 King of All Israel *5–6* 17

3 A House Forever *7* 23

4 A Seat at the King's Table *8–10* 28

5 The King Who Took *11* 34

6 You Are the Man *12* 40

7 Tamar and Absalom *13–14* 45

8 My Son, My Son *15–19* 51

9 The Last Words of David *20–24* 58

Where This Points 64

CHAPTER 1

How the Mighty Have Fallen

2 Samuel 1–4

2 Samuel opens three days after the end of 1 Samuel. David is back in Ziklag after rescuing his people from the Amalekite raiders. He doesn't know yet that Saul and Jonathan are dead.

Then a young man stumbles into camp with his clothes torn and dirt on his head, the signs of mourning. He bows to David and tells him the news. Israel has lost the battle. Saul and Jonathan are dead. And then he adds a detail: he says he was there on Mount Gilboa, that Saul was badly wounded and asked him to finish him off, and that he did. To prove it, he hands David Saul's crown and armband.

The young man is an Amalekite, and he probably expects a reward. He's just brought the next king the crown of his enemy. But his story doesn't match the account in 1 Samuel 31, where Saul died by his own hand. Most readers think he found Saul's body, took the crown, and made up the rest to win David's favor.

If so, it backfires badly. David and his men tear their clothes and weep and fast until evening for Saul, for Jonathan, and for the army of Israel. Then David turns to the young man. You weren't afraid to lift your hand against the LORD's anointed? David orders him executed. Whether or not his story was true, he had claimed to kill

God's anointed king and expected to profit from it, and David wanted everyone to know he would never reward that.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Was David So Upset?**
>
> Saul had spent years trying to kill David. You might expect David to celebrate his death. But David never saw Saul as just an enemy. Saul was the king God had anointed, the father of David's best friend, and the man David had served and played music for. David's grief was real. It was also wise. If he had celebrated Saul's death or rewarded the man who claimed to kill him, he would have looked like a man who grabbed the throne by violence. Instead, he made it clear that he would wait for God to give him the kingdom, not take it.

Then David writes a song, a lament for Saul and Jonathan. It's one of the most beautiful poems in the Bible, and it has a refrain that's still quoted today: "How the mighty have fallen!" David doesn't want the Philistines to hear the news and celebrate. He curses the mountains of Gilboa where they died.

And he praises them both, even Saul. "Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives. In their death, they were not divided. They were swifter than eagles. They were stronger than lions." He tells the women of Israel to weep for Saul, who dressed them in fine clothes.

Then the song turns personal. "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan. You have been very pleasant to me." David says Jonathan's loyal love for him was wonderful, greater than the love of women, meaning greater than any romantic love he had known. It's the cry of a man who has lost his best friend.

> **REAL TALK** **It's Okay to Grieve Loudly**
>
> David didn't hide his grief. He wept, fasted, and wrote a song so everyone would remember. And he grieved even for Saul, someone who had hurt him

deeply. Sometimes grief is complicated like that. You can mourn someone you also had a hard relationship with. If you've lost someone, a friend, a grandparent, a parent, or even a pet, there's no right way or right timeline to grieve. Writing, music, art, crying, talking about the person, and praying are all good ways to let it out. Don't bottle it up. Talk to someone you trust. And if your grief becomes so heavy that you can't function, or you start thinking about hurting yourself, reach out right away to a trusted adult or call or text 988.

After the lament, David does something that will become a habit in the best parts of his life: he asks the LORD what to do. God tells him to go up to Hebron, a city in Judah. There "The men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah." Finally, after all those years of running, David is king, but only over his own tribe.

The rest of Israel doesn't follow him yet. Saul's general, Abner, makes Saul's surviving son Ishbosheth king over the northern tribes. Ishbosheth seems to be a weak king, with Abner as the real power behind him. So now there are two kingdoms and two kings. "Now there was a long war between Saul's house and David's house. David grew stronger and stronger, but Saul's house grew weaker and weaker."

The civil war is ugly. At one point, the two armies meet at the pool of Gibeon and agree to settle things with a contest between twelve young men from each side. All twenty-four end up dead. In the battle that follows, Abner kills Asahel, the younger brother of David's general Joab. Joab never forgets it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Joab and the Sons of Zeruiah**

Joab, Abishai, and Asahel were David's nephews, the sons of his sister Zeruiah. They were fierce, loyal, and effective, and they were also violent and

> hard to control. Joab in particular will be one of the most important characters in 2 Samuel. He wins David's battles and helps him out of trouble, but he also kills people on his own terms whenever he decides it's necessary. David will complain more than once that the sons of Zeruiah are too hard for him. It's a picture of a problem many leaders face: the people who help you get power can be the hardest to hold accountable.

Eventually Ishbosheth and Abner have a falling-out. Ishbosheth accuses Abner of sleeping with one of Saul's concubines, which in that culture was a way of claiming the throne. Abner is furious and decides to switch sides. He sends a message to David offering to bring all Israel over to him.

David agrees on one condition: give me back my wife Michal, Saul's daughter. Saul had given Michal to another man while David was on the run. Now David wants her back, probably for political reasons as much as personal ones, since she connects him to Saul's family. Her second husband follows her, weeping, until Abner orders him to go home. It's a heartbreaking little scene, and a reminder that the powerful men in this story often treat women as political pieces. We'll see where that leads.

Abner goes around to the elders of Israel and urges them to make David king. He points out that God had promised to save Israel through David. Then he meets with David at Hebron, they make a deal, and David sends him away in peace.

But Joab hears about it. He's furious. He tells David that Abner was only spying. Then, without David's knowledge, he sends messengers to bring Abner back, takes him aside at the gate of Hebron as if to speak privately, and stabs him to death, to avenge his brother Asahel.

David is horrified. He publicly declares that he and his kingdom are innocent of Abner's blood. He makes Joab and all the people tear their clothes and mourn. He walks behind the coffin and weeps at the grave. He refuses to eat all day. And he sings a short lament: "Should Abner die as a fool dies?" The people notice. "All the people took notice of it, and it pleased them." They understand that David had nothing to do with the murder.

But David doesn't punish Joab. "I am weak today, though anointed king," he says. "These men, the sons of Zeruiah are too hard for me." It's an honest admission, and also a failure. A king who can't hold his own general accountable is setting up problems for later.

> **REAL TALK** **Saying It's Wrong Isn't the Same as Stopping It**
>
> David mourned Abner sincerely and said all the right things. But he let Joab get away with murder. That's a pattern that will haunt David's whole reign. He feels deeply, but he often doesn't act when he should, especially when it involves people close to him. You've probably seen this happen: a coach who lets the star player get away with bullying, or a group of friends who all know something is wrong but nobody does anything. Feeling bad about wrong isn't enough. Sometimes love and justice require us to act, to speak up, to tell someone in authority, or to set a boundary, even when it's hard.

With Abner dead, Ishbosheth's kingdom collapses. Two of his own captains sneak into his house while he's taking an afternoon nap, kill him, and bring his head to David, expecting a reward. Like the Amalekite in chapter 1, they get the opposite. David reminds them what happened to the man who claimed to have killed Saul. "How much more, when wicked men have slain a righteous person in his own house on his bed, should I not now require his blood from your hand?" He has them executed.

In the middle of all this violence, the writer slips in a short, sad note. Jonathan had a son named Mephibosheth. When news came that Saul and Jonathan had died, his nurse picked him up and ran, and in her hurry she dropped him. He was five years old, and he became disabled in both feet. Remember his name. He's going to come back.

KEY VERSE

Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives. In their death, they were not divided. They were swifter than eagles. They were stronger than lions.

2 Samuel 1:23 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think David grieved so deeply for Saul, who had tried to kill him?
2. David refused to reward anyone who killed his enemies for him. Why was that so important?
3. David mourned Abner but didn't punish Joab. What should he have done?
4. Have you ever seen someone say the right things but fail to act? What happened?

TRY THIS *If you're grieving someone, try writing your own lament, a letter, poem, or song about them. Then share it with someone you trust.*

CHAPTER 2

King of All Israel

2 Samuel 5–6

With Ishbosheth gone, the tribes of Israel finally come to David at Hebron. “Behold, we are your bone and your flesh,” they say. In other words, we’re family. They remind him that even when Saul was king, David was the one who really led Israel in battle, and that God had said to him, “You will be shepherd of my people Israel.” So the elders make a covenant with David, and “they anointed David king over Israel.”

It’s David’s third anointing. The first was by Samuel in his father’s house when he was a teenager. The second was by the men of Judah. Now all Israel anoints him. “David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years.” He had been anointed as a boy, but he waited perhaps fifteen years for the promise to come true.

> REAL TALK **The Long Wait**
>
> David spent years between his anointing and his crowning: years of running, hiding, living in caves, and wondering whether God’s promise would ever happen. Waiting is hard, especially when you believe God has something for you. Maybe you’re waiting for a friend, a healing, a family situation to change, or just to know what you’re supposed to do with your life. David’s story says God’s timing isn’t always fast, but it’s never wasted. Those hard years made

> David the kind of leader who could shepherd a nation. What might God be building in you while you wait?

David's first move as king of all Israel is to capture a capital. He chooses Jerusalem, a fortress city on a hill that the Jebusites had held for centuries. It's right on the border between Judah and the northern tribes, so it doesn't belong to either side, a smart choice for a king trying to unite a divided country.

The Jebusites are so confident in their walls that they taunt David: "The blind and the lame will keep you out of here." Basically, we could defend this place with our weakest people. But David's men find a way in, possibly through a water tunnel. "Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion. This is David's city." From now on, Jerusalem will be known as the City of David, and Zion will become one of the most important names in the Bible.

"David grew greater and greater, for the LORD, the God of Armies, was with him." The king of Tyre sends cedar wood and builders to make David a palace. David defeats the Philistines twice, asking God for direction each time. And he realizes something important: God has made him king "for his people Israel's sake." The kingdom isn't about David. It's about God's people.

But there's a warning sign in the same chapter. The writer mentions that David took more wives and concubines in Jerusalem. Deuteronomy had specifically warned that Israel's king "shall not multiply wives to himself, that his heart not turn away." David is starting to collect the things kings of the nations collect. Keep an eye on that.

Now that David has a capital, he wants to bring the ark of the covenant there. The ark has been sitting in a village called Kiriath

Jearim, also known as Baale Judah, for about twenty years, ever since the Philistines sent it back. David gathers thirty thousand men for a huge celebration.

They put the ark on a new cart pulled by oxen, with two brothers, Uzzah and Ahio, guiding it. David and all Israel dance and play music with all their might. It's a parade.

Then the oxen stumble. Uzzah reaches out and grabs the ark to steady it. "The LORD's anger burned against Uzzah, and God struck him there for his error; and he died there by God's ark."

The party stops. Everyone is stunned. And David is angry. "David was displeased because the LORD had broken out against Uzzah." He names the place Perez Uzzah, which means outburst against Uzzah. Then his anger turns to fear. "How could the LORD's ark come to me?" He leaves the ark at the house of a man named Obed-Edom and goes home.

REAL TALK **Why Did Uzzah Die?**

This is one of the hardest stories in the Bible, and lots of people find it unfair. Uzzah was trying to help. So what happened? Christians have offered several explanations. First, God's law gave clear instructions about the ark. It was to be carried on poles by Levites from the family of Kohath, and even they were warned: "they shall not touch the sanctuary, lest they die." Putting it on a cart was how the Philistines had moved it. David had copied the pagans instead of checking God's word. Second, Uzzah's family had kept the ark in their house for years, and some think familiarity had made them careless about its holiness. Third, some point out that Uzzah may have thought the ark needed his protection, as if God couldn't take care of Himself. Others admit that the story still feels hard and that we don't know everything about Uzzah's heart. All agree on the main point: God is holy, and He is not to be handled casually. Hebrews says "our God is a consuming fire." The good news of the gospel isn't

> that God's holiness stopped mattering. It's that Jesus made a way for us to come near safely.

Three months later, David hears that the LORD has blessed Obed-Edom's household because of the ark. So he tries again, and this time he does it right. The Levites carry the ark on poles, as God's law said. After the bearers take six steps, David offers a sacrifice. And "David danced before the LORD with all his might; and David was clothed in a linen ephod," a simple priestly garment, not his royal robes. The whole nation celebrates with shouting and trumpets.

But one person isn't celebrating. "Michal the daughter of Saul looked out through the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart."

When David comes home to bless his family, Michal meets him with sarcasm. "How glorious the king of Israel was today," she says, accusing him of making a fool of himself in front of the servant girls by dancing around in his underwear, more or less.

David doesn't back down. "It was before the LORD, who chose me above your father." He says he'll celebrate before the LORD, and "I will be yet more undignified than this." He doesn't care what he looks like when he's worshiping God.

There's an important detail in David's answer to Michal. He says the servant girls she was worried about will honor him. David isn't trying to impress the important people. He's comfortable being humbled before God in front of ordinary people. That's a mark of a good leader. The best leaders aren't the ones who protect their image at all costs. They're the ones who are willing to look foolish for the right reasons, who admit they need God, and who don't think they're too important to celebrate with everyone else. Jesus would

later wash His disciples' feet, the job of the lowest servant, and tell them to do the same.

The chapter ends with a sad line: "Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death." We aren't told exactly why. It may have been God's judgment, or it may simply mean David never shared a home with her again. Either way, their marriage, which began with love in 1 Samuel 18, ends in contempt.

> **REAL TALK** **Worship Without Worrying What People Think**
>
> David was the king, and he danced before God with all his might, without worrying about looking cool. Michal cared more about appearances. It's easy to be like Michal: to feel embarrassed about worship, judge how other people express their faith, or hold back because you're worried what someone will think. Worship can be loud or quiet, joyful or tearful, and Christians express it in different ways. The point isn't to dance a certain way. It's to care more about God than about your image. In fairness to Michal, she had been treated badly by David and by her father, used as a pawn, taken from a husband who loved her, and that may have fed her bitterness. Hurt can make it hard to rejoice. But bitterness never makes it better.

KEY VERSE

David danced before the LORD with all his might; and David was clothed in a linen ephod.

2 Samuel 6:14 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. David waited years between being anointed and becoming king. What do you think those years taught him?
2. Why do you think God took Uzzah's mistake so seriously? Does the explanation about the ark's poles help you, or does the story still feel hard?
3. What's the difference between being afraid of God and having reverence for God?
4. Have you ever held back in worship because of what others might think? What would it look like to worship "with all your might"?

TRY THIS *Spend ten minutes this week worshiping God in a way that feels free: singing in your room, praying out loud on a walk, or writing a list of reasons to praise Him.*

CHAPTER 3

A House Forever

2 Samuel 7

Chapter 7 is one of the most important chapters in the entire Old Testament. If you remember only one chapter from 2 Samuel, make it this one.

It begins in a moment of peace. "When the king lived in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies all around," David has an idea. He says to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but God's ark dwells within curtains." David lives in a beautiful palace, and the ark of God is still in a tent. That doesn't seem right. David wants to build God a temple.

Nathan thinks it's a great idea. "Go, do all that is in your heart, for the LORD is with you." But that night, God speaks to Nathan, and the message turns everything around.

God's answer starts with a question: Are you going to build a house for Me to live in? God reminds David that He has never asked for a house. Ever since He brought Israel out of Egypt, He's been moving around with His people in a tent. Then He reminds David where he came from. "I took you from the sheep pen, from following the sheep, to be prince over my people, over Israel." I have been with you wherever you went. I have defeated your enemies. I will make your name great.

And then comes the twist. David wanted to build God a house. Instead, God says He will build David a house. "Moreover the LORD tells you that the LORD will make you a house."

There's a wordplay here. In Hebrew, the word house can mean a building, like a palace or a temple, or it can mean a family line, a dynasty, like the house of Windsor or the house of David. David wanted to build God a house made of stone and cedar. God says, I'm going to build you a house made of people, a royal family that will last forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Covenant with David**

A covenant is a binding agreement. God had already made covenants with Noah, with Abraham, and with Israel at Mount Sinai. Now He makes one with David. Scholars call it the Davidic Covenant. Unlike the covenant at Sinai, which came with conditions and consequences if Israel broke it, this promise is unconditional in its core. If David's sons sin, God will discipline them, but He will never take away His loyal love from David's family the way He did from Saul. Psalm 89 celebrates it: "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David, my servant." This covenant becomes the foundation of Israel's hope for a Messiah, an anointed king from David's line, and it's central to how the New Testament understands Jesus.

Here's what God promises. When David dies, "I will set up your offspring after you, who will proceed out of your body, and I will establish his kingdom." That son will build the temple David wanted to build. "He will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

And God promises something incredibly personal: "I will be his father, and he will be my son." If that son does wrong, God will discipline him, the way a father disciplines a child. "But my loving kindness will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul."

Then comes the big finish: "Your house and your kingdom will be made sure forever before you. Your throne will be established forever."

Forever. That's a huge word. In the short term, the promise is fulfilled in Solomon, David's son, who builds the temple. But Solomon dies. So do all his sons. About four hundred years after David, the kingdom of Judah falls to Babylon, and there's no son of David on the throne anymore. For centuries, it looks like the promise has failed.

That's why the prophets kept talking about a future king from David's line. Isaiah promised a child who would sit "on David's throne," whose government and peace would have no end. Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke of a righteous Branch from David. By the time of Jesus, many Jewish people were waiting for the Son of David to come and restore the kingdom.

> **REAL TALK** **Is This About Jesus?**
>
> When Christians read 2 Samuel 7, they see Jesus all over it. The angel Gabriel told Mary that God would give her son "the throne of his father David," and that "There will be no end to his Kingdom." Matthew's Gospel begins by calling Jesus "the son of David." Hebrews quotes the line "I will be his father, and he will be my son" about Jesus. And Jesus, who rose from the dead, is the only son of David who could actually reign forever. But it's also fair to say that the first meaning of the promise is about Solomon and David's royal line, and that Jewish readers understand the promise in their own way, many still waiting for a Messiah to come. Christians believe that the promise, which seemed to fail when David's kingdom fell, came true in a bigger way than anyone expected. God didn't just keep a dynasty going. He sent His own Son to become a son of David.

It's worth pausing on how big this promise is in the story of the whole Bible. God promised Abraham a family that would bless all

nations. He promised Israel at Sinai that they would be His treasured people. Now He narrows the promise down to one family within one tribe: the family of David. From here on, the Old Testament keeps watching David's descendants, waiting to see which one will be the forever King. Some are good. Many are terrible. None of them lives forever. The promise keeps getting passed down like a torch, through wars, exile, and centuries of silence, until an angel shows up in Nazareth and tells a young woman engaged to a man "of the house and family of David" that her son will sit on David's throne. When you read the New Testament's long genealogies, this is why they matter. They're tracing the torch.

Notice too what the promise doesn't say. It doesn't say David's sons will be perfect. In fact, God expects them to sin and promises to discipline them. The promise doesn't depend on how good David's family is. It depends on how faithful God is. That's good news for anyone who has ever felt like their family is a mess.

How does David respond? He goes into the tent where the ark is, sits before the LORD, and prays. "Who am I, Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me this far?"

That's the prayer of a humble man. He doesn't say, I deserve this. He says, who am I? I'm a shepherd boy. My family is nothing special. And yet You've brought me this far, and now You're promising something that reaches far into the future. David says, "Therefore you are great, LORD God. For there is no one like you."

He ends by asking God to do what He said. "Now, O Lord GOD, you are God, and your words are truth, and you have promised this good thing to your servant." David doesn't try to earn the promise. He

receives it with gratitude and asks God to keep it. That's what faith looks like.

REAL TALK **When God Says No to a Good Idea**

David's plan to build the temple wasn't a bad idea. It came from a good heart. Even Nathan said go for it. But God said no, at least not you, not now. 1 Chronicles explains that David had fought many wars and shed a lot of blood, so God wanted a man of peace to build His house. Sometimes God says no to good things because He has something better, or someone else in mind for that task. That can be disappointing. You might not make the team, get the role, or get into the school you wanted, even though your motives were good. David's response is worth copying. He didn't sulk. He worshiped. And later, he gathered materials so his son could build the temple. He helped make someone else's success possible.

KEY VERSE

Your house and your kingdom will be made sure forever before you. Your throne will be established forever.

2 Samuel 7:16 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What's the wordplay on "house" in this chapter? Why does it matter?
2. David's prayer begins with "Who am I?" What does that tell you about his heart at this point in his life?
3. How do you think God's promise to David is fulfilled in Jesus?
4. Have you ever had a good plan that God seemed to say no to? How did you respond?

TRY THIS *Pray David's prayer this week: "Who am I, Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me this far?" Then list five ways God has brought you this far.*

CHAPTER 4

A Seat at the King's Table

2 Samuel 8–10

Chapter 8 reads like a highlight reel. David defeats the Philistines, Moab, the Arameans, Edom, and others. He builds a small empire stretching from the Egyptian border toward the Euphrates River. Kings send him gifts of gold, silver, and bronze, and David dedicates all of it to the LORD. The writer sums it up: "David reigned over all Israel; and David executed justice and righteousness for all his people." For a moment, David is the king Israel always hoped for.

But the most beautiful story in this section isn't about a battle. It's about a guest at dinner.

One day David asks a question. "Is there yet any who is left of Saul's house, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?" Years earlier, David and Jonathan had made a covenant. Jonathan had asked David never to cut off his kindness from Jonathan's family, even after the LORD had defeated all of David's enemies. Now David is king, and he remembers his promise.

That question would have shocked people. In the ancient world, when a new dynasty took over, the new king usually wiped out every surviving member of the old royal family so nobody could challenge him. If you were related to Saul, the safest thing to do was

hide. And here is David, asking where Saul's relatives are, not to kill them, but to be kind to them.

They find a servant of Saul's family named Ziba. David asks him again, "Is there not yet any of Saul's house, that I may show the kindness of God to him?" Notice that phrase: the kindness of God. The Hebrew word is hesed, loyal love, the same word that runs all through the book of Ruth. David wants to show someone the kind of love God has shown him.

Ziba answers, "Jonathan still has a son, who is lame in his feet." It's Mephibosheth, the boy who was dropped by his nurse when he was five. He's grown up now and has a young son of his own. He's been living in a town called Lo Debar, east of the Jordan. The name may mean something like no pasture or nothing, a fitting picture of where he's been: far away, forgotten, with nothing.

David sends for him. You can imagine what Mephibosheth was thinking on that trip. The king knows I exist. The king has sent soldiers to bring me. This is it.

When he arrives, he falls on his face before David. "David said, 'Mephibosheth?' He answered, 'Behold, your servant!'"

And David's first words are: "Don't be afraid." Then he explains. "I will surely show you kindness for Jonathan your father's sake, and will restore to you all the land of Saul your father. You will eat bread at my table continually."

Mephibosheth can hardly believe it. "What is your servant, that you should look at such a dead dog as I am?" A dead dog was about the most worthless thing you could call yourself in that culture. He thinks he's nothing. Maybe that's how people had treated him his whole life.

David gives him all of Saul's land and orders Ziba, his fifteen sons, and twenty servants to farm it for him. And Mephibosheth eats at the king's table "like one of the king's sons." The chapter ends with this line: "So Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he ate continually at the king's table. He was lame in both his feet."

That last sentence is beautiful. The writer doesn't pretend Mephibosheth's disability disappeared. He's still lame in both feet. But now, when he sits at the king's table, his feet are under the table like everyone else's. He's not a charity case in the corner. He's family.

> **REAL TALK** **Disability, Dignity, and Belonging**
>
> Remember what the Jebusites said when David attacked Jerusalem: "The blind and the lame will keep you out of here"? In that world, people with disabilities were often mocked, pushed aside, or treated as less than human. Mephibosheth called himself a dead dog. David saw a son of his best friend and gave him a seat at the table. God's law had already said, "You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind." Every person, with or without a disability, is made in God's image and has full dignity and worth. If you have a disability, visible or invisible, physical, learning, or mental, you are not a burden, and you belong. And for all of us, the question is: who's missing from our table? Who gets left out at lunch, in group projects, at youth group, or at parties? Belonging isn't just letting someone in the room. It's making sure they have a real seat, and treating them as family.

Think about what David's kindness cost him. Restoring Saul's land to Saul's grandson meant giving up valuable property. Feeding Mephibosheth at the royal table every day, for the rest of his life, was an ongoing expense. And politically, keeping a descendant of Saul close to the palace could have been risky. David did it anyway, because he had made a promise to Jonathan and because he wanted to show the kindness of God. Real kindness usually costs something.

It takes time, attention, and sometimes risk. It's easy to be nice to people who can do something for you. Mephibosheth couldn't do anything for David. That's what makes the story so powerful.

Christians have long seen Mephibosheth's story as a picture of the gospel. We were far away, helpless, and afraid of the King. We couldn't walk to Him on our own. But for the sake of someone else, Jesus, God sought us out, told us not to be afraid, and gave us a permanent seat at His table as His children. We don't earn it. We just receive it.

Mephibosheth's story isn't over, though. Later, when David has to run from Jerusalem during Absalom's rebellion, Ziba shows up with supplies and claims that Mephibosheth stayed behind, hoping to get Saul's kingdom back. David believes him and gives Ziba all of Mephibosheth's property. But when David returns, Mephibosheth comes out to meet him looking terrible. He hasn't trimmed his beard, cared for his feet, or washed his clothes the whole time David was gone, a sign that he'd been mourning. He explains, "My lord, O king, my servant deceived me." He had wanted to go with David, but because he was lame, he needed Ziba to saddle a donkey, and Ziba had left without him.

David doesn't know whom to believe, so he splits the land between them. Mephibosheth's answer shows his heart: "Yes, let him take all, because my lord the king has come in peace to his own house." He doesn't care about the land. He cares about the king.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Kindness Rejected**

Chapter 10 tells another story about kindness, with a very different ending. When the king of the Ammonites dies, David sends messengers to comfort his son Hanun, saying, "I will show kindness to Hanun the son of Nahash, as his father showed kindness to me." But Hanun's advisers convince him the

> messengers are spies. So Hanun humiliates them: he shaves off half of each man's beard and cuts their robes off at the hips, sending them home half naked. David tells the men to wait in Jericho until their beards grow back. The insult leads to a war, which Israel wins. The contrast with Mephibosheth is striking. One man receives the king's kindness with humility and gratitude. The other treats it with suspicion and contempt, and it costs him dearly.

That war with the Ammonites is the background for what happens next. It's still going on at the start of chapter 11. And it's in the middle of that war, at the height of David's power, that the man who gave Mephibosheth a seat at his table does the worst thing he ever does.

KEY VERSE

David said to him, "Don't be afraid, for I will surely show you kindness for Jonathan your father's sake, and will restore to you all the land of Saul your father. You will eat bread at my table continually."

2 Samuel 9:7 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why would Mephibosheth have been afraid when David sent for him?
2. Mephibosheth called himself a dead dog. How do you think the way people treated him shaped how he saw himself?
3. Who in your school, team, or church might feel left out of the table? What could you do about it?
4. How is Mephibosheth's story a picture of what God does for us through Jesus?

TRY THIS *This week, invite someone who usually sits alone, or who often gets left out, to sit with you or join your group. Treat them like family.*

CHAPTER 5

The King Who Took

2 Samuel 11

Chapter 11 begins with a sentence that sounds like a calendar note but works like a warning siren. “At the return of the year, at the time when kings go out, David sent Joab and his servants with him, and all Israel.” Spring was the season for war, when the rains ended and armies could march. Kings led their armies. “But David stayed at Jerusalem.”

David isn’t where he’s supposed to be. He’s not leading his people. He’s sitting at home in his palace.

“At evening, David arose from his bed and walked on the roof of the king’s house.” He’s been napping in the late afternoon. From the roof of the palace, the highest point in the city, he sees a woman bathing, and “the woman was very beautiful to look at.”

Some people over the years have blamed the woman, as if she was bathing on purpose to be seen. But the text doesn’t say that. The detail that she was purifying herself suggests she was carrying out a ritual washing after her monthly period, which God’s law required. She was likely in a private courtyard, doing what she was supposed to do. The person in the story with a view of everything was the king on his roof.

David sends someone to find out who she is. The answer should have stopped him cold: "Isn't this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, Uriah the Hittite's wife?" She's married. Her husband, Uriah, is one of David's own elite soldiers, listed among his mighty men. And he's away fighting David's war.

David doesn't stop. "David sent messengers, and took her; and she came in to him, and he lay with her." Notice the verbs. David sent. David took. David lay. Bathsheba doesn't say a word in the whole scene. The only time she speaks in the chapter is to send David a message a few weeks later: "I am with child."

> **REAL TALK** **This Isn't a Romance**
>
> Movies and some sermons have treated this story like a love affair, or blamed Bathsheba for tempting David. That misses what the Bible actually says. David was the king, with almost unlimited power. He sent armed men from the palace to bring a woman whose husband was away at war. In that situation, she could not freely say no. What David did was an abuse of royal power. Many scholars and Christian writers today describe it as sexual coercion, and some call it rape; others think the text leaves her response unstated. But all careful readers agree on what the Bible makes unmistakable: the blame lies with David. When God sends the prophet Nathan to confront him, the story Nathan tells casts Bathsheba as an innocent lamb, and God's charge is against David alone.

So David has a problem. Bathsheba is pregnant, and her husband has been away. Everyone will know. And instead of confessing, David starts a cover-up.

He sends for Uriah from the battlefield. When Uriah arrives, David asks him casually how Joab is doing, how the soldiers are, how the war is going. Then he says, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." It's a polite way of saying, go home and spend the night with

your wife. David even sends a gift after him. If Uriah sleeps with Bathsheba, everyone will assume the baby is his.

But Uriah doesn't go home. He sleeps at the entrance of the palace with the king's servants. When David asks why, Uriah's answer is devastating. "The ark, Israel, and Judah, are staying in tents; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are encamped in the open field. Shall I then go into my house to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing!"

Uriah is a foreigner, a Hittite, but he has more integrity than the king of Israel. He won't enjoy comfort while his fellow soldiers are in danger. Without knowing it, he's exposing everything David should have been.

David tries again. He invites Uriah to dinner and gets him drunk, hoping that will change his mind. It doesn't. Drunk Uriah is still more honorable than sober David.

So David does something unthinkable. "In the morning, David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah." Uriah carries his own death sentence back to the front lines. The letter says, "Send Uriah to the forefront of the hottest battle, and retreat from him, that he may be struck and die."

Joab does it. He sends Uriah and other soldiers close to the city wall, where the enemy's best fighters are. Uriah is killed, and so are other men of David's army. Joab sends a messenger with the news, and David responds coldly: "Don't let this thing displease you, for the sword devours one as well as another." Basically: these things happen in war. Don't worry about it.

SAFETY NOTE **When Someone Uses Power to Pressure You**

David used his power as king to take what he wanted and then to cover it up. People with power still do this: a boss, a coach, a teacher, a youth leader, an older boyfriend or girlfriend, or anyone who has some kind of control over you. They may use threats, gifts, flattery, secrets, or their position to pressure you into something sexual or to keep quiet about it. If someone has more power than you, it is very hard to say no freely, and that's exactly why it's so wrong for them to ask. If anything like this has ever happened to you, it is not your fault, no matter what anyone says. You are not in trouble. Tell a trusted adult, like a parent, a school counselor, or a doctor. In the United States, you can call the RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673 or chat online at rainn.org, any time. If you are in danger, call 911.

Think about Joab's role in all this. He gets a letter from the king ordering him to arrange the death of one of his own best soldiers, and he does it without question. He doesn't refuse. He doesn't confront David. He even coaches his messenger on how to report the news so David won't get angry about the losses. And now Joab knows David's darkest secret, which gives Joab a kind of power over the king that he'll use for the rest of David's life. When people with power do wrong, they usually need others to go along with it. Every person who chose to look away, follow orders, or keep quiet made David's sin possible. It takes courage to say no to someone powerful, but sometimes that's exactly what faithfulness requires.

When Bathsheba hears that her husband is dead, "she mourned for her husband." The text gives her real grief. She has lost her husband, and she is carrying the child of the man who had him killed. When the mourning period is over, David brings her to the palace, and she becomes his wife and has a son.

To everyone else, it might look like the king did something kind, marrying a war widow. The cover-up seems to have worked. Nobody knows.

Except one. The chapter ends with one short sentence that changes everything: "But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD."

REAL TALK **How Did David Get Here?**

This is David: the boy who trusted God against Goliath, the fugitive who refused to kill Saul, the king who gave Mephibosheth a seat at his table. How could he do this? Look at the steps. He was where he shouldn't have been, at home instead of leading. He was idle. He let himself keep looking. He used power without accountability, with no one around willing to tell him no. Then each wrong choice led to a worse one: lust led to abuse, abuse led to lying, lying led to murder. Sin rarely shows up all at once. It usually grows from small compromises that nobody sees. That's why it matters what you do when you're bored, alone, and think nobody's watching. And it's why everybody, especially people with power, needs people in their life who can tell them no.

KEY VERSE

But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.

2 Samuel 11:27 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. The chapter begins by saying David stayed in Jerusalem when kings went to war. Why does that detail matter?
2. Why is it important to see this story as an abuse of power and not as a romance?
3. Compare Uriah and David in this chapter. What does Uriah's integrity reveal about David?
4. David's sin grew one step at a time. What are some small compromises that can lead to bigger ones?

TRY THIS *Think of one area where you're most tempted when you're bored or alone. Make a specific plan this week to guard it, and tell someone you trust about your plan.*

CHAPTER 6

You Are the Man

2 Samuel 12

Months go by. The baby is born. David seems to have gotten away with it. Then "The LORD sent Nathan to David."

Nathan is the same prophet who brought David God's amazing promise in chapter 7. Now he has to confront the most powerful man in the country about adultery and murder. That's dangerous. Kings had prophets killed for less. So Nathan doesn't start with an accusation. He tells a story.

"There were two men in one city: the one rich, and the other poor." The rich man has huge flocks and herds. The poor man has only one little ewe lamb, which he bought and raised. "It grew up together with him and with his children. It ate of his own food, drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was like a daughter to him." It's not just livestock. It's a family pet.

One day a traveler visits the rich man. The rich man doesn't want to use one of his own animals for the meal. So he takes the poor man's lamb, kills it, and serves it to his guest.

David is furious. He thinks Nathan is reporting a real case for the king to judge. "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die!" He must pay back four times over, "because he did this thing and because he had no pity!"

And Nathan looks at him and says four words that land like a hammer: "You are the man!"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why a Story?**
>
> Nathan's parable is one of the most brilliant moments in the Bible. If Nathan had walked in and said, David, you committed adultery and murder, David might have gotten defensive, denied it, or had Nathan killed. Instead, the story gets past David's defenses. It lets him see the wrong clearly from the outside, and he pronounces judgment before he realizes he's judging himself. Jesus often taught with parables for a similar reason. Stories can show us truths about ourselves that we'd never accept if someone just told us directly. Notice too who the lamb represents: Bathsheba, innocent and taken by the one with power. Nathan's story makes it clear which man in the story is guilty.

Then Nathan delivers God's message. I anointed you king. I rescued you from Saul. I gave you everything. If that had been too little, I would have given you more. "Why have you despised the LORD's word, to do that which is evil in his sight? You have struck Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon."

The consequences are severe. "Now therefore the sword will never depart from your house." Trouble will come from within David's own family. What David did in secret, God says, will be repaid in public.

And David's response is what makes him different from Saul. He doesn't make excuses. He doesn't blame Bathsheba, or Joab, or the war, or the stress of being king. He says six words: "I have sinned against the LORD."

Remember Saul in 1 Samuel 15? He also said I have sinned, but then he asked Samuel to honor him in front of the people. David doesn't ask for anything. He just admits it.

Nathan answers immediately. "The LORD also has put away your sin. You will not die." The law said that both adultery and murder deserved death. But God forgives David.

REAL TALK **Psalm 51, a Prayer for When You've Blown It**

The heading of Psalm 51 says David wrote it "when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." It's one of the most honest prayers ever written. "Have mercy on me, God, according to your loving kindness." David doesn't minimize what he did. "For I know my transgressions. My sin is constantly before me." He asks God to wash him and make him new: "Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me." And he understands what God wants most: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. O God, you will not despise a broken and contrite heart." If you've ever done something you're deeply ashamed of, Psalm 51 can become your prayer too. Real repentance isn't just feeling bad or being sorry you got caught. It's agreeing with God about what you did, turning from it, and trusting His mercy. And part of repentance, when you've hurt someone, is making it right with them as much as you can.

But forgiveness doesn't erase consequences. Nathan says the child born to Bathsheba will die, because David's sin has given the LORD's enemies reason to mock Him. Soon after, the baby becomes very sick.

REAL TALK **Why Did the Baby Die?**

This part of the story is painful, and many readers struggle with it. Why would an innocent baby die for his father's sin? Christians have answered in different ways. Some emphasize that this was a unique judgment tied to David's public role as king, showing that God would not let the king's sin go unpunished in front of the nation. Some point out that in a fallen world, the sins of parents often bring suffering on their children, and that this story shows that painful reality honestly. Many also hold that young children who die are safe with God, pointing to David's own words later in the chapter. It's okay to find this hard. The Bible doesn't ask us to pretend it isn't. What it does

show is that sin is never private. It always hurts others, often the most vulnerable.

David fasts and prays for seven days, lying on the ground all night. His servants try to get him up, but he won't eat. On the seventh day, the baby dies. The servants are afraid to tell him. If he was this upset while the child was alive, what will he do now?

David sees them whispering and asks, "Is the child dead?" When they say yes, he does something that surprises everyone. He gets up, washes, changes his clothes, goes to the house of the LORD, and worships. Then he goes home and eats.

His servants are confused. He explains. "While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows whether the LORD will not be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."

Many Christians have found comfort in those last words: "I will go to him." They see in them David's hope that he will be with his son again someday.

Then David comforts Bathsheba. The text calls her "his wife" now. She has lost her husband and her child, and she has endured all of this because of David's choices. Later, she has another son. "He called his name Solomon. The LORD loved him." God sends Nathan with a second name for the baby: Jedidiah, which means loved by the LORD.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Grace in the Middle of the Mess**

Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba, becomes the next king, builds the temple, and continues the line of David that leads to Jesus. Matthew's genealogy even mentions Bathsheba, calling her "her who had been Uriah's

wife," a reminder of exactly what happened. God didn't approve of what David did. But He brought grace and new life out of a terrible situation. And Bathsheba, the woman who had no voice in chapter 11, becomes one of the most influential people in the kingdom, the mother of a king, who later speaks up boldly to make sure Solomon gets the throne.

The chapter ends with David leading the army to capture the Ammonite city of Rabbah, which is what he should have been doing back in chapter 11. But Nathan's words hang over everything that follows. The sword will never depart from your house. In the next chapters, we'll see how true they were.

KEY VERSE

David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has put away your sin. You will not die."

2 Samuel 12:13 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Nathan told a story instead of accusing David directly?
2. Compare David's "I have sinned" with Saul's in 1 Samuel 15. What's the difference?
3. God forgave David, but there were still consequences. Why doesn't forgiveness always remove consequences?
4. Who is a Nathan in your life, someone who loves you enough to tell you the truth?

TRY THIS *Read Psalm 51 slowly this week. If there's something you need to confess, pray it to God in your own words, and if you've hurt someone, take one step toward making it right.*

CHAPTER 7

Tamar and Absalom

2 Samuel 13–14

Nathan had warned that the sword would never depart from David's house. Chapter 13 is where that warning starts coming true. It's one of the hardest chapters in the Bible, and we're going to handle it carefully. The writer tells it plainly, and he leaves no doubt about who did wrong.

David had many wives and many children. His oldest son was Amnon. Another son, Absalom, had a beautiful sister named Tamar. Amnon and Tamar had the same father, David, but different mothers. Amnon became obsessed with Tamar. The text says he "loved her," but as the story shows, it wasn't love at all. It was a selfish desire that made him sick.

Amnon had a cousin and friend named Jonadab, described as "a very subtle man," which means crafty. Jonadab gave him a plan to get Tamar alone: pretend to be sick and ask the king to send Tamar to make him food. David, without suspecting anything, sent her.

When Tamar came and Amnon got her alone, he grabbed her. She said no clearly and repeatedly. "No, my brother, do not force me! For no such thing ought to be done in Israel. Don't you do this folly!" She reasoned with him. She thought about what it would do to her and what it would make him. She even tried to buy time by

suggesting he ask the king. But Amnon would not listen, and because he was stronger, he raped her.

Then the writer shows what Amnon's so-called love really was. Immediately afterward, Amnon hated her even more than he had wanted her, and he had her thrown out and the door bolted behind her. Tamar tore the special robe that showed she was a king's daughter, put ashes on her head, and went away crying out loud. She didn't stay silent. She grieved publicly, as a way of saying: something terrible has been done to me.

SAFETY NOTE **Sexual Assault and Family Abuse**

What Amnon did to Tamar was a crime, and the Bible calls it what it was. It was not her fault. She said no, and he forced her anyway. Sadly, sexual abuse still happens, and often it's by someone the person knows: a family member, a relative, a family friend, a boyfriend or girlfriend, or someone in a position of trust. If someone has ever touched you in a sexual way you didn't want, or pressured or forced you, it is never your fault, no matter what you were wearing, where you were, or what happened before. You don't have to keep it secret, even if the person is family, and even if someone tells you to keep quiet. Tell a trusted adult, like a parent, a teacher, a school counselor, a doctor, or a pastor. If the first person doesn't help, tell another. In the United States, you can call the RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673 or visit rainn.org, call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453, and in an emergency, call 911. What happened to you matters, and you deserve help and healing.

Tamar's brother Absalom finds her and figures out what happened. His response is painful to read. "But now hold your peace, my sister. He is your brother. Don't take this thing to heart." He tells her to keep quiet. Absalom is secretly planning revenge, but in the meantime, his sister is silenced. "So Tamar remained desolate in

her brother Absalom's house." Desolate means ruined, alone, and abandoned. It's the last we hear of her in the story.

And what about David, her father and the king? "But when King David heard of all these things, he was very angry." That's it. He was angry, and he did nothing. Some ancient manuscripts, including the Septuagint and a Dead Sea Scroll, add that David wouldn't punish Amnon because he loved him, since he was his firstborn. Either way, David didn't protect his daughter, didn't punish his son, and didn't bring justice.

> **REAL TALK** **Silence Is Not Neutral**
>
> Tamar was failed by almost everyone around her. Jonadab helped plan the crime. Amnon committed it. Absalom told her to keep quiet. And David, the king who was supposed to bring justice, was angry and did nothing. Maybe he felt he couldn't punish Amnon after what he had done with Bathsheba. Whatever the reason, his silence left his daughter without justice and his family headed for disaster. When someone is hurt, silence protects the person who did wrong, not the person who was hurt. Telling someone isn't betraying your family. It's standing up for the person who needs protection. If someone ever tells you they've been abused, believe them, tell them it isn't their fault, and help them get to a trusted adult.

Absalom waits two years. He never says a word to Amnon, good or bad. "For Absalom hated Amnon, because he had forced his sister Tamar." Then he throws a sheep-shearing party and invites all the king's sons. He tells his servants that when Amnon is drunk, they should kill him. They do. The other princes jump on their mules and flee.

At first, a rumor reaches David that Absalom has killed all his sons. David tears his clothes and lies on the ground. Then Jonadab, the same crafty cousin who planned the crime against Tamar, tells

David that only Amnon is dead, and that Absalom had been planning it ever since what happened to his sister. Jonadab knew the whole time.

Absalom runs away to his grandfather, the king of Geshur, and stays there for three years. "David mourned for his son every day." The text says David longed to go out to Absalom once he was comforted about Amnon's death. But he doesn't go. Once again, David feels deeply but doesn't act.

> **REAL TALK** **Revenge Doesn't Heal**
>
> Absalom's anger at Amnon was understandable. His sister had been horribly wronged, and their father had done nothing. But murder didn't heal Tamar. It didn't bring justice. It just added more violence and more grief to a broken family. When someone we love is hurt and nobody does anything, the desire for revenge can be overwhelming. The right response is to seek real justice: to tell people in authority, to report crimes to the police, and to keep pushing for the person who was hurt to be protected and cared for. Revenge takes the place of justice, but it never does its job.

Joab can see that David is stuck. So he comes up with a plan. He finds a wise woman from the town of Tekoa and has her pretend to be a widow in mourning. She comes to David with a made-up story: one of her two sons killed the other in a fight, and now her family wants to execute the surviving son, which would leave her with no one. David promises to protect her son.

Then she turns it around, Nathan-style. If you would protect my son, why won't you bring back your own banished son? And she says something beautiful about God: "For we must die, and are like water spilled on the ground, which can't be gathered up again; neither does God take away life, but devises means, that he who is banished not be an outcast from him."

God devises means so that the banished don't stay outcasts. It's one of the most hopeful lines in the book. God is always working to bring people home.

David realizes Joab is behind it, but he agrees to bring Absalom back. But he does it halfway. "Let him return to his own house, but let him not see my face." Absalom lives in Jerusalem for two years without seeing his father. He's back in the city, but not back in the family.

The writer describes Absalom like a celebrity. "Now in all Israel there was no one to be so much praised as Absalom for his beauty." He had famously thick hair; when he cut it once a year, it weighed about five pounds. He's handsome, charming, and angry.

Eventually Absalom gets so frustrated that he sets Joab's barley field on fire just to get his attention. It works. Joab goes to David, and David finally calls for Absalom. Absalom bows to the ground, "and the king kissed Absalom." It looks like reconciliation. But there's no conversation, no confession, no real healing. Nothing about Tamar, nothing about Amnon. The wounds are covered, not cleaned. And under the surface, Absalom is planning something much bigger.

KEY VERSE

For we must die, and are like water spilled on the ground, which can't be gathered up again; neither does God take away life, but devises means, that he who is banished not be an outcast from him.

2 Samuel 14:14 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Tamar said no clearly and tried to reason with Amnon. Why is it important that the Bible records her words?
2. Absalom told Tamar to keep quiet, and David did nothing. What should each of them have done instead?
3. Why doesn't revenge bring healing? What does real justice look like?
4. David brought Absalom home but didn't really reconcile with him. What's the difference between avoiding a conflict and actually resolving it?

TRY THIS *Save the RAINN (1-800-656-4673) and Childhelp (1-800-422-4453) numbers in your phone, so you have them if you or a friend ever needs them.*

CHAPTER 8

My Son, My Son

2 Samuel 15–19

Absalom starts building his own following. He gets a chariot and horses and fifty men to run ahead of him, like a king. Every morning, he gets up early and stands by the road to the city gate, where people come to bring their legal cases to the king.

When someone comes by, Absalom calls out to them, "What city are you from?" He listens to their complaint, tells them they're right, and then sighs that the king has no one to hear them. "Oh that I were made judge in the land, that every man who has any suit or cause might come to me, and I would do him justice!" When people try to bow to him, he pulls them up and kisses them. He makes everyone feel seen.

"So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel." He does this for four years. It's a masterclass in manipulation: flattery, fake humility, and constant hints that the current leader doesn't care about you.

> REAL TALK **Watch Out for Smooth Talkers**
>
> Absalom was handsome, charming, and great at making people feel important. He told everyone what they wanted to hear. And he used all of it to steal their loyalty for his own ambition. People like that still exist, in friend groups, in relationships, online, and in politics. They flatter you, tell you that you deserve better than the people in your life, and slowly turn you against

> those who really care about you. That's a warning sign, especially in dating. If someone keeps trying to isolate you from your parents, friends, or church, or makes you feel like they're the only one who really understands you, talk to someone you trust. Real love doesn't need to cut you off from everyone else.

Then Absalom asks his father for permission to go to Hebron to fulfill a vow to the LORD. David, as clueless as ever, says, go in peace. Absalom has already sent secret messengers to all the tribes: when you hear the trumpet, shout, "Absalom is king in Hebron!" And he sends for Ahithophel, David's most trusted adviser, who joins the rebellion. "The conspiracy was strong, for the people increased continually with Absalom."

When David hears, he makes a quick decision. "Arise! Let's flee, or else none of us will escape from Absalom." He doesn't want a battle in the streets of Jerusalem. So the king who captured the city runs from it.

It's one of the saddest scenes in the Bible. David crosses the Kidron Valley, east of Jerusalem, and climbs the Mount of Olives barefoot, with his head covered, weeping. All the people with him are weeping too. The priests Zadok and Abiathar bring the ark, but David sends it back. "If I find favor in the LORD's eyes, he will bring me again." And if not, "behold, here I am. Let him do to me as seems good to him." He's not trying to use God like a good-luck charm. He's surrendering to God's will.

Christians have noticed that, about a thousand years later, Jesus would also cross the Kidron Valley and go up the Mount of Olives on the night He was betrayed, praying in distress. A trusted friend would also betray Him. But where David was fleeing the consequences of his own sin, Jesus was walking toward a cross to pay for the sins of others.

When David hears that Ahithophel has joined Absalom, he prays a short, urgent prayer: "LORD, please turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness." Ahithophel's advice was so respected that it was like asking God Himself. Then, almost immediately, God provides an answer to the prayer. David's friend Hushai shows up, and David sends him back to Jerusalem to pretend to join Absalom and undermine Ahithophel's advice.

On the road, a man from Saul's family named Shimei comes out and curses David, throwing rocks and dirt at him and calling him a man of blood. David's nephew Abishai wants to cut off his head. But David says no. My own son is trying to kill me. Why not this man? "Leave him alone, and let him curse." Maybe, David says, the LORD will see my misery and repay me with good. David is humbled. He knows he isn't innocent.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Did Ahithophel Turn?**
>
> The Bible doesn't say why David's best adviser betrayed him. But many readers have noticed a clue. Bathsheba's father was Eliam, and a man named Eliam son of Ahithophel is listed among David's mighty men in chapter 23. If that's the same Eliam, then Ahithophel was Bathsheba's grandfather. He may have been holding a grudge for years over what David did to his granddaughter and to Uriah. That doesn't excuse betrayal. But it's another reminder that David's sin had consequences that spread far beyond one night.

In Jerusalem, Ahithophel gives Absalom two pieces of advice. The first is meant to make the break with David permanent: a public act that shows Absalom has taken over his father's household. It fulfills, in a terrible way, exactly what Nathan said would happen. The second is military: let me take twelve thousand men tonight and attack David while he's exhausted. Strike only the king, and

everyone else will come back to you. It's brilliant advice. It probably would have worked.

But Hushai convinces Absalom to wait, gather the whole army, and lead it himself. It sounds more glorious, so Absalom takes it. "For the LORD had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel." God answered David's prayer.

When Ahithophel sees that his advice hasn't been followed, he goes home, puts his affairs in order, and takes his own life. It's a short, stark verse, and it's heartbreaking.

> **SAFETY NOTE** **When Life Feels Like It's Falling Apart**
>
> Ahithophel had been the most respected adviser in the kingdom. When his plans failed and his future collapsed, he saw no way forward. If you've ever felt that kind of despair, after a failure, a loss, a public embarrassment, or a mistake you think can't be undone, please hear this: your life is worth more than your plans, your reputation, or your worst moment. Failures feel final, but they almost never are. Things can change, and people want to help you through it. Please talk to someone today: a parent, a counselor, a pastor, a doctor, or another trusted adult. In the United States, you can call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. If you are in immediate danger, call 911. And if you've lost someone to suicide, it is not your fault, and you don't have to carry that grief alone.

David's army gathers east of the Jordan. Before the battle, David gives his commanders, Joab, Abishai, and Ittai, an order that everyone hears: "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." Even now, David loves his son.

The battle happens in the forest of Ephraim, and Absalom's army is crushed. Then a strange thing happens. Absalom is riding his mule under a big oak tree, and his head gets caught in the branches.

Maybe it was his famous hair. The mule keeps going, and Absalom is left hanging in the air, helpless.

A soldier sees him and tells Joab. Joab asks why he didn't kill him. The soldier says, are you kidding? Even for a thousand pieces of silver, I wouldn't disobey the king's order. Joab doesn't care. "I'm not going to wait like this with you." He goes and kills Absalom, and his armor bearers finish it. They throw Absalom's body into a pit in the forest and pile a huge heap of stones on it.

Two runners carry the news to David, who is sitting between the gates of a city, waiting. The first runner avoids the question. The second answers clearly. David's only question is, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" Not, did we win? Not, is my kingdom safe? Is my son okay?

When he hears, "The king was much moved, and went up to the room over the gate and wept. As he went, he said, 'My son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! I wish I had died instead of you, Absalom, my son, my son!'"

> **REAL TALK** **A Father's Grief**
>
> David's cry over Absalom is one of the most heartbreaking moments in all of literature. Absalom had tried to kill him, stolen his kingdom, and humiliated him in public. And David still wished he could have died in his place. Maybe part of his grief was guilt, knowing how much of this started with his own sin and his own silence. But mostly, it's a picture of a parent's love that doesn't stop, even when a child goes terribly wrong. If you're in a hard place with your parents right now, it may be hard to believe, but many parents feel that kind of love even when they're angry, disappointed, or failing to show it well. And Christians see in David's cry something even deeper: God the Father didn't just wish He could take our place. In Jesus, He did.

David's grief is so overwhelming that the army sneaks back into the city like they lost the battle. Joab finally confronts him harshly: your men just saved your life, and you're acting like you'd rather they were all dead and Absalom alive. Go out and encourage them, or nobody will be left with you by tonight. David pulls himself together and goes to sit at the gate.

On his way back to Jerusalem, David shows mercy. He spares Shimei, who comes groveling. He hears Mephibosheth's side of the story. And he tries to rebuild a broken, divided kingdom. But the damage has been done, and the tension between the northern tribes and Judah will soon break out again.

KEY VERSE

The king was much moved, and went up to the room over the gate and wept. As he went, he said, "My son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! I wish I had died instead of you, Absalom, my son, my son!"

2 Samuel 18:33 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. How did Absalom steal the hearts of the people? Where do you see that kind of manipulation today?
2. David sent the ark back to Jerusalem and said, let God do as seems good to Him. What does that show about his faith at this low point?
3. Why do you think David let Shimei curse him?
4. What does David's grief over Absalom show about a parent's love, and about God's?

TRY THIS *Write a note or text to a parent or someone who has cared for you, thanking them for one specific way they've loved you.*

CHAPTER 9

The Last Words of David

2 Samuel 20–24

The last chapters of 2 Samuel aren't in strict time order. They're more like an appendix, a collection of stories, songs, and lists that help sum up David's life. Some of them probably happened earlier in his reign. Together, they show both the best and the worst of the king.

First, the kingdom almost splits again. A troublemaker named Sheba blows a trumpet and shouts, "We have no portion in David, neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse. Every man to his tents, Israel!" The northern tribes follow him. Joab chases him down, and when Sheba hides in a walled city, a wise woman of the city negotiates with Joab from the wall and saves her town. Along the way, Joab murders yet another rival commander, Amasa. The violence of the sons of Zeruiah never really stops.

Chapter 21 tells of a famine and a painful story about Saul's descendants. In the middle of it is a quiet, powerful picture of grief and devotion. A woman named Rizpah, the mother of two of the men who were killed, spreads sackcloth on a rock and guards their bodies day and night for months, keeping away the birds and wild animals. When David hears what she has done, he is moved to give Saul and Jonathan and the others a proper burial. Sometimes one person's faithful love changes a king's heart.

Then comes chapter 22, David's song of praise. It's almost exactly the same as Psalm 18. It looks back on his whole life, especially the years when he was running from Saul. "The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer." He describes being in deep trouble: "In my distress, I called on the LORD. Yes, I called to my God. He heard my voice out of his temple." And God came to rescue him like a storm, with thunder and lightning. "He drew me out of many waters." "He delivered me, because he delighted in me."

> **REAL TALK** **God Delights in You**
>
> "He delivered me, because he delighted in me." David wrote that line knowing everything he had done, good and bad. And he still believed God delighted in him. That's not because David was perfect. It's because God's love isn't based on our performance. Many teenagers carry a quiet belief that God is disappointed in them, or that He only tolerates them. The Bible says something different. If you belong to Him, He delights in you, not because you've earned it, but because He loves you. David also says, "For you are my lamp, LORD. The LORD will light up my darkness." If you're in a dark place, that's a prayer you can borrow.

Chapter 23 begins with "the last words of David," a short poem about what a good ruler should be. One who rules justly, in the fear of God, is like the morning light when the sun rises, like grass sparkling after the rain. David knows he hasn't always been that kind of king. "Isn't my house so with God?" he asks. But he holds on to God's promise: "Yet he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure." His hope isn't in his own record. It's in God's faithfulness.

Then comes a list of David's mighty men, his most elite warriors, with short, action-movie descriptions of their feats. One killed eight hundred men in one battle. Another fought until his hand froze to his sword. Another killed a lion in a pit on a snowy day. And at the

very end of the list is a name that hits hard: "Uriah the Hittite." The writer doesn't let us forget.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Water from Bethlehem**

One story in the list of mighty men shows why they loved David. Once, when David was hiding in the cave of Adullam and the Philistines had taken over his hometown of Bethlehem, he said longingly, "Oh that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!" He probably didn't mean it as an order. But three of his mighty men broke through the Philistine lines, got the water, and brought it back. And David wouldn't drink it. "He would not drink of it, but poured it out to the LORD." He said it was like the blood of the men who had risked their lives for it. It was too precious to drink, so he gave it to God as an offering. Leaders who honor the sacrifices of the people around them inspire that kind of loyalty.

The book ends with a story that's both troubling and hopeful. "Again the LORD's anger burned against Israel, and he moved David against them, saying, 'Go, count Israel and Judah.'" David orders Joab to take a census of all the fighting men. Even Joab, who isn't exactly known for his spiritual sensitivity, objects. "But why does my lord the king delight in this thing?" David insists, and it takes nearly ten months.

Why was a census wrong? The text doesn't fully explain. Many readers think David was proud of his military strength and was trusting in numbers instead of in God. A census of fighting men was a way of measuring your power. Exodus also said that whenever Israel was counted, each person should pay a ransom so that no plague would come, and some think this was ignored. Either way, as soon as it's done, "David's heart struck him after he had counted the people." He confesses: "I have sinned greatly in that which I have done."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Did God or Satan Move David?**

2 Samuel 24:1 says the LORD moved David to take the census. But 1 Chronicles 21:1, telling the same story, says, "Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to take a census of Israel." So which was it? Christians have understood this in a few ways. Many see both as true from different angles: God, in His sovereignty, allowed Satan to tempt David as a judgment on Israel, much as God allowed Satan to test Job. The Bible elsewhere says God "tempts no one," so God permitted the temptation but wasn't the author of the sin. Others note that Chronicles was written centuries later and may be making clear what Samuel left in the background, that the direct tempter was an adversary, not God. The Hebrew word satan can also mean an adversary in general, so some think Chronicles refers to a human enemy or an accusing angel. All these views agree that David was responsible for his choice, and that God remained in control.

The prophet Gad brings David three options for his punishment: famine, fleeing from enemies, or a plague. David's answer shows what he's learned about God over a lifetime. "Let us fall now into the LORD's hand, for his mercies are great. Let me not fall into man's hand." A plague comes, and seventy thousand people die.

When the destroying angel reaches Jerusalem, God says, "It is enough. Now withdraw your hand." The angel is standing by the threshing floor of a man named Araunah the Jebusite. David sees the angel and cries out, "Behold, I have sinned, and I have done perversely; but these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me, and against my father's house." The shepherd king asks to take the punishment himself instead of his flock.

Gad tells David to build an altar on Araunah's threshing floor. When David arrives, Araunah offers to give him the land for free, along with oxen for the sacrifice and wood from the threshing sledges. But David refuses. "No, but I will most certainly buy it from you for a

price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing."

> **REAL TALK** **Worship That Costs Something**
>
> "I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing." David understood that giving God something that cost him nothing wasn't really giving at all. What does your faith cost you? Maybe it's time you could spend on something else, money you could keep, a reputation you might lose, a habit you give up, or a hard conversation you have because it's right. Following Jesus isn't supposed to be a burden that crushes you; He says His burden is light. But real love always involves sacrifice. And remember, the greatest sacrifice was the one God made for us. Our giving is a response to His.

David buys the threshing floor, builds an altar, and offers sacrifices. "So the LORD was entreated for the land, and the plague was removed from Israel."

And here's the amazing ending. That threshing floor becomes the site of the temple. 1 Chronicles says David declared, "This is the house of the LORD God." And 2 Chronicles says Solomon built the temple "on Mount Moriah," on the threshing floor David had bought. Mount Moriah is the same place where, a thousand years earlier, Abraham had been willing to offer his son Isaac, and God had provided a ram instead. The place where God provided a substitute for Isaac and where David's sacrifice stopped the plague becomes the place where sacrifices will be offered for centuries. And not far from there, Christians believe, God provided the ultimate sacrifice in His Son.

KEY VERSE

The king said to Araunah, "No, but I will most certainly buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver.

2 Samuel 24:24 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the writer listed Uriah the Hittite at the end of the list of mighty men?
2. David wrote that God "delighted in" him, even after everything he'd done. Do you believe God delights in you? Why or why not?
3. How do you put together 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1? Which explanation makes the most sense to you?
4. What is something your faith costs you, or something you could give to God that would actually cost you something?

TRY THIS *Give something to God this week that costs you: time to help someone, money to someone in need, or giving up something you'd rather keep doing.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

2 Samuel ends with an old king buying a threshing floor and an altar standing on the site where the temple would one day be built. David was a great king. He was also an adulterer, a murderer, and a father who failed his children. The best human king Israel ever had couldn't save his own family, let alone the world. But God had made him a promise: a son of David would sit on a throne that would last forever.

Jewish readers treasure 2 Samuel 7 as the foundation of the hope for a Messiah, an anointed king from David's line, and many still pray for his coming. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, believed that promise came true in Jesus. When the angel Gabriel told Mary she would have a son, he said, "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. There will be no end to his Kingdom." Peter preached that David, "knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him," spoke about the resurrection of the Christ. David took what wasn't his; Jesus gave what was His. David's sin brought death to others; Jesus' death brings life. David's son rebelled to take the throne; God's Son humbled Himself, and God gave Him the name above every name.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. He keeps His promises, even when people fail.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all sinned, even the best of us.

Even David, the man after God's own heart, did terrible things. The Bible says all of us have sinned.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. 2 Samuel shows how sin spreads and destroys. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the true Son of David.

David's kingdom fell apart. Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again, and His kingdom will never end.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Mephibosheth didn't earn his seat at the king's table. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Turn and trust.

Like David when Nathan confronted him, admit your sin, turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Have mercy on me. Create in me a clean heart. Thank You for keeping Your promise to send a King from David's family. Thank You that Jesus, the true Son of David, gave His life for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. Forgive me, and give me a seat at Your table. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King forever. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 2 Samuel 7 and 12, then Psalm 51, David's prayer of repentance, and Luke 1.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Find a Nathan. Everyone needs someone who loves them enough to tell them the truth. Find a wise friend or mentor who will, and listen when they do.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. 2 Samuel doesn't hide anything, and you don't have to either. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if 2 Samuel is right, the God who kept His promise to a deeply flawed king is still keeping His promises, and there is still a seat at His table for you.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. There will be no end to his Kingdom.

Luke 1:32–33 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF 1 KINGS

The King Greater Than Solomon

1 Kings, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Greater Than Solomon: The Book of 1 Kings, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

Copyright © 2026 Bill McLeod. All rights reserved.

Published by Papa Bill Books.

Scripture quotations are from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, which is in the public domain.

All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” You might know a couple of stories from 1 Kings. Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, threatening to cut a baby in half. Elijah calling down fire from heaven. Maybe you’ve heard of Jezebel, whose name is still an insult three thousand years later.

1 Kings starts at the very top. Israel has its greatest king, its most beautiful building, its biggest empire, and its most famous wise man. Then, chapter by chapter, it comes apart. The wise king becomes foolish. The kingdom splits in two. Kings come and go, most of them bad. And into the darkness steps a strange, rugged prophet from the wilderness named Elijah, who takes on a king, a queen, and four hundred and fifty prophets of a false god, and then crashes so hard he asks God to let him die.

So why read it? Because 1 Kings shows that being smart, gifted, and successful isn’t the same as being faithful. It shows what happens when leaders forget God, and what it looks like to stand up for the truth when nobody else will. And it shows a God who is patient, persistent, and gentle with the worn out.

Let’s go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through 1 Kings in nine chapters: David’s last days and Solomon’s rise (1 Kings 1–2), Solomon’s wisdom (3–4), building

and dedicating the temple (5–8), the Queen of Sheba and Solomon's drift (9–11), the kingdom torn in two (12–16), Elijah, the ravens, and the widow (17), fire on Mount Carmel (18), Elijah's burnout and the gentle whisper (19), and Naboth's vineyard and Micaiah (20–22).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book 1 Kings is, where it fits, and the world it came from. Read it first. And when the kingdom splits in chapter 5, look for the quick guide to Israel and Judah. You'll need it.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as how to date the building of the temple and how to understand the lying spirit in chapter 22, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes 1 Kings in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the eleventh book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

1 Kings raises real questions. I've presented the main views fairly on the dating of the exodus and the temple (1 Kings 6:1), on the execution of the prophets of Baal, and on the lying spirit in Micaiah's vision. I'd encourage you to share your own church's view with your teen, and to explain why other Christians see it differently. Because the divided kingdom confuses many readers, chapter 5 includes a quick guide to the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

Elijah's collapse under the juniper tree in 1 Kings 19 gets special attention. A Real Talk box explains that exhaustion, burnout, and depression are not signs of weak faith, encourages readers to talk to a trusted adult or a doctor, and points them to the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Other boxes address peer pressure, standing alone for what's right, and the abuse of power in the story of Naboth's vineyard.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees Solomon's wisdom, the temple, and Elijah pointing to Jesus, while acknowledging that Jewish readers treasure 1 Kings in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see in 1 Kings that wisdom begins with listening to God, and that the God who sent fire on Carmel also speaks in a gentle whisper to the worn out.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Kind of Book Is This?

1 Kings is history told as a story, with a clear point of view. The writer judges every king by one standard: did he do what was right in the LORD's eyes, like David, or did he lead the people into idolatry? It's not a complete record of everything the kings did. The writer often tells you where to find more details, in books like the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel, which have since been lost. In the Hebrew Bible, 1 and 2 Kings were originally one book.

Where It Fits

1 Kings picks up right where 2 Samuel leaves off, with David old and dying. It covers about 120 years, from roughly 970 BC to about 850 BC: Solomon's reign, the split of the kingdom, and the first several decades of the two kingdoms that followed. 2 Kings continues the story all the way to the destruction of both kingdoms. 1 and 2 Chronicles retell much of the same history from a different angle, focusing on Judah.

Who Wrote It?

The book doesn't name its author. Jewish tradition says the prophet Jeremiah wrote Kings. Because 2 Kings ends during the exile in Babylon, most scholars think the final version was put together around that time, drawing on older royal records and prophetic stories, as part of a larger history running from Deuteronomy through Kings. That helps explain its big question: how did God's

people end up losing everything? Christians with different views agree that it is God's Word.

The World of 1 Kings

When Solomon takes the throne, Israel is at peace and stronger than it has ever been. Egypt and Assyria are relatively weak, so small kingdoms like Israel have room to grow. Trade routes run through the land, bringing wealth. Later, the neighboring kingdom of Aram, also called Syria, with its capital at Damascus, becomes Israel's main enemy. And the Phoenicians, a seafaring people from cities like Tyre and Sidon, bring both trade and the worship of Baal, a storm god believed to send rain and good harvests.

Two Big Characters

The first half of 1 Kings belongs to Solomon, the king who had everything: wisdom, wealth, peace, and the privilege of building God's temple. The second half belongs to Elijah, a prophet who had almost nothing but God's word, and who stood against a powerful king and queen who were leading Israel into Baal worship. Watching the contrast between them is one of the keys to the book.

Hard Stories and Safety Notes

1 Kings includes violence, war, injustice, and a prophet so exhausted and discouraged that he asks to die. Including a story in the Bible doesn't mean God approves of what happens in it. When we come to these stories, you'll find a box with a safety note. If you ever feel so worn out or hopeless that you think about not wanting to live, please talk to a trusted adult or a doctor. In the United States you can call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, and in an emergency, call 911.

The Map

Chapter 1 (1 Kings 1–2): Long live King Solomon.

Chapter 2 (1 Kings 3–4): A listening heart.

Chapter 3 (1 Kings 5–8): A house for God's name.

Chapter 4 (1 Kings 9–11): Splendor and drift.

Chapter 5 (1 Kings 12–16): A kingdom torn in two.

Chapter 6 (1 Kings 17): Ravens and a widow.

Chapter 7 (1 Kings 18): Fire on Mount Carmel.

Chapter 8 (1 Kings 19): The gentle whisper.

Chapter 9 (1 Kings 20–22): Naboth and Micaiah.

Contents

Setting the Scene 7

1 Long Live King Solomon *1–2* 11

2 A Listening Heart *3–4* 17

3 A House for God's Name *5–8* 23

4 Splendor and Drift *9–11* 29

5 A Kingdom Torn in Two *12–16* 35

6 Ravens and a Widow *17* 41

7 Fire on Mount Carmel *18* 46

8 The Gentle Whisper *19* 53

9 Naboth and Micaiah *20–22* 59

Where This Points 66

CHAPTER 1

Long Live King Solomon

1 Kings 1–2

1 Kings opens with a sad picture. “Now King David was old and advanced in years; and they covered him with clothes, but he couldn’t keep warm.” The giant-killer, the warrior king, the man who danced before the ark, is now an old man shivering in bed. His servants find a young woman named Abishag to take care of him and keep him warm. The writer makes clear that David had no sexual relationship with her. He’s simply too weak.

And when a king gets weak, people start making moves.

David’s oldest surviving son is Adonijah. With Amnon and Absalom dead, he assumes the throne should be his. So “Adonijah the son of Haggith exalted himself, saying, ‘I will be king.’” He gets chariots and horsemen and fifty men to run in front of him, exactly what Absalom did before his rebellion. Then the writer adds a revealing comment: “His father had not displeased him at any time in saying, ‘Why have you done so?’” David had never once corrected him. David’s failure as a father shows up again.

> REAL TALK **Kids Who Are Never Told No**
>
> The Bible says David never confronted Adonijah, never asked him, why did you do that? It sounds nice to have a parent who never says no. But Adonijah grew up thinking he could take whatever he wanted, and it ended up costing him his life. Boundaries are a form of love. Parents who correct their kids

> aren't trying to ruin their lives. They're trying to help them become people who can handle power, disappointment, and responsibility. If your parents set limits you don't like, it might be worth asking what they're trying to protect you from. And if you ever end up in a position of leadership, remember: people who are never told no usually end up hurting themselves and others.

Adonijah throws a big sacrificial feast and invites the king's sons and important officials, including Joab, the army commander, and Abiathar the priest. But he leaves out a few people: Nathan the prophet, Zadok the priest, Benaiah the commander of David's bodyguard, David's mighty men, and his younger half-brother Solomon. That tells you he knows exactly who would oppose him.

Nathan acts fast. He goes to Bathsheba, Solomon's mother, and warns her. "Haven't you heard that Adonijah the son of Haggith reigns, and David our lord doesn't know it?" If Adonijah becomes king, Bathsheba and Solomon will probably be killed as rivals. Nathan tells her to remind David of a promise he made: that Solomon would be king after him.

Remember Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11? She didn't speak a word except to say she was pregnant. Now she walks into the king's room and speaks boldly. "My lord, you swore by the LORD your God to your servant, 'Assuredly Solomon your son shall reign after me, and he shall sit on my throne.'" She tells him about Adonijah's feast and says that all Israel is waiting for him to announce his successor. While she's still talking, Nathan comes in and backs her up.

It works. The old king rouses himself one last time. He swears, "As the LORD lives, who has redeemed my soul out of all adversity," that Solomon will be king, today.

David gives detailed orders. Put Solomon on my own mule. Take him down to the Gihon spring. "Let Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anoint him there king over Israel. Blow the trumpet, and say, 'Long live King Solomon!'" And that's exactly what happens. "Zadok the priest took the horn of oil from the Tent, and anointed Solomon. They blew the trumpet; and all the people said, 'Long live King Solomon!'" The crowd celebrates so loudly the ground shakes.

Across town, Adonijah and his guests are just finishing their feast when they hear the noise. A messenger runs in with the news: David has made Solomon king. The guests panic and scatter. Adonijah runs to the altar and grabs its horns, a way of asking for sanctuary. "Adonijah was afraid because of Solomon." Solomon agrees to spare him, as long as he behaves.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Solomon?**
>
> Solomon wasn't David's oldest son. In most ancient kingdoms, the oldest son inherited the throne. But in Israel, the king was supposed to be the one God chose, and the Bible had been showing God's preference for younger sons all along: Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph over his older brothers, David over his. 1 Chronicles says God told David that Solomon would build the temple. And remember that when Solomon was born, God sent Nathan to give him a special name, Jedidiah, loved by the LORD. Solomon, the son of Bathsheba, is a living reminder that God can bring grace out of even the worst situations.

Then David's time comes. He calls Solomon to his bedside and gives him his final charge. "I am going the way of all the earth. You be strong therefore, and show yourself a man; and keep the instruction of the LORD your God, to walk in his ways." If Solomon obeys God, David says, God will keep His promise that there will always be one of David's descendants on Israel's throne.

But David's last words also include some uncomfortable instructions. He tells Solomon to deal with Joab, who murdered Abner and Amasa in peacetime, and with Shimei, who cursed David when he fled from Absalom. David had promised not to kill Shimei himself, but he leaves Solomon to handle it. Many readers find this troubling. It looks like David holding grudges to the very end. Others see it as David finally addressing the injustice he had been too weak to deal with during his reign, especially Joab's murders. Either way, it's a reminder that even the man after God's own heart was complicated to the end.

"David slept with his fathers, and was buried in David's city." He had reigned for forty years. "Solomon sat on David his father's throne; and his kingdom was firmly established."

The rest of chapter 2 is tense. Adonijah asks Bathsheba to ask Solomon if he can marry Abishag, the young woman who had cared for David. It sounds innocent, but in that culture, taking the former king's companion could be a claim to his throne. Solomon sees it as a second attempt at a coup and has Adonijah executed. Abiathar the priest, who had supported Adonijah, is removed from the priesthood and sent home, which the writer says fulfills the old prophecy against Eli's family from 1 Samuel. Joab, hearing what's happening, runs to the altar too, but Benaiah kills him there. And Shimei is put under house arrest in Jerusalem, breaks the agreement, and is executed.

> **REAL TALK** **Starting Clean**
>
> It's a bloody way to begin a reign, and many readers feel uneasy about it. Some see Solomon wisely securing a fragile kingdom against real threats. Others see the same ruthless politics every ancient king used, and a warning sign about the kind of king Solomon might become. The text doesn't fully

> settle it. What's clear is that the kingdom Solomon inherited came with a lot of unfinished business, much of it caused by David's failure to deal with problems when they first came up. Unresolved conflict doesn't go away. It just gets passed on. If there's something in your life or your family that needs to be dealt with, a conflict, an apology, a hard conversation, it's usually better to face it now, wisely and with help, than to leave it for later.

One more thing stands out in these opening chapters. God's promise to David is being kept, but not because the people involved are especially good. David is weak and passive until the last minute. Adonijah is grasping and entitled. Joab switches sides. The palace is full of scheming and fear. And yet the son God chose ends up on the throne, just as God said. That's a theme you'll see all through Kings. God works through flawed, messy, sometimes ruthless people, and His purposes still move forward. That doesn't excuse their sins. But it should give you hope when your own family or school or church feels like a mess. God isn't stuck because people are complicated.

By the end of chapter 2, Solomon is firmly on the throne. He is young, maybe around twenty, and he has just inherited the most powerful kingdom Israel has ever had. What will he do with it? The next chapter gives an answer that has inspired people for three thousand years.

KEY VERSE

I am going the way of all the earth. You be strong therefore, and show yourself a man; and keep the instruction of the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, according to that which is written in the law of Moses, that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn yourself.

1 Kings 2:2–3 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. The Bible says David never corrected Adonijah. How do you think that shaped Adonijah?
2. Bathsheba went from silent in 2 Samuel 11 to bold in 1 Kings 1. What do you think changed?
3. David told Solomon to "show yourself a man" by keeping God's instructions. What do you think real strength looks like?
4. Is there unfinished business in your life that you need to deal with instead of passing it on?

TRY THIS *Ask a parent, grandparent, or older mentor what advice they would give you if it were their last chance. Write it down.*

CHAPTER 2

A Listening Heart

1 Kings 3–4

Chapter 3 starts with a mixed report. Solomon makes an alliance with Egypt by marrying Pharaoh's daughter. That's a big political win, but it's also the first hint of a problem that will grow. Then the writer says something warm: "Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of David his father." But even that comes with a catch: "except that he sacrificed and burned incense in the high places." The temple hadn't been built yet, so people worshiped at local hilltop shrines. Some of those places would later become centers of idol worship.

One day Solomon goes to the high place at Gibeon, the most important one, and offers a thousand burnt offerings. That night, "the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, 'Ask for what I should give you.'"

Think about that. God says, ask for anything. What would you ask for? Money? Fame? A long life? A cure for something? Revenge on someone who hurt you?

Solomon's answer is surprising. He starts by thanking God for His kindness to David. Then he's honest about how he feels. "I am just a little child. I don't know how to go out or come in." He's not literally a child, but he feels completely unprepared for the job. He's in

charge of a nation too big to count, and he knows he can't do it on his own.

So he asks for one thing. "Give your servant therefore an understanding heart to judge your people, that I may discern between good and evil; for who is able to judge this great people of yours?"

The Hebrew phrase for an understanding heart is literally a listening heart, or a hearing heart. Solomon isn't asking to be a genius. He's asking for a heart that listens: to God, to people, and to the truth, so he can tell right from wrong and lead well.

> **REAL TALK** **What Would You Ask For?**
>
> Solomon could have asked for anything, and he asked for wisdom. Not so he could be impressive, but so he could serve people well. James says something similar to us: "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him." You don't need a dream at Gibeon to ask God for wisdom. You can ask for it right now about your friendships, your choices, your future, your family. Wisdom isn't the same as being smart. Plenty of smart people make terrible decisions. Wisdom is knowing what's right and having the sense to do it. And Proverbs, many of which Solomon wrote or collected, says where it starts: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge."

God is thrilled with the request. "This request pleased the Lord." God tells Solomon that because he didn't ask for long life or riches or the death of his enemies, but for understanding to do justice, God will give him "a wise and understanding heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, and after you none will arise like you." And then God adds a bonus: the things Solomon didn't ask for, wealth and honor, God will give him too. And if Solomon obeys like David did, God will give him a long life.

Solomon wakes up and realizes it was a dream. He goes to Jerusalem, stands before the ark of the covenant, and offers sacrifices. It's a good start.

Then comes the most famous test of his wisdom. "Then two women who were prostitutes came to the king, and stood before him." That detail matters. These women are about as low on the social ladder as you can get. And yet they have access to the king, and he takes their case seriously.

The first woman explains. We live in the same house. We both had babies a few days apart. Nobody else was there. During the night, her baby died because she rolled over on him. Then she got up while I was asleep, took my son, and put her dead son next to me. When I woke up to nurse my baby, he was dead, but when I looked closely in the morning, I saw it wasn't my son.

The second woman says no, the living child is mine. They argue right there in front of the king. "No! But the living one is my son, and the dead one is your son." There are no witnesses, no DNA tests, no way to know.

Solomon summarizes their arguments. Then he says, "Get me a sword." Everyone must have gasped. When they bring the sword, he gives the order: "Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other."

Immediately, the real mother cries out. Her heart is breaking for her son. "Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and in no way kill him!" She'd rather lose him than see him die. The other woman says, "He shall be neither mine nor yours. Divide him."

And Solomon knows. "Give the first woman the living child, and definitely do not kill him. She is his mother."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Would Solomon Really Have Done It?**

Almost every reader agrees that Solomon never intended to harm the baby. The sword was a test, designed to reveal which woman truly loved the child. Real love sacrifices for the good of the one it loves. Fake love, or jealousy, would rather destroy than lose. Solomon's wisdom wasn't just knowing facts. It was understanding people's hearts. Notice too that the story shows Solomon's care for justice even for the poorest people in his kingdom. A wise ruler doesn't only listen to the powerful.

"All Israel heard of the judgment which the king had judged; and they feared the king, for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice."

Chapter 4 describes Solomon's kingdom at its peak. He organizes his government with officials and twelve districts that each supply food for the palace for one month a year, and the daily food list is enormous. Israel is at peace. "Judah and Israel were numerous as the sand which is by the sea in multitude," eating, drinking, and happy, each person under their own vine and fig tree, a picture of security and contentment.

And Solomon's wisdom becomes world-famous. "God gave Solomon abundant wisdom, understanding, and breadth of mind like the sand that is on the seashore." He was wiser than all the famous wise men of the east and of Egypt. "He spoke three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered one thousand five." He studied trees, plants, animals, birds, reptiles, and fish. You could almost call him the first great scientist in the Bible. "People of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon."

REAL TALK **Wisdom Includes Curiosity**

Notice how wide Solomon's wisdom was. It wasn't only about religion. He wrote songs and proverbs, and he studied cedars and hyssop, animals and

> fish. Christians throughout history have seen science, art, music, and learning as ways of exploring God's world. You don't have to choose between faith and curiosity. Whether you love biology, history, engineering, music, or anything else, studying it carefully and honestly can be a way of honoring the God who made it. The book of Proverbs, much of which comes from Solomon, is full of practical advice about work, money, friendship, words, anger, and laziness. It's a great book for teens. Try reading one chapter a day for a month.

It's worth noticing the order of things in these chapters. Solomon asked for wisdom first, and God gave him everything else as a bonus. Jesus later said something similar: seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness, and the other things you need will be given to you as well. When we chase success, money, or popularity first, we often end up empty. When we seek God first, He takes care of the rest, maybe not always with riches like Solomon's, but always with what we truly need. The danger, as we'll see, is that once the bonuses arrive, it's easy to start loving the gifts more than the Giver.

At this point, Solomon has everything: wisdom, wealth, peace, and God's favor. If only it could stay that way.

KEY VERSE

Give your servant therefore an understanding heart to judge your people, that I may discern between good and evil; for who is able to judge this great people of yours?

1 Kings 3:9 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. If God told you to ask for anything, what would you honestly ask for? Why?
2. Solomon said he felt like a little child who didn't know what to do. Why is admitting that a sign of wisdom, not weakness?
3. What's the difference between being smart and being wise?
4. How did Solomon's test reveal the real mother? What does it show about real love?

TRY THIS *Read one chapter of Proverbs each day this week. Pick one verse to write down and try to live out.*

CHAPTER 3

A House for God's Name

1 Kings 5–8

David had wanted to build a temple for God, but God told him that his son would do it. Now Solomon is ready. "Behold, I intend to build a house for the name of the LORD my God, as the LORD spoke to David my father."

Solomon makes a deal with Hiram, the king of Tyre, who had been David's friend. Tyre is famous for its cedar forests and skilled builders. Hiram's workers cut cedar and cypress logs in Lebanon, float them down the coast on rafts, and deliver them to Israel. In exchange, Solomon sends huge amounts of wheat and olive oil every year.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Cost of Construction**
>
> The temple was built with massive amounts of labor. Solomon drafted tens of thousands of Israelite workers to serve in Lebanon in shifts, a month there and two months at home, and used tens of thousands more to cut and carry stone. Later in 1 Kings, the people complain that Solomon's labor demands were a "heavy yoke." Building God's house was a good thing, but the way it was done sowed seeds of resentment that would eventually help tear the kingdom apart. It's a reminder that doing something for God doesn't excuse treating people badly along the way.

Chapter 6 gives the date: "In the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt, in the

fourth year of Solomon's reign," construction begins. That's around 966 BC. Scholars debate how to read the 480 years. Some take it literally, which would date the exodus to around 1446 BC. Others think it's a symbolic number, twelve generations of forty years, and date the exodus later, in the 1200s BC. Christians hold both views.

The temple itself wasn't huge by modern standards, about ninety feet long, thirty feet wide, and forty-five feet high. But it was stunning. The walls were lined with cedar carved with flowers, palm trees, and cherubim, and the inside was overlaid with gold. There was a front porch, a main hall called the Holy Place, and at the back, a perfect cube about thirty feet on each side: the Most Holy Place, where the ark of the covenant would be kept. Two giant cherubim, fifteen feet tall and covered in gold, spread their wings over it.

One detail is fascinating. "The house, when it was under construction, was built of stone prepared at the quarry; and no hammer or ax or any tool of iron was heard in the house while it was under construction." All the stone was cut off-site and fitted together quietly. The building of God's house was surrounded by a kind of holy silence.

In the middle of construction, God speaks to Solomon. "Concerning this house which you are building, if you will walk in my statutes, and execute my ordinances, and keep all my commandments to walk in them, then I will establish my word with you." And then God promises, "I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel." The building matters, but obedience matters more. God isn't impressed by gold. He's looking for faithful hearts.

The temple takes seven years to build. Then the writer mentions that Solomon spent thirteen years building his own palace, which was much bigger. Some readers think the writer is quietly pointing out Solomon's priorities.

Then comes the dedication, one of the greatest days in Israel's history. The priests carry the ark into the Most Holy Place and set it under the wings of the cherubim. And as they come out, "the cloud filled the LORD's house, so that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud; for the LORD's glory filled the LORD's house." It's the same glory cloud that filled the tabernacle in the days of Moses. God has come to live among His people.

> **REAL TALK** **God's Glory Then and Now**
>
> When the temple was dedicated, God's glory was so overwhelming that the priests couldn't even stand. In the Old Testament, God's presence was especially connected to the temple. But the New Testament says something amazing: God's presence is no longer limited to a building. John says that in Jesus, God's Word "became flesh and lived among us. We saw his glory." Jesus called His own body a temple. And Paul says that Christians, together and individually, are now God's temple, because the Holy Spirit lives in them. That means worship isn't just something that happens in a church building. It can happen anywhere you are.

Solomon then stands before the altar, spreads his hands toward heaven, and prays one of the longest prayers in the Bible. He begins, "LORD, the God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above, or on earth beneath; who keeps covenant and loving kindness with your servants."

Then he asks a profound question. "But will God in very deed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens can't contain you; how much less this house that I have built!"

Solomon understands something important. The temple isn't a box that holds God. The universe can't hold Him. The temple is a place where God chooses to meet with His people and hear their prayers. So Solomon asks God to listen whenever people pray toward this place. "Yes, hear in heaven, your dwelling place; and when you hear, forgive."

He imagines all kinds of situations: someone accused of a crime, the army defeated in battle, a drought, a famine, a plague. And even foreigners who come from far away because they've heard of God's great name. Solomon prays that God will hear them too, "that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD himself is God." The temple was never meant to be just for Israel. It was meant to draw the whole world to God.

Most strikingly, Solomon prays about a time when Israel will sin so badly that they'll be taken away as captives to a foreign land. If they turn back to God and pray toward this land and this city and this house, he asks, then hear them and forgive them. It's as if Solomon could see the exile coming. The writer of Kings, writing during the exile, wanted his readers to know: even now, God is listening.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hear and Forgive**

Solomon's prayer repeats one phrase over and over: hear and forgive. He doesn't pretend Israel will be perfect. He expects them to fail. His hope isn't that the people will never sin, but that God will be merciful when they turn back. 2 Chronicles, which retells this story, records God's answer: "if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." That promise was specifically for Israel and the temple, but Christians have long found in it a picture of how God responds to anyone who humbly turns to Him.

Solomon ends by blessing the people. “Blessed be the LORD, who has given rest to his people Israel, according to all that he promised. There has not failed one word of all his good promise.” And he gives them a challenge: “Let your heart therefore be perfect with the LORD our God.” Perfect here means whole, undivided, fully devoted.

Solomon’s prayer also shows us how to pray. He starts with who God is: there is no God like You. He remembers what God has already done and promised. He’s honest about human failure. He asks boldly for specific things. He prays not only for himself but for his whole nation, and even for foreigners he’s never met. And he ends with praise and a call to faithfulness. You don’t have to pray a prayer as long as Solomon’s, but that pattern can help when you don’t know what to say: praise God for who He is, thank Him for what He’s done, confess honestly, ask for what you need, pray for others, and commit yourself to Him again.

The celebration lasts fourteen days, with an enormous number of sacrifices. The people go home “joyful and glad in their hearts” for all the goodness God had shown.

It’s the high point of Israel’s history. God’s glory fills the temple. The king is wise. The people are united and joyful. If you were a reader in exile, hearing this story, you’d feel the ache. This is what we had. How did we lose it?

KEY VERSE

But will God in very deed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens can't contain you; how much less this house that I have built!

1 Kings 8:27 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God reminded Solomon in the middle of building that obedience mattered more than the building?
2. Solomon said that even heaven can't contain God. Why build a temple at all?
3. What does it mean that Christians are now God's temple? How should that change the way you live?
4. Solomon's prayer expected people to fail and asked God to forgive. How does that give you hope?

TRY THIS *Find a quiet place this week and pray Solomon's simple prayer for yourself: hear and forgive. Then thank God for one promise He has kept.*

CHAPTER 4

Splendor and Drift

1 Kings 9–11

After the temple is dedicated, God appears to Solomon a second time, just like He did at Gibeon. He tells Solomon He has heard his prayer: “I have made this house holy, which you have built, to put my name there forever; and my eyes and my heart shall be there perpetually.”

But then God gives Solomon a clear choice. If you walk before Me with integrity like David, I will establish your throne forever. “But if you turn away from following me, you or your children, and not keep my commandments and my statutes which I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them,” then Israel will be cut off from the land, and this beautiful temple will become a ruin that people walk past and shake their heads at.

It’s a warning with a fork in the road. Hold on to it. The rest of this chapter shows which way Solomon goes.

At first, everything looks amazing. Solomon builds cities, fortresses, and a fleet of ships. He brings in gold from a faraway place called Ophir. And his fame spreads all the way to the kingdom of Sheba, probably in southern Arabia, around modern Yemen, or possibly across the Red Sea in Ethiopia.

"When the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the LORD's name, she came to test him with hard questions." She shows up with a huge caravan of camels loaded with spices, gold, and precious stones. And she asks Solomon everything she can think of, riddles, hard questions, maybe questions about life and God and justice. "Solomon answered all her questions. There wasn't anything hidden from the king which he didn't tell her."

She's blown away by his wisdom, his palace, the food on his table, his officials, and the way he worships at the temple. The Bible says it took her breath away. She tells him, "It was a true report that I heard in my own land of your acts and of your wisdom. However, I didn't believe the words until I came and my eyes had seen it. Behold, not even half was told me!"

And she praises Israel's God: "Blessed is the LORD your God, who delighted in you, to set you on the throne of Israel. Because the LORD loved Israel forever, therefore he made you king, to do justice and righteousness." A foreign queen sees clearly what a king is for. Not to get rich. To do justice and righteousness.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Queen of Sheba**

The Queen of Sheba became a legend. Ethiopian tradition says she and Solomon had a son, Menelik, who founded Ethiopia's royal line, a story told in a medieval book called the Kebra Nagast. Arabic and Jewish traditions have their own versions. The Bible itself gives only a short account. Jesus mentions her, calling her the Queen of the South: "she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, someone greater than Solomon is here." Jesus' point was that this foreign queen traveled a long way to hear wisdom, while many people who were standing right in front of Jesus, the source of all wisdom, refused to listen.

Chapter 10 describes Solomon's wealth like a highlight reel of excess. He gets about twenty-five tons of gold every year. He makes two hundred large shields and three hundred small shields of hammered gold. He builds a giant ivory throne overlaid with gold, with six steps and twelve lion statues. All his drinking cups are gold. Silver is as common in Jerusalem as rocks. "So King Solomon exceeded all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom."

It sounds like the dream life. But if you know Deuteronomy, alarm bells should be going off. Deuteronomy 17 gave specific rules for Israel's future kings. The king "shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt." He "shall not multiply wives to himself, that his heart not turn away. He shall not greatly multiply to himself silver and gold." Read 1 Kings 10 and 11 with those rules in mind. Solomon is importing horses from Egypt. He's piling up silver and gold. And then we get to the wives.

> **REAL TALK** **Can You Have Too Much?**
>
> Solomon's wealth wasn't evil in itself. God had promised him riches. But Deuteronomy warned that kings who piled up money, horses, and wives would end up with hearts that turned away from God. The problem wasn't having things. It was what the things did to his heart. That's still true. Money, possessions, followers, and status can slowly become what you trust instead of God. Jesus said, "even Solomon in all his glory was not dressed like one of these," pointing to simple wildflowers. He wasn't saying stuff is bad. He was saying it can't give you what only God can. A good question to ask: do I own my things, or do they own me?

Chapter 11 begins with a sentence that changes everything. "Now King Solomon loved many foreign women." Pharaoh's daughter, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, Hittites, women from exactly the nations God had warned Israel not to marry into, "for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods."

Many of these marriages were political. In the ancient world, kings sealed treaties by marrying each other's daughters. A marriage alliance with Egypt or Sidon meant peace and trade. But "He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines. His wives turned his heart away."

It didn't happen overnight. "When Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not perfect with the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father was." He built shrines for Chemosh, the god of Moab, and Molech, the god of Ammon, on a hill right outside Jerusalem, facing the temple he had built for the LORD. He did this for all his foreign wives, so they could worship their gods.

The wisest man in the world, the man who prayed the great dedication prayer, who wrote three thousand proverbs, ends up building altars to idols across from God's temple.

> **REAL TALK** **The Slow Drift**
>
> Solomon didn't wake up one day and decide to worship idols. It happened slowly, over years, through a thousand small compromises: one political marriage, then another, then a shrine to keep a wife happy, then another. Each step probably seemed reasonable at the time. That's how drifting works. Nobody plans to walk away from God. They just stop paying attention to the current. It can happen through friendships, relationships, entertainment, ambition, or just being busy. That's why the people closest to you matter so much, especially the people you date and eventually marry. They will shape what you love. Ask yourself honestly: who or what is slowly shaping my heart right now? And is it pulling me toward God or away?

"The LORD was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice." Twice! Solomon had experiences with God that most people

only dream about. And it still wasn't enough to keep him faithful. Spiritual experiences are wonderful, but they don't replace daily faithfulness.

God tells Solomon the consequence. "I will surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant." But for David's sake, God won't do it during Solomon's lifetime, and He won't take the whole kingdom. He'll leave one tribe for David's family, for the sake of His promise and for the sake of Jerusalem.

Trouble starts right away. Enemies rise up in Edom and Damascus. And inside Israel, a capable young official named Jeroboam, whom Solomon had put in charge of forced labor in the north, begins to stir.

One day, Jeroboam is walking out of Jerusalem when a prophet named Ahijah meets him in a field. Ahijah is wearing a brand new robe. He takes it off and tears it into twelve pieces. Then he tells Jeroboam, "Take ten pieces." God is going to tear the kingdom out of Solomon's hand and give ten tribes to Jeroboam. And Ahijah gives Jeroboam the same offer God gave David: "if you will listen to all that I command you, and will walk in my ways," then God will build him a lasting dynasty too.

Solomon hears about it and tries to kill Jeroboam, who flees to Egypt and stays there until Solomon dies. After forty years on the throne, Solomon dies and is buried in the city of David. His son Rehoboam becomes king.

Some Jewish and Christian traditions hope that Solomon turned back to God at the end of his life, and some read the book of Ecclesiastes, with its reflections on the emptiness of wealth and pleasure, as the words of an older, wiser Solomon looking back. The

book of Kings doesn't say. It simply records that the most gifted king in Israel's history finished badly.

KEY VERSE

When Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not perfect with the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father was.

1 Kings 11:4 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. The Queen of Sheba said a king is meant to "do justice and righteousness." What do you think good leaders are for?
2. Read Deuteronomy 17:16–17. Which of those warnings did Solomon ignore?
3. Solomon's drift happened slowly. What are some small compromises that can lead you away from God over time?
4. Why do you think spiritual experiences, even seeing God twice, weren't enough to keep Solomon faithful?

TRY THIS *Make a list of the five biggest influences on your heart right now: people, media, activities. Next to each, write whether it pulls you toward God or away.*

CHAPTER 5

A Kingdom Torn in Two

1 Kings 12–16

Solomon is dead, and his son Rehoboam goes to Shechem, an important city in the north, to be crowned king of all Israel. Jeroboam has come back from Egypt, and he leads a delegation of the northern tribes to meet the new king with a simple request.

"Your father made our yoke difficult. Now therefore make the hard service of your father, and his heavy yoke which he put on us, lighter, and we will serve you." Solomon's building projects, taxes, and forced labor had been crushing. They're saying: lighten up, and we'll be loyal.

Rehoboam asks for three days to think about it. First he consults the older advisers who had served his father. Their advice is wise: "If you will be a servant to this people today, and will serve them, and answer them with good words, then they will be your servants forever." Serve them, and they'll serve you. It's a principle of leadership that still works.

"But he abandoned the counsel of the old men which they had given him, and took counsel with the young men who had grown up with him." His buddies. The guys he grew up with in the palace, who had never had to work for anything. And their advice is basically: show them who's boss. Tell them, "My little finger is thicker than my

father's waist." Some scholars think the original phrase may have been even cruder. And then: "My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions." Scorpions may have been a nickname for a particularly brutal kind of whip.

Three days later, Rehoboam gives the people his answer, word for word from his friends. "The king answered the people roughly."

> **REAL TALK** **Whose Advice Do You Listen To?**
>
> Rehoboam had two groups of advisers. One had experience and wisdom. The other had told him what he wanted to hear his whole life. He picked the second group, and it cost him most of his kingdom. It's a good question for any teenager: who are you listening to? Friends your own age matter a lot, and they can be wise. But if you only take advice from people who have the same experience and the same blind spots as you, you'll miss a lot. Look for people who have lived longer, who care about you, and who will tell you the truth even when it isn't what you want to hear. Parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, pastors, and mentors can see things you can't yet. And notice what the wise advisers told Rehoboam: real leadership means serving people, not controlling them. Jesus said the same thing.

The response is instant. "What portion have we in David? We don't have an inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, Israel!" The ten northern tribes walk away. When Rehoboam sends his official in charge of forced labor to deal with them, they stone him to death, and Rehoboam has to jump in his chariot and race back to Jerusalem.

The northern tribes make Jeroboam their king. "There was no one who followed David's house, except for the tribe of Judah only." Benjamin stays with Judah too. The united kingdom of David and Solomon, which lasted about eighty years, is over. It will never be reunited.

Rehoboam gathers an army to fight the north, but a prophet named Shemaiah tells him not to fight his own relatives, because this split is from the LORD. Surprisingly, Rehoboam listens. The kingdom stays divided.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Quick Guide to Israel and Judah**

After the split, the Bible uses names that can get confusing. Here's a cheat sheet.

The northern kingdom is called Israel, and sometimes Ephraim, after its biggest tribe. It had ten tribes. Its first king was Jeroboam. Its capital moved around and eventually settled at Samaria. It had a series of different royal families, many ending in assassinations. Every one of its kings is described as doing evil. It lasted about two hundred years, until it fell to Assyria in 722 BC, and its people were scattered.

The southern kingdom is called Judah. It had the tribe of Judah and most of Benjamin. Its first king was Rehoboam, Solomon's son. Its capital was Jerusalem, with the temple. All its kings came from David's family, just as God promised. Some were good, many were bad. It lasted about 340 years, until it fell to Babylon in 586 BC.

One more tip: before the split, Israel means the whole nation. After the split, Israel usually means the north. And when you read the prophets, a king of Israel and a king of Judah are two different kings ruling at the same time.

Now Jeroboam has a problem. The temple is in Jerusalem, in Judah. Every year, his people are supposed to go there to worship at the major festivals. "If this people goes up to offer sacrifices in the LORD's house at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, even to Rehoboam king of Judah; and they will kill me."

So he comes up with his own religion. "The king took counsel, and made two calves of gold; and he said to them, 'It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Look and behold your gods, Israel, which

brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" Sound familiar? It's almost word for word what Aaron said about the golden calf at Mount Sinai. Jeroboam puts one calf at Bethel, in the south of his kingdom, and the other at Dan, in the far north. He builds shrines on high places, appoints priests who aren't Levites, and invents his own festival to compete with the one in Jerusalem.

"This thing became a sin." It's such a big deal that for the rest of 1 and 2 Kings, the writer describes almost every northern king the same way: he walked in the sins of Jeroboam, who made Israel to sin. Jeroboam had been offered a dynasty like David's. He traded it for political security and a homemade religion.

> **REAL TALK** **Making Faith Convenient**
>
> Jeroboam's golden calves were a matter of convenience. It's too much trouble to go to Jerusalem, he said. Here's something easier, closer, and more under our control. People still do this. We like a faith that fits our schedule, doesn't ask too much, and lets us keep control. We keep the parts of God we like and replace the rest. Jeroboam probably told himself the calves still represented the God who brought them out of Egypt. But God doesn't let us redesign Him to suit ourselves. Following Jesus will sometimes be inconvenient. That's part of what makes it real.

The rest of these chapters move fast, like scrolling through a history feed. Jeroboam's son gets sick, and his wife disguises herself to visit the prophet Ahijah, now old and blind, who sees right through it and gives her a message of judgment. God tells Jeroboam, you have not been "as my servant David, who kept my commandments, and who followed me with all his heart," but "have cast me behind your back."

In the south, Rehoboam's kingdom also goes downhill, and Egypt's Pharaoh Shishak raids Jerusalem and carries off the gold shields

Solomon had made. Rehoboam replaces them with bronze ones. It's a perfect picture of the decline: the gold is gone, and they're trying to make bronze look like it.

Some kings of Judah are better. King Asa, Rehoboam's grandson, "did that which was right in the LORD's eyes, as David his father did." He removes idols and even removes his own grandmother from her position as queen mother because she had made an idol. Even the writer's praise of David is honest: David did right "except only in the matter of Uriah the Hittite."

In the north, it's chaos. Jeroboam's son is assassinated. That killer's son is assassinated. One king reigns for seven days before burning down the palace around himself. Eventually an army commander named Omri takes over and builds a new capital at Samaria. Omri was apparently powerful; Assyrian records called Israel the land of Omri for years after his death. But the Bible gives him only a few verses, because what matters to the writer isn't power. It's faithfulness. And Omri "dealt wickedly above all who were before him."

Then his son takes the throne. "Ahab the son of Omri did that which was evil in the LORD's sight above all that were before him." He marries "Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians," a Phoenician princess, and builds a temple and an altar for Baal in Samaria. "Ahab did more yet to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him."

Things have never been darker in the northern kingdom. And that's exactly when God sends Elijah.

KEY VERSE

They replied, "If you will be a servant to this people today, and will serve them, and answer them with good words, then they will be your servants forever."

1 Kings 12:7 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Rehoboam ignored the older advisers? Who do you tend to listen to when you make decisions?
2. The wise advisers said leaders should serve. How did Jesus show that kind of leadership?
3. Why did Jeroboam make the golden calves? In what ways do people make faith more convenient today?
4. Using the quick guide, explain the difference between Israel and Judah after the split.

TRY THIS *Before you make one decision this week, ask an older person you respect what they think, and really listen to their answer.*

CHAPTER 6

Ravens and a Widow

1 Kings 17

Elijah arrives in the story with no introduction, no family background, and no warning. He just walks in on King Ahab and says: "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word."

That's a direct challenge to Baal. Ahab and Jezebel worshiped Baal as the storm god, the one who supposedly controlled the rain, the clouds, and the harvest. Elijah is saying: you think Baal brings the rain? Let's see. The God of Israel is going to shut off the sky, and nothing your god does will turn it back on. Even Elijah's name is a message. In Hebrew, Elijah means my God is the LORD.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Was Baal?**

Baal was one of the most important gods in Canaan and Phoenicia. His name means lord or master. People believed he was a storm god who rode on the clouds, threw lightning, and brought the rain that made crops grow. In a farming society with no irrigation, that was everything. If it didn't rain, people starved. Canaanite stories described Baal fighting the god of death every year; when he lost, the dry season came, and when he came back to life, the rains returned. Worship of Baal often included practices God's law condemned. Jezebel was a passionate Baal worshiper, and she was determined to make Baal the main god of Israel.

Then God tells Elijah to hide. Go east, to the brook Kerith, by the Jordan River. "You shall drink from the brook. I have commanded the ravens to feed you there."

Ravens. Of all the creatures God could use, He picks ravens, birds known for being scavengers that were considered unclean under the law. But "The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the brook." Twice a day, God's strange delivery service shows up right on time. Elijah's takeout comes by air.

Then the brook dries up, because there's no rain. The drought Elijah announced is affecting Elijah too. Sometimes obeying God doesn't exempt you from the hard things happening around you.

So God gives him new directions. "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to sustain you."

Sidon. That's Jezebel's home territory, the heart of Baal country. God is sending His prophet into enemy land. And He's sending him to be cared for by a widow, one of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the ancient world, during a famine.

When Elijah arrives at the town gate, there she is, gathering sticks. He asks her for a drink of water. As she goes to get it, he adds, "Please bring me a morsel of bread in your hand."

Her answer is heartbreaking. "As the LORD your God lives, I don't have anything baked, but only a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a jar. Behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and bake it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die." She's not exaggerating. She's preparing her last meal.

REAL TALK **When You Have Almost Nothing**

The widow of Zarephath had a handful of flour, a little oil, and a son she couldn't feed. She was ready to give up. Maybe you know what it feels like to be at the end of something: money, energy, hope, or patience. Maybe your family is struggling financially, or you're just exhausted. The widow's story doesn't promise that God will always fix things the way we want. But it shows that God sees the people at the very bottom, even outside Israel, even in the land of Baal. If your family is struggling to have enough food or other basic needs, it's okay to tell a trusted adult, a school counselor, or your church. Many communities have help available, and asking for help is not shameful.

Elijah says something that sounds outrageous. "Don't be afraid. Go and do as you have said; but make me a little cake from it first, and bring it out to me, and afterward make some for you and for your son." Feed me first.

That would be a selfish request, except for what comes next. "For the LORD, the God of Israel, says, 'The jar of meal will not run out, and the jar of oil will not fail, until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth.'"

She has a choice. Trust a strange foreign prophet's promise about his God, or hold on to the little she has. "She went and did according to the saying of Elijah; and she, he, and her household ate many days." Every morning, there's just enough flour and oil in the jars. Never a lot. Always enough. "The jar of meal didn't run out and the jar of oil didn't fail, according to the LORD's word."

Then tragedy strikes. The widow's son gets sick and stops breathing. She turns on Elijah in grief and anger. "What have I to do with you, you man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to memory, and to kill my son!" Like many grieving people, she wonders whether God is punishing her for something.

Elijah takes the boy from her arms, carries him up to the upstairs room where he's been staying, and lays him on his bed. Then he cries out to God honestly, asking why He would bring this tragedy on the widow who had taken him in. He stretches himself over the child three times and prays, "LORD my God, please let this child's soul come into him again."

"The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived." It's the first time in the Bible that someone is raised from the dead.

Elijah carries the boy downstairs and hands him to his mother. "Behold, your son lives." And she says, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the LORD's word in your mouth is truth."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jesus and the Widow**

Centuries later, Jesus preached His first sermon in His hometown of Nazareth and mentioned this story. "There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah," He said, but "Elijah was sent to none of them, except to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow." The crowd was furious, because Jesus was pointing out that God had shown His kindness to a foreigner while Israel was worshiping Baal. God's love was always bigger than Israel's borders. Jesus Himself later raised a widow's only son at a town called Nain, and the crowd said that a great prophet had appeared among them. They were thinking of Elijah.

In a chapter about a king who worships a fake storm god, the true God shows what He's really like. He feeds His prophet by ravens. He keeps a poor widow's jars from running dry. He gives a dead boy his life back. Baal couldn't send rain. The LORD gives life.

KEY VERSE

The woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the LORD's word in your mouth is truth."

1 Kings 17:24 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God sent Elijah to a widow in Sidon, Jezebel's home territory?
2. The widow was asked to give first, before she saw the miracle. Have you ever had to trust God before you could see how things would work out?
3. God provided just enough flour and oil each day, not a huge supply. What might that teach about trusting God day by day?
4. Why do you think Jesus brought up this story in His hometown? Why did it make people so angry?

TRY THIS *Look for a way this week to give something to someone who has less than you: food, time, money, or attention. Do it quietly.*

CHAPTER 7

Fire on Mount Carmel

1 Kings 18

Three years go by with no rain. The land is cracked and brown. Crops have failed, streams have dried up, and animals are dying. Then God tells Elijah it's time to go back and face Ahab, because He is about to send rain.

Meanwhile, Ahab is out searching for grass to keep his horses and mules alive. He's not out looking for God. He's looking for pasture. With him is Obadiah, the official in charge of the palace. And Obadiah has a secret. He is a man who "feared the LORD greatly." When Jezebel was hunting down and killing the LORD's prophets, Obadiah hid a hundred of them in two caves, fifty in each, and fed them bread and water. He's working inside the most wicked government in Israel's history, quietly risking his life to protect God's people.

> **REAL TALK** **Faithful Where You Are**
>
> Obadiah didn't get to call down fire from heaven. He wasn't famous like Elijah. He worked a government job for a king and queen who hated God, and he used his position to save a hundred lives. Not every faithful person is a public hero. Some people serve God quietly in hard places: the only Christian on the team, the kid who sticks up for someone in a group chat, the employee who refuses to cut corners. Obadiah's story says that matters to God. You

> don't have to be on a mountaintop to be faithful. You can be faithful right where you are.

Elijah meets Obadiah on the road and tells him to go tell Ahab that Elijah is here. Obadiah panics. He explains that Ahab has been searching every nation for Elijah for three years. If I tell Ahab you're here, and then the Spirit of the LORD carries you off somewhere, Ahab will kill me. Elijah promises he'll show up. And he does.

When Ahab sees him, the first words out of his mouth are an accusation: "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" In Ahab's mind, Elijah is the problem. Elijah fires right back: "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house, in that you have forsaken the LORD's commandments and you have followed the Baals." You're the troublemaker, Ahab. Not me.

Then Elijah issues a challenge. Gather all Israel at Mount Carmel, and bring the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah who eat at Jezebel's table. Mount Carmel is a ridge near the Mediterranean coast, close to the border with Phoenicia, a place associated with Baal worship. Elijah is choosing to fight on Baal's home turf.

When the crowd gathers, Elijah steps forward and confronts them. "How long will you waver between the two sides? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." The word translated waver can mean limp, or hop from one foot to the other. The people are trying to keep one foot with the LORD and one foot with Baal, just in case. Elijah's saying: pick one.

"The people didn't say a word."

REAL TALK **Stop Wavering**

The Israelites at Carmel didn't think of themselves as Baal worshipers. They probably still believed in the LORD. They just wanted Baal too, for the rain, for the crops, to fit in with the king and queen. Elijah wouldn't let them have it both ways. A lot of people try to live with one foot in faith and one foot in something else: Christian on Sunday, and something completely different on Friday night. Or believing in God but trusting money, popularity, or a relationship to make life work. Jesus said nobody can serve two masters. Silence, like the crowd's at Carmel, is often a sign that we know exactly what the right answer is and don't want to say it.

So Elijah lays out the rules. Two bulls. Two altars. The prophets of Baal pick a bull, cut it up, and put it on the wood, but don't light the fire. Elijah will do the same. "You call on the name of your god, and I will call on the LORD's name. The God who answers by fire, let him be God." The people like this. It's a fair test. Baal was supposed to be the god of lightning. If he's real, sending fire should be easy.

Elijah even lets them go first, since there are so many of them. The prophets of Baal prepare their bull and start calling out to their god from morning until noon. "Baal, hear us!" Nothing. They start dancing around the altar. Still nothing.

And here's where 1 Kings shows its sense of humor. At noon, Elijah starts trash-talking. "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is deep in thought, or he has gone somewhere, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he sleeps and must be awakened." The phrase translated gone somewhere may actually be a polite way of saying he's gone to the bathroom. Elijah is basically saying: shout louder. Maybe your god is busy. Maybe he's on vacation. Maybe he's in the bathroom. Maybe he's taking a nap.

It's mockery, and it's meant to be. Elijah is showing how ridiculous it is to trust in a god who can't hear, can't see, and can't act. The Bible often uses humor to expose idols. The psalms describe idols with mouths that can't speak and eyes that can't see. Isaiah mocks a man who cuts down a tree, uses half of it to cook his dinner, and carves the other half into a god to worship.

The prophets of Baal get desperate. They shout louder and cut themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until blood flows. They keep it up through the afternoon, raving all the way to the time of the evening sacrifice. "But there was no voice, no answer, and nobody paid attention."

> **SAFETY NOTE** **When Worship Becomes Self-Harm**
>
> The prophets of Baal cut themselves, thinking pain would get their god's attention. The true God never asks for that. He doesn't want us to hurt ourselves to earn His love, and He never stops listening. If you ever find yourself hurting yourself on purpose, whether by cutting, burning, starving, or any other way, to cope with pain, numbness, guilt, or anything else, you're not alone, and you're not beyond help. Please tell a trusted adult, like a parent, a school counselor, or a doctor. In the United States, you can call or text 988 any time to talk with someone who understands. God's love isn't earned by pain. Jesus already took the wounds for us.

Then it's Elijah's turn. He calls the people to come near him. He rebuilds the broken-down altar of the LORD that had been thrown down, using twelve stones for the twelve tribes of Israel. It's a quiet statement: even though the kingdom is divided, God's people are still one family.

Then Elijah does something that seems crazy. He digs a trench around the altar, arranges the wood, and puts the bull on it. Then he tells the people to fill four large jars with water and pour it on the

offering and the wood. Do it again. Do it a third time. Water soaks everything and fills the trench. In the middle of a three-year drought, that water is precious, and he's pouring it out. And he's making it impossible for anyone to say the fire was a trick.

At the time of the evening offering, Elijah steps up and prays. No dancing. No shouting. No cutting. Just a short, simple prayer. "LORD, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant." And then: "Hear me, LORD, hear me, that this people may know that you, LORD, are God, and that you have turned their heart back again."

Then the LORD's fire falls. It burns up the offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and it licks up all the water in the trench.

The people fall on their faces and shout, "The LORD, he is God! The LORD, he is God!" In Hebrew, that sounds a lot like Elijah's name.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Prophets of Baal**

After the fire, Elijah orders the people to seize the prophets of Baal, and they are executed at the brook Kishon. This is hard for modern readers. Christians have understood it in a few ways. In the Old Testament law, Israel was a nation under a covenant with God, and leading people to worship other gods was a capital crime, in part because Baal worship was tied to practices like child sacrifice. Many see Elijah carrying out that covenant law in a moment of national crisis, and note that these prophets were also agents of Jezebel's campaign to kill the LORD's prophets. Others emphasize that this belonged to a unique time under the old covenant and that the New Testament never calls Christians to use violence against people of other religions. Jesus even rebuked His disciples when they wanted to call down fire on a village that rejected Him. All agree that this story gives no one permission to harm people in God's name today.

Then Elijah tells Ahab to go eat and drink, because he can hear the sound of heavy rain coming. There isn't a cloud in the sky. Elijah climbs to the top of Mount Carmel, bows down to the ground, and puts his face between his knees to pray. He sends his servant to look out toward the sea. Nothing. Go back. Seven times.

On the seventh time, the servant reports, "Behold, a small cloud, like a man's hand, is rising out of the sea." That's all Elijah needs. He tells Ahab to get in his chariot and go before the rain stops him. Soon the sky turns black with clouds and wind, and a huge rainstorm pours down. The drought is over.

And then the last detail: "The LORD's hand was on Elijah; and he tucked his cloak into his belt and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel." Elijah outruns a chariot for about seventeen miles in the rain. It's the greatest day of his life.

James, in the New Testament, uses Elijah as an example of prayer, saying he "was a man with a nature like ours." He wasn't a superhero. He was a person who prayed, and God answered. And as the next chapter will show, he was very much a man with a nature like ours.

KEY VERSE

Elijah came near to all the people, and said, "How long will you waver between the two sides? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." The people didn't say a word.

1 Kings 18:21 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Ahab called Elijah the troubler of Israel. Why do people sometimes blame the person who points out a problem instead of the person causing it?
2. What does it look like for someone today to waver between two sides?
3. Why do you think Elijah made fun of the prophets of Baal? Is there a place for humor in exposing false ideas?
4. Compare the prayers of the prophets of Baal with Elijah's prayer. What's the difference?

TRY THIS *Identify one area where you've been trying to keep one foot on each side. Make one concrete choice this week to stop wavering.*

CHAPTER 8

The Gentle Whisper

1 Kings 19

If you've ever had a huge high followed by a crushing low, this chapter is for you.

Ahab goes home and tells Jezebel everything Elijah did, especially that he killed all her prophets. Jezebel isn't impressed by the fire or the rain. She's furious. She sends Elijah a message: may the gods punish me if, by this time tomorrow, I haven't made your life like the lives of those prophets.

And Elijah, who just stood alone against 850 false prophets and watched fire fall from heaven, runs for his life.

That might seem strange. Why would he be afraid of one queen after everything he just saw? But it's actually very human. After an enormous adrenaline rush, people often crash hard. Elijah had been living in hiding for three years, carrying the weight of a whole nation, and had just gone through the most intense day of his life. He'd hoped Carmel would change everything. Instead, the queen is still in power and still trying to kill him. The disappointment hits as hard as the fear.

He runs south, all the way through Judah to Beersheba, at the edge of the desert, about a hundred miles. He leaves his servant there. Then he goes another day's journey alone into the wilderness and

collapses under a juniper tree, a scrubby desert bush; many translations call it a broom tree.

And he asks to die. "It is enough. Now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers."

That's one of the most honest prayers in the Bible. The great prophet of fire is done. He feels like a failure. He thinks nothing he did mattered. He's exhausted, alone, and hopeless.

> **REAL TALK** **Burnout Is Not Weak Faith**
>
> Elijah had just experienced one of the greatest miracles in history. He had more faith than almost anyone who ever lived. And he still crashed so hard he wanted to die. That should tell you something important: exhaustion, burnout, anxiety, and depression are not signs of weak faith. They can happen to anyone, including people who love God deeply. Bodies and minds get worn out, especially after long stress, big disappointments, lack of sleep, or carrying more than anyone should carry alone. Look at how God responds to Elijah in the rest of this chapter. He doesn't scold him or tell him to pray harder. He gives him sleep, food, time, and His presence. If you're feeling worn out, numb, or hopeless, please don't try to push through it alone. Talk to a parent or another trusted adult, and see a doctor, because some causes of depression and exhaustion are physical and very treatable. Counseling can help too, and getting help is wise, not weak. And if you ever feel like Elijah did, like you want your life to end, please reach out right away. In the United States, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. If you are in danger, call 911. You matter, and this is not the end of your story.

Elijah lies down under the bush and falls asleep. And then something tender happens. An angel touches him and says, "Arise and eat!" Elijah looks around, and there by his head is a cake of bread baking on hot stones and a jar of water. He eats, drinks, and lies back down.

The angel comes again, touches him a second time, and says, "Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you."

Notice what God does first. Not a sermon. Not a lecture about faith. Not a rebuke for running away. Food, water, sleep, and a gentle touch. Twice. God knows that Elijah is not just a soul but a body, and that his body is completely spent. Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is eat a meal and take a nap.

> **REAL TALK** **Take Care of Your Body**
>
> God cared about Elijah's sleep and nutrition before He addressed anything else. That's a good reminder for teenagers, who often get far less sleep than they need. Doctors generally recommend eight to ten hours a night for teens, and many get much less, thanks to homework, jobs, sports, and phones. Lack of sleep can make anxiety, sadness, anger, and hopelessness much worse. So can skipping meals, never getting outside, or never taking a break from screens. Taking care of your body isn't selfish or unspiritual. It's part of honoring the God who made you. Try putting your phone in another room at night. Eat real food. Move your body. Rest is a gift from God, not a reward you have to earn.

Strengthened by the food, Elijah travels forty days and forty nights to Horeb, which is another name for Mount Sinai, the mountain of God, where Moses received the law. He goes into a cave and spends the night there.

Then God speaks. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" It's not an angry question. It's an invitation to talk.

Elijah pours out his heart. I've been so zealous for You. The Israelites have rejected Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets. "I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." Elijah feels completely alone. And honestly, he's not quite right. Obadiah hid a hundred prophets. But when you're

burned out, it often feels like you're the only one, and like everything depends on you.

God tells him to go out and stand on the mountain, because the LORD is about to pass by.

Then a huge, powerful wind tears the mountains apart and shatters the rocks. "But the LORD was not in the wind." After the wind, an earthquake. But the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, a fire. But the LORD was not in the fire.

"After the fire, there was a still small voice." Other translations call it a gentle whisper, or the sound of a low whisper, or even the sound of sheer silence.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Still Small Voice**
>
> The Hebrew phrase is hard to translate. It can mean a thin, quiet sound, a soft whisper, or even a kind of silence you can almost hear. The wind, earthquake, and fire recall Mount Sinai in the days of Moses, when God came down in thunder, fire, and smoke. Elijah had just seen God answer with fire on Carmel. But this time, God shows that He doesn't always come in the spectacular. Sometimes He comes in quiet. Christians have read this in different ways. Some see it as a lesson that God usually speaks gently, through His word and His Spirit, rather than through dramatic signs. Others see it as God's tenderness toward a broken man, meeting him quietly because he couldn't handle anything louder. Both can be true.

When Elijah hears the whisper, he wraps his face in his cloak and goes out to stand at the entrance of the cave. And the voice asks the same question again. "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah gives exactly the same answer, word for word. He's still hurting. One encounter with God didn't fix everything instantly. That's realistic. Recovery from burnout often takes time.

So God gives him three things.

First, a purpose. Go back. Anoint Hazael as king of Aram, Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha as the prophet who will succeed you. Elijah's work isn't over, but he won't have to do it all himself.

Second, a partner. Elisha will be his apprentice and friend.

Third, perspective. "Yet I reserved seven thousand in Israel, all the knees of which have not bowed to Baal." You are not the only one, Elijah. There are seven thousand faithful people you don't even know about. Paul quoted this in Romans to remind Christians that God always keeps a faithful remnant, even when it looks like everyone has given up.

Elijah leaves the mountain and finds Elisha plowing a field with twelve pairs of oxen; Elisha is driving the last pair. Elijah walks over and throws his cloak around Elisha's shoulders, a sign that Elisha is being called to take up his work. Elisha understands. He asks to say goodbye to his parents. Then he does something dramatic: he slaughters his oxen, burns his plowing equipment to cook the meat, and throws a feast for the people. There's no going back to farming. "Then he arose, and went after Elijah, and served him."

> **REAL TALK** **You Were Never Meant to Do It Alone**
>
> One of the reasons Elijah burned out was that he thought he was alone. God's answer was to give him a friend and to remind him of seven thousand others. You weren't meant to carry life by yourself either. God made us for community: family, friends, church, mentors. If you feel like you're the only one who cares, the only one trying, or the only one struggling, it might be time to let someone in. Who could be an Elisha for you, someone to walk alongside? And who might need you to be that for them?

Elijah went from the mountaintop to the bottom of despair in a single day. But God met him there with bread, water, rest, a whisper, and a friend. The God who answered by fire is the same God who whispers to the worn out.

KEY VERSE

After the earthquake a fire passed; but the LORD was not in the fire. After the fire, there was a still small voice.

1 Kings 19:12 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Elijah crashed so hard right after his greatest victory?
2. What did God do first to help Elijah? What does that tell you about how God cares for us?
3. Elijah thought he was the only faithful person left. Why does burnout make us feel so alone?
4. Have you ever experienced God in a quiet way rather than a dramatic one? What was it like?

TRY THIS *This week, take one practical step to care for your body and mind: go to bed an hour earlier, put your phone away at night, or tell someone how you're really doing.*

CHAPTER 9

Naboth and Micaiah

1 Kings 20–22

The last chapters of 1 Kings focus on Ahab. Chapter 20 tells of two wars with the king of Aram, also called Syria. In both, God gives Ahab victory against huge odds, sending prophets to tell him what to do. But Ahab makes a peace deal with the defeated Syrian king that God had told him to destroy, and a prophet tells him it will cost him his life. Ahab goes home "sullen and angry." He does that a lot.

Then comes one of the most chilling stories in the Bible.

Next to Ahab's palace in Jezreel is a vineyard that belongs to a man named Naboth. Ahab wants it for a vegetable garden. So he makes Naboth an offer: I'll give you a better vineyard somewhere else, or I'll pay you what it's worth.

It's not an unreasonable offer, by today's standards. But Naboth says no. "May the LORD forbid me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers to you!" In Israel, land wasn't just property. God had given each family its land as an inheritance, and the law said it should stay in the family forever. Naboth isn't being stubborn. He's being faithful.

Ahab goes home, lies on his bed, turns his face to the wall, and refuses to eat. The most powerful man in Israel is pouting like a toddler because he can't have a garden.

Jezebel finds him and is disgusted. “Do you now govern the kingdom of Israel? Arise, and eat bread, and let your heart be merry. I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.” In her Phoenician world, kings took what they wanted. She’s going to show Ahab how it’s done.

She writes letters in Ahab’s name, seals them with his seal, and sends them to the elders and nobles of Naboth’s town. The instructions are cold and calculated. Declare a day of fasting, as if some terrible sin needs to be dealt with. Seat Naboth in a place of honor. Then bring in two worthless men to testify falsely that he cursed God and the king. Then take him out and stone him.

And the leaders of the town do it. Every single one of them goes along with it. Two liars testify. Naboth is taken outside the city and stoned to death. 2 Kings later adds that his sons were killed too, so no heir would be left to claim the land.

When Jezebel hears Naboth is dead, she tells Ahab, go take possession of the vineyard. And Ahab gets up and goes.

> **REAL TALK** **Power, Injustice, and the People Who Go Along**
> Naboth’s story is about the abuse of power. A king wanted something. A queen used the king’s authority, fake religion, and false witnesses to take it. And a whole town’s leaders knew it was wrong and went along with it anyway, probably out of fear. Injustice usually needs more than one bad person. It needs people who stay quiet, follow orders, and look away. The prophet Micah later summed up what God wants: “to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” Today, injustice can look like powerful people taking advantage of the poor, lies spread to destroy someone’s reputation, or groups turning on one person. If you see someone being targeted, lied about, or mistreated, don’t be one of the elders who went along. Speak up, support the person being hurt, and tell someone with the authority to help.

But God sees. He sends Elijah to meet Ahab in Naboth's vineyard, with a question that cuts right to the point: "Have you killed and also taken possession?" And then a terrible prophecy: in the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up Ahab's blood too. And the same judgment will fall on Jezebel and on Ahab's whole family.

Ahab's greeting tells you everything. "Have you found me, my enemy?" Elijah answers, "I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do that which is evil in the LORD's sight."

And then, surprisingly, Ahab repents. He tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth, fasts, and goes around quietly and humbly. And God notices. He tells Elijah, "See how Ahab humbles himself before me?" Because Ahab humbled himself, God delays part of the judgment. Even for one of the worst kings in Israel's history, God responds to humility. That's how merciful He is.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Even Ahab**
>
> It's striking that God responded to Ahab's repentance at all. The writer has just said there was no one like Ahab, "who sold himself to do that which was evil in the LORD's sight." And yet when Ahab humbled himself, God showed mercy. Ahab's repentance didn't seem to last, and the consequences still came. But this little scene shows God's heart. He takes no pleasure in judgment, and He is always ready to respond to anyone who humbles themselves. Nobody is too far gone to turn back.

Three years later comes the final story. Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, who is a good king, comes to visit Ahab. The two kingdoms have made peace, and their royal families are even connected by marriage. Ahab asks Jehoshaphat to join him in battle to take back the city of Ramoth Gilead from Syria. Jehoshaphat agrees, but says, "Please inquire first for the LORD's word."

So Ahab gathers his prophets, about four hundred of them, and asks, should I go to war? And all four hundred answer together: Go up, for the Lord will give it into the king's hand. One of them even makes iron horns and acts out how Ahab will gore the Syrians.

But Jehoshaphat isn't convinced. Four hundred prophets saying exactly what the king wants to hear seems a little suspicious. "Isn't there here a prophet of the LORD, that we may inquire of him?"

Ahab admits there's one more. "Micaiah the son of Imlah; but I hate him, for he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil." That might be the most honest thing Ahab ever says. He doesn't want truth. He wants a cheerleader.

They send a messenger to get Micaiah, and on the way, the messenger gives him some advice: all the other prophets agree, so just go along with them and say something nice. Micaiah's answer is the heart of this chapter. "As the LORD lives, what the LORD says to me, that I will speak."

> **REAL TALK** **Standing Alone Against the Crowd**
>
> Micaiah was one man against four hundred. Everyone in the room wanted him to say yes. The king hated him. The messenger begged him to go along. And he refused to say anything except what God told him. Peer pressure is one of the most powerful forces in a teenager's life. When everyone in your friend group agrees, saying something different can feel impossible. But the truth isn't decided by a vote. Micaiah teaches us that sometimes faithfulness means being the only one who says no: no to the party, no to the gossip, no to the cheating, no to the lie everyone's telling. That takes courage. It also helps to have even one friend who will stand with you. And if the pressure is about something dangerous, tell a trusted adult.

When Micaiah arrives, the kings are sitting on their thrones at the city gate, with all four hundred prophets performing in front of

them. Ahab asks Micaiah the question. And Micaiah, with obvious sarcasm, repeats what the others said: go up and win. Ahab can tell he's mocking them. How many times do I have to make you swear to tell me only the truth?

So Micaiah tells him. "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd." In other words, the king will die, and his army will be left without a leader.

Then Micaiah describes a vision. He saw the LORD sitting on His throne, with the armies of heaven standing around Him. The LORD asked who would entice Ahab to go to battle and fall at Ramoth Gilead. A spirit volunteered to be a lying spirit in the mouths of Ahab's prophets, and the LORD allowed it. So, Micaiah says, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouths of all your prophets, and He has decreed disaster for you.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Lying Spirit?**
>
> This vision troubles many readers. Would God send a lie? Christians have understood it in several ways. Many see it as a picture of God's judgment in which He gives people over to what they have chosen. Ahab had surrounded himself with prophets who told him what he wanted to hear, and God allowed that deception to lead to his downfall, while at the same time sending Micaiah to tell him the truth. Paul describes something similar when he says that God sends a strong delusion to people who refuse to love the truth. Others read the vision as a kind of parable, describing in heavenly-court language the fact that Ahab's prophets were lying. All agree that God Himself cannot lie, and that the point of the story is that Ahab was warned plainly and chose not to listen.

One of the four hundred prophets walks up and slaps Micaiah in the face. Ahab orders Micaiah thrown in prison and fed only bread and water until he returns safely. Micaiah's last words are bold: "If you

return at all in peace, the LORD has not spoken by me." Then he turns to the crowd: "Listen, all you people!"

Ahab is nervous anyway. So he comes up with a plan. He tells Jehoshaphat to wear his royal robes into battle, while Ahab disguises himself as an ordinary soldier. Some ally. The Syrian king has ordered his chariot commanders to fight only against the king of Israel, so they chase Jehoshaphat, thinking he's Ahab, until he cries out and they realize their mistake.

Then, "A certain man drew his bow at random, and struck the king of Israel between the joints of the armor." A random arrow. Not even aimed. And it finds the one gap in Ahab's armor. You can disguise yourself from the Syrians, but not from God.

Ahab is propped up in his chariot facing the enemy all day, and he dies at evening. They bring his body back to Samaria and bury him. When they wash his chariot at the pool of Samaria, the dogs lick up his blood, just as the LORD had said through Elijah.

The book ends with brief summaries of Jehoshaphat, who did what was right in the LORD's eyes, and of Ahab's son Ahaziah, who walked in the ways of his father and mother. The story of Elijah and Elisha continues in 2 Kings.

KEY VERSE

Micaiah said, "As the LORD lives, what the LORD says to me, that I will speak."

1 Kings 22:14 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the elders of Naboth's town went along with Jezebel's plan? What would you have done?
2. God responded to Ahab's humility, even after everything he had done. What does that show about God?
3. Ahab said he hated Micaiah because he never said anything good about him. Why do people prefer cheerleaders to truth-tellers?
4. When have you felt pressure to say what everyone else was saying? How did you respond?

TRY THIS *This week, when you're tempted to go along with something you know is wrong, practice Micaiah's response in your own words: I'm going to say what's true.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

1 Kings begins with the wisest king in history and the most glorious building in Israel, and it ends with a wicked king bleeding to death in his chariot. Solomon was wise, but not wise enough to stay faithful. The temple was beautiful, but Solomon himself admitted that heaven can't contain God, "how much less this house that I have built!" Elijah was powerful, but he burned out and needed someone to rescue him. Every good thing in the book points beyond itself to something greater.

Jewish readers treasure 1 Kings as the story of the first temple and of the prophets who called Israel back to God, and many still expect Elijah to come again. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, believed that what these stories pointed to arrived in Jesus. Jesus said the Queen of Sheba traveled far "to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, someone greater than Solomon is here." Paul calls Christ "the power of God and the wisdom of God." John says that in Jesus, God's Word "became flesh and lived among us," and Jesus called His own body a temple that would be destroyed and raised in three days. And on a mountain, Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus, talking about the death He would accomplish in Jerusalem. Solomon's wisdom, the temple's glory, and Elijah's fire all find their fulfillment in Him.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. He is the God who sends fire and the God who whispers to the worn out.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all drifted.

Even Solomon, the wisest man alive, turned his heart away from God. The Bible says all of us have sinned.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. 1 Kings shows how sin tears kingdoms apart. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is greater than Solomon.

Solomon built a temple and then turned away. Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again, so that we can know God and be with Him forever.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being wise, gifted, or good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Stop wavering.

Elijah asked how long the people would waver between two sides. Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I've drifted from You, and I've tried to keep one foot on each side. I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You that You are patient with me, and gentle when I'm worn out. Thank You that Jesus, who is greater than Solomon, gave His life for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. Forgive me, and give me a listening heart. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 1 Kings 3, 18, and 19, then read Matthew 12 and the story of the transfiguration in Luke 9.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Guard your heart. Solomon drifted slowly. Build habits that keep you close to God: daily prayer, Scripture, church, rest, and friends who follow Jesus.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Elijah asked how long the people would waver, and he waited for their answer. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if 1 Kings is right, the God who answered by fire and spoke in a still small voice is still speaking, and someone greater than Solomon is here.

The Queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and will condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, someone greater than Solomon is here.

Matthew 12:42 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF 2 KINGS

The King Who Keeps the Lamp Burning

2 Kings, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Keeps the Lamp Burning: The Book of 2 Kings, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

Copyright © 2026 Bill McLeod. All rights reserved.

Published by Papa Bill Books.

Scripture quotations are from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, which is in the public domain.

All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” You might remember a few wild stories from 2 Kings. A prophet carried into heaven in a chariot of fire. An ax head that floats. A foreign general who dips in a muddy river seven times and comes out with skin like a baby’s. Maybe the one about the bears, which everybody wants to ask about.

2 Kings is the story of how God’s people lost everything. It begins with Elijah leaving and Elisha taking his place, performing more miracles than almost anyone in the Old Testament. But as the book goes on, the kings get worse, the warnings get louder, and the people keep refusing to listen. First the northern kingdom of Israel falls to Assyria. Then, about 135 years later, the southern kingdom of Judah falls to Babylon. The temple is burned. Jerusalem is destroyed. The people are dragged away into exile.

So why read it? Because 2 Kings is honest about what happens when people ignore God for generations. And yet, even in the darkest moments, there are flashes of light: a brave servant girl, a baby king hidden in the temple, an eight-year-old who grows up to change a nation, and a final scene that whispers that God’s promise to David isn’t dead.

Let’s go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through 2 Kings in nine chapters: Elijah's departure and Elisha's double portion (2 Kings 1–3), Elisha's miracles of oil, life, and bread (4), Naaman (5), the floating ax head and the armies of heaven (6–8), Jehu and the hidden king (9–12), the fall of Israel (13–17), Hezekiah and the siege of Jerusalem (18–20), Manasseh and Josiah (21–23), and the fall of Jerusalem (24–25).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book 2 Kings is, where it fits, and the world it came from. Read it first. If you get confused about the two kingdoms, look back at the quick guide in the 1 Kings book, or in the Setting the Scene section here.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as how to understand the story of Elisha and the bears, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes 2 Kings in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the twelfth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

2 Kings raises real questions. A hard-passage box on Elisha and the bears (2:23–25) explains the Hebrew term ne'arim and presents the main views fairly. Jehu's violent purge and Jezebel's death are summarized without graphic detail, and the book notes that the prophet Hosea later condemned the bloodshed at Jezreel. The fall of Israel and Judah, including Manasseh's child sacrifice and the siege of Jerusalem, are handled honestly but age-appropriately.

Real Talk boxes address greed, courage, peer pressure, fear, mental health, and grief, and the book points readers to trusted adults and the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline where relevant. Background Check boxes explain archaeological finds like Hezekiah's Tunnel, Sennacherib's Prism, and the Babylonian records of Jehoiachin.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees Elisha's miracles and the surviving line of David pointing to Jesus, while acknowledging that Jewish readers treasure 2 Kings in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted

directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see in 2 Kings both the seriousness of ignoring God and the faithfulness of a God who keeps His lamp burning even in exile.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Kind of Book Is This?

2 Kings is history told as a story, with a clear point of view. It was originally the second half of one book with 1 Kings. The writer judges every king by whether he was faithful to the LORD, and he keeps asking one big question: why did God's people lose their land? The answer runs through the whole book. They were warned again and again by prophets, and they wouldn't listen.

Where It Fits

2 Kings covers about 300 years, from around 850 BC, when Elijah is taken to heaven, to around 560 BC, when the exiled king Jehoiachin is released from prison in Babylon. Many of the prophets whose books appear later in the Bible lived during these years: Amos and Hosea in the north, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, and others in the south. Reading 2 Kings helps their books make sense.

Who Wrote It?

Like 1 Kings, the book doesn't name its author. Jewish tradition says Jeremiah wrote it. Since it ends during the exile in Babylon, most scholars think the final version was completed then, drawing on royal records and stories of the prophets, as part of a larger history running from Deuteronomy through Kings. Christians with different views agree that it is God's Word.

Two Kingdoms, Two Empires

After Solomon, the kingdom split. The northern kingdom, called Israel, had its capital at Samaria and a series of different royal families, none of them faithful to the LORD. The southern kingdom, called Judah, had its capital at Jerusalem, the temple, and kings from David's family, some good and many bad. During 2 Kings, two huge empires rise. Assyria, based in what is now northern Iraq, destroys Israel in 722 BC. Then Babylon, based in what is now southern Iraq, destroys Judah and Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Archaeology and 2 Kings

Many people and events in 2 Kings show up in ancient records outside the Bible. Assyrian inscriptions mention kings like Jehu, Hezekiah, and Manasseh. Sennacherib's own account of his attack on Jerusalem has been found. A tunnel Hezekiah cut through solid rock still carries water under Jerusalem today. And Babylonian tablets list food rations for Jehoiachin, king of Judah, in exile. You'll find boxes on some of these finds along the way.

Hard Stories and Safety Notes

2 Kings includes war, famine, violent revolutions, child sacrifice, and the destruction of a city. Including a story in the Bible doesn't mean God approves of what happens in it. Often the writer is showing us how badly things have gone wrong. When we come to these stories, you'll find a box with a safety note. If you are ever going through something that feels like too much, please talk to a trusted adult. In the United States you can call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, and in an emergency, call 911.

The Map

Chapter 1 (2 Kings 1–3): The chariot of fire.

Chapter 2 (2 Kings 4): Oil, life, and bread.

Chapter 3 (2 Kings 5): Naaman.

Chapter 4 (2 Kings 6–8): More are with us.

Chapter 5 (2 Kings 9–12): Jehu and the hidden king.

Chapter 6 (2 Kings 13–17): The fall of Israel.

Chapter 7 (2 Kings 18–20): Hezekiah and the siege.

Chapter 8 (2 Kings 21–23): The boy king and the lost book.

Chapter 9 (2 Kings 24–25): The fall of Jerusalem.

Contents

Setting the Scene .....

1 The Chariot of Fire *1–3* .....

2 Oil, Life, and Bread *4* .....

3 Naaman *5* .....

4 More Are with Us *6–8* .....

5 Jehu and the Hidden King *9–12* .....

6 The Fall of Israel *13–17* .....

7 Hezekiah and the Siege *18–20* .....

8 The Boy King and the Lost Book *21–23* .....

9 The Fall of Jerusalem *24–25* .....

Where This Points .....

CHAPTER 1

The Chariot of Fire

2 Kings 1–3

2 Kings opens with Ahab dead and his son Ahaziah on the throne of Israel. Ahaziah falls through a lattice window in his upstairs room and is badly hurt. Instead of asking the LORD what will happen, he sends messengers to ask Baal-zebub, the god of the Philistine city of Ekron, whether he'll recover. The name Baal-zebub probably meant something like lord of the flies, a mocking nickname for the god. In the New Testament, a version of the name, Beelzebul, became a name for Satan.

God sends Elijah to intercept the messengers. Is it because there is no God in Israel that you're going to ask the god of Ekron? Tell the king he won't get out of bed. He's going to die. When the messengers report back, the king asks what the man looked like. They say, "He was a hairy man, and wearing a leather belt around his waist." The king knows immediately. "It's Elijah the Tishbite."

The king sends soldiers to arrest Elijah, and fire from heaven falls on two groups of fifty. The third captain falls on his knees and begs for mercy, and the angel of the LORD tells Elijah to go with him. Elijah delivers the message to the king in person, and Ahaziah dies, just as he said. The point of the story is the same one Elijah made on Carmel: the LORD is God, and you can't go around Him to some other power.

Then comes one of the most famous scenes in the Bible. “When the LORD was about to take Elijah up by a whirlwind into heaven, Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal.”

Everyone seems to know what’s about to happen. Elijah, Elisha, and groups of prophets in Bethel and Jericho all know that God is going to take Elijah away that day. Three times, Elijah tells Elisha to stay behind. Three times, Elisha refuses. “As the LORD lives, and as your soul lives, I will not leave you.” It’s the same kind of loyalty Ruth showed Naomi. Elisha won’t let his teacher go alone.

At each town, groups of young prophets come out and ask Elisha, do you know the LORD is going to take your master from you today? Elisha’s answer is short. Yes, I know. Be quiet. He doesn’t want to talk about it. He just wants to stay close.

> **REAL TALK** **When Someone You Love Is Leaving**
>
> Elisha knew his mentor was leaving, and he didn’t want to waste a single moment. Maybe you’ve been through something like that: a grandparent who was sick, a friend moving away, a coach or youth leader leaving, or parents separating. Those seasons are hard. Elisha’s example is to stay close while you can, to say what needs to be said, and to receive whatever they have to give you. Afterward, it’s okay to grieve hard. Elisha did. And if a loss feels too heavy to carry, please talk to a trusted adult or a counselor. You don’t have to carry it alone.

At the Jordan River, Elijah rolls up his cloak and strikes the water, and it divides, like the Red Sea for Moses and the Jordan for Joshua. The two of them cross on dry ground. On the other side, Elijah turns to Elisha and asks, “Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you.”

Elisha says, “Please let a double portion of your spirit be on me.”

That sounds greedy, like he wants twice as much power as Elijah. But in Israel, the oldest son inherited a double portion of his father's property, which made him the main heir. Elisha is asking to be Elijah's true successor, his spiritual firstborn, carrying on his work.

Elijah says, "You have asked a hard thing." It's not his to give. But if you see me when I'm taken from you, it will happen.

They keep walking and talking. And suddenly, "behold, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven." Elijah doesn't die. He's taken. Only one other person in the Old Testament, Enoch, leaves the world without dying.

Elisha sees it. He cries out, "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" Elijah was worth more to Israel than an entire army. Then Elisha tears his clothes in grief.

Elijah's cloak has fallen to the ground. Elisha picks it up, walks back to the Jordan, and strikes the water. And he asks a question that every person who has lost a spiritual mentor eventually asks: "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" Is God still here, now that Elijah is gone?

The water divides. Elisha crosses over. God is still here. The prophets watching from Jericho say, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha," and they bow down to him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Elijah Will Return**

Because Elijah never died, many Jewish people came to believe he would come back. The prophet Malachi, at the very end of the Old Testament, promised: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes." To this day, many Jewish families set a cup of wine for Elijah at the Passover meal and open the door for him. In the New Testament, an angel says John the Baptist would come "in the spirit and

power of Elijah," and Jesus says of John, "this is Elijah, who is to come." And on the mountain where Jesus was transfigured, Elijah appeared with Moses, talking with Jesus about His coming death in Jerusalem.

Now comes the story everyone asks about. Elisha leaves Jericho and heads up to Bethel. On the way, a group of youths comes out of the city and mocks him. "Go up, you baldy! Go up, you baldy!" Elisha turns around, looks at them, and curses them in the LORD's name. Then two female bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of them.

REAL TALK **The Bears and the Youths**

This is one of the most uncomfortable stories in the Bible, and it's worth looking at carefully. First, the people involved. Some older translations call them little children, which makes the story sound like God punished kids for teasing a bald man. But the Hebrew words are ne'arim qetannim. Na'ar, the singular of ne'arim, is used for a wide age range, from a baby to a young man of fighting age; Joseph is called a na'ar at seventeen, and so are soldiers and servants. Most scholars think these were teenagers or young men, not small children. And there were at least forty-two of them, which sounds more like a mob than a playground. Second, the place. Bethel was the center of Jeroboam's golden calf worship, and its people were hostile to the LORD's prophets. Third, the insult. Go up may be a mocking reference to Elijah's being taken up, as if to say, why don't you disappear too? And mocking God's prophet was a way of mocking God. Christians read the story in a few ways. Many see it as a serious warning, at the very start of Elisha's ministry, that rejecting and mocking God's messenger was rejecting God, much as Leviticus warned that curses would come on a rebellious nation. Some note that the text says the youths were mauled, not necessarily killed. Others honestly admit that the story is still hard and that they can't fully explain it. All agree that the story is not about God being touchy about baldness, and that it doesn't give anyone permission to curse people who mock them. Jesus taught us to bless those who curse us.

Chapter 3 tells of a war against Moab. Joram, Ahab's son and the new king of Israel, teams up with Jehoshaphat, the good king of Judah, and the king of Edom. They march through the desert and run out of water. Jehoshaphat asks for a prophet of the LORD, and someone mentions Elisha.

Elisha isn't impressed with Joram. Go ask your father's prophets, he says. If it weren't for Jehoshaphat, I wouldn't even look at you. But for Jehoshaphat's sake, he agrees to help. Then he does something interesting. "But now bring me a musician." When the musician plays, the LORD's hand comes on Elisha, and he prophesies that God will fill the dry valley with water without any rain. The next morning, the valley is full of water, and Israel wins the battle.

Music helped Elisha hear from God. David's harp had calmed Saul. Throughout the Bible, music is one of the ways people connect with God, express their hearts, and quiet their minds enough to listen.

> **REAL TALK** **Carrying the Mantle**
>
> Elisha picked up Elijah's cloak and kept going. Every generation of believers has to do that: pick up the faith of the people who came before them and carry it forward. Maybe you have a parent, grandparent, pastor, or teacher whose faith has shaped you. Someday you'll have to make that faith your own. Elisha's question, where is the LORD, the God of Elijah, is a great question to ask. It's not enough to know that God was real for someone else. You need to know He's real for you. The good news is that the same God who was with Elijah is with Elisha, and He can be with you.

KEY VERSE

When they had gone over, Elijah said to Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let a double portion of your spirit be on me."

2 Kings 2:9 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Elisha refused to leave Elijah three times. What does that tell you about him?
2. What did Elisha mean by asking for a double portion? Why do you think Elijah called it a hard thing?
3. How does understanding the word ne'arim change the way you read the story of the bears? What questions do you still have?
4. Whose faith has shaped you? What would it look like to pick up their mantle?

TRY THIS *Ask someone whose faith you respect how they came to know God. Then ask God to make Himself real to you in the same way.*

CHAPTER 2

Oil, Life, and Bread

2 Kings 4

Chapter 4 is like a highlight reel of Elisha's ministry. In one chapter, he helps a desperate widow, a wealthy woman, a dying boy, and a group of hungry prophets. In each story, God meets people right where they are, in the kitchen, the bedroom, and the dinner table.

The first story begins with a woman crying out to Elisha. Her husband was one of the prophets, a man who "feared the LORD." Now he's dead, and he left debts. The creditor is coming to take her two sons as slaves to pay off what's owed. In that world, debt slavery was a real and terrifying possibility for the poor.

Elisha asks her, "What should I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?"

She says she has nothing, except a pot of oil.

Elisha tells her to do something strange. Go to all your neighbors and borrow empty jars. "Don't borrow just a few containers." Then go inside with your sons, shut the door, and start pouring oil from your little pot into the empty jars.

She does it. Her sons bring jar after jar, and she keeps pouring, and the oil keeps coming. Finally she says, bring me another one. Her son says, there aren't any more. And the oil stops.

She goes back to Elisha, and he tells her to sell the oil, pay off her debts, and live on what's left. The miracle was exactly as big as her faith. The number of jars she gathered determined how much oil she got.

> **REAL TALK** **What Do You Have in the House?**
>
> Elisha didn't start with a miracle out of nowhere. He started by asking the widow what she already had. A little pot of oil didn't seem like anything. But God used it. That's often how He works. When you feel like you have nothing to offer, a small talent, a little time, a few dollars, a kind word, God can take what you have and do more with it than you imagined. The widow also had to trust Him enough to collect a lot of jars. Sometimes faith means preparing for God to do more than you expect.

The second story is about a very different woman. In the town of Shunem lives a "prominent woman," wealthy and respected. Whenever Elisha passes through, she invites him in for a meal. Eventually she tells her husband, this man is a holy man of God. Let's build him a little room on the roof, with a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so he has a place to stay.

Elisha is so grateful that he wants to do something for her. He asks if she'd like him to put in a good word for her with the king or the army commander. Her answer is lovely: "I dwell among my own people." She's content. She doesn't need anything.

But Elisha's servant Gehazi notices something. She has no son, and her husband is old. So Elisha calls her and makes her a promise. "At this season next year, you will embrace a son." She can hardly bear it. "No, my lord, you man of God, do not lie to your servant." She had given up on that dream, and she doesn't want to hope again only to be disappointed.

But a year later, she has a son.

Years pass. The boy grows up. One day, he's out in the fields with his father during the harvest, and suddenly he cries out, my head, my head! He's carried home to his mother, sits on her lap until noon, and dies.

She doesn't scream or tell anyone. She carries his body up to Elisha's room, lays him on the prophet's bed, shuts the door, and asks her husband for a donkey and a servant. She's going to see the man of God. Her husband doesn't understand. It isn't a holy day. Why go today? She only says, "It is well," or as some translate it, it will be all right.

She rides hard to Mount Carmel. Elisha sees her coming and sends Gehazi to ask if everything's okay. She says, "It is well." But when she reaches Elisha, she falls down and grabs his feet. Gehazi tries to push her away, but Elisha says, leave her alone. She is in deep distress, and the LORD has hidden it from me.

Then she says what's in her heart. "Did I ask you for a son, my lord? Didn't I say, 'Do not deceive me'?" I didn't ask for this. I told you not to get my hopes up. And now he's gone.

> **REAL TALK** **It Is Well, and It Isn't**
>
> The Shunammite woman said "It is well" to everyone until she got to the one person who could help. Then she let it all out. Many of us do that. We tell everyone we're fine, because it's easier. But it's important to have at least one person, and God Himself, with whom you can be completely honest about how not okay you are. Her honesty wasn't a lack of faith. Going to Elisha was an act of faith. If you're carrying something heavy behind a smile, find a safe person, a parent, counselor, pastor, or trusted friend, and tell them the truth. And if you're ever thinking about hurting yourself, call or text 988 right away.

Elisha sends Gehazi ahead with his staff to lay on the boy's face, but nothing happens. The mother refuses to leave Elisha, so he goes

himself. When he gets to the house, the boy is lying dead on his bed. Elisha goes in, shuts the door, and prays to the LORD. Then he stretches himself out over the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands, and the child's body begins to grow warm. Elisha gets up, paces the room, and stretches out over him again. And "the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes."

That's one of the most delightfully specific details in the Bible. Seven sneezes. Life comes back with a sneeze.

Elisha calls the mother and says, "Take up your son." She falls at his feet, bows to the ground, and picks up her boy.

Later in the book, there's a postscript to her story. Elisha warns her of a seven-year famine, and she moves away to the land of the Philistines. When she comes back, her house and land have been taken. She goes to the king to ask for them back, and at that very moment, Gehazi happens to be telling the king about the boy Elisha raised from the dead. Gehazi says, this is the woman, and this is her son! The king gives her back everything, plus all the income from her land while she was away. God's timing is perfect.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Poison Stew and Twenty Loaves**

The chapter ends with two short miracles about food. During a famine, someone gathers wild gourds for a stew for the prophets, but they turn out to be poisonous. "Man of God, there is death in the pot!" they shout. Elisha throws in some flour, and the stew becomes safe to eat. Then a man brings Elisha twenty small loaves of barley bread. Elisha tells his servant to give it to a hundred men. The servant protests that it's nowhere near enough. Elisha insists, "for the LORD says, 'They will eat, and will have some left over.'" They eat, and there are leftovers. Centuries later, when a boy brought Jesus five barley loaves and two fish and the disciples asked, "what are these among so many?" people who knew this story would have remembered Elisha. But Jesus fed five thousand men, and the leftovers filled twelve baskets.

In this one chapter, Elisha provides oil for a widow, a son for a woman who had given up hope, life for a dead child, safe food in a famine, and bread for a hungry crowd. While the kings of Israel were busy with wars and politics, God was quietly caring for ordinary people through His prophet.

KEY VERSE

So he set it before them and they ate and had some left over, according to the LORD's word.

2 Kings 4:44 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Elisha asked the widow, "what do you have in the house?" What small things do you have that God could use?
2. Why do you think the Shunammite woman said "It is well" to everyone except Elisha?
3. Is it a lack of faith to tell God you're upset or disappointed? Why or why not?
4. How do Elisha's miracles in this chapter point forward to Jesus?

TRY THIS *Think of one small thing you have, a skill, some time, or something you own, and offer it to God this week by using it to help someone.*

CHAPTER 3

Naaman

2 Kings 5

Naaman has it all. He's the commander of the army of Syria, Israel's enemy to the north. He's a great man, respected by his king, a successful general, and "a mighty man of valor." And then the writer adds four words that change everything: "but he was a leper."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Leprosy in the Bible**
>
> The Hebrew word often translated leprosy covered a range of skin diseases, not only what doctors today call leprosy, or Hansen's disease. Some were mild, and some were serious and contagious. In Israel, people with these diseases were considered ceremonially unclean and often had to live outside the community. In other nations, the rules were different; Naaman still had his job, so his condition may not have been the most severe kind. But it was serious enough that no one could cure it, and it threatened his career and his future.

Now meet the bravest person in the story. During one of Syria's raids into Israel, soldiers captured "a little girl" and brought her back to serve as a slave in Naaman's house. She was taken from her family and her country, and she had every reason to hate the man she worked for.

Instead, she says to Naaman's wife, "I wish that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! Then he would heal him of his leprosy."

We never learn her name. But her faith and compassion set the whole story in motion. She could have kept quiet. She could have been glad her captor was suffering. Instead, she pointed him to the God who could help him.

REAL TALK **The Girl Who Spoke Up**

The servant girl was young, enslaved, far from home, and powerless. And yet she was the only person in Naaman's house who knew where real help could be found, and she was brave enough to say it. You might feel like you don't have much influence because of your age or your situation. But one sentence from a young person who trusts God can change someone's life. Maybe someone you know is struggling, and you know where help can be found: a counselor, a trusted adult, a church, or God Himself. Don't underestimate what your words can do. And her story is also a reminder that kindness to people who have hurt you, when it's safe, is one of the most powerful ways to show God's love. That doesn't mean staying in an unsafe situation; it means refusing to let bitterness win.

Naaman tells his king, and the king of Syria sends him to the king of Israel with a letter and a fortune in gifts: silver, gold, and ten sets of clothing. The letter says, I'm sending my servant Naaman to you so you can heal him.

The king of Israel reads it and panics. He tears his clothes. "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends to me to heal a man of his leprosy?" He assumes the Syrian king is trying to start a fight. Notice that the king of Israel doesn't even think about the prophet of God living in his own country. A little servant girl had more faith than the king.

Elisha hears about it and sends a message: send him to me, "and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel."

So Naaman arrives at Elisha's house with his horses and chariots, the whole impressive convoy. And Elisha doesn't even come to the door. He sends a messenger out with instructions: "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall come again to you, and you shall be clean."

Naaman is furious. "Behold, I thought, 'He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and heal the leper.'" He had a picture in his head of how this would go, and this wasn't it. He expected a show. And wash in the Jordan? It's a muddy little river. "Aren't Abanah and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?" He turns and storms away in a rage.

> **REAL TALK** **When God Doesn't Do It Your Way**
>
> Naaman's biggest obstacle wasn't his disease. It was his pride. He wanted to be treated like an important man. He wanted a dramatic healing. He didn't want to do something simple and humbling. People often approach God that way. We want Him to work on our terms, in our timing, in impressive ways. Sometimes what He asks is simple: confess, forgive, apologize, ask for help, show up, read, pray, obey. The hard part isn't figuring out what to do. It's being humble enough to do it.

His servants follow him and gently reason with him. "My father, if the prophet had asked you to do some great thing, wouldn't you have done it? How much rather then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?" If he'd asked you to do something hard, you would have done it. Why not something easy?

Once again, servants are the wisest people in the story.

Naaman listens. He goes down to the Jordan and dips himself in the water seven times. And "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean." The great general comes out of the

water with skin like a little child's, and in a way, he has become like a child, humble enough to trust and obey.

He goes back to Elisha with his whole company, stands before him, and says, "See now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel." A foreign enemy general has come to faith in the LORD. He offers Elisha a gift, and Elisha refuses. This healing isn't for sale. Grace is free.

Naaman asks for two mule-loads of Israelite dirt to take home, so he can worship the LORD on it. He also asks forgiveness in advance for one thing: when his king goes to worship in the temple of the Syrian god Rimmon, leaning on Naaman's arm, Naaman will have to bow too. Elisha simply says, "Go in peace." It's a gentle answer to a new believer in a complicated situation.

But the story has a dark ending. Elisha's servant Gehazi can't believe Elisha turned down all that money. "As the LORD lives, I will run after him, and take something from him." Notice that he uses God's name to justify his greed.

He runs after Naaman's chariot. Naaman sees him and gets down to meet him. Gehazi makes up a story: my master sent me. Two young prophets just arrived, and he'd like a talent of silver and two sets of clothes for them. Naaman gladly gives him twice as much. Gehazi hides the silver and clothes in his house and goes back to Elisha as if nothing happened.

Elisha asks, "Where did you come from, Gehazi?" Gehazi says, "Your servant went nowhere."

Elisha says, my spirit was with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you. Is this the time to take money and clothes and

olive groves and vineyards? And then the consequence: Naaman's leprosy will cling to you. Gehazi walks out, his skin white as snow.

> **REAL TALK** **Greed and Lies**
>
> Gehazi had spent years with one of the greatest prophets who ever lived. He had seen dead children raised and lepers healed. And he still threw it all away for some silver and clothes. Greed often starts with a thought like Gehazi's: they have so much, they won't miss it; I deserve something too. Then it leads to lying, hiding, and pretending. Paul wrote, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." It's not that money itself is evil. It's that loving it can lead us to do almost anything to get it. Gehazi's story is also a warning about how lies grow. He lied to Naaman, then hid what he took, then lied to Elisha's face. If you've taken something or told a lie, the best time to come clean is now, before it grows.

The story is full of reversals. The foreign enemy general is healed and comes to faith. The prophet's own servant, an Israelite, ends up with the disease. The little slave girl knows more than the king. And the man who wanted a big show finds healing in a simple, humble act of obedience.

When Jesus preached His first sermon in Nazareth, He brought up this story. "There were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed, except Naaman, the Syrian." His hometown crowd was so angry they tried to throw Him off a cliff. They didn't like being reminded that God's grace reaches outsiders and enemies, sometimes before it reaches people who think they deserve it.

KEY VERSE

He returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and came, and stood before him; and he said, "See now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel. Now therefore, please take a gift from your servant."

2 Kings 5:15 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the servant girl spoke up for the man who held her captive?
2. Naaman almost missed his healing because of pride. What's one way pride gets in the way of what God wants to do in your life?
3. Why did Elisha refuse Naaman's gift? What does that say about grace?
4. Gehazi had seen amazing miracles and still gave in to greed. How can someone close to God still fall into sin?

TRY THIS *Do one simple, humble thing this week that you've been putting off because of pride: apologize, ask for help, or admit you were wrong.*

CHAPTER 4

More Are with Us

2 Kings 6–8

Chapter 6 opens with a problem that sounds like a youth group building project. The prophets who study with Elisha say, "See now, the place where we live and meet with you is too small for us." They want to go down to the Jordan, cut logs, and build a bigger meeting place. Elisha says, "Go!" and agrees to come along.

While one of them is chopping down a tree, the iron ax head flies off the handle and splashes into the river. He cries out, "Alas, my master! For it was borrowed."

That detail matters. In those days, iron tools were expensive. A poor student prophet couldn't easily replace one, and since it was borrowed, he might have had to work off the debt. This was a real crisis for him.

Elisha asks where it fell. The man shows him. Elisha cuts a stick, throws it into the water, and the iron floats to the surface. "Take it," Elisha says, and the man reaches out and grabs it.

> REAL TALK **God Cares About Small Things**
>
> The floating ax head is one of the smallest miracles in the Bible. No one was dying. No army was attacking. A guy lost a borrowed tool. And God cared enough to help. Sometimes we think God is only interested in big spiritual things, so we don't bother praying about a lost phone, a hard test, an

> awkward friendship, or money we owe. But this story says that nothing that matters to you is too small for God to care about. You can bring Him anything. Also notice that the man was upset because the ax wasn't his. He cared about returning what he'd borrowed. That's a small mark of integrity worth copying.

Next, the king of Syria is at war with Israel, and he keeps setting ambushes. But every time, Elisha warns the king of Israel exactly where the Syrians will be, and Israel avoids the trap. The king of Syria is convinced there's a spy among his officers. One of them says, no, my lord. It's Elisha, the prophet in Israel. He tells the king of Israel the words you speak in your bedroom.

So the king of Syria sends a huge army with horses and chariots to capture one prophet. They surround the town of Dothan during the night.

The next morning, Elisha's servant gets up early, walks outside, and sees an army surrounding the city. He runs back in panic. "Alas, my master! What shall we do?"

Elisha's answer is one of the great lines of the Bible. "Don't be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

The servant must have thought Elisha had lost his mind. There were two of them and an entire army outside. So Elisha prays. "LORD, please open his eyes, that he may see." And God opens the young man's eyes, "and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire around Elisha."

The same fiery chariots that carried Elijah away are now surrounding Elisha. They were there all along. The servant just couldn't see them.

> **REAL TALK** **When Fear Surrounds You**
>
> Sometimes it feels like you're surrounded: by pressure, by problems, by anxiety, by people who are against you, by things you can't control. Elisha's servant saw only the enemy. Elisha saw what was really there. The point of this story isn't that bad things never happen to believers. It's that you're never as alone or outnumbered as you feel. God is present even when you can't see Him. If fear or anxiety is overwhelming you, pray Elisha's prayer for yourself: open my eyes so I can see. And tell a trusted adult. Anxiety is real and treatable, and asking for help from a doctor or counselor is a wise and faithful thing to do. If you ever feel like you can't go on, call or text 988.

What happens next is surprising. As the Syrian soldiers come toward him, Elisha prays that God will strike them with blindness, probably a kind of confusion, since they can still walk. Elisha goes out and says, you're on the wrong road. Follow me, and I'll take you to the man you're looking for. He leads them right into Samaria, Israel's capital, surrounded by Israel's army. Then he prays for their eyes to be opened, and they realize where they are.

The king of Israel is thrilled. "My father, shall I strike them?" he asks.

Elisha says no. "You shall not strike them. Would you strike those whom you have taken captive with your sword and with your bow? Set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink, then go to their master."

So the king throws a feast for the enemy soldiers and sends them home. And "the bands of Syria stopped raiding the land of Israel." Kindness accomplished what war couldn't.

> **REAL TALK** **Feeding Your Enemies**
>
> Elisha could have had his enemies killed. Instead, he fed them. Paul later wrote, "Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." That

> doesn't mean letting people hurt you, and it doesn't mean pretending wrong is right. It means refusing to let revenge be your goal. Sometimes the most powerful way to stop a cycle of hurt is to respond in a way the other person never expects.

The peace doesn't last forever. Later, the king of Syria, Ben-hadad, besieges Samaria, and the famine inside the city becomes so terrible that a donkey's head sells for a fortune. The writer describes the desperation honestly but briefly, and the king of Israel blames Elisha and God for the disaster. Elisha makes a prediction: by this time tomorrow, food will be cheap again in Samaria. One of the king's officers laughs at him. Even if the LORD opened windows in heaven, could that happen? Elisha says, you'll see it with your own eyes, but you won't eat any of it.

Now the story shifts to four men with leprosy sitting at the city gate. They're outcasts, starving like everyone else. "Why do we sit here until we die?" they ask each other. If we go into the city, we'll starve. If we stay here, we'll starve. Let's go over to the Syrian camp. If they kill us, we were going to die anyway.

When they get to the camp at twilight, it's empty. God had made the Syrian army hear the sound of a huge army approaching, chariots and horses, and they panicked and ran for their lives, leaving everything behind: tents, horses, food, silver, gold, and clothes.

The four men go from tent to tent eating and drinking and hiding treasure. Then they stop. "We aren't doing right. Today is a day of good news, and we keep silent." They go and tell the city, and the people rush out and plunder the camp. By the next day, food is cheap, just as Elisha said. And the officer who laughed at him is trampled in the gate by the crowd, seeing the food but never eating it.

REAL TALK **A Day of Good News**

The four lepers were outsiders, the last people anyone expected to save the city. And they realized that keeping good news to themselves was wrong. Christians have often used their words as a picture of sharing the gospel. If you've found something good, the forgiveness and hope that Jesus offers, it's not right to keep it to yourself while people around you are starving for it. You don't have to be a preacher. You just have to be someone who found food and says, come and see.

Chapter 8 tells of Elisha traveling to Damascus, the capital of Syria. King Ben-hadad is sick and sends his officer Hazael to ask whether he'll recover. Elisha stares at Hazael until Hazael is uncomfortable, and then Elisha begins to weep. He sees the terrible things Hazael will do to Israel when he becomes king. Hazael acts shocked. But the next day, he murders Ben-hadad and takes the throne.

Meanwhile, the kings of Judah are making bad choices too. Jehoram, king of Judah, marries a daughter of Ahab, and he walks in the ways of the kings of Israel. But the writer pauses to make an important statement: "However, the LORD would not destroy Judah, for David his servant's sake, as he promised him to give to him a lamp for his children always."

That lamp is the promise God made to David in 2 Samuel 7: someone from his family would always sit on his throne. No matter how bad Judah's kings get, God won't let that lamp go out. Keep an eye on it. It's going to be tested again and again in the rest of the book.

KEY VERSE

He answered, "Don't be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

2 Kings 6:16 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God cared about a lost ax head? What small things do you hesitate to pray about?
2. What made the difference between what Elisha saw and what his servant saw?
3. Elisha fed his enemies instead of killing them. What might that look like in your life?
4. The four lepers said, "We aren't doing right." What good news do you have that someone else needs to hear?

TRY THIS *This week, when you feel afraid or surrounded, pray Elisha's prayer: LORD, please open my eyes. Write down anything you notice about how God is with you.*

CHAPTER 5

Jehu and the Hidden King

2 Kings 9–12

Back in 1 Kings, God told Elijah on Mount Sinai to anoint a man named Jehu as king over Israel. Elijah never got around to it. Now Elisha sends one of the young prophets to do it. The young man finds Jehu, a commander in Israel's army, sitting with other officers. He takes Jehu into a private room, pours oil on his head, and gives him God's message: "I have anointed you king over the people of the LORD, even over Israel." You will wipe out the house of Ahab, for the blood of the prophets that Jezebel shed. Then the young prophet opens the door and runs.

Jehu goes back to the other officers, who ask what that crazy man wanted. When he tells them, they immediately spread their cloaks on the steps, blow a trumpet, and shout, "Jehu is king!"

Jehu jumps in his chariot and races to Jezreel, where King Joram of Israel is recovering from battle wounds. King Ahaziah of Judah is visiting him. A watchman on the tower sees Jehu's group approaching and reports that "the driving is like the driving of Jehu the son of Nimshi, for he drives furiously." Even three thousand years ago, some people were known for their reckless driving.

Joram and Ahaziah ride out to meet him, and they meet at, of all places, the field that once belonged to Naboth, the man Ahab and

Jezebel had murdered for his vineyard. Jehu kills Joram there, and his men chase and kill Ahaziah too. The justice Elijah predicted is coming true in the very place where the crime was committed.

Then Jehu rides into Jezreel. Jezebel hears that he's coming. She puts on her makeup, fixes her hair, and looks out the window. She knows what's coming, and she meets it like a queen. As Jehu enters the gate, she calls down an insult, comparing him to a man who murdered his king and reigned only seven days. Jehu looks up and calls out, "Who is on my side? Who?" Two or three of her own servants look out at him, and at his command they throw her down from the window. She dies there.

Later, Jehu sends men to bury her, because she was a king's daughter. But they find that very little is left. Jehu says this was the word Elijah spoke years earlier: Jezebel would not have a grave. The queen who had hunted God's prophets and murdered Naboth meets the end the prophet said she would.

> **REAL TALK** **Justice Comes, but Not Always Fast**
>
> Jezebel did evil for years. She killed God's prophets. She framed and murdered Naboth. She threatened Elijah's life. For a long time, it seemed like she got away with it. But Elijah's prophecy didn't fail. It just took time. If you've been hurt by someone who seems to get away with it, this story says God sees, and His justice is real, even when it's slow. That doesn't mean we should take revenge into our own hands. It means we can trust God to handle what we can't. Paul wrote, "Don't be deceived. God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap." And if you're being hurt right now, don't wait. Tell a trusted adult who can help keep you safe.

Jehu doesn't stop there. He kills Ahab's seventy sons and all of Ahab's officials, friends, and priests. Then he announces a huge festival for Baal, gathers all the priests and worshipers of Baal into

the temple, and has them killed. He tears down the temple of Baal and turns it into a toilet. "Thus Jehu destroyed Baal out of Israel."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Was Jehu a Hero?**
>
> 2 Kings gives Jehu mixed reviews. God commends him for carrying out judgment on Ahab's house, and He promises that Jehu's descendants will sit on Israel's throne for four generations. But the writer adds, "But Jehu took no heed to walk in the law of the LORD, the God of Israel, with all his heart." He kept the golden calves Jeroboam had set up. A century later, the prophet Hosea announced that God would "avenge the blood of Jezreel on the house of Jehu," which many scholars think means that Jehu's bloodshed went far beyond what God commanded, driven by his own ambition. Christians read these passages differently. Some think Hosea condemns Jehu's excess and cruelty; others think it refers to his family's later sins. Either way, the lesson is clear: doing a job God gives you doesn't mean your heart is right with God. Jehu could destroy Baal and still not love the LORD.

Archaeologists found an ancient black stone monument from Assyria, called the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III, that shows a man bowing before the Assyrian king and bringing tribute. The inscription calls him Jehu, son of Omri. It may be the oldest surviving picture of an Israelite king.

Meanwhile, in Judah, something terrible happens. King Ahaziah, killed by Jehu, had a mother named Athaliah. She was a daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, and she had her mother's ruthlessness. When she hears her son is dead, she seizes the throne and tries to kill the entire royal family, her own grandchildren.

If she succeeds, the line of David is gone. God's promise is dead. The lamp is out.

But one woman stops her. "But Jehosheba, the daughter of King Joram, sister of Ahaziah, took Joash the son of Ahaziah, and stole

him away from among the king's sons who were slain." She grabs a baby, Joash, and his nurse, and hides them in a bedroom. Then she hides him in the temple, where her husband, Jehoiada, is the high priest. "He was with her hidden in the LORD's house six years while Athaliah reigned over the land."

Think about that. For six years, the entire hope of God's promise to David is a little boy hiding in the temple, growing up among the priests, while a murderous queen rules outside.

> **REAL TALK** **The Brave Ones Behind the Scenes**
>
> Jehosheba and Jehoiada risked their lives to protect a child. If Athaliah had found out, they would have been killed. We don't know much else about them, but because of their courage, the line of David survived. God's biggest plans often depend on ordinary people who quietly do the right thing when it's dangerous. Protecting the vulnerable, standing up for someone who can't defend themselves, telling the truth when it costs you, are all ways of being like Jehosheba. And if you know a child who isn't safe, the brave thing is to tell a trusted adult or call the Childhelp hotline at 1-800-422-4453.

In the seventh year, Jehoiada makes his move. He gathers the captains of the royal guard in the temple, makes them swear an oath, and shows them the king's son. They had thought David's line was gone. Jehoiada carefully organizes the guards in shifts around the temple. Then he brings out the boy, "and put the crown on him, and gave him the covenant; and they made him king and anointed him; and they clapped their hands, and said, 'Long live the king!'"

Athaliah hears the noise and runs into the temple. She sees the boy king standing by the pillar, surrounded by guards and cheering people blowing trumpets. She tears her clothes and screams, "Treason! Treason!" which is ironic, since she's the one who stole the throne. The guards take her out of the temple and put her to

death. Then Jehoiada makes a covenant between the LORD, the king, and the people, "that they should be the LORD's people." The people tear down the temple of Baal in Jerusalem.

"Jehoash was seven years old when he began to reign." (Joash and Jehoash are two forms of the same name.)

Joash grows up under the guidance of Jehoiada the priest, and he's a good king. He organizes a fund to repair the temple, which has been neglected. Jehoiada drills a hole in the lid of a chest and sets it by the altar, and people put their offerings in it. It might be the first offering box in history. The money is used to pay carpenters, builders, and stonemasons, and the workers are so honest that no one needs to check their accounts.

But there's a sad note. The writer says, "Jehoash did that which was right in the LORD's eyes all his days in which Jehoiada the priest instructed him." 2 Chronicles tells us that after Jehoiada died, Joash turned away from God. His faith had been borrowed from his mentor, and when the mentor was gone, his faith faded.

> **REAL TALK** **Borrowed Faith**
>
> Joash's story is a warning for anyone who has grown up in church. It's a great gift to have a Jehoiada in your life, a parent, pastor, or mentor who teaches you about God. But at some point, your faith has to become your own. If you only follow God because the people around you do, what happens when they're gone, or when you move away from home? Now is a great time to ask yourself whether you believe because someone told you to, or because you have come to know God for yourself.

KEY VERSE

Jehoash did that which was right in the LORD's eyes all his days in which Jehoiada the priest instructed him.

2 Kings 12:2 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Jehu destroyed Baal worship but still didn't follow God with all his heart. How is that possible?
2. What do you think it was like for Joash to grow up hidden in the temple?
3. Why do you think Jehosheba risked her life to save a baby?
4. Is your faith your own, or is it borrowed from someone else? How can you tell?

TRY THIS *Write down three reasons you believe in God, or three questions you have about Him, in your own words. Then talk to a mentor about one of them.*

CHAPTER 6

The Fall of Israel

2 Kings 13–17

The next few chapters move fast, covering about a hundred years and a long list of kings. If you've ever read these chapters and felt lost in a blur of names, you're not alone. Here's the big picture: the northern kingdom of Israel keeps getting worse, and the clock is ticking.

Elisha's long ministry finally comes to an end in chapter 13. Even on his deathbed, he's still helping Israel. King Jehoash of Israel (not the same as Joash of Judah, though they have the same name) comes to see him and weeps, calling out the same words Elisha once said about Elijah: My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen. Elisha tells him to shoot an arrow out the window, the LORD's arrow of victory over Syria. Then he tells him to strike the ground with the arrows. The king strikes three times and stops. Elisha is angry. You should have struck five or six times! Then you would have completely defeated Syria. Now you'll only win three times. Half-hearted obedience brings half-hearted results.

After Elisha dies and is buried, a strange thing happens. Some Israelites are burying a man when they see raiders coming. In a panic, they throw the body into Elisha's tomb. When the dead man touches Elisha's bones, he comes back to life and stands up. Even in death, Elisha is connected to life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jonah, Amos, and Hosea**

Some of the prophets whose books are in the Bible lived during this period. In 2 Kings 14, we learn that King Jeroboam II of Israel expanded the kingdom's borders, just as the LORD had promised "by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet." That's the same Jonah who was swallowed by a great fish and sent to preach to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Jeroboam II's reign was a time of wealth for Israel's rich, but the prophet Amos condemned them for cheating and crushing the poor, and the prophet Hosea compared Israel's unfaithfulness to God to an unfaithful spouse. Reading their books alongside these chapters shows what life was really like.

After Jeroboam II, Israel falls into chaos. In about twenty-five years, there are six kings, and four of them are assassinated. Meanwhile, a terrifying new power is rising in the east: Assyria. The Assyrians were famous for their brutality. They destroyed cities that resisted them and deported entire populations, moving conquered peoples to distant parts of their empire so they couldn't unite and rebel.

Judah isn't doing much better. King Ahaz of Judah "walked in the way of the kings of Israel, and even made his son to pass through the fire." That means he sacrificed his own son to a false god. When Syria and Israel attack him, he sends the temple's silver and gold to the king of Assyria, asking for help. Assyria crushes Syria. Then Ahaz goes to Damascus, sees a pagan altar he likes, and has a copy built for the temple in Jerusalem. He makes the kingdom a servant of Assyria to save himself.

The last king of Israel is Hoshea. He stops paying tribute to Assyria and secretly asks Egypt for help. That's a fatal mistake. "Then the king of Assyria came up throughout all the land, went up to Samaria, and besieged it three years." In 722 BC, Samaria falls. The king of Assyria "carried Israel away to Assyria, and placed them in

Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes."

The northern kingdom of Israel is gone. Its ten tribes are scattered across the Assyrian empire. They are sometimes called the ten lost tribes, because most of them never returned as a group. Some fled south to Judah, and many probably mixed into the peoples where they were taken.

Then the writer stops the story to explain why. This is one of the most important passages in 2 Kings. "It was so because the children of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who brought them up out of the land of Egypt." The God who rescued them from slavery had given them a land, a law, and a covenant, and they had turned to other gods.

And He had warned them. Again and again. "Yet the LORD testified to Israel and to Judah, by every prophet and every seer, saying, 'Turn from your evil ways, and keep my commandments and my statutes.'" Elijah, Elisha, Micaiah, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, and many others whose names we don't know. For two hundred years, God sent messenger after messenger. "Notwithstanding, they would not listen, but hardened their neck like the neck of their fathers who didn't believe in the LORD their God."

They followed worthless idols, the writer says, and became worthless themselves. You become like what you worship.

REAL TALK **Ignoring Warnings**

Israel didn't fall in a day. It fell after two centuries of warnings ignored. That's how a lot of damage happens in real life too. It's rarely one huge decision. It's a long string of small choices to ignore the voice that says, this isn't right. A friend warns you about someone. A parent warns you about a habit. Your conscience warns you about a choice. Each time you ignore it, it gets a little

easier to ignore the next time. God's warnings aren't threats from someone who wants to ruin your fun. They're like a parent shouting, stop! at a child running toward a busy street. He warned Israel for so long because He loved them and didn't want to lose them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Origin of the Samaritans**

After deporting the Israelites, the king of Assyria "brought people from Babylon, from Cuthah, from Avva, and from Hamath and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel." These new settlers brought their own gods, and when lions started attacking them, they decided they needed to learn how to worship the god of the land. So the king of Assyria sent back an Israelite priest to teach them. The result was a mix: "They feared the LORD, and also served their own gods." Over time, the people of this region, mixed with Israelites who remained, became known as the Samaritans. The Samaritans themselves tell a different story; they see themselves as descendants of Israelites who stayed faithful in the land, and a small Samaritan community still lives in Israel and the West Bank today, worshiping on Mount Gerizim. By Jesus' time, Jews and Samaritans had centuries of hostility between them. That's why a Samaritan woman was so surprised when Jesus asked her for a drink: "How is it that you, being a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" And it's why Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan was so shocking. Jesus deliberately crossed a wall of hatred that went back to 2 Kings 17.

When the chapter ends, only one tribe's kingdom is left: "There was none left but the tribe of Judah only." The question hanging over the rest of the book is whether Judah will learn from Israel's mistakes.

KEY VERSE

Yet the LORD testified to Israel and to Judah, by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways, and keep my commandments and my statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets."

2 Kings 17:13 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Israel kept ignoring God's prophets for so long?
2. The writer says that people who follow worthless things become worthless. What do you think it means that we become like what we worship?
3. Have you ever ignored a warning and then regretted it? What happened?
4. How does knowing the origin of the Samaritans change the way you read Jesus' conversations with Samaritans?

TRY THIS *Think of a warning someone has given you that you've been ignoring. Talk to God, or to the person who warned you, about it this week.*

CHAPTER 7

Hezekiah and the Siege

2 Kings 18–20

After the long run of bad kings, Judah finally gets a good one. His name is Hezekiah, and he's the son of the terrible king Ahaz. Having a bad father doesn't decide what kind of person you'll be. "He did that which was right in the LORD's eyes, according to all that David his father had done."

Hezekiah starts tearing down the places where people worshiped idols. He even breaks into pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made in the wilderness. Remember that story? When the Israelites were dying from snakebites, God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole, and whoever looked at it lived. That snake had been kept for over seven hundred years, and by Hezekiah's time, people were burning incense to it as if it were a god. Hezekiah called it Nehushtan, which sounds like a word for a piece of bronze. Something God once used for good had become an idol, and Hezekiah had the courage to destroy it.

> **REAL TALK** **When Good Things Become Idols**
>
> The bronze serpent wasn't evil. God commanded Moses to make it. But over time, people started worshiping the object instead of the God who had used it. That can happen with good things in our lives too: a church tradition, a worship song, a talent, a relationship, a cause, even a spiritual experience. Any good thing can become an idol when we start trusting it, loving it, or

depending on it more than God. Hezekiah's question is a good one to ask: is there anything good in my life that has taken God's place?

The writer gives Hezekiah one of the highest compliments in the whole book. "He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel, so that after him was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among them that were before him." Hezekiah also rebels against Assyria and refuses to pay them tribute.

That's a dangerous move. In the fourteenth year of his reign, about 701 BC, "Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them." The Assyrian army sweeps through Judah, capturing city after city. Hezekiah tries to buy them off, stripping gold from the temple doors to pay the tribute. It doesn't work. The Assyrians surround Jerusalem.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sennacherib's Prism and Hezekiah's Tunnel**

Sennacherib recorded his own version of this campaign on clay prisms, six-sided clay cylinders covered in writing, that have been found by archaeologists. He boasts that he captured forty-six of Hezekiah's fortified cities and took over two hundred thousand people captive. Then he says of Hezekiah, "Himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage." Notice what he doesn't say: that he captured Jerusalem. Ancient kings loved to boast about their victories, and Sennacherib never claims to have taken the city. Carved wall panels in his palace at Nineveh show the brutal siege of Lachish, one of Judah's major cities, but not Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the Bible says Hezekiah "made the pool, and the conduit, and brought water into the city." Preparing for a siege, he had workers dig a tunnel through solid rock, about a third of a mile long, to bring water from the Gihon Spring outside the city walls to a pool inside. Two teams dug from opposite ends and met in the middle. An inscription found in the tunnel describes the moment they heard each other's picks through the rock.

> You can still walk through Hezekiah's Tunnel today, with water up to your knees.

Sennacherib sends his field commander, called the Rabshakeh, to Jerusalem with a large army. He stands outside the city walls and shouts up at Hezekiah's officials in Hebrew, so that all the people listening on the wall can understand him. His speech is a masterpiece of intimidation.

"What confidence is this in which you trust?" he asks. Are you trusting Egypt? Egypt is a broken reed that will stab your hand if you lean on it. Are you trusting the LORD? Didn't Hezekiah tear down His altars? (He's twisting the truth. Hezekiah tore down the idol shrines.) He even claims the LORD Himself sent him to destroy Judah.

Hezekiah's officials beg him to speak in Aramaic, the international language, so the people won't understand. He refuses and shouts even louder in Hebrew to the people on the wall. "Don't let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you out of his hand. Don't let Hezekiah make you trust in the LORD." Make peace with me, and I'll take you to a good land. Then he says the most dangerous thing of all: "Who are they among all the gods of the countries, that have delivered their country out of my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?"

He's comparing the LORD to the idols of the nations he has already destroyed. That's a mistake.

> **REAL TALK** **The Voice Outside the Wall**
>
> The Rabshakeh's strategy was psychological. He wanted the people to doubt their leader, doubt their God, and give up before the fight even started. A lot of the battles we face work the same way. There's a voice that says, you can't do this. God won't help you. Everyone else gave up, so why not you? You

> might hear it in your own head, from people around you, or from things you see online. The people on the wall did something wise: Hezekiah had told them not to answer, and they stayed silent. You don't have to argue with every voice of doubt and fear. Sometimes the best response is to take it straight to God, which is exactly what Hezekiah did next.

When Hezekiah hears the report, "he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the LORD's house." He sends his officials to the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah sends back a message: Don't be afraid of the words you have heard. The king of Assyria will hear a rumor and return to his own land.

Then Sennacherib sends Hezekiah a letter repeating his threats. Hezekiah does something beautiful. He takes the letter up to the temple and spreads it out before the LORD, as if to say, God, look at this.

Then he prays. "LORD, the God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, even you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth." He asks God to listen and see how Sennacherib has insulted the living God. He admits that the Assyrians really have destroyed many nations and thrown their gods into the fire, because those gods were just wood and stone. And then he asks for rescue, not just for Jerusalem's sake, but for God's glory: "Now therefore, LORD our God, save us, I beg you, out of his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, LORD, are God alone."

God answers through Isaiah with a long poem mocking Sennacherib's pride. Then He makes a promise: the king of Assyria will not enter this city or shoot an arrow here. "For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for my servant David's sake."

There's that lamp again.

That night, "the LORD's angel went out and struck one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians." In the morning, the camp is full of dead bodies. Sennacherib packs up and goes home to Nineveh. Some time later, while he is worshiping in the temple of his god, two of his sons kill him. The god he trusted couldn't protect him in his own temple. The God he mocked had protected a whole city.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Happened to the Assyrian Army?**

The Bible says the angel of the LORD struck the Assyrian camp. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus tells a story about an Assyrian army in the region that was overrun by mice, which some scholars think may be a garbled memory of a plague. Christians understand the event in different ways. Some think God sent a sudden disease; others take it as a direct act of an angel without any natural cause. Either way, the Bible and Sennacherib's own records agree on the key point: the mighty Assyrian army went home without taking Jerusalem.

In chapter 20, Hezekiah becomes deathly ill. Isaiah comes and tells him, "Set your house in order; for you will die, and not live." Hezekiah turns his face to the wall, prays, and weeps bitterly. Before Isaiah even leaves the palace courtyard, God sends him back with a new message: "I have heard your prayer. I have seen your tears. Behold, I will heal you." God gives Hezekiah fifteen more years.

REAL TALK **God Sees Your Tears**

Hezekiah didn't pray a polished prayer. He turned to the wall and cried. And God said, I have seen your tears. Your tears matter to God. You don't have to hide them or clean them up before you pray. If you're going through something painful, a serious illness in your family, a loss, a fear about the future, you can bring it to God exactly as it is. And if your sadness or fear is

> heavy and won't lift, please talk to a trusted adult or a doctor. Getting help is not a lack of faith.

Unfortunately, Hezekiah's story ends on a weaker note. Envoys come from Babylon, a rising power, to congratulate him on his recovery. Hezekiah is flattered and shows them everything in his treasury and armory. Isaiah warns him that someday all of it will be carried off to Babylon, and some of his own descendants will be taken there. Hezekiah's response is disappointing. He says the word is good, thinking, "Isn't it so, if peace and truth will be in my days?" As long as it doesn't happen to me, it's fine. Even the best kings had blind spots.

KEY VERSE

Now therefore, LORD our God, save us, I beg you, out of his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, LORD, are God alone.

2 Kings 19:19 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What good things in your life could become idols if you're not careful?
2. How did the Rabshakeh try to make the people of Jerusalem give up? Do you ever hear voices like that?
3. Hezekiah spread the letter out before God. What would it look like for you to do that with something you're worried about?
4. Why do you think Hezekiah didn't care much about what would happen after his lifetime?

TRY THIS *Write down something that's worrying you, like Hezekiah's letter. Spread it out before God and pray about it. Keep the paper and look back at it in a month.*

CHAPTER 8

The Boy King and the Lost Book

2 Kings 21–23

Hezekiah's son Manasseh becomes king at twelve years old. He reigns fifty-five years, longer than any other king of Judah. And he is the worst of them all.

"He did that which was evil in the LORD's sight." He rebuilds every idol shrine his father tore down. He sets up altars to Baal and to the stars in the temple courts. He practices sorcery and consults mediums. He sacrifices his own son in the fire. And "Manasseh shed innocent blood very much, until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another." An old Jewish tradition says he had the prophet Isaiah killed.

The writer says he led Judah to do more evil than the nations God had driven out of Canaan. The people who were supposed to show the world what God was like had become worse than the people before them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Did Manasseh Repent?**

2 Kings presents Manasseh as almost completely evil, and it says his sins were a major reason God later allowed Babylon to destroy Jerusalem. But 2 Chronicles 33 adds a surprising part of the story. It says the Assyrians took Manasseh to Babylon in chains, and there, in his distress, he humbled himself and prayed. God heard him and brought him back to Jerusalem, and he tried to undo some of the damage he had done. Scholars discuss how the two

accounts fit together. Many think Kings focuses on the lasting national damage his reign caused, while Chronicles shows the personal mercy God showed him. Either way, Manasseh's story says something remarkable: even the worst king in Judah's history was not beyond God's reach. But it also shows that repentance doesn't automatically undo the damage sin has done to others.

Manasseh's son Amon is just as bad, and after two years his own servants assassinate him. The people of the land kill the assassins and make Amon's son king.

His name is Josiah. "Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem." Eight years old. Think about what you were like at eight. Josiah's grandfather was the most evil king in Judah's history, and his father was murdered. He had every reason to turn out badly. Instead, "He did that which was right in the LORD's eyes, and walked in all the ways of David his father, and didn't turn away to the right hand or to the left."

REAL TALK **You're Not Too Young**

Josiah became king at eight, and 2 Chronicles says that at sixteen, he began to seek the God of David, and at twenty, he started cleaning out the idols from Judah. Paul wrote to a young pastor named Timothy, "Let no man despise your youth; but be an example to those who believe, in word, in your way of life, in love, in spirit, in faith, and in purity." God doesn't wait until you're an adult to use you. Josiah also didn't let his family history decide his future. If your family has a history of brokenness, addiction, abuse, or unbelief, you are not trapped by it. With God, a new story can start with you.

In the eighteenth year of his reign, when he's about twenty-six, Josiah sends his secretary Shaphan to the temple to arrange repairs. The temple has been neglected for decades. During the work, the

high priest Hilkiah makes an amazing discovery. "I have found the book of the law in the LORD's house."

Imagine that. The Book of the Law, God's word to His people, had been lost in the temple. It had been neglected so long that people had forgotten what it said.

Shaphan reads it to the king. "When the king had heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes." He's horrified. He realizes how far Judah has wandered from what God commanded. He sends officials to ask the LORD what to do, "for great is the LORD's wrath that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not listened to the words of this book."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What Book Was It?**
>
> The Bible doesn't say exactly what the book was. Most scholars think it was all or part of Deuteronomy, because Josiah's reforms match what Deuteronomy commands so closely: worship at one central place, destroy the idols, celebrate the Passover, and keep the covenant. Its warnings about curses for disobedience would explain why Josiah was so terrified. Some scholars think the book was written or edited around this time; others think it was an ancient copy of Moses' law that had been hidden or lost during Manasseh's long, wicked reign. Christians hold different views on the details of how Deuteronomy took its final form, but the story's main point is clear: when God's word was rediscovered, it changed a king and a nation.

Josiah's officials go to a prophet named Huldah, a woman respected for her wisdom. Her message is hard: disaster is coming on Jerusalem, because the people have abandoned God. But she has a personal message for Josiah. "Because your heart was tender, and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I spoke against this place," God has heard you. The disaster won't come in your lifetime.

Josiah doesn't just feel bad. He acts. He gathers all the leaders and people of Judah, "both small and great," at the temple and reads the entire book to them. Then he stands by the pillar and makes a covenant before the LORD to follow Him and keep His commands "with all his heart and all his soul." And all the people join the covenant.

Then he launches the biggest reform in Judah's history. He removes from the temple everything made for Baal, Asherah, and the stars, and burns it. He removes the idolatrous priests. He tears down the houses of the male shrine prostitutes. He defiles Topheth, the place in the valley of Hinnom where children were sacrificed, "that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Molech." He tears down the altars Manasseh built. He even goes north to Bethel and destroys the altar Jeroboam built there, fulfilling a prophecy made three hundred years earlier in 1 Kings 13, which actually named Josiah before he was born.

Then he commands the people, "Keep the Passover to the LORD your God, as it is written in this book of the covenant." It's the biggest Passover celebration since the days of the judges.

The writer's verdict on Josiah is the highest praise given to any king. "There was no king like him before him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; and there was none like him who arose after him." That's an echo of the greatest commandment in Deuteronomy, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." Josiah lived it.

> **REAL TALK** **Finding the Book**
>
> Judah lost God's word in the temple, the very place where it should have been treasured. It's possible to lose it in our lives too. A Bible can sit on a shelf

> at home, or an app on your phone, for years without being opened. When Josiah heard what God said, it changed everything. You don't have to wait for a dramatic rediscovery. The book is right there. Try reading one chapter a day, starting with one of the Gospels. Ask God to make your heart tender, like Josiah's, to what you read.

Sadly, Josiah's story ends suddenly. In 609 BC, Pharaoh Necho of Egypt marches north to help Assyria against Babylon. Josiah goes out to stop him at Megiddo, and Necho kills him there. Josiah is only thirty-nine. The nation mourns him deeply, and the prophet Jeremiah writes laments for him.

Even Josiah's reforms couldn't undo the damage of Manasseh's reign. The writer says God's anger against Judah didn't turn away. Josiah's sons didn't follow his example. Within twenty-five years, Jerusalem would be destroyed. Josiah's story shows that one person's faith can make a huge difference, but it also shows that each generation has to choose God for itself.

KEY VERSE

There was no king like him before him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; and there was none like him who arose after him.

2 Kings 23:25 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Josiah came from a terrible family and still followed God. What does his story say to someone whose family history is painful?
2. How do you think God's word could get lost in a temple? How could it get lost in a person's life?
3. Why do you think Josiah tore his clothes when he heard the book read?
4. What would it look like for you to love God with all your heart, soul, and might, like Josiah?

TRY THIS *Pick one book of the Bible, such as Mark or John, and read one chapter a day for a week. Write down one thing from each chapter that stands out to you.*

CHAPTER 9

The Fall of Jerusalem

2 Kings 24–25

After Josiah, Judah's last kings come and go quickly, and they're all bad. Pharaoh Necho of Egypt removes Josiah's son Jehoahaz after only three months and puts another son, Jehoiakim, on the throne. Then a new superpower takes over the world stage: Babylon, led by its brilliant and ruthless king, Nebuchadnezzar.

"In his days Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up, and Jehoiakim became his servant for three years. Then he turned and rebelled against him." That was a mistake. The writer says this was the LORD's judgment, coming "for the sins of Manasseh, according to all that he did, and also for the innocent blood that he shed; for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the LORD would not pardon."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Daniel and Jeremiah**

Some of the most famous people in the Bible lived through these events. In about 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar took some young men from Judah's royal and noble families to Babylon to train them for his service. One of them was a teenager named Daniel, along with his friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, better known by their Babylonian names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Meanwhile, the prophet Jeremiah stayed in Jerusalem, warning the kings to stop rebelling and surrender to Babylon. They mostly ignored him, and sometimes threw him in prison or into a muddy pit. His book and

> the book of Lamentations give us a heartbreaking inside view of Jerusalem's last days.

Jehoiakim dies, and his eighteen-year-old son Jehoiachin becomes king. Three months later, the Babylonian army besieges Jerusalem, and Nebuchadnezzar himself arrives. Jehoiachin surrenders. He, his mother, his wives, and his officials are taken captive to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar carries off the treasures of the temple and the palace and cuts up the gold objects Solomon had made. He takes ten thousand captives, including the leaders, the soldiers, and all the skilled craftsmen and metalworkers. "No one remained except the poorest people of the land." One of the captives taken in this group was the young priest Ezekiel, who would become a prophet in exile.

Nebuchadnezzar makes Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah, king over what's left. Zedekiah is weak and indecisive. Jeremiah begs him to submit to Babylon, but eventually he rebels too.

So in 588 BC, Nebuchadnezzar comes back with his whole army and builds siege walls around Jerusalem. For about a year and a half, no one gets in or out. Inside, the famine becomes so severe that there is no food left.

Finally, the Babylonians break through the wall. Zedekiah and his soldiers escape by night through a gate near the king's garden and flee toward the Jordan. The Babylonians catch him near Jericho, close to where Joshua had first led Israel into the promised land. They take him to Nebuchadnezzar, who punishes him severely: he is forced to see the deaths of his sons, and then he is blinded and taken in chains to Babylon. The writer reports it briefly, without dwelling on it, but it's a tragic picture. The last king of Judah, who wouldn't listen to God's prophet, ends his life in darkness.

A month later, in 586 BC, Nebuzaradan, commander of Nebuchadnezzar's guard, arrives in Jerusalem. "He burned the LORD's house, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem." The Babylonian army tears down the city walls. The temple that Solomon built, where God's glory had filled the room, where the ark had rested for nearly four hundred years, is burned to the ground. The bronze pillars and the great bronze sea are broken up and carried to Babylon.

Most of the remaining people are taken into exile. Only some of the poorest are left "to work the vineyards and fields." Then the writer states it plainly: "So Judah was carried away captive out of his land."

REAL TALK **When Everything Falls Apart**

For the people of Judah, the destruction of Jerusalem was like the end of the world. They lost their homes, their city, their king, their temple, and their land. Many wondered whether God had abandoned them, or whether He even existed. Psalm 137 records their grief: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yes, we wept, when we remembered Zion." Maybe you've had a season when everything seemed to fall apart: a divorce, a move, a death, a breakup, a diagnosis. The Bible doesn't pretend that those seasons aren't devastating. It gives us words to grieve with. Lamentations, written about this very disaster, says, "It is because of the LORD's loving kindnesses that we are not consumed, because his mercies don't fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness." If you're going through a season like that, please don't go through it alone. Talk to a trusted adult, a counselor, or a pastor. And if you're thinking about ending your life, call or text 988 right now.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Did God Let It Happen?**

2 Kings answers that question clearly. The people of Judah had broken their covenant with God for generations, and they had refused to listen to prophet after prophet. Deuteronomy had warned that if they did that, they would be scattered among the nations. The exile wasn't God breaking His promise; it

was God keeping His word. But it also wasn't the end. The same prophets who warned about exile also promised return. Jeremiah told the exiles to settle down in Babylon, build houses, plant gardens, and pray for the city, because after seventy years God would bring them home. He wrote, "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you," says the LORD, "thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you hope and a future." That promise was spoken to people in exile, people who had lost everything.

The book could have ended there, in ashes. Instead, the writer adds four verses that are easy to skip, but they might be the most important in the book.

Thirty-seven years after Jehoiachin was taken captive, a new king named Evil-merodach (his name has nothing to do with the English word evil; in Babylonian it meant man of the god Marduk) comes to power in Babylon. In the year he becomes king, he "released Jehoiachin king of Judah out of prison, and he spoke kindly to him and set his throne above the throne of the kings who were with him in Babylon."

Jehoiachin takes off his prison clothes. "Jehoiachin ate bread before him continually all the days of his life." For the rest of his life, he has a seat at the king's table, with a daily allowance from the king.

Why end with this? Because Jehoiachin is a son of David. He's alive. He's out of prison. He's sitting at a king's table. The lamp God promised David is still burning, flickering, small, far from home, but not out. The story of God's promise isn't over.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jehoiachin's Rations**

In the early 1900s, archaeologists excavating Babylon found clay tablets listing rations of oil and food given to captives and foreign workers. Several of them mention "Ya'ukin, king of the land of Yahud," that is, Jehoiachin, king of Judah, along with his five sons. They were written while he was still a

> prisoner, years before his release, but they show that Babylon was keeping the king of Judah and his family alive. A family line that could have ended in Babylon continued.

The end of 2 Kings is like the end of a season of a show where nearly everything has gone wrong, but in the final scene there's one small hint that the story will continue. And it does. Jehoiachin, called Jeconiah or Jechoniah, has a grandson named Zerubbabel, who will lead the first exiles home to rebuild the temple. And centuries later, Matthew's Gospel will trace the line of David right through the exile: "Josiah became the father of Jechoniah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon. After the exile to Babylon, Jechoniah became the father of Shealtiel. Shealtiel became the father of Zerubbabel." The line keeps going until it reaches "Joseph, the husband of Mary, from whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ."

KEY VERSE

In the thirty-seventh year of the captivity of Jehoiachin king of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, Evilmerodach king of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, released Jehoiachin king of Judah out of prison, and he spoke kindly to him and set his throne above the throne of the kings who were with him in Babylon, and changed his prison garments. Jehoiachin ate bread before him continually all the days of his life; and for his allowance, there was a continual allowance given him from the king, every day a portion, all the days of his life.

2 Kings 25:27–30 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the people of Judah kept ignoring Jeremiah's warnings, even as the Babylonians were at the gates?
2. How would you feel if you were an exile sitting by the rivers of Babylon? What questions would you ask God?
3. Why do you think the writer chose to end the book with Jehoiachin's release instead of with the destruction of Jerusalem?
4. Have you ever seen a small sign of hope in a hard season? What was it?

TRY THIS *Read Lamentations 3:19–26. Then write down one way God's mercies have been new for you this week, even in something hard.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

2 Kings ends with the temple in ashes, Jerusalem in ruins, and God's people in exile. But it also ends with a son of David, released from prison, eating at the king's table. God had promised to keep a lamp burning for David's family, and even in Babylon, the flame hadn't gone out.

Jewish readers treasure 2 Kings as a sobering history of the exile and a call to faithfulness, and they remember Elijah at every Passover, setting a cup for him in hope of his return. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, saw in Elijah and Elisha a preview of Jesus. Elisha fed a hundred men with twenty loaves and had some left over; Jesus fed five thousand with five loaves and two fish, and the leftovers filled twelve baskets. Elisha raised the Shunammite's son; Jesus raised a widow's son and Lazarus. Elisha healed Naaman the foreigner, and Jesus pointed to that story in His very first sermon: "There were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed, except Naaman, the Syrian." Then Jesus Himself reached out and touched a leper and said, "I want to. Be made clean." And Matthew's genealogy traces David's line straight through the exile, through Jehoiachin, called Jechoniah, to Joseph, "the husband of Mary, from whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ." The lamp never went out.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. He is patient, sending warning after warning because He wants His people to come home.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all refused to listen.

Israel and Judah kept ignoring God's prophets. The Bible says all of us have sinned and gone our own way.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. 2 Kings shows sin leading to exile. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the true Son of David.

David's line survived the exile. Jesus, the Son of David, died on the cross for our sins and rose again, to bring us home from exile for good.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Naaman couldn't pay for his healing. He just had to trust and obey. Salvation is a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Wash and be clean.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I haven't listened to You the way I should. I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You for being patient with me and for keeping Your promises. Thank You that Jesus, the Son of David, gave His life for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. Wash me and make me clean. Open my eyes to see that those who are with me are more than those who are against me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 2 Kings 5 and 22–23, then read Luke 4 and Luke 7, where Jesus does what Elisha did and more.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Find the book. Josiah's life changed when he heard God's word. Start a habit of reading the Bible every day, even a little.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Naaman almost walked away angry, but he listened in the end. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if 2 Kings is right, the God who kept David's lamp burning through the exile is still keeping His promises, and there is still a seat at the King's table for you.

However, the LORD would not destroy Judah, for David his servant's sake, as he promised him to give to him a lamp for his children always.

2 Kings 8:19 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF 1 CHRONICLES

The King Who Knows Your Name

1 Chronicles, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Knows Your Name: The Book of 1 Chronicles, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

Copyright © 2026 Bill McLeod. All rights reserved.

Published by Papa Bill Books.

Scripture quotations are from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, which is in the public domain.

All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” If you’ve read 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, you might open 1 Chronicles and think, wait, didn’t I just read this? And then you hit nine chapters of names, and you start to wonder whether anyone has ever actually read them.

Here’s the secret that makes Chronicles make sense. It isn’t a rerun. Samuel and Kings were written to explain how God’s people lost everything. Chronicles was written later, after the exile in Babylon was over, for people who had come home to a ruined city and a tiny, struggling community. They were asking two huge questions: Do we still belong to God? Are His promises still alive?

1 Chronicles answers yes. It tells the story of David again, but from a different angle, focusing on what God was building through him: a family line that would last forever and a place where God’s people could worship Him. It was written to give hope to discouraged people. It still does.

Let’s go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through 1 Chronicles in seven chapters: the family tree from Adam to the return from exile (1 Chronicles 1–9), Saul’s fall and David uniting all Israel (10–12), bringing the ark to Jerusalem (13–15), David’s song of thanks and the singers and

gatekeepers (16, 23–27), God's covenant with David (17–20), the census and the threshing floor (21), and David passing the baton to Solomon (22, 28–29).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book 1 Chronicles is, when it was written, and why it tells the story differently from Samuel and Kings. Read it first. It's the key to the whole book.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as how to understand the prayer of Jabez, and how to put together 1 Chronicles 21, which says Satan moved David to take a census, with 2 Samuel 24, which says the LORD did, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes 1 Chronicles in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the thirteenth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

1 Chronicles is one of the least-read books of the Bible, partly because it opens with nine chapters of genealogies and partly because so much of it overlaps with Samuel and Kings. This book explains from the start that Chronicles was written after the exile to encourage a struggling community, and it reads every part of the book through that lens. Rather than listing names, the first chapter explains why the genealogies mattered to their first readers and highlights some surprising people in them, including women and foreigners.

A balanced box on the prayer of Jabez (4:9–10) affirms that it is a good thing to ask God for blessing while cautioning against treating the prayer as a formula for prosperity. The book explains fairly why Chronicles leaves out David's sin with Bathsheba and Absalom's rebellion, and it briefly presents the main views on how 1 Chronicles 21:1 relates to 2 Samuel 24:1. Real Talk boxes address belonging, worship, quiet faithfulness, courage, and generosity.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees the promised Son of David and the temple fulfilled in Jesus, while acknowledging that Jewish readers treasure Chronicles in their own rich ways; in the Hebrew Bible, it is the very last book. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will finish 1 Chronicles knowing that God remembers their name and that His promises are still alive.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

Not a Rerun

Chronicles covers some of the same history as Samuel and Kings, and sometimes it copies them almost word for word. But it was written for a different audience with a different purpose. Samuel and Kings were finished during the exile and answer the question, why did we lose everything? Chronicles was written after the exile and answers the question, now that we're back, who are we, and does God still care about us? Think of it like two documentaries about the same events: one investigates what went wrong, and the other reminds a discouraged team who they are and what they're playing for.

When It Was Written

In 586 BC, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and carried most of the people of Judah into exile. About fifty years later, in 539 BC, Cyrus king of Persia conquered Babylon and allowed the exiles to go home and rebuild the temple. Many stayed in Babylon, but some returned. What they found was discouraging: ruined walls, a much smaller and plainer temple, no king from David's family on the throne, and powerful empires all around them. Chronicles was probably written sometime in the 400s or 300s BC, for these returning exiles and their children.

Who Wrote It?

The book doesn't name its author. Jewish tradition says Ezra the priest wrote it, and the end of 2 Chronicles is almost identical to the beginning of the book of Ezra. Many scholars today speak more generally of the Chronicler, a writer, probably a Levite or priest, who cared deeply about the temple and its worship. He used Samuel and Kings as sources and mentions many others, including the records of prophets. Christians with different views agree that it is God's Word.

What the Chronicler Cares About

Three themes run through the whole book. First, all Israel: the Chronicler keeps reminding readers that all twelve tribes belong to God's people, even after the northern kingdom was scattered. Second, David's family: God's promise to David of a forever King is still alive, even though no king sits on the throne. Third, the temple and worship: the heart of Israel's life is not its army or its politics but its worship of God, with singers, musicians, priests, and gatekeepers all playing their part.

Last in Line

In English Bibles, 1 and 2 Chronicles come right after Kings. In the Hebrew Bible, the books are arranged differently, and Chronicles comes last of all. That means the Hebrew Scriptures begin with Adam in Genesis and end with Cyrus's decree in 2 Chronicles, inviting God's people to go up and rebuild. It's an ending that looks forward, waiting for something more.

The Map

Chapter 1 (1 Chronicles 1–9): The family tree.

Chapter 2 (1 Chronicles 10–12): All Israel.

Chapter 3 (1 Chronicles 13–15): The ark comes home.

Chapter 4 (1 Chronicles 16, 23–27): Singers and gatekeepers.

Chapter 5 (1 Chronicles 17–20): A house forever.

Chapter 6 (1 Chronicles 21): The threshing floor.

Chapter 7 (1 Chronicles 22, 28–29): Passing the baton.

Contents

Setting the Scene .....

1 The Family Tree *1–9* .....

2 All Israel *10–12* .....

3 The Ark Comes Home *13–15* .....

4 Singers and Gatekeepers *16, 23–27* .....

5 A House Forever *17–20* .....

6 The Threshing Floor *21* .....

7 Passing the Baton *22, 28–29* .....

Where This Points .....

CHAPTER 1

The Family Tree

1 Chronicles 1–9

Most people who try to read the Bible from cover to cover hit 1 Chronicles and stall. The book opens like this: "Adam, Seth, Enosh," and keeps going. Nine chapters. Hundreds of names. Some of them appear nowhere else in the Bible. It's tempting to skip straight to chapter 10.

But imagine you're one of the first people to read this book. Your grandparents were dragged to Babylon as prisoners. You grew up hearing stories about Jerusalem, the temple, and the kings of David's family, but all of that was gone. Now you're back in the land, living in a small, poor community among the ruins. The temple you've rebuilt is a shadow of Solomon's. There's no king. Powerful empires rule over you. And you can't help wondering: Are we still God's people? Did the exile cancel everything? Do we still belong?

Then someone hands you a scroll, and it starts with Adam.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Genealogies Mattered**
>
> In the ancient world, a genealogy wasn't a boring list. It was your identity. It told you who you were, where you came from, what land your family owned, and what role you could play in the community. After the exile, this was very practical. The book of Ezra says some returning families who couldn't find their names in the family records weren't allowed to serve as priests. Genealogies were also a way of saying that the story hadn't been broken. The

> line ran unbroken from the very first human being all the way to the people reading the scroll. The message was clear: you are connected to everything God has been doing since the beginning.

The family tree begins with the whole human race. Adam, then the generations to Noah, then the sons of Noah and the nations that came from them, including Israel's neighbors and enemies. Then it narrows down to Abraham: "The sons of Abraham: Isaac and Ishmael." Then to Isaac's sons, "Esau and Israel." Even Esau's descendants, the Edomites, get a long list.

Why include all those other nations? Because the Chronicler wants his readers to remember that Israel's story is part of a bigger story. God chose Abraham's family for the sake of the whole world. Israel doesn't exist just for itself.

Then the lists slow down and focus on the twelve sons of Israel, the tribes. Judah comes first and gets the most space, because Judah is the tribe of David, and David's line is the heart of the book. Chapter 3 lists David's sons, then the kings of Judah, generation by generation, right up through the exile. And then it keeps going past the exile: "The sons of Jeconiah, the captive: Shealtiel his son," and on to Zerubbabel, who led the first exiles home, and his descendants after him.

That's a quiet but powerful message. The royal family of David survived the exile. The lamp was still burning. For readers with no king on the throne, this list said: God hasn't forgotten His promise.

After Judah come the other tribes, including the tribes of the northern kingdom that had been scattered by Assyria. The Chronicler includes them all. Chapter 6 lists the Levites and priests in detail, including "they whom David set over the service of song in

the LORD's house." Chapter 9 lists the people who returned and settled in Jerusalem after the exile. "So all Israel were listed by genealogies." Then it says honestly why they had to come back in the first place: "Judah was carried away captive to Babylon for their disobedience."

From Adam to the returned exiles, the whole story is there. The Chronicler is telling his readers: you're not an afterthought. You're the next line in the list.

> **REAL TALK** **Do I Belong?**
>
> Lots of people wonder whether they really belong. Maybe you've felt like an outsider at school, in your family, at church, or with your friends. Maybe you've wondered whether God really knows who you are. The genealogies of Chronicles are one long answer to that question. God remembers names. Hundreds of them, people most of us have never heard of, people who did nothing famous. Every one of them mattered enough to be written down. If you're in Christ, you're part of a family that God has been building since the beginning, and He knows your name. And if you're struggling with feeling alone or like you don't matter, please talk to a trusted adult. You matter more than you know.

If you read the lists slowly, you'll find surprising people tucked in among the names, including women and outsiders. Tamar, the Canaanite woman who was wronged by Judah, is named as the mother of Perez, an ancestor of David. Judah's first wife is called "Shua's daughter the Canaanitess." David's sisters, Zeruiah and Abigail, are listed, and Abigail's husband is "Jether the Ishmaelite." A man named Sheshan has no sons, only daughters, so he gives his daughter in marriage to "Jarha," his Egyptian servant, and their son continues the family line. In the tribe of Ephraim, there's a woman named Sheerah, "who built Beth Horon the lower and the upper."

She was a builder of cities. And David's wife Bathsheba appears too, as the mother of Solomon.

These names show that God's family was never as neat as people might think. It included Canaanites, Ishmaelites, Egyptians, and women whose stories mattered. Matthew does the same thing in his genealogy of Jesus, naming Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and "her who had been Uriah's wife."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Spotting the Stories**
>
> The genealogies sometimes pause for a short story. Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, lost his birthright because of his sin, and it went to Joseph's sons, though leadership came through Judah. Er, Judah's firstborn, "was wicked in the LORD's sight." The tribes east of the Jordan won a battle "for they cried to God in the battle, and he answered them because they put their trust in him." These little notes are like highlights in a textbook. They show readers what the Chronicler cares about: faithfulness to God brings blessing, unfaithfulness brings loss, and God answers those who call on Him.

The most famous story in the genealogies is just two verses long. In the middle of the tribe of Judah, there's a man named Jabez. "Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother named him Jabez, saying, 'Because I bore him with sorrow.'" In Hebrew, the name Jabez sounds like the word for pain. Imagine being named Pain. Every time someone called you, they'd be reminding you that your birth hurt your mother.

But Jabez didn't let his name define him. "Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, 'Oh that you would bless me indeed, and enlarge my border! May your hand be with me, and may you keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain!' God granted him that which he requested."

Jabez asks for four things: blessing, more territory, God's presence, and protection from harm, so that he won't cause pain or experience it. The man whose name meant pain asked God to give him a different story, and God did.

REAL TALK **The Prayer of Jabez**

About twenty-five years ago, a small book about Jabez's prayer became a huge bestseller, and many people started praying it every day. Lots of Christians were encouraged by it. The prayer is in the Bible, and it's a good thing to ask God boldly to bless you, to give you opportunities, to be with you, and to protect you. Jesus taught us to ask. But other Christians have raised fair concerns about the way the prayer is sometimes used. It's not a magic formula. Repeating the right words doesn't force God to give you what you want, and the Bible never promises that God will make every believer rich or successful. Jesus said, "But seek first God's Kingdom and his righteousness," and His followers often faced poverty and suffering. The best way to read Jabez is probably in context: a man with a painful start in life who honestly asked God for help, and whose story the Chronicler included to encourage struggling people that God hears those who call on Him. You can pray boldly like Jabez. Just remember you're talking to a Father, not operating a vending machine.

The prayer of Jabez fits perfectly with the purpose of Chronicles. Its first readers had a painful past. Their history included exile and loss. Jabez's story told them that a painful beginning doesn't have to be the end of the story. If they called on the God of Israel, He would hear them.

Chapter 9 ends by repeating Saul's family tree, which sets up the story that comes next. And it quietly mentions the gatekeepers, the Levites who stood guard at the doors of God's house, "in an office of trust," whose job was "to open it morning by morning." Hold on to that detail. It comes back later.

KEY VERSE

Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, "Oh that you would bless me indeed, and enlarge my border! May your hand be with me, and may you keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain!" God granted him that which he requested.

1 Chronicles 4:10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. If you were one of the first readers of Chronicles, how do you think these genealogies would have made you feel?
2. Why do you think the Chronicler included women, foreigners, and outsiders in Israel's family tree?
3. What's the difference between praying boldly and treating prayer like a magic formula?
4. Is there something painful in your past that you'd like God to give you a new story about?

TRY THIS *Ask an older relative about your family history. Then write a short prayer, like Jabez, asking God to write a good story through your life.*

CHAPTER 2

All Israel

1 Chronicles 10–12

After nine chapters of names, the story finally begins. And it begins with a death.

Chapter 10 tells the story of Saul's last battle in just fourteen verses. The Philistines defeat Israel on Mount Gilboa. Saul's sons, including Jonathan, are killed. Saul is badly wounded, and he ends his own life. The Chronicler doesn't give us all the background that 1 Samuel does. He skips Saul's early years, his anointing, his jealousy of David, and his long pursuit of David in the wilderness. Instead, he goes straight to the end and tells us why it happened.

"So Saul died for his trespass which he committed against the LORD, because of the LORD's word, which he didn't keep, and also because he asked counsel of one who had a familiar spirit, to inquire, and didn't inquire of the LORD. Therefore he killed him, and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse."

Notice the key word: inquire, or seek. Saul sought help from a medium instead of seeking God. The Chronicler uses this word, to seek God, again and again throughout his book. It's one of his favorite ideas. People who seek God find Him. People who don't, like Saul, lose everything.

REAL TALK **Where Do You Go for Answers?**

Saul's biggest failure, according to Chronicles, wasn't losing a battle. It was where he turned when he was desperate. When God seemed silent, he went to a medium instead of waiting on God. When we're anxious or scared, it's tempting to look for answers anywhere: horoscopes, online quizzes, influencers, whatever promises quick certainty. There's nothing wrong with getting good advice from wise people, doctors, and counselors. In fact, that's often how God helps us. But the Chronicler's point is that the first place to go is to God Himself. Seek Him first.

SAFETY NOTE **When Life Feels Hopeless**

Saul died by suicide after a crushing defeat. If you have ever felt so hopeless that you thought about ending your life, please know you are not alone and there is help. Talk to a trusted adult today. In the United States, you can call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. In an emergency, call 911. Your life matters, and dark moments can pass.

The Chronicler's version of Saul's story is short, and that's part of the point. Saul was Israel's first king, tall, impressive, and chosen by God. He had every advantage. But the summary of his whole life comes down to one thing: he didn't seek the LORD. For the readers of Chronicles, that was a warning. They had seen kings rise and fall. They knew that what mattered most wasn't power, looks, or popularity. It was whether a person sought God. That's still true. A life can look impressive from the outside and still miss the one thing that matters most.

Then, in chapter 11, the scene shifts immediately. "Then all Israel gathered themselves to David to Hebron, saying, 'Behold, we are your bone and your flesh.'" They remind David that even when Saul was king, David was the one who led Israel in battle, and that God had said to him, you will be the shepherd of My people Israel. So

"They anointed David king over Israel, according to the LORD's word by Samuel."

If you've read 2 Samuel, you know that David's road to the throne was long and complicated. He reigned over Judah alone for seven years while Saul's son Ishbosheth ruled the other tribes, and there was a bitter civil war. Chronicles skips all that. Why? Not because the Chronicler wanted to hide it. His readers had the books of Samuel. He wanted to make a point: all Israel belongs together under the king God chose. For a community made up of the remnants of different tribes, that was an important message. You belong together.

Right away, David and "all Israel" go to Jerusalem, which was still a Canaanite fortress held by the Jebusites. The Jebusites taunt him, sure their city can't be taken. David announces that whoever leads the attack will become commander of the army. Joab goes up first and earns the job. David captures the city and makes it his capital, the City of David. And the writer sums it up: "David grew greater and greater, for the LORD of Armies was with him."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Mighty Men**

1 Chronicles 11 includes a list of David's mighty men, his elite warriors, with short stories of their heroics. One killed three hundred men with his spear. One stood his ground in a barley field when everyone else ran. One went down into a pit on a snowy day and killed a lion. In one famous story, three of them broke through Philistine lines just to bring David a drink from the well at Bethlehem, his hometown, because he said he was thirsty for it. David was so moved by their loyalty that he refused to drink it and poured it out as an offering to the LORD, saying it was like the blood of the men who had risked their lives. This list also includes Uriah the Hittite, whose story Chronicles never tells but whose name it doesn't erase.

Think about how unusual this list is. Saul's own relatives from Benjamin, the tribe that had every reason to stay loyal to the old king, are among the first to switch sides. People came from the far north and from across the Jordan. Old rivalries between tribes, which had nearly torn Israel apart in the days of the judges, were set aside. The Chronicler wanted his readers to see that unity among God's people is possible, even after years of division. For a small community that included people whose families had been on opposite sides of old conflicts, that was a hopeful picture. It still is. Churches, families, and friend groups split over all kinds of things. Real unity doesn't mean everyone is the same. It means people with different stories choose to gather around the same King.

Chapter 12 goes back in time to show how people from every tribe came to David, even while Saul was still alive and David was a fugitive. Warriors from Benjamin, Saul's own tribe, who could shoot arrows and sling stones with either hand. Fierce fighters from Gad, "whose faces were like the faces of lions" and who were as fast as gazelles on the mountains. Men from Judah and Benjamin.

When some of them show up at David's stronghold, David isn't sure whether they've come as friends or as spies. Then "the Spirit came on Amasai," one of their leaders, and he says, "We are yours, David, and on your side, you son of Jesse. Peace, peace be to you, and peace be to your helpers; for your God helps you." It's a beautiful declaration of loyalty.

"For from day to day men came to David to help him, until there was a great army, like God's army." The list of tribes includes one fascinating group: "the children of Issachar, men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do." They

weren't just strong. They were wise. They understood what was happening around them and knew what to do about it.

The section ends with a party. Thousands of soldiers from every tribe come to Hebron "with a perfect heart" to make David king over all Israel, and "all the rest also of Israel were of one heart to make David king." For three days, they eat and drink together, and people from as far away as the northern tribes bring food on donkeys, camels, mules, and oxen: flour, figs, raisins, wine, oil, cattle, and sheep. "For there was joy in Israel," the chapter ends.

> **REAL TALK** **Understanding the Times**
>
> The men of Issachar "had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do." That's a great goal for anyone, especially a young person growing up in a fast-changing world. It means paying attention to what's going on around you, thinking carefully about it in the light of God's word, and figuring out how to live faithfully right now. It's not about being afraid of everything new, and it's not about going along with whatever is popular. It's about wisdom. Read widely, ask good questions, learn from wise people, and ask God to help you understand your world and your place in it.

KEY VERSE

David grew greater and greater, for the LORD of Armies was with him.

1 Chronicles 11:9 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Chronicles says Saul died because he didn't seek the LORD. What does it mean to seek God?
2. Why do you think the Chronicler skipped over the civil war and went straight to all Israel uniting around David?
3. Amasai said, "We are yours, David, and on your side." What would it look like to say that to Jesus?
4. What would it look like for you to understand the times you live in?

TRY THIS *This week, before you look for answers anywhere else, take one thing you're anxious about to God in prayer first. Write down what happens.*

CHAPTER 3

The Ark Comes Home

1 Chronicles 13–15

Right after becoming king, David does something that shows what kind of king he wants to be. He gathers the leaders of Israel and proposes bringing the ark of God to Jerusalem. "Also, let's bring the ark of our God back to us again, for we didn't seek it in the days of Saul."

There's that word again: seek. Under Saul, the ark had been neglected for decades, sitting in a house in the town of Kiriath Jearim. David wants God's presence at the center of the nation. Everyone agrees.

So they put the ark on a new cart and set off with a huge celebration. "David and all Israel played before God with all their might, even with songs, with harps, with stringed instruments, with tambourines, with cymbals, and with trumpets."

Then disaster. At a threshing floor along the way, the oxen stumble, and a man named Uzza reaches out to steady the ark. "The LORD's anger burned against Uzza, and he struck him because he put his hand on the ark; and he died there before God."

The party stops. David is angry and afraid. "How can I bring God's ark home to me?" he asks. He leaves the ark at the house of a man

named Obed-Edom, and for three months, "the LORD blessed Obed-Edom's house and all that he had."

> **REAL TALK** **Why Did Uzza Die?**
>
> This is one of the hardest stories in the Old Testament, and if you've read the 2 Samuel book in this series, you've seen a longer box on it there. Here's the short version. The law of Moses said the ark was never supposed to be carried on a cart. It had poles so the Levites could carry it on their shoulders, and no one was supposed to touch it, on pain of death. David had copied the Philistines, who once sent the ark back on a cart, instead of following God's instructions. Christians read Uzza's death in a few ways. Many see it as a sobering lesson that God is holy and that His presence is not something to handle casually, even with good intentions. Others focus on the leaders' responsibility for ignoring God's clear instructions, with Uzza caught in the consequences. Others honestly admit that the story still troubles them. Chronicles itself draws one lesson clearly, as David says in chapter 15: we didn't seek Him in the right way.

Chapter 14 shows God blessing David while the ark waits. King Hiram of Tyre sends cedar and workers to build David a palace. David's family grows. Twice, the Philistines attack, and twice David asks God what to do before he fights. The second time, God tells him to wait until he hears the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, a sign that God Himself is going out ahead of him. "The fame of David went out into all lands," the chapter ends.

In chapter 15, David tries again, and this time he does his homework. "Then David said, 'No one ought to carry God's ark but the Levites. For the LORD has chosen them to carry God's ark, and to minister to him forever.'"

He gathers the priests and Levites and tells them to purify themselves. He admits honestly what went wrong the first time: "For because you didn't carry it at first, the LORD our God broke out

in anger against us, because we didn't seek him according to the ordinance."

That's a mature thing for a king to say. He doesn't blame Uzza or the oxen. He takes responsibility. We messed up. We didn't do it God's way. Let's do it right.

> **REAL TALK** **Learning from Failure**
>
> David's first attempt ended in tragedy, and he was angry and afraid. He could have given up on the whole idea. He could have blamed God. Instead, he went back, figured out what went wrong, and tried again the right way. That's a skill every person needs. When something you try fails, whether it's a relationship, a project, a team, or a goal, it's worth asking honestly: what did I do wrong? What can I learn? Then try again, wiser. Failure isn't the end of the story unless you let it be.

So "the children of the Levites bore God's ark on their shoulders with its poles, as Moses commanded according to the LORD's word." And David doesn't just get the logistics right. He makes sure the music is right too. He tells the leaders of the Levites to appoint singers and musicians "with instruments of music, stringed instruments, harps, and cymbals, sounding aloud and lifting up their voices with joy." Chapter 15 lists them by name. Some play bronze cymbals. Some play harps. A Levite named Chenaniah is put in charge of the singing "because he was skillful." There are even gatekeepers assigned to walk with the ark.

This time, the procession is a total success. "Thus all Israel brought the ark of the LORD's covenant up with shouting, with sound of the cornet, with trumpets, and with cymbals, sounding aloud with stringed instruments and harps." David wears a fine linen robe and dances. Doing things God's way didn't make the celebration less joyful. It made it more joyful.

It's worth noticing how much space the Chronicler gives to the music in this chapter. In 2 Samuel, the second trip with the ark takes just a few verses. In Chronicles, it takes a whole chapter, with name after name of singers, harp players, cymbal players, trumpeters, and gatekeepers. That tells us what mattered to him and to his readers. By their time, the temple singers and Levites were at the center of community life in Jerusalem. The Chronicler is showing them that their work went all the way back to David. Their songs weren't just tradition. They were part of God's plan from the beginning. When you sing in church, or listen to worship music in your room, you're joining a very old choir.

There's only one sour note. "Michal the daughter of Saul looked out at the window, and saw king David dancing and playing; and she despised him in her heart." Chronicles mentions her briefly, in a single verse. It's a quiet reminder that Saul's family had never sought the ark, and some of them still didn't understand why it mattered.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Ark of the Covenant**

The ark was a wooden chest covered with gold, about four feet long, with two golden cherubim on its lid. Inside were the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. The lid, sometimes called the mercy seat, was where God said He would meet with His people. The ark was the most sacred object in Israel, a sign of God's presence and His covenant. After the Babylonians destroyed the temple in 586 BC, the ark disappears from history. No one knows what happened to it. That means the first readers of Chronicles had never seen it. For them, reading about David's joy as the ark came home was a reminder of what mattered most: not the gold box itself, but the God whose presence it represented.

KEY VERSE

The children of the Levites bore God's ark on their shoulders with its poles, as Moses commanded according to the LORD's word.

1 Chronicles 15:15 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think David wanted to bring the ark to Jerusalem so badly?
2. What did David do differently the second time? What does that teach about doing things God's way?
3. How do you usually respond when something you try fails?
4. Does doing things God's way make life less joyful or more joyful? Why?

TRY THIS *Think of something you tried that didn't go well. Ask yourself honestly what you can learn from it, and then try again this week, wiser.*

CHAPTER 4

Singers and Gatekeepers

1 Chronicles 16, 23–27

Once the ark is safely inside the tent David has prepared for it, there are offerings, blessings, and a gift of food for every man and woman in Israel: a loaf of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then David does something new. "He appointed some of the Levites to minister before the LORD's ark, and to commemorate, to thank, and to praise the LORD, the God of Israel." Worship becomes a full-time job.

That day, David gives Asaph and his relatives a song of thanks to sing. It's a medley of parts of three psalms that we now know as Psalms 105, 96, and 106. It begins, "Oh give thanks to the LORD. Call on his name. Make what he has done known among the peoples. Sing to him. Sing praises to him. Tell of all his marvelous works."

BACKGROUND CHECK **An Old Song for a New Day**

David's song in chapter 16 is made up of parts of three psalms, and the parts the Chronicler includes seem carefully chosen for his readers. The first part, from Psalm 105, reminds them that God remembers His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and that He protected their ancestors when they were "few in number" and wandering from nation to nation, which is exactly how the returning exiles felt. The middle part, from Psalm 96, calls all the nations to worship the LORD as King. And the end, from Psalm 106, includes a prayer: "Save us, God of our salvation! Gather us together and deliver us from

the nations." For people who had just come back from exile, that prayer must have felt very personal.

The song is full of instructions about what to do with God: thank Him, call on Him, sing to Him, tell others about Him, remember what He has done, and "Seek the LORD and his strength. Seek his face forever more." It looks back at God's faithfulness to Israel's ancestors. Then it widens to the whole world. "Sing to the LORD, all the earth! Display his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations." It mocks the idols of the nations: "For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens." And it calls on all creation to celebrate: "Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice! Let them say among the nations, 'The LORD reigns!'"

Then comes a line that became one of the most repeated refrains in the whole Bible: "Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his loving kindness endures forever." The Hebrew word translated loving kindness is hesed, God's loyal, faithful, covenant love, the kind of love that doesn't quit. For people who had survived exile, that was the deepest truth they knew. They had been through disaster, and God's love was still there.

David appoints Asaph and his relatives "to minister before the ark continually, as every day's work required." Worship isn't a one-time event. It's an everyday rhythm.

REAL TALK **Thankfulness in Hard Times**

David's song was written for a day of celebration, but the Chronicler included it for people living through hard times. That's when thankfulness matters most. It's easy to thank God when everything is going well. It's harder, and more powerful, when life is difficult. Gratitude doesn't mean pretending things are fine. It means remembering that God's love hasn't stopped, even

when circumstances are hard. Some people find it helpful to write down three things they're thankful for every day. Over time, it changes the way you see your life. And if you're in a season where you're struggling to feel anything at all, that's okay to admit too. Talk to God honestly, and talk to a trusted adult.

Later in the book, in chapters 23 through 27, David organizes the whole system of temple worship in detail, preparing for the day Solomon will build the temple. These chapters are mostly lists, and like the genealogies, they're easy to skip. But they're worth a look.

David counts the Levites and assigns them jobs. Some help the priests with sacrifices. Some are officials and judges. Four thousand are gatekeepers. And four thousand are musicians who praise the LORD with instruments David himself designed. Their job description is beautiful: "to stand every morning to thank and praise the LORD, and likewise in the evening." Every morning and every evening, for generations, there would be music in God's house.

The musicians come from three families: the sons of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, "who were to prophesy with harps, with stringed instruments, and with cymbals." Their music was a way of speaking God's truth. Many of the psalms in your Bible are credited to these musicians, especially Asaph and the sons of Korah, a family of Levites. The skilled musicians numbered two hundred eighty-eight. And here's a detail I love: "They cast lots for their offices, all alike, the small as well as the great, the teacher as well as the student." There was no special treatment. Everyone took their turn.

REAL TALK **Using Your Gifts**

The musicians were chosen because they were skillful, and they had trained hard. That's a reminder that serving God isn't only about sincerity. It's also about developing the gifts He's given you and offering them back to Him with excellence. Maybe your gift is music. Maybe it's art, writing, sports, building

things, organizing, listening, or making people feel welcome. Paul wrote, "And whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men." Whatever your gift is, practice it, grow in it, and look for ways to use it for God and for other people.

Then there are the gatekeepers. Chapter 26 lists their divisions, family by family, and assigns them to the east, west, north, and south gates of the temple, along with the storehouses. Back in chapter 9, we learned that their work was "an office of trust." They guarded the doors, protected the treasures, and opened God's house "morning by morning."

It wasn't a glamorous job. Nobody wrote songs about the gatekeepers. They didn't stand in front of the crowd. They stood at the doors, day after day, making sure God's house was open, safe, and ready for worship. And yet the Chronicler lists them by name. Some of them, like Obed-Edom, whose house was blessed when the ark stayed there, are described as strong and capable men. One gatekeeper named Zechariah is called "a wise counselor." Even the people at the door mattered.

REAL TALK **Quiet Faithfulness**

Most of the work that keeps a church, a family, a team, or a community running isn't seen by anyone. Someone unlocks the doors. Someone sets up the chairs. Someone runs the sound board, cleans up afterward, welcomes newcomers, prays for people, or shows up every week without being asked. The Chronicler made sure the gatekeepers were remembered by name, because God sees quiet faithfulness. One psalm, written by the sons of Korah, who served as gatekeepers, says it would be better to be a doorkeeper in God's house than to live in the tents of the wicked. If you serve in ways no one notices, God notices. And if you're tempted to want only the spotlight jobs, remember that some of the most important work in God's kingdom happens at the door.

Chapter 27 finishes with lists of army divisions, tribal leaders, and officials who managed David's farms, vineyards, olive groves, herds, and flocks. It's the Bible's version of an organization chart. The point is that David's kingdom wasn't just a man with a crown. It was a community where many people, from generals to shepherds, had a role to play.

KEY VERSE

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his loving kindness endures forever.

1 Chronicles 16:34 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think David made worship a full-time, everyday job instead of a once-a-year event?
2. What does God's loving kindness, His hesed, mean to you?
3. What gifts do you have that you could develop and offer to God?
4. Who are the gatekeepers in your life, the people who serve quietly without being noticed? How could you thank them?

TRY THIS *For one week, write down three things you're thankful for every morning or every evening. At the end of the week, write a thank-you note to someone who serves quietly.*

CHAPTER 5

A House Forever

1 Chronicles 17–20

David is settled in his new palace in Jerusalem, and something bothers him. He says to the prophet Nathan, "Behold, I live in a cedar house, but the ark of the LORD's covenant is in a tent." It doesn't seem right for the king to live in luxury while God's ark sits in a tent. David wants to build God a house, a temple.

Nathan thinks it's a great idea. "Do all that is in your heart; for God is with you."

But that night, God speaks to Nathan with a different message. Go tell David, "You shall not build me a house to dwell in." God reminds David that He has never asked for a house. He has moved with His people from tent to tent since the days of the exodus. Then God reminds David where he came from: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people. I have been with you wherever you went. I will make your name great.

Then comes a wordplay that changes everything. David wanted to build God a house. Instead, God says, "the LORD will build you a house." Not a building, but a family, a dynasty.

God promises that after David dies, He will raise up one of his sons. "He will build me a house, and I will establish his throne forever. I

will be his father, and he will be my son. I will not take my loving kindness away from him, as I took it from him who was before you; but I will settle him in my house and in my kingdom forever. His throne will be established forever."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Comparing the Two Versions**

The promise to David appears in both 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17, and most of the wording is the same. But there are a few small, telling differences. In 2 Samuel, God says, "Your house and your kingdom will be made sure forever." In Chronicles, God says, "I will settle him in my house and in my kingdom forever." The kingdom isn't just David's. It's God's. Also, 2 Samuel includes a warning that when David's son does wrong, God will discipline him. Chronicles leaves that line out, keeping the focus on the promise itself. For readers who had seen David's kingdom destroyed, this was a reminder that the forever kingdom belonged to God, and God's promise couldn't be destroyed.

David's response is humble and amazed. "Then David the king went in and sat before the LORD; and he said, 'Who am I, LORD God, and what is my house, that you have brought me this far?'" He knows he doesn't deserve any of this. A shepherd boy from Bethlehem, now king, and promised a family that will rule forever. "LORD, there is no one like you, neither is there any God besides you." He ends by saying, "for you, LORD, have blessed, and it is blessed forever."

REAL TALK **When God Says No**

David's desire to build God a temple was a good one. Nathan even approved it. And God still said no. Not because David's heart was wrong, but because God had a different plan, and a bigger gift in mind. Sometimes we have good desires, good plans, even godly dreams, and God closes the door. That can be confusing and painful. But David's story shows that God's no is sometimes the doorway to a better yes. David didn't get to build the temple, but he got a promise that pointed to Jesus. If you've had a dream that didn't work out, it's

> okay to grieve it. And it's worth asking God what He might be building instead.

This promise is the hinge of the whole book. Everything before it, including the family tree, the crowning of David, and the arrival of the ark, has been leading here. Everything after it, including the census, the threshing floor, and the preparations for the temple, flows from it. For the Chronicler's readers, it was the promise they clung to most. They had no king. They lived under Persian rule. Their temple was small. But God had said forever, and God doesn't lie. When they read these words, they were reading a promise that was still waiting to be fully kept. That's why later Jewish readers kept looking for a coming Son of David, an anointed one, the Messiah. And it's why the very first verse of the New Testament calls Jesus "the son of David."

Chapters 18 through 20 summarize David's military victories over the Philistines, Moabites, Syrians, Edomites, and Ammonites. The Chronicler moves through them quickly, and he says David "executed justice and righteousness for all his people." These chapters show that God was keeping His promise to give David rest from his enemies.

Now comes something important to notice. If you've read 2 Samuel, you know that in the middle of the war with the Ammonites, David stayed home from battle, took Bathsheba, and arranged the death of her husband, Uriah. That led to Nathan's confrontation, the death of a child, and years of family disaster: Amnon and Tamar, Absalom's murder of Amnon, Absalom's rebellion, and David running for his life.

1 Chronicles skips all of it. Chapter 20 begins, "At the time of the return of the year, at the time when kings go out," Joab led out the

army. "But David stayed at Jerusalem." That's the exact moment in 2 Samuel when the Bathsheba story starts. In Chronicles, the same verse goes straight on to tell us that Joab conquered the city, and the next verse says David took the enemy king's crown. The whole story is simply missing.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Does Chronicles Leave Out David's Sins?**

Some people have accused the Chronicler of a cover-up, of trying to make David look better than he was. But that doesn't fit the facts. First, the Chronicler's readers already had 2 Samuel. Everyone knew the story of Bathsheba. You can't hide something that's already in the Scriptures your readers are reading. Second, Chronicles doesn't hide all of David's failures. It tells the story of Uzza's death, which happened because David didn't follow God's instructions, and it tells the story of David's sinful census in chapter 21, which brought a plague on Israel. Third, Chronicles isn't trying to be a full biography of David. It's focused on two things: God's promise of a dynasty and the preparation for the temple. Bathsheba and Absalom are part of David's personal story, but the census leads directly to the location of the temple, so it stays in. Most Christians see Samuel and Chronicles as working together, like two camera angles on the same events. Samuel shows us David the man, flaws and all. Chronicles shows us David the founder of the dynasty and the temple. Both are true.

So why does it matter that the Chronicler tells the story this way? Because it says something about how God sees us. David's sins were real, and God dealt with them seriously in David's lifetime. But when God tells the story of what He was doing through David, the focus isn't on David's worst moments. It's on God's promise and God's purpose. That doesn't mean sin doesn't matter. It does. But for people who have confessed their sin and received God's forgiveness, their failures are not the main headline of their lives. God's grace is. If you've been forgiven, you don't have to keep defining yourself by the worst thing you've ever done.

Chapter 20 ends with brief accounts of battles against giants from Gath, descendants of the same people as Goliath. One of them has six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot. Each one is defeated by one of David's men. Even the giants fall when God is with His people.

KEY VERSE

He will build me a house, and I will establish his throne forever.

1 Chronicles 17:12 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. David wanted to build God a house, and God said He would build David a house instead. What's the difference?
2. Why do you think David asked, "Who am I"? Have you ever felt that way about something God has done?
3. Have you ever had a good plan or dream that God seemed to say no to? What happened?
4. Why do you think Chronicles leaves out the story of Bathsheba and Absalom? Do you find the explanation convincing?

TRY THIS *Write a short "Who am I" prayer, like David's, thanking God for three ways He has brought you this far.*

CHAPTER 6

The Threshing Floor

1 Chronicles 21

Chapter 21 begins with a startling sentence. "Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to take a census of Israel."

David tells Joab and the leaders of the army to count all the fighting men from Beersheba in the south to Dan in the north. Joab, of all people, objects. "May the LORD make his people a hundred times as many as they are. But, my lord the king, aren't they all my lord's servants? Why does my lord require this thing? Why will he be a cause of guilt to Israel?"

Joab was a hard, violent man, and even he could see this was wrong. But David insists, and Joab reluctantly does it, though he refuses to count the tribes of Levi and Benjamin because he finds the king's order so disgusting.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Satan or the LORD?**

The same story in 2 Samuel 24 begins differently: "Again the LORD's anger burned against Israel, and he moved David against them, saying, 'Go, count Israel and Judah.'" So who moved David, the LORD or Satan? If you've read the 2 Samuel book in this series, you've seen a box on this question. Here's the short version. Many Christians believe both are true from different angles: God allowed Satan to tempt David, as He allowed Satan to test Job, so that God's purposes, including judgment on Israel's sin, would be carried out, while Satan's purpose was to destroy. Some note that the Hebrew word satan

can mean an adversary or accuser, and think the Chronicler may be describing a human or heavenly opponent rather than the devil himself. Others see a development in Israel's understanding over time, as later writers made clearer that God is never the source of evil. James later wrote, "Let no man say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God,' for God can't be tempted by evil, and he himself tempts no one." All agree that David was fully responsible for his choice.

Why was the census so wrong? The Bible doesn't spell it out. Counting people wasn't sinful in itself; God commanded censuses in the book of Numbers. Many think David's problem was pride. He wanted to know how powerful he was, to trust in the size of his army instead of in God. After all of God's promises, David was looking at numbers to feel secure.

"God was displeased with this thing; therefore he struck Israel." David's conscience catches up with him. "I have sinned greatly, in that I have done this thing. But now put away, I beg you, the iniquity of your servant, for I have done very foolishly."

REAL TALK **Counting What You Have**

David's census was about security. He wanted to count his soldiers so he could feel strong. We do the same thing in different ways. We count followers, likes, grades, money, achievements, or friends, hoping the numbers will tell us we're okay. There's nothing wrong with working hard or doing well. But when we start trusting the numbers instead of God, or feeling worthless when the numbers are low, something has gone wrong. Your worth isn't a number. You are loved by God apart from anything you can count.

The prophet Gad brings David a terrible choice of three judgments: three years of famine, three months of being defeated by his enemies, or three days of a plague from the LORD. David's answer is wise. "I am in distress. Let me fall, I pray, into the LORD's hand, for his mercies are very great. Don't let me fall into man's hand."

So the LORD sends a plague, and seventy thousand men of Israel die. It's a devastating consequence. Then God sends an angel to destroy Jerusalem. But "as he was about to destroy, the LORD saw, and he relented of the disaster, and said to the destroying angel, 'It is enough. Now withdraw your hand.'" The angel stops at the threshing floor of a man named Ornan the Jebusite.

David looks up and sees the angel "standing between earth and the sky, having a drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem." David and the elders, dressed in sackcloth, fall on their faces. And David prays one of the most selfless prayers in his life. "Isn't it I who commanded the people to be counted? It is even I who have sinned and done very wickedly; but these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand, O LORD my God, be against me and against my father's house; but not against your people."

> **REAL TALK** **Taking Responsibility**
>
> David finally does what a real shepherd does. He stops thinking about himself and starts protecting his sheep. He says, this is my fault, not theirs. Punish me instead. That's the opposite of what most of us do when we've messed up. We make excuses, shift blame, or hope no one notices. Taking responsibility is hard, especially when your choices have hurt others. But it's the beginning of healing. And when you've hurt someone, the most important words are often the simplest: I was wrong. It was my fault. I'm sorry.

The angel tells the prophet Gad to tell David to build an altar on Ornan's threshing floor. A threshing floor was a flat, hard area, usually on a hilltop where the wind blew, where farmers separated grain from straw. Ornan is threshing wheat when he sees the angel, and his four sons hide. Then he sees King David coming and bows to the ground.

David asks to buy the threshing floor for the full price. Ornan, who is probably terrified, offers to give it to him for free, along with oxen for the sacrifice, threshing sledges for firewood, and wheat for the grain offering. "I give it all," he says.

David refuses. "No, but I will most certainly buy it for the full price. For I will not take that which is yours for the LORD, nor offer a burnt offering that costs me nothing."

So David pays Ornan six hundred shekels of gold for the place. He builds an altar and offers sacrifices, and he calls on the LORD. And God "answered him from the sky by fire on the altar of burnt offering." Then the LORD tells the angel to put his sword back in its sheath.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Fifty Shekels or Six Hundred?**
>
> 2 Samuel says David paid fifty shekels of silver for the threshing floor and the oxen. Chronicles says he paid six hundred shekels of gold for "the place." Many scholars think there's no contradiction: 2 Samuel describes the price of the threshing floor itself and the oxen, while Chronicles describes the price of the whole site, the larger area around it where the temple would later be built. Others think the different numbers reflect the different focus of each writer. Either way, both agree that David insisted on paying, because a gift to God should cost something.

The chapter ends with David still afraid of the angel's sword, and then in chapter 22 he makes an announcement that explains why this whole story matters: "This is the house of the LORD God, and this is the altar of burnt offering for Israel." The threshing floor of Ornan will be the place where the temple is built.

2 Chronicles makes it even clearer. "Then Solomon began to build the LORD's house at Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD

appeared to David his father, which he prepared in the place that David had appointed, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite."

Mount Moriah. That's where Abraham went, almost a thousand years earlier, to offer his son Isaac. God stopped him and provided a ram instead, and Abraham called the place "The LORD Will Provide." Now, on the same mountain, God stops the angel of death and accepts a sacrifice. The place where God's people would worship for centuries was a place of mercy, where judgment was stopped and sin was covered.

KEY VERSE

King David said to Ornan, "No, but I will most certainly buy it for the full price. For I will not take that which is yours for the LORD, nor offer a burnt offering that costs me nothing."

1 Chronicles 21:24 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the census was such a serious sin?
2. What things are you tempted to count to feel secure or valuable?
3. David said, "these sheep, what have they done?" Why is it so hard to take full responsibility when we've done wrong?
4. Why did David refuse to accept the threshing floor as a gift? What would it look like to give God something that costs you?

TRY THIS *Give something that costs you this week: your time, money, or something you'd rather keep. Do it for God, without telling anyone.*

CHAPTER 7

Passing the Baton

1 Chronicles 22, 28–29

David can't build the temple. God told him so. But David decides that if he can't build it, he can make sure his son has everything he needs to build it.

"David said, 'Solomon my son is young and tender, and the house that is to be built for the LORD must be exceedingly magnificent, of fame and of glory throughout all countries. I will therefore make preparation for it.' So David prepared abundantly before his death."

He gathers stonecutters to shape stones. He collects iron for nails, more bronze than anyone can weigh, and cedar logs from Tyre and Sidon. Then he calls Solomon and explains why he isn't building it himself. God told him, "You have shed blood abundantly and have made great wars. You shall not build a house to my name." But God promised that Solomon would be "a man of peace." Solomon's name sounds like the Hebrew word shalom, which means peace. The house of God would be built by a man of peace.

REAL TALK **Preparing for Someone Else's Success**

David spent the last years of his life gathering materials for a building he would never see. He wasn't going to get credit for it. It would be called Solomon's temple. And he did it anyway, with joy. That takes real humility. Most people want to be the one who finishes the project and gets the applause. But some of the most important work in the world is preparing the

> way for others: parents who sacrifice for their kids, teachers who invest in students, older believers who mentor younger ones. You can do that too. Encourage a younger sibling or friend. Help a teammate succeed. Celebrate someone else's win. The kingdom of God moves forward when people are willing to build for someone else.

David gives Solomon a charge. "Now, my son, may the LORD be with you and prosper you, and build the house of the LORD your God." He tells him the secret of success: obey the laws God gave Moses. "Be strong and courageous. Don't be afraid and don't be dismayed." Those words echo what God said to Joshua as he took over from Moses: "Be strong and courageous. Don't be afraid. Don't be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." The baton is being passed again.

Then David shows Solomon the supplies he has prepared "in my affliction," or in some translations, with great effort: a staggering amount of gold, silver, bronze, iron, timber, and stone. "And you may add to them," he says. He calls on all the leaders of Israel to help Solomon. "Now set your heart and your soul to follow the LORD your God. Arise therefore, and build."

After the chapters about the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, the story picks up again in chapter 28. David, now old, gathers all the leaders of Israel. He stands up and tells them the story: it was in his heart to build a house for God, but God chose Solomon instead. Then he speaks directly to his son, in front of everyone.

"You, Solomon my son, know the God of your father, and serve him with a perfect heart and with a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands all the imaginations of the thoughts. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will cast you off forever."

There's that word one more time: seek. If you seek Him, you will find Him. It's the message of the whole book.

> **REAL TALK** **Knowing God for Yourself**
>
> Notice what David tells Solomon to do first. Not build the temple. Not be a great king. "Know the God of your father." David couldn't hand his faith to Solomon like a set of building plans. Solomon had to know God for himself. That's true for you too. Maybe you've grown up hearing about God from your parents, grandparents, or church. That's a gift. But at some point, the question becomes personal. Do you know Him? David's promise is that if you seek Him, you will find Him. He isn't hiding from you.

David gives Solomon the plans for the temple, which he says came to him from the Spirit and from the hand of the LORD in writing. They include every detail: the porch, the rooms, the treasuries, the divisions of priests and Levites, the weight of gold and silver for every lampstand and table, even the golden cherubim over the ark.

Then David gives Solomon the words that would carry him through the whole project. "Be strong and courageous, and do it. Don't be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD God, even my God, is with you. He will not fail you nor forsake you, until all the work for the service of the LORD's house is finished."

> **REAL TALK** **Be Strong and Do It**
>
> Solomon was young, and the job in front of him was enormous. He probably felt overwhelmed. David's advice wasn't, you've got this, you're amazing. It was, God is with you, and He won't quit on you, so be strong and do it. Courage isn't the absence of fear. It's doing the right thing while you're afraid, because you trust that God is with you. Maybe there's something in front of you that feels too big: a new school, a hard conversation, a tryout, a decision, a responsibility. You don't have to feel ready. God's promise is that He'll be with you until the work is finished.

In chapter 29, David turns to the whole assembly. He tells them that Solomon is young and the work is great, "for the palace is not for man, but for the LORD God." Then he tells them that beyond everything he has prepared as king, he is giving his own personal treasure of gold and silver to the house of God, "because I have set my affection on the house of my God." Then he asks a question: "Who then offers willingly to consecrate himself today to the LORD?"

The response is overwhelming. The leaders of the families, the tribes, and the army give gold, silver, bronze, iron, and precious stones. "Then the people rejoiced, because they offered willingly, because with a perfect heart they offered willingly to the LORD; and David the king also rejoiced with great joy."

Then David prays one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible. "You are blessed, LORD, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, LORD, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty! For all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, LORD, and you are exalted as head above all." (If that sounds familiar, it's because some versions of the Lord's Prayer end with words that echo it: for Yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever.)

He continues: "Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all!" And then he says something that changes how we think about giving. "But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly as this? For all things come from you, and we have given you of your own."

That's the secret of generosity. Everything we have came from God in the first place. When we give, we're just giving Him back what was already His. "For we are strangers before you and foreigners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are as a shadow." Life is

short. Our stuff won't last. What matters is what we give back to God.

> **REAL TALK** **Cheerful Giving**
>
> David and the people gave enormous amounts, and the result wasn't misery. It was joy. They "rejoiced, because they offered willingly." That's how generosity works. Paul later wrote, "Let each man give according as he has determined in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Giving isn't just about money. You can be generous with your time, your attention, your talents, your encouragement, and your stuff. And when you remember that everything you have came from God, it becomes easier to open your hands. Try it and see if it doesn't make you happier.

The next day, the people offer thousands of sacrifices and celebrate with a feast "before the LORD on that day with great gladness." They make Solomon king a second time, publicly, and anoint him. Solomon sits on "the throne of the LORD" as king in place of his father David, and all Israel obeys him.

The book ends with David's death. "He died at a good old age, full of days, riches, and honor; and Solomon his son reigned in his place." The baton has been passed. The temple is ready to be built. And the promise of a forever King from David's family is still alive.

KEY VERSE

David said to Solomon his son, "Be strong and courageous, and do it. Don't be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD God, even my God, is with you. He will not fail you nor forsake you, until all the work for the service of the LORD's house is finished.

1 Chronicles 28:20 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think David worked so hard to prepare for a temple he would never see?
2. David told Solomon to "know the God of your father." What's the difference between knowing about God and knowing Him?
3. What's something in your life right now that requires you to be strong and courageous?
4. David said, "we have given you of your own." How does that idea change the way you think about giving?

TRY THIS *Read David's prayer in 1 Chronicles 29:10–14 out loud. Then give something away this week, cheerfully, remembering that it came from God in the first place.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

1 Chronicles ends with David giving everything he has for a temple he will never see, and with a young king, Solomon, ready to build it. But for the first readers of Chronicles, that temple had been burned, and no son of David sat on a throne. They were left holding on to promises: a King from David's line whose throne would last forever, and a house where God would live among His people.

Jewish readers treasure Chronicles as the closing book of the Hebrew Scriptures, a book that calls God's people to seek Him, to worship Him, and to hope. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, believed both promises came true in Jesus. Matthew opens his Gospel with a genealogy, just like Chronicles: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Luke traces Jesus' family all the way back to "the son of Adam, the son of God," which is exactly where Chronicles begins. Jesus said, "one greater than the temple is here," and He spoke of His own body as the temple that would be destroyed and raised in three days. And Paul tells believers from every nation that they are "no longer strangers and foreigners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God." In Jesus, God's family tree has room for you.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He knows your name. He keeps His promises, even after His people have failed.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all sinned.

Chronicles was written to people who knew where sin had led: exile. The Bible says all of us have sinned and gone our own way.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. Even David's sin brought death on his people. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the promised King.

Jesus, the Son of David, died on the cross for our sins and rose again. He is the King whose throne lasts forever and the place where God meets us.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

David said everything he gave already came from God. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Seek Him.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life and a place in God's family.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You that You remember my name and that Your promises are still alive. Thank You that Jesus, the Son of David, gave His life for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. Forgive me, and make me part of Your family. Everything I have comes from You, so I give myself back to You. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King forever. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 1 Chronicles 16, 17, and 29, then read Matthew 1, the family tree that leads to Jesus.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Find your part. Like the singers and gatekeepers, every believer has a role. Ask a leader at your church where you could serve.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Chronicles was written for people full of questions and doubts about whether God still cared. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if 1 Chronicles is right, the God who remembered every name in Israel's family tree remembers yours, and there is still room for you in His family.

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his loving kindness endures forever.

1 Chronicles 16:34 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF 2 CHRONICLES

The King Who Hears from Heaven

2 Chronicles, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Hears from Heaven: The Book of 2 Chronicles, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

Copyright © 2026 Bill McLeod. All rights reserved.

Published by Papa Bill Books.

Scripture quotations are from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, which is in the public domain.

All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” You may know one verse from 2 Chronicles without knowing it’s from 2 Chronicles. It shows up on church signs, coffee mugs, and posters: “if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven.” But most people have never read the rest of the book.

2 Chronicles tells the story of the kings of Judah, from Solomon to the exile in Babylon. If you’ve read 1 and 2 Kings, many of the names will be familiar. But just like 1 Chronicles, this book tells the story from a different angle and for a different audience: God’s people who had come home from exile and were trying to rebuild their lives around a humble new temple.

Over and over, 2 Chronicles asks one question about every king: did he seek the LORD? The kings who seek God find help. The kings who abandon Him find trouble. And again and again, when people humble themselves and pray, even the worst of them, God hears. That’s the message of the whole book. It’s a message for anyone who has ever wondered whether it’s too late to turn back.

Let’s go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through 2 Chronicles in eight chapters: Solomon’s temple and its dedication (2 Chronicles 1–7), the kingdom splits (8–

12), Asa (13–16), Jehoshaphat (17–20), from Joash to Uzziah (21–28), Hezekiah's great Passover (29–32), Manasseh and Josiah (33–35), and the fall of Jerusalem and Cyrus's decree (36).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book 2 Chronicles is, when it was written, and how it's different from 1 and 2 Kings. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as how 2 Chronicles 7:14 applies today, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes 2 Chronicles in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the fourteenth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Rather than retelling 1 and 2 Kings, this book focuses on what makes 2 Chronicles distinct: its focus on Judah, the temple, worship, and the call to seek God, along with stories found only in Chronicles, such as Hezekiah's invitation to the northern tribes and Manasseh's repentance in exile. A balanced box on 2 Chronicles 7:14 explains the verse's original setting, God's answer to Solomon's temple prayer for Israel, and how Christians have applied its call to humility and prayer today, while cautioning against turning it into a political slogan for any nation or party.

Real Talk boxes address pride, fear, anxiety, peer pressure, finishing well, and the hope that no one is too far gone for God. Where relevant, readers are pointed to trusted adults, and the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is listed for anyone in crisis.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees the temple, repentance, and the book's open-ended final words fulfilled in Jesus, while acknowledging that Jewish

readers treasure Chronicles as the final book of the Hebrew Bible. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will finish 2 Chronicles convinced that God hears humble prayer, and that it is never too late to seek Him.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Kind of Book Is This?

2 Chronicles is the second half of one long book, Chronicles, which was split in two because it was too long for one scroll. 1 Chronicles covered the family tree of Israel and the reign of David. 2 Chronicles covers Solomon and the kings of Judah who came after him, ending with the destruction of Jerusalem and the decree of Cyrus king of Persia, about 970 to 538 BC.

Who Was It For?

Chronicles was written after the exile, probably in the 400s or 300s BC, for Jews who had returned from Babylon to a rebuilt but humble temple in Jerusalem. They had no king and lived under Persian rule. The Chronicler wanted them to learn from their history: when their ancestors sought God, He helped them; when they abandoned Him, disaster followed; and when they humbled themselves and returned, He forgave. That pattern gave the returning exiles hope that God would hear them too.

How Is It Different from Kings?

1 and 2 Kings tell the story of both kingdoms, north and south, and explain why both fell. 2 Chronicles focuses almost entirely on Judah, the southern kingdom, where David's family ruled and the temple stood. It says very little about the northern kings, except when they interact with Judah. It includes many stories that Kings doesn't, especially about worship, prayer, and repentance. And it

adds a lot of detail about the temple, the priests, the Levites, and the singers.

The Big Idea: Seek the LORD

If you read 2 Chronicles carefully, you'll notice certain words coming up again and again: seek, humble, pray, turn, heart, forsake. These words are the key to the book. The Chronicler judges every king by one question: did he seek the LORD with all his heart? The answer explains almost everything that happens to him. And in 2 Chronicles, God is quick to respond when people humble themselves, even the worst of them.

The Last Book of the Hebrew Bible

In Christian Bibles, 2 Chronicles comes in the middle of the Old Testament, after Kings and before Ezra. But in the Hebrew Bible, called the Tanakh, the books are arranged differently, and Chronicles comes last. That means the Hebrew Scriptures end not with a neat conclusion, but with an invitation from Cyrus king of Persia to God's people: let him go up. The story ends in the middle of a journey.

The Map

Chapter 1 (2 Chronicles 1–7): The house of God.

Chapter 2 (2 Chronicles 8–12): The kingdom splits.

Chapter 3 (2 Chronicles 13–16): Asa.

Chapter 4 (2 Chronicles 17–20): Jehoshaphat.

Chapter 5 (2 Chronicles 21–28): From Joash to Uzziah.

Chapter 6 (2 Chronicles 29–32): Hezekiah's great Passover.

Chapter 7 (2 Chronicles 33–35): Manasseh and Josiah.

Chapter 8 (2 Chronicles 36): Let him go up.

Contents

Setting the Scene .....

1 The House of God *1–7* .....

2 The Kingdom Splits *8–12* .....

3 Asa *13–16* .....

4 Jehoshaphat *17–20* .....

5 From Joash to Uzziah *21–28* .....

6 Hezekiah's Great Passover *29–32* .....

7 Manasseh and Josiah *33–35* .....

8 Let Him Go Up *36* .....

Where This Points .....

CHAPTER 1

The House of God

2 Chronicles 1–7

2 Chronicles opens with Solomon firmly on the throne and God with him. Solomon goes to Gibeon, where the old tabernacle from Moses' time still stands, and offers a thousand sacrifices. That night, God appears to him with an astonishing offer. "Ask for what you want me to give you."

Solomon asks for wisdom. "Now give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may go out and come in before this people; for who can judge this great people of yours?" God is pleased. Because Solomon didn't ask for riches, honor, revenge on his enemies, or a long life, God gives him wisdom and all the rest too.

If you've read 1 Kings, you know that story. What's different here is what comes next. 1 Kings spends time on Solomon's wise rulings and his palace. 2 Chronicles goes almost straight to the temple. Of the first nine chapters, six are about building and dedicating it. For the Chronicler's readers, who were worshiping in a rebuilt temple, this was the story of where their worship came from.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Mount Moriah**
>
> 2 Chronicles 3 says Solomon built the temple "on Mount Moriah," on the threshing floor of Ornan, where God had stopped the plague in David's day. Moriah is also where Abraham went to offer Isaac in Genesis 22, and where God provided a ram instead. The Chronicler is connecting three moments:

> Abraham's near-sacrifice, David's sacrifice that stopped the plague, and the temple where sacrifices would be offered for centuries. Many Christians see a fourth connection. Jesus was crucified just outside Jerusalem, close to this same area, as the sacrifice God Himself provided.

Solomon understands that no building can hold God. He writes to King Huram of Tyre, asking for cedar and skilled workers, and says, "But who is able to build him a house, since heaven and the heaven of heavens can't contain him?" The temple isn't a box for God. It's a place where God chooses to meet His people.

The temple takes seven years to build. It's covered in gold, decorated with carved cherubim, palm trees, and flowers, and furnished with a huge bronze basin, lampstands, tables, and altars. When it's finished, Solomon gathers all Israel, and the priests carry the ark of the covenant into the Most Holy Place.

Then comes the moment the whole project was for. The Levite singers and musicians, dressed in fine linen, stand with cymbals, harps, and lyres, along with 120 priests blowing trumpets. And "the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD." They sing, "For he is good, for his loving kindness endures forever." And at that moment, a cloud fills the temple, "so that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud; for the LORD's glory filled God's house."

That detail is unique to Chronicles. In 1 Kings, the cloud comes after the ark is put in place. In 2 Chronicles, it comes when the people worship with one voice. God's presence shows up in the middle of praise.

> **REAL TALK** **When Worship Is One Sound**
>
> The singers and trumpeters were "as one." Hundreds of people, different instruments, different voices, all focused on praising God together. It's a

> beautiful picture of what worship can be. Worship isn't a performance, and it isn't just about the music you like. It's a whole community turning its attention to God at the same time. Next time you're at church or youth group, try to stop worrying about how you sound or what people think, and focus on the words. You're part of something much bigger than one song.

Then Solomon kneels on a bronze platform in front of everyone, raises his hands toward heaven, and prays. He praises God for keeping His promises to David. Then he asks the big question: "But will God indeed dwell with men on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens can't contain you; how much less this house which I have built!"

He asks God to keep His eyes open toward the temple day and night and to listen when people pray toward it. And over and over, he asks one thing: "hear from your dwelling place, even from heaven; and when you hear, forgive." He lists situations where people will need God's help: when someone wrongs a neighbor, when Israel loses a battle because of sin, when there's no rain, when there's famine or plague, when foreigners come to pray, when the army goes to war.

The last situation is the one that mattered most to the Chronicler's readers. "If they sin against you (for there is no man who doesn't sin)," and You let them be carried away into exile, and then they come to their senses there, and turn back to You, and pray toward this land and this house, "then hear from heaven, even from your dwelling place, their prayer and their petitions, and maintain their cause, and forgive your people who have sinned against you." Solomon was praying, centuries ahead of time, for the exiles. And the people reading Chronicles were those exiles' children.

Solomon's prayer is worth reading in full, because it's so honest about human nature. He doesn't pray as if Israel will always be

faithful. He assumes they will fail. Notice his little aside in the middle: there is no one who doesn't sin. Solomon knows that the temple won't make people perfect. What it will do is give them a place to come back to when they fail. That's a helpful way to think about church, prayer, and faith. They aren't only for people who have it all together. They're for people who have messed up and need somewhere to turn. The most important prayer in Solomon's list isn't for a perfect people. It's for forgiven ones.

When Solomon finishes praying, "fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the LORD's glory filled the house." The people fall on their faces on the pavement and worship, singing again, "For he is good, for his loving kindness endures forever!"

Later, the LORD appears to Solomon at night and answers his prayer. "I have heard your prayer, and have chosen this place for myself for a house of sacrifice." If I shut up the sky so there's no rain, or send locusts or plague, "if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."

But God also gives a warning. If you turn away and serve other gods, I will uproot you from the land, and this temple will become a joke among the nations. The Chronicler's readers knew that this warning had come true. But they also knew the promise was still there.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Does 7:14 Mean Today?**

2 Chronicles 7:14 is one of the most quoted verses in the Bible, and it's worth reading carefully. In its original setting, God was speaking to Solomon about Israel, the people "called by my name," in the land He had given them, connected to the temple Solomon had just built. The healing of the land

refers first to things like rain, crops, and an end to plagues, the disasters listed in verse 13. Christians apply the verse today in different ways. Many believe its pattern still holds for God's people anywhere: when believers humble themselves, pray, seek God, and turn from sin, God hears and forgives, and renewal often follows. The New Testament echoes this, as James says, "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he will exalt you." Others emphasize that no modern nation is in Israel's position, so the promise to heal the land shouldn't be read as a guarantee for any country. Most agree on a couple of cautions. The verse is addressed to God's people, not to a nation's government or to people who disagree with us. It calls us to humble ourselves and turn from our own wicked ways, not to point fingers at others. And it isn't a political slogan for any party or country. Read in context, it's an invitation to humble, honest prayer, starting with me.

KEY VERSE

if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.

2 Chronicles 7:14 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Solomon said that heaven itself can't contain God. Why build a temple at all?
2. Why do you think God's glory filled the temple at the moment the people worshiped together?
3. Solomon prayed ahead of time for people who would fail. What does that tell you about God's mercy?
4. What do you think it looks like to humble yourself, pray, seek God's face, and turn from your wicked ways today?

TRY THIS *Take ten minutes this week to pray through 2 Chronicles 7:14 for yourself, one phrase at a time. Ask God to show you one way you need to humble yourself or turn.*

CHAPTER 2

The Kingdom Splits

2 Chronicles 8–12

Solomon's reign is the high point of Israel's history. He builds cities, trades across the world, and becomes wealthier than any king on earth. The Queen of Sheba hears about his fame and comes all the way to Jerusalem "with a very great caravan, including camels that bore spices, gold in abundance, and precious stones." She tests him with hard questions, and he answers every one. She is so overwhelmed that she says the reports didn't tell half of it. And she praises Solomon's God, who made him king "to do justice and righteousness."

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Chronicles Leaves Out**

In 1 Kings 11, we learn that Solomon married hundreds of foreign wives, that they turned his heart toward other gods, and that God told him the kingdom would be torn from his son. 2 Chronicles leaves that out completely, just as 1 Chronicles left out David's sin with Bathsheba. The Chronicler isn't hiding the facts; his readers had Kings, and Chronicles itself mentions elsewhere that Solomon's foreign wives led him into sin. He's focusing on Solomon as the builder of the temple. But the consequences of Solomon's choices show up anyway in what happens next.

After Solomon dies, his son Rehoboam goes to Shechem to be crowned. The northern tribes, led by Jeroboam, come to him with a request. "Your father made our yoke grievous. Now therefore make

the grievous service of your father and his heavy yoke which he put on us, lighter, and we will serve you." Solomon's building projects had required heavy taxes and forced labor, and the people were exhausted.

Rehoboam asks for three days to think. First, he asks the older advisers who served his father. They tell him: be kind to them and speak good words, and they'll serve you forever. Then he asks the young men he grew up with. They tell him to be tough. Tell them, my little finger is thicker than my father's waist.

Rehoboam goes with his friends. "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to it. My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions."

The response is immediate. "What portion do we have in David?" the northern tribes shout. "Every man to your tents, Israel!" Ten tribes break away and make Jeroboam their king. Rehoboam is left with just Judah and Benjamin. The kingdom David built is split in two, and it will never be united again.

> **REAL TALK** **Whose Advice Do You Take?**
>
> Rehoboam had two sets of advisers. The older ones had experience and wisdom. The younger ones were his friends, and they told him what he wanted to hear. He chose his friends, and it cost him most of his kingdom. That doesn't mean young people never give good advice or that old people are always right. But it's worth asking: when you have a big decision, who are you listening to? Are they wise? Do they have experience? Do they care about what's right, or only about making you feel strong? It's also worth noticing that the wise advice was about kindness. Being a leader isn't about being tough. It's about serving people.

It's worth pausing on how quickly a kingdom can fall apart. Solomon had spent forty years building the richest, most powerful

kingdom Israel would ever have. His son lost most of it in a single conversation. One harsh answer, given to impress his friends, undid generations of work. Words carry more weight than we think. A harsh answer in an argument, a cruel post online, or a dismissive comment to a parent can break trust in seconds that takes years to rebuild. Proverbs puts it this way: a gentle answer turns away wrath. Rehoboam learned that lesson the hard way.

From here on, 2 Chronicles follows only Judah, the southern kingdom. The northern kingdom of Israel almost disappears from the story. Why? Because for the Chronicler, Judah was where David's family ruled and where the temple stood.

But the Chronicler never forgets that the northern tribes are part of God's people. And he records something interesting. When Jeroboam set up golden calves and appointed his own priests, the priests and Levites in the north left their land and moved to Judah. "After them, out of all the tribes of Israel, those who set their hearts to seek the LORD, the God of Israel, came to Jerusalem to sacrifice to the LORD, the God of their fathers." Faithful people from every tribe were drawn to the place where God was worshiped. The kingdom was divided, but God's people weren't defined by political borders. They were defined by whether they sought Him.

For three years, Rehoboam's kingdom does well. But then "when the kingdom of Rehoboam was established and he was strong, he abandoned the LORD's law, and all Israel with him." Notice the pattern. When things were hard, Rehoboam followed God. When he got comfortable and strong, he drifted away. This pattern will come up again and again in 2 Chronicles.

So King Shishak of Egypt invades with a huge army, captures Judah's fortified cities, and marches on Jerusalem. The prophet

Shemaiah brings Rehoboam a blunt message: "The LORD says, 'You have forsaken me, therefore I have also left you in the hand of Shishak.'"

Rehoboam and the leaders respond the right way. They "humbled themselves; and they said, 'The LORD is righteous.'" And God responds immediately. "They have humbled themselves. I will not destroy them, but I will grant them some deliverance." Shishak still takes the treasures from the temple and the palace, including the gold shields Solomon had made. Rehoboam replaces them with bronze ones. It's a sad picture of a kingdom that has lost its shine. But Jerusalem isn't destroyed.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Shishak in History**
>
> Shishak is known from Egyptian records as Pharaoh Sheshonq I, who ruled around 945 to 924 BC. On a wall of the great temple of Karnak in Egypt, he recorded a list of more than 150 towns he conquered in a military campaign into Canaan. Many of the names are places in Israel and Judah. It's one of the earliest outside records that matches events in the Bible.

This is the first clear example of the book's big theme in action. Humility brings mercy. "When he humbled himself, the LORD's wrath turned from him." But the Chronicler's final verdict on Rehoboam is sobering: "He did that which was evil, because he didn't set his heart to seek the LORD." He humbled himself once, in a crisis. But he never set his heart to seek God as a way of life.

> **REAL TALK** **Comfortable and Strong**
>
> It's often easier to pray when you're struggling than when life is good. When you're stressed, sick, scared, or sad, you reach for God. When everything is going well, it's easy to forget Him. Rehoboam drifted away when he felt secure. If life is good for you right now, that's a gift. Thank God for it. But don't

let comfort pull you away from Him. Seeking God isn't just for emergencies. It's for every day.

KEY VERSE

After them, out of all the tribes of Israel, those who set their hearts to seek the LORD, the God of Israel, came to Jerusalem to sacrifice to the LORD, the God of their fathers.

2 Chronicles 11:16 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Rehoboam listened to his friends instead of the older advisers?
2. What made the faithful people from the northern tribes move to Jerusalem? What did it cost them?
3. Why is it so easy to drift away from God when life is comfortable?
4. What's the difference between humbling yourself once in a crisis and setting your heart to seek God?

TRY THIS *Think of a decision you're facing. Ask one wise, older person for their advice this week, and really listen.*

CHAPTER 3

Asa

2 Chronicles 13–16

Rehoboam's son Abijah reigns only three years, but the Chronicler tells one story about him that Kings doesn't. Jeroboam's army, twice the size of Judah's, surrounds Abijah's troops. Before the battle, Abijah stands on a mountain and shouts to the northern army. You've abandoned the LORD, made golden calves, and driven out His priests. "Behold, God is with us at our head, and his priests with the trumpets of alarm." Don't fight against the LORD. You won't win.

Jeroboam ambushes them anyway, and Judah finds itself attacked from front and back. They cry out to the LORD, the priests blow the trumpets, and the men of Judah shout. God gives them a stunning victory.

Then Abijah's son Asa becomes king, and his story is one of the most interesting in the book, because it starts so well and ends so sadly.

"Asa did that which was good and right in the LORD his God's eyes." He tears down the altars to foreign gods, smashes their sacred stones, and cuts down the Asherah poles. And he "commanded Judah to seek the LORD, the God of their fathers, and to obey his law and command." For ten years, the land has peace.

Then an enormous army from Cush, the region south of Egypt, invades Judah. The Bible describes it as a vast army with three hundred chariots. Asa's army is much smaller. So Asa prays one of the great prayers of the Bible. "LORD, there is no one besides you to help, between the mighty and him who has no strength. Help us, LORD our God; for we rely on you, and in your name we have come against this multitude. LORD, you are our God. Don't let man prevail against you."

God answers, and Judah wins.

On the way home, a prophet named Azariah meets Asa with a message that sums up the whole book of Chronicles. "The LORD is with you while you are with him; and if you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will forsake you." And then he adds an encouragement: "But you be strong! Don't let your hands be slack, for your work will be rewarded."

Asa takes it to heart. He removes even more idols, repairs the altar of the LORD, and gathers the people of Judah, along with many from the northern tribes who had come over to him when they saw that the LORD was with him. They make a covenant together "to seek the LORD, the God of their fathers, with all their heart and with all their soul." "All Judah rejoiced at the oath, for they had sworn with all their heart and sought him with their whole desire; and he was found by them." Asa even removes his own grandmother from her position as queen mother because she had made an idol for Asherah. Faithfulness cost him something at home.

> **REAL TALK** **Seeking with Your Whole Heart**
>
> Notice the phrases: with all their heart, with all their soul, with their whole desire. Seeking God isn't something you do halfway. It's not just showing up to church or praying when you need something. It's wanting God more than

> anything else. Jeremiah later wrote, "You shall seek me and find me, when you search for me with all your heart." That doesn't mean you have to be perfect. It means you keep turning your heart toward Him, again and again. And His promise is that when you seek Him like that, He will be found.

Notice what Azariah's message does. It doesn't just warn Asa about what could go wrong. It encourages him to keep going: be strong, don't let your hands go slack, your work will be rewarded. Sometimes the hardest part of following God isn't starting. It's continuing after the first big victory, when the excitement wears off and faithfulness turns into daily, ordinary work. Asa listened, and for twenty-five years Judah had peace. Encouragement like that is something you can give to others too. A short message to a friend who is trying to do the right thing, telling them you see it and it matters, can be exactly what keeps them going.

But Asa's story doesn't end there. In the thirty-sixth year of his reign, King Baasha of Israel builds a fortress just north of Jerusalem to cut off travel into Judah. This time, Asa doesn't pray. He takes silver and gold from the temple treasury and sends it to the king of Syria, asking him to break his treaty with Israel and attack them instead. The plan works. Baasha pulls back.

But a prophet named Hanani comes to Asa. "Because you have relied on the king of Syria, and have not relied on the LORD your God, therefore the army of the king of Syria has escaped out of your hand." Remember the huge army from Cush? Because you relied on the LORD, He gave you victory. "For the LORD's eyes run back and forth throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him. You have done foolishly in this; for from now on you will have wars."

REAL TALK **God Is Looking for You**

Hanani's words to Asa contain one of the most encouraging pictures in the Bible. God's eyes are moving across the whole earth, searching. Not searching for people to catch doing something wrong, but searching for people whose hearts are fully His, so He can show Himself strong for them. The word perfect here means whole or completely devoted, not flawless. God isn't looking for perfect people. He's looking for people who are all in. That could be you.

Asa doesn't take the rebuke well. He's furious. He throws Hanani in prison and starts oppressing some of the people. Then, near the end of his life, he develops a severe disease in his feet. "His disease was exceedingly great; yet in his disease he didn't seek the LORD, but just the physicians."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Is It Wrong to See a Doctor?**

Some people have read this verse as meaning that going to a doctor is a lack of faith. That's not what it says. The problem wasn't that Asa saw physicians. It was that he saw only physicians and didn't seek the LORD at all. The Bible elsewhere treats medicine as a good gift; Paul told Timothy to take some wine for his stomach, and Luke, who wrote two books of the New Testament, was a doctor. The lesson is to seek God and also use the help He provides. If you're sick, or struggling with your mental health, go to a doctor or counselor and pray. Those two things belong together.

Asa started so well. He prayed one of the great prayers of faith. He led a national revival. But in the last years of his life, he relied on his own schemes, refused correction, and stopped seeking God. His story is a warning for every believer: it's not just how you start. It's how you finish.

KEY VERSE

For the LORD's eyes run back and forth throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him. You have done foolishly in this; for from now on you will have wars.

2 Chronicles 16:9 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Asa trusted God against the huge army from Cush, but not against Baasha. Why do you think he changed?
2. Azariah said, "if you seek him, he will be found by you." What does it look like to seek God with your whole heart?
3. Why do you think Asa got so angry when Hanani corrected him? How do you respond to correction?
4. What helps someone finish well in their faith, not just start well?

TRY THIS *Write a short prayer like Asa's first one, telling God about something too big for you, and telling Him you're relying on Him. Then pray it each day this week.*

CHAPTER 4

Jehoshaphat

2 Chronicles 17–20

Asa's son Jehoshaphat is one of the best kings in the book. "The LORD was with Jehoshaphat, because he walked in the first ways of his father David, and didn't seek the Baals, but sought the God of his father." His heart, the Chronicler says, "was lifted up in the ways of the LORD." That's a great phrase. Pride lifts a heart up in a bad way. Jehoshaphat's heart was lifted up with courage and enthusiasm for God.

In his third year, Jehoshaphat does something no king before him had done. He sends officials, Levites, and priests throughout Judah. "They taught in Judah, having the book of the LORD's law with them. They went about throughout all the cities of Judah and taught among the people." It was a traveling Bible school. Jehoshaphat understood that a nation can't seek God if it doesn't know what God has said.

But even good kings make bad choices. Jehoshaphat makes an alliance with Ahab, the wicked king of Israel, and arranges a marriage between his son and Ahab's daughter. That decision will cause disaster for Judah for years to come.

Then Ahab invites Jehoshaphat to go to war with him. Ahab's four hundred prophets all promise victory. Jehoshaphat isn't convinced.

"Isn't there here a prophet of the LORD besides, that we may inquire of him?" Ahab admits there's one, Micaiah, "but I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me." Micaiah is summoned and pressured to agree with everyone else. But he says, "As the LORD lives, I will say what my God says." He predicts Ahab's death. Ahab goes into battle anyway, disguised, and dies from a random arrow. Jehoshaphat, wearing his royal robes, is nearly killed. He cries out, and God helps him.

When he gets home, the prophet Jehu son of Hanani confronts him. "Should you help the wicked, and love those who hate the LORD?" But then he adds, "Nevertheless there are good things found in you." God sees both the failures and the faithfulness.

> **REAL TALK** **The Company You Keep**
>
> Jehoshaphat was a good man, but his alliance with Ahab almost got him killed and later brought Ahab's family into Judah's royal house, with terrible results. The people closest to you shape your choices more than you realize. That doesn't mean you should only hang out with Christians or avoid people who are different from you. Jesus was a friend of sinners. But it does mean being careful about whose influence you let into the steering wheel of your life. Ask yourself whether your closest friends help you follow God or pull you away from Him.

Jehoshaphat takes the correction well. He goes out among the people himself, bringing them back to the LORD, and he appoints judges in every city. He gives them a charge that still applies to anyone with power: "Consider what you do, for you don't judge for man, but for the LORD." No bribes. No favoritism. God is watching.

Then comes the most famous story of Jehoshaphat's reign, found only in Chronicles. A huge army of Moabites, Ammonites, and

others is marching toward Judah. They're already at En Gedi, near the Dead Sea, less than a day away.

"Jehoshaphat was alarmed, and set himself to seek the LORD." He calls a fast throughout Judah, and people come from every town to seek help from the LORD. They stand together in front of the temple, men, women, and children, and Jehoshaphat prays.

He reminds God who He is. "LORD, the God of our fathers, aren't you God in heaven? Aren't you ruler over all the kingdoms of the nations?" He reminds God of His promises, and of Solomon's prayer that God would hear when His people cried out to Him from this temple. And then he ends with one of the most honest prayers in the Bible: "For we have no might against this great company that comes against us. We don't know what to do, but our eyes are on you."

> **REAL TALK** **When You Don't Know What to Do**
>
> Jehoshaphat was the king. He was supposed to have the answers. And he stood in front of his entire nation and admitted, we don't know what to do. That takes humility. Sometimes life throws things at you that you can't fix: a family crisis, a diagnosis, a friendship falling apart, anxiety that won't go away, a decision with no good options. It's okay not to know what to do. What matters is where you look. Paul wrote, "In nothing be anxious, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." Keep your eyes on Him. And don't carry it alone; talk to a trusted adult, a pastor, or a counselor. If you're feeling overwhelmed to the point of not wanting to live, please call or text 988.

While the whole crowd stands there waiting, the Spirit of the LORD comes on a Levite named Jahaziel. "Don't be afraid, and don't be dismayed because of this great multitude; for the battle is not yours, but God's." Go down tomorrow. "You will not need to fight this

battle. Set yourselves, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD with you."

Jehoshaphat bows to the ground, and all the people fall down and worship. Then the Levites stand up and praise God "with an exceedingly loud voice."

The next morning, Jehoshaphat does something that makes no military sense. He tells the people, "Believe in the LORD your God, so you will be established!" Then he appoints singers to march out in front of the army, dressed in holy clothes, singing, "Give thanks to the LORD, for his loving kindness endures forever."

Imagine being in that choir. You're walking toward an enemy army, in front of the soldiers, armed with nothing but a song.

"When they began to sing and to praise, the LORD set ambushers against the children of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah; and they were struck." The enemy armies turn on each other. By the time Judah reaches the lookout point in the wilderness, all they see is the aftermath. The battle is over. It takes them three days to collect all the plunder.

On the fourth day, they gather in a valley and name it the Valley of Beracah, which means blessing, because they spent the day praising God. Then they march back to Jerusalem "with joy; for the LORD had made them to rejoice over their enemies," with harps, lyres, and trumpets, straight to the temple.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Praise as a Weapon?**
>
> Some Christians have taken this story as a pattern: praise God first, and He'll fight your battles. There's truth in that. Praising God in a hard situation reminds us who's really in charge and moves our focus from the problem to Him. But it's important not to turn the story into a technique, as if singing the

right songs guarantees the outcome you want. Judah sang because God had already promised victory through His prophet. Their praise was an act of trust in what God had said. Paul wrote that "the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh." Worship, prayer, and trust are real spiritual weapons, but they work because of who God is, not because of the words we use.

KEY VERSE

Our God, will you not judge them? For we have no might against this great company that comes against us. We don't know what to do, but our eyes are on you.

2 Chronicles 20:12 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Jehoshaphat sent teachers around the country with God's law?
2. What's a situation in your life where you honestly don't know what to do?
3. What would it look like to say, "our eyes are on you," in that situation?
4. Why do you think God had the choir go in front of the army?

TRY THIS *The next time you feel anxious this week, stop and pray your own version of Jehoshaphat's prayer out loud: God, I don't know what to do, but my eyes are on You. Then put on a worship song and listen to the words.*

CHAPTER 5

From Joash to Uzziah

2 Chronicles 21–28

After Jehoshaphat, Judah goes through a dark stretch. His son Jehoram marries Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, and that alliance Jehoshaphat made with Ahab bears bitter fruit. Jehoram murders all six of his brothers as soon as he takes the throne. He leads Judah into idolatry. And yet the Chronicler pauses to say that God would not destroy David's house, "because of the covenant that he had made with David, and as he promised to give a lamp to him and to his children always."

Jehoram dies of a painful disease, and the Chronicler adds a sad note: no one was sorry to see him go. After his son Ahaziah is killed, Athaliah seizes power and tries to wipe out the royal family. One baby, Joash, is rescued by his aunt and hidden in the temple for six years, until the priest Jehoiada leads a revolt and crowns him king at seven years old. If you've read 2 Kings, you know this story. It's one of the closest calls in the history of David's family.

Joash does well while Jehoiada is alive. He repairs the temple, which had been looted and neglected under Athaliah. He sets up a chest at the temple gate, and the people joyfully bring their offerings until it's full, again and again. The work is finished, and the temple is restored.

But then Jehoiada dies at 130 years old, and he's buried among the kings, an unusual honor for a priest. And everything changes. The leaders of Judah come to Joash, bow down, and flatter him, "Then the king listened to them." They abandon the temple and go back to idols.

God sends prophets to call them back, but they won't listen. Then the Spirit of God comes on Zechariah, Jehoiada's own son, and he stands up in front of the people. Why are you disobeying the LORD's commands? You can't prosper this way. You've abandoned Him, and so He has abandoned you.

The people conspire against him, and at the king's command, they stone him to death in the courtyard of the temple. Joash, the boy whose life had been saved by Zechariah's father, has the son of his rescuer murdered.

BACKGROUND CHECK **From A to Z**

Hundreds of years later, Jesus mentioned Zechariah when He warned the religious leaders of His day about the long history of God's people rejecting His messengers. He spoke of the blood of the righteous from Abel to Zechariah, who was killed between the sanctuary and the altar. Since Chronicles was the last book in the Hebrew Bible, many scholars think Jesus meant something like from the first book to the last, or from A to Z: from the first murder in Genesis to the last murder of a prophet in Chronicles. Jesus was saying that the rejection of God's messengers ran through the whole story, and it was about to reach its climax.

REAL TALK **When the Mentor Is Gone**

Joash's faith seems to have depended on Jehoiada. When Jehoiada was gone, Joash listened to flatterers instead. It's a pattern worth watching for in your own life. Maybe your faith has been strong because of a parent, a youth leader, a camp, or a friend. What happens when you go to college, move away, or those people aren't around? The best time to build a faith that's your

> own is now. Read the Bible for yourself. Pray on your own. Ask your own questions. And be careful about people who tell you what you want to hear. Flattery feels good, but it's rarely wise.

Joash's last words show how far he had fallen. As he died, Zechariah said, "May the LORD look at it, and repay it." And within a year, a small Syrian army defeated Judah's much larger army, and Joash was badly wounded. His own servants then killed him in his bed, to avenge the blood of Zechariah. The king who started life hidden and protected in God's house ended it by shedding innocent blood in that same house. It's one of the saddest reversals in the Bible, and it shows how dangerous it is to let other people's voices replace God's voice in your life.

The next king, Amaziah, is described in one telling line. "He did that which was right in the LORD's eyes, but not with a perfect heart." He obeys God in some things, but halfway. After defeating the Edomites, he brings their idols home and worships them. It makes no sense: why worship the gods of a nation you just beat? But pride and halfway faith rarely make sense. He ends up defeated, and later assassinated.

Then comes his son Uzziah, who becomes king at sixteen. His story is one of the clearest pictures in the Bible of how success can lead to pride.

At first, Uzziah does everything right. "He set himself to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the vision of God; and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper." (This is a different Zechariah, a wise adviser.) Uzziah wins wars against the Philistines and Arabs. The Ammonites pay him tribute. He builds towers in Jerusalem and in the wilderness, digs wells, and has huge herds and farms, "for he loved farming," the Chronicler adds. He

organizes a well-trained army. And he becomes famous for his inventions: devices on the towers of Jerusalem that could shoot arrows and hurl large stones, possibly an early kind of catapult. "His name spread far abroad, because he was marvelously helped until he was strong."

That last phrase is the turning point. Marvelously helped, until he was strong.

"But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up, so that he did corruptly." Uzziah walks into the temple to burn incense on the altar, something only the priests were allowed to do. He seems to think that because he's the king, and so successful, he can do whatever he wants, even in God's house.

Eighty brave priests follow him in, led by the high priest Azariah. They confront him directly. This isn't your job. It belongs to the priests. Leave the sanctuary, for you have sinned.

Uzziah, holding the incense burner, becomes furious. And while he's raging at the priests, right there by the altar, a skin disease breaks out on his forehead. The priests rush him out, and he hurries out himself. For the rest of his life, he lives in a separate house, cut off from the temple, while his son Jotham runs the kingdom. When he dies, he's buried in a field near the royal tombs, not in them, because of his disease.

> **REAL TALK** **Success and Pride**
>
> Uzziah's problem wasn't failure. It was success. He was talented, hardworking, and blessed by God. And somewhere along the way, he started to believe it was all him. Proverbs says, "Pride goes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall." Success can be one of the most dangerous tests a person faces, whether it's being the best on your team, getting the top grades, becoming popular, or going viral. None of those things are bad. But

> they can quietly convince you that you don't need God, that rules don't apply to you, or that you're better than others. The antidote is gratitude and humility: remembering that every gift you have came from God, and that the higher you rise, the more you need Him.

The prophet Isaiah, whose book is in your Bible, began his ministry "in the year that King Uzziah died." That year, Isaiah saw a vision of the true King, the LORD, high and lifted up in the temple, the place Uzziah had tried to take for himself. Earthly kings come and go. The real King is always on His throne.

The section ends with Ahaz, one of the worst kings of Judah. He sacrifices his children, worships the gods of Syria, and finally shuts the doors of the temple. "In the time of his distress, he trespassed yet more against the LORD, this same King Ahaz." Some people turn to God in hard times. Ahaz turned further away.

KEY VERSE

He set himself to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the vision of God; and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper.

2 Chronicles 26:5 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Joash turned away after Jehoiada died?
2. What does it mean to do what is right "but not with a perfect heart"?
3. Uzziah was "marvelously helped until he was strong." Why is success sometimes more dangerous than failure?
4. Ahaz turned further from God in his distress. What helps a person turn toward God in hard times instead?

TRY THIS *Make a list of three things you're good at or have succeeded in. Next to each one, write a short thank-you to God for it.*

CHAPTER 6

Hezekiah's Great Passover

2 Chronicles 29–32

After Ahaz shut the temple, his son Hezekiah opens it. Literally. "In the first year of his reign, in the first month, he opened the doors of the LORD's house and repaired them." He doesn't wait. On day one, he goes to work.

He gathers the priests and Levites and tells them what has happened. Our fathers were unfaithful. They shut the doors, put out the lamps, and stopped worship. That's why disaster has come on us. "Now it is in my heart to make a covenant with the LORD, the God of Israel, that his fierce anger may turn away from us." He tells them not to be negligent, because God has chosen them to serve Him.

For sixteen days, the priests and Levites clean out the temple, carrying all the filth and idol junk out to the Kidron Valley. Then Hezekiah offers sacrifices for the sins of the nation, and as the offerings begin, the Levites start singing with the instruments David had made. The whole assembly worships until the offerings are finished. Hezekiah and the people rejoice "because of that which God had prepared for the people; for the thing was done suddenly." Sometimes revival happens faster than anyone expects.

Then Hezekiah does something no king had done since the kingdom split two hundred years earlier. He sends letters not only throughout Judah, but to the northern tribes, inviting everyone to come to Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover.

This is a big deal. By this time, the northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by Assyria, and many of its people had been deported. Those who remained were scattered, leaderless, and spiritually lost. Hezekiah's message to them is full of grace. Return to the LORD, so He can return to you. Don't be stubborn like your ancestors were. Come to His sanctuary. "For if you turn again to the LORD, your brothers and your children will find compassion with those who led them captive, and will come again into this land, because the LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you if you return to him."

The messengers go from town to town through the north. Most people laugh at them and mock them. "Nevertheless some men of Asher, Manasseh, and Zebulun humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem."

> **REAL TALK** **When People Laugh at the Invitation**
>
> Hezekiah's messengers carried an invitation to come home to God, and most people laughed in their faces. That must have been discouraging. But some came. If you've ever invited a friend to church or youth group, or tried to talk about your faith, and been mocked or brushed off, you're in good company. You're not responsible for how people respond. You're only responsible for delivering the invitation with kindness. And you never know who will say yes. Sometimes the people you least expect are the ones who come.

A huge crowd gathers in Jerusalem. They tear down the pagan altars in the city and throw them into the Kidron Valley. Then they celebrate the Passover. But there's a problem. Many of the people

from the north haven't gone through the required purification rituals. According to the law, they weren't supposed to eat the Passover meal. They didn't know the rules. They'd been away from God's house for generations.

So Hezekiah prays for them. "May the good LORD pardon everyone who sets his heart to seek God, the LORD, the God of his fathers, even if they aren't clean according to the purification of the sanctuary." And "The LORD listened to Hezekiah, and healed the people."

That might be the most beautiful moment in the book. God cared more about hearts that were seeking Him than about getting every ritual right. The rules mattered. But the heart mattered more.

> **REAL TALK** **Coming Back Messy**
>
> Some people stay away from God or church because they think they need to get their lives cleaned up first. They don't know the songs. They don't know where to find books in the Bible. They've done things they're ashamed of. Hezekiah's Passover says: come anyway. The northern Israelites showed up messy, and God welcomed them because they were seeking Him. Jesus told a story about a son who wasted everything and came home dirty and broke, and "while he was still far off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion, and ran." You don't have to clean yourself up to come to God. He's the one who makes you clean.

The celebration is so joyful that the people decide to keep going for another seven days. "So there was great joy in Jerusalem; for since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there was nothing like this in Jerusalem." For a moment, all Israel worshiped together again, north and south, as one family. The priests bless the people, "and their prayer came up to his holy habitation, even to heaven." That's the answer to Solomon's prayer and to 7:14. People

humbled themselves, prayed, and sought God, and He heard from heaven and healed them.

Think about what this Passover meant for the people who came from the north. For two centuries, their kingdom had been separated from Jerusalem. Their kings had built rival altars and told them the temple wasn't for them. Many had probably never seen it. Now a king of Judah, a son of David, was writing to them personally, calling them brothers and inviting them home. It took courage for them to make the journey, past neighbors who were laughing at them, to a city where they didn't know the customs. But when they arrived, they weren't treated as outsiders. They were welcomed as family. That's a picture of what God's people should always be: a family that keeps the door open and runs to welcome people who come home.

The Chronicler tells the story of Sennacherib's invasion more briefly than Kings does. When the Assyrian army comes, Hezekiah prepares the city's defenses, including stopping the spring of Gihon and channeling its water into the city, the famous tunnel you can still walk through today. Then he gathers the people and encourages them. Be strong and courageous. Don't be afraid of the king of Assyria, "for there is a greater one with us than with him. An arm of flesh is with him, but the LORD our God is with us to help us and to fight our battles." And God delivers Jerusalem.

But Hezekiah isn't perfect. After God heals him of a serious illness, his heart becomes proud. Then he humbles himself, and the disaster is delayed. When envoys come from Babylon, the Chronicler says that "God left him to test him, that he might know all that was in his heart." Even the best kings have hearts that need testing.

KEY VERSE

For if you turn again to the LORD, your brothers and your children will find compassion with those who led them captive, and will come again into this land, because the LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you if you return to him.

2 Chronicles 30:9 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Hezekiah started repairing the temple in the very first month of his reign?
2. What do you think it took for the northern Israelites to accept Hezekiah's invitation when others were laughing?
3. Hezekiah prayed for people who weren't ritually clean, and God healed them. What does that say about what God values most?
4. Is there anything that makes you feel like you need to clean yourself up before coming to God?

TRY THIS *Invite one person this week to something where they could hear about God: church, youth group, or just a conversation. Whatever they say, thank God for the chance.*

CHAPTER 7

Manasseh and Josiah

2 Chronicles 33–35

Hezekiah's son Manasseh is twelve years old when he becomes king, and he reigns for fifty-five years. He is the worst king in Judah's history. He rebuilds the pagan altars his father destroyed. He worships the stars. He puts an idol in the temple itself. He sacrifices his own sons in the fire in the Valley of Hinnom. He practices sorcery and consults mediums. 2 Kings adds that he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood from one end to the other.

"The LORD spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they didn't listen."

If you've read 2 Kings, you might think that's the end of Manasseh's story. In Kings, he's simply the king whose sins were so great that they sealed Jerusalem's fate. But 2 Chronicles tells us something Kings doesn't.

The army of Assyria captures Manasseh. They put a hook in him, bind him with bronze chains, and drag him off to Babylon. The most powerful man in Judah is now a prisoner far from home, in chains, with nothing left.

And there, at the bottom, something happens. "When he was in distress, he begged the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He prayed to him; and he was

entreated by him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God."

REAL TALK **Nobody Is Too Far Gone**

Manasseh sacrificed his own children. He led an entire nation into evil. He killed innocent people. If anyone was beyond forgiveness, it was him. And when he humbled himself and prayed, God heard him. That doesn't mean what he did didn't matter; the damage he caused lasted for generations, and Kings is honest that his sins helped bring about the exile. But it means that God's mercy is bigger than any sin. Paul wrote, "where sin abounded, grace abounded more exceedingly." Maybe you think you've gone too far, that you've done something God could never forgive, or that someone you know is beyond hope. Manasseh's story says otherwise. If you're carrying guilt that's crushing you, please talk to a trusted adult or a pastor. And if you're ever thinking about harming yourself, call or text 988. God's not done with you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Only in Chronicles?**

Some scholars have wondered why Kings doesn't mention Manasseh's repentance. One likely answer is that the two books have different purposes. Kings explains why the exile happened, so it focuses on the lasting damage of Manasseh's long reign. Chronicles was written for people who had just come back from exile in Babylon, and Manasseh's story was their story: taken to Babylon in chains because of sin, humbled there, praying, and brought back home by God. For them, Manasseh was proof that 7:14 was true. Assyrian records confirm that Manasseh was a vassal of the Assyrian kings, and many scholars find a summons to Babylon historically plausible. Later Jewish writers even composed a prayer in his name, the Prayer of Manasseh, imagining what he might have said in his chains.

Back in Jerusalem, Manasseh tries to undo the damage. He throws out the foreign gods and the idol from the temple. He tears down the altars he built and throws them out of the city. He repairs the altar of the LORD and offers thank offerings. He tells Judah to serve

the LORD. But the people keep worshiping at the old shrines, and his son Amon follows Manasseh's earlier example, not his later one. Repentance changed Manasseh's heart. It couldn't erase all the consequences of fifty years of evil.

There's something quietly powerful about the fact that Manasseh's repentance didn't fix everything. We sometimes want forgiveness to be like a reset button that erases every consequence. Usually it isn't. If you break someone's trust, God can forgive you completely, but rebuilding that trust may still take time. If a habit has damaged your health or your relationships, forgiveness doesn't always undo the damage overnight. That's not because God's forgiveness is weak. It's because sin really does hurt people, and healing takes time. What forgiveness does is give you a new relationship with God and a new direction. Manasseh spent his last years trying to repair what he had broken. That's what real repentance looks like: not just saying sorry, but turning around and working to make things right where you can.

After Amon is assassinated, his eight-year-old son Josiah becomes king. Chronicles gives us a detail that Kings doesn't: "For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David his father." Josiah was sixteen. At twenty, he began cleaning the idols out of Judah and Jerusalem, and he went even further north, into the territory of the old northern kingdom, tearing down altars there too.

At twenty-six, while the temple is being repaired, the high priest Hilkiah finds "the book of the LORD's law given by Moses." When it's read to Josiah, he tears his clothes. The prophetess Huldah tells him that judgment is still coming, but not in his lifetime, "because your

heart was tender, and you humbled yourself before God." There's that word again: humbled.

Josiah gathers the people, reads the whole book to them, and makes a covenant to follow the LORD with all his heart and soul. Imagine hearing God's word for the first time as an adult, after growing up in a culture that had forgotten it. That's what happened to Josiah and to the whole nation. The words had been there all along, gathering dust in the temple. When they were finally read aloud, they were like a mirror, showing the people how far they had drifted. That's one of the reasons to read the Bible: not just to learn facts, but to let it show you yourself. It's uncomfortable sometimes. But Josiah's tender heart turned that discomfort into change.

Then he celebrates a Passover so great that the Chronicler says nothing like it had been seen since the days of the prophet Samuel. Josiah personally gives thousands of animals from his own flocks so the people can celebrate. The singers are in their places, the gatekeepers at every gate. Everything is done the way David and Solomon had arranged it.

> **REAL TALK** **Sixteen and Seeking**
>
> Josiah was sixteen when he began to seek God for himself. He didn't wait until he was an adult. His father and grandfather had both been evil for most of their lives, and he could have used that as an excuse. Instead, he started a new pattern. If you're a teenager, you're at exactly the age Josiah was when he made his choice. Your faith doesn't have to wait until you're older. You can seek God now, with all your heart, and it could change not just your life but the lives of people around you.

Josiah's story ends tragically. Pharaoh Neco of Egypt marches north to fight at Carchemish, on the Euphrates. Josiah goes out to stop him. Neco sends messengers saying, I'm not here to fight you. God

has told me to hurry. Don't oppose God, or He will destroy you. Josiah doesn't listen. He disguises himself and goes into battle at Megiddo. Archers shoot him, and he says to his servants, "Take me away, because I am seriously wounded!" He dies in Jerusalem, and all Judah mourns. Jeremiah writes laments for him, and singers remember him for generations.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Did Josiah Die?**

The Chronicler says Josiah didn't listen to God's words through Neco. That's surprising. Why would God speak through a pharaoh? And why would such a good king make such a mistake? Christians have understood it in different ways. Some think Josiah simply made a bad decision by not seeking God before going to war, the way good kings in Chronicles usually did. Others see it as a reminder that even the most faithful people can misjudge situations. The Chronicler doesn't diminish Josiah's goodness; he honors him. But he shows that even the best king couldn't save Judah. The people needed something more than a good king.

KEY VERSE

When he was in distress, he begged the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He prayed to him; and he was entreated by him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God.

2 Chronicles 33:12–13 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think it took being in chains for Manasseh to humble himself?
2. Does Manasseh's story make you feel hopeful, uncomfortable, or both? Why?
3. Manasseh's repentance was real, but it couldn't erase all the damage he'd done. What does that teach about sin and forgiveness?
4. Josiah began to seek God at sixteen. What would it look like for you to seek God for yourself right now?

TRY THIS *Think of someone you've written off as too far gone. Pray for them by name every day this week.*

CHAPTER 8

Let Him Go Up

2 Chronicles 36

The last chapter of 2 Chronicles moves fast. After Josiah, four kings reign in twenty-two years, and every one of them does evil. Egypt removes one. Babylon carries off two. Each time, more treasures from the temple are taken to Babylon, and more people go with them.

The last king is Zedekiah, Josiah's son. The Chronicler sums him up with the book's key words, used in reverse. He didn't humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet. He rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, breaking an oath he had sworn in God's name. "He stiffened his neck, and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD." Everything 7:14 called for, he refused to do.

And it wasn't just the king. The leaders of the priests and the people became more and more unfaithful, following the practices of the nations and defiling the temple.

Then comes one of the most heartbreaking sentences in the Bible. "The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent to them by his messengers, rising up early and sending, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place." God was like a parent who gets up early every morning to try again, sending messenger after messenger, because He loved them. "But they mocked the

messengers of God, despised his words, and scoffed at his prophets, until the LORD's wrath arose against his people, until there was no remedy."

> **REAL TALK** **Rising Up Early**
>
> That phrase, rising up early and sending, shows God's heart. He didn't want to judge His people. He kept giving them chances, day after day, year after year, through prophet after prophet. Judgment came only after they had rejected every warning. If you've ever felt like God is eager to punish you, look at this verse. He's the God who rises early to call you back. But it's also a warning. It's possible to ignore God's voice for so long that you stop hearing it. If you sense Him calling you to turn around about something, don't wait. Today is a good day.

So the Babylonians come. The Chronicler describes the destruction briefly and soberly. The army kills many, with no mercy for young or old. They carry off everything from the temple, every vessel large and small, and all the treasures of the king and his officials. Then "they burned God's house, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all of its valuable vessels." The survivors are taken to Babylon as servants, until the kingdom of Persia rises.

The temple whose dedication filled the first chapters of the book, where the glory cloud filled the house and fire fell from heaven, is gone.

Then the Chronicler adds an explanation found nowhere else. The exile happened "to fulfill the LORD's word by Jeremiah's mouth, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. As long as it lay desolate, it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Seventy-Year Sabbath**

God's law commanded Israel to let the land rest every seventh year, a Sabbath year with no planting or harvesting, trusting God to provide. Leviticus 26 warned that if the people disobeyed, they would be scattered, and "the land will enjoy its Sabbaths as long as it lies desolate." Many think Israel had ignored the Sabbath years for centuries, so the land finally got the rest it was owed. Jeremiah had prophesied that the exile would last seventy years. Scholars count the seventy years in different ways: some from the first deportation in 605 BC to the first return in about 538 BC, others from the temple's destruction in 586 BC to its rebuilding in 516 BC. Others see seventy as a round number for a full lifetime. Either way, the point is that the exile had a limit. God set an end date. And Leviticus also promised that if the people humbled themselves in exile, God would remember His covenant.

And then, in the last two verses, everything turns.

The Chronicler jumps ahead to the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, who conquered Babylon in 539 BC. To fulfill what He had said through Jeremiah, "the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia," and Cyrus issued a decree throughout his kingdom. The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem. Then Cyrus speaks to the scattered people of God: whoever among you belongs to His people, may the LORD his God be with him, "and let him go up."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Cyrus Cylinder**

In 1879, archaeologists found a clay cylinder in the ruins of Babylon. It's now in the British Museum. On it, Cyrus describes his conquest of Babylon and says that he returned conquered peoples to their homelands and restored their temples. It doesn't mention the Jews by name, but it matches the policy the Bible describes. A pagan king, without knowing it, was carrying out the

> plan of the God of Israel. The prophet Isaiah had even named Cyrus as God's chosen instrument, long before he was born.

And that's where the book ends. Not with the exiles arriving home. Not with the temple rebuilt. Not with a king on David's throne. It ends with an invitation, in the middle of a sentence of hope: let him go up.

Think about how unlikely this was. The Babylonians had destroyed Judah, and now Persia had destroyed Babylon. To the empires of the world, the Jews were one small, defeated people among dozens. No one expected them to survive as a nation, let alone rebuild their temple. But the God who had sent them into exile had also promised to bring them back, and He kept His word through the most unexpected person imaginable, a foreign emperor who didn't worship Him. The Chronicler wants his readers to see that God is in control of history, even when it looks like empires are running everything. Kings rise and fall, but the King of heaven keeps His promises.

The book of Ezra repeats this decree at its beginning and finishes the sentence, telling the exiles to go up to Jerusalem and rebuild the house of the LORD. But in 2 Chronicles, the words just hang there.

Remember, in the Hebrew Bible, Chronicles is the very last book. The Hebrew Scriptures, which begin in Genesis with "In the beginning," end here, with God's people standing at the start of a journey home, waiting for the rest of the story. It's as if the whole Old Testament ends with a door swinging open and a voice saying, go.

REAL TALK **The Story Isn't Over**

2 Chronicles could have ended with the ashes of Jerusalem. That would have been an honest ending. Instead, the Chronicler ends with hope. God's people had sinned, been warned, been judged, and lost everything. But God hadn't given up on them. He had set a limit on the exile and stirred up a king to send them home. If you're in a season that feels like exile, where things are broken and you've lost something important, maybe even because of your own choices, this ending is for you. God's last word isn't judgment. It's an invitation. Go up. Come home. The story isn't over.

KEY VERSE

Cyrus king of Persia says, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given all the kingdoms of the earth to me; and he has commanded me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all his people, the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up.'

2 Chronicles 36:23 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God kept sending prophets, "rising up early," even when the people mocked them?
2. What do you think the land enjoying its Sabbaths says about God's commands?
3. Why do you think the Hebrew Bible ends with "let him go up" instead of a neat conclusion?
4. Is there an area of your life where you sense God inviting you to go up, to start over, or to come home?

TRY THIS *Write a short letter to God about one area of your life that feels like exile. End it by telling God you're going up, and name one step you'll take this week.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

2 Chronicles begins with a magnificent temple filled with God's glory and ends with that temple in ashes and an invitation to go up and rebuild. The Hebrew Bible ends there, mid-journey. The exiles did go up and rebuild, but the new temple was smaller, the glory cloud never returned in the same way, and no son of David sat on the throne. God's people kept waiting.

Jewish readers treasure Chronicles as the final word of the Tanakh, a call to seek God, to worship Him, and to keep hoping. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, believed the waiting ended with Jesus. John wrote, "The Word became flesh and lived among us. We saw his glory." Jesus spoke of His own body as the true temple: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." When He died, "the veil of the temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom," opening the way to God for anyone. And the message of 7:14 came to its fullest meaning when Jesus said that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem." The book that ends with go up is answered by a risen King who says, go and make disciples of all nations, "Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. He hears from heaven when you pray.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all sinned.

Even the best kings of Judah failed. The Bible says all of us have sinned and gone our own way.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. 2 Chronicles shows sin ending in exile. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the true temple.

Jesus, the Son of David, died on the cross for our sins and rose again. In Him, God's presence comes to us, and the way to God is open.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Manasseh couldn't undo what he had done. He could only humble himself and pray. Salvation is a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Humble yourself and turn.

Admit your sin, turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I humble myself before You. I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You that You hear from heaven and that no one is too far gone for You. Thank You that Jesus gave His life for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. Forgive me, and make me new. I don't always know what to do, but my eyes are on You. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 2 Chronicles 7, 20, and 33, then read John 2 and Hebrews 10, where Jesus opens the way into God's presence.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Seek Him daily. The best kings of Judah sought God every day, not just in emergencies. Set aside a few minutes each day to pray and read.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Manasseh took decades to turn, and God still heard him. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if 2 Chronicles is right, the God who heard a king in chains is still listening, and the invitation is still open: go up.

For the LORD's eyes run back and forth throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him.

2 Chronicles 16:9 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF EZRA

The King Who Builds Again

Ezra, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Builds Again: The Book of Ezra, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

Copyright © 2026 Bill McLeod. All rights reserved.

Published by Papa Bill Books.

Scripture quotations are from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, which is in the public domain.

All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” 2 Chronicles ended with a door swinging open. After seventy years of exile, the king of Persia told God’s people they could go home and rebuild. Ezra is the story of what happened when they walked through that door.

It wasn’t easy. The people who went back found ruins, hostile neighbors, crushing poverty, and endless red tape. They started strong, got discouraged, and quit for sixteen years. Then God sent prophets to get them moving again. Decades later, a teacher named Ezra arrived and called them back to God’s word, and the book ends with one of the hardest decisions in the whole Bible.

So why read it? Because Ezra is about starting over. It’s about what happens when God gives you a second chance and you have to actually do the work of rebuilding: your faith, your habits, your relationships, your life. It’s honest about how hard that is. And it shows that God is faithful through every delay, every setback, and every small beginning.

Let’s go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Ezra in six chapters: the decree of Cyrus and the first return (Ezra 1–2), the altar and the foundation (3), opposition and the long stall (4–5), the Second Temple finished (6), Ezra’s journey and mission (7–8), and the hard ending (9–10).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Ezra is, when it happened, and how it connects to Chronicles, Nehemiah, and the prophets. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, especially the end of the book, where Ezra and the leaders send away foreign wives and their children, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Ezra in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the fifteenth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Ezra is a book about rebuilding after loss, and it speaks well to teenagers who are working out their own faith. It also ends with a genuinely difficult passage: the decision in chapters 9–10 to send away foreign wives and their children. This book treats that passage carefully. A hard-passage box explains that the concern was religious, the fear of returning to the idolatry that led to exile, rather than ethnic, noting that foreigners like Rahab and Ruth were welcomed into Israel. It also presents fairly the debate among scholars and Christians over whether Ezra's measure was God's command for that moment or a painful human overreaction, citing Malachi 2:16 and 1 Corinthians 7:12–13.

Because this passage involves divorce and separated families, a second, gentle box speaks directly to teens from divorced or mixed-faith families, assuring them that they are not a mistake, that God's love for them is not in question, and encouraging them to talk with a trusted adult. You may want to read that chapter together.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees the Second Temple and the renewal of God's people fulfilled in Jesus, while acknowledging that Jewish readers treasure Ezra as a founder of the tradition of studying and teaching the Torah. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see in Ezra a God who builds again, and will set their own hearts, like Ezra, to seek His word, to do it, and to share it.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Kind of Book Is This?

Ezra is history, built partly from official documents. It includes lists of the people who returned, letters to and from Persian kings, royal decrees, and, in the second half, Ezra's own first-person memoir. Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one scroll in the Hebrew Bible, telling one story in two parts: rebuilding the temple and the people (Ezra), then rebuilding the walls and the city (Nehemiah). Later they were divided into two books.

When It Happened

Ezra covers about eighty years. It opens in 538 BC, when Cyrus king of Persia allowed the exiles to return. The temple was finished in 516 BC. Then the story jumps nearly sixty years, past the events of the book of Esther, to 458 BC, when Ezra himself arrives in Jerusalem. Nehemiah arrives about thirteen years after that.

The World of Ezra

The Persian Empire was the largest the world had ever seen, stretching from India to Egypt. Unlike the Assyrians and Babylonians, the Persians generally let conquered peoples return to their homelands and worship their own gods, as long as they paid taxes and stayed loyal. Judah, now called Yehud, was a tiny province in a region the Persians called Beyond the River, meaning west of the Euphrates. Jerusalem was still largely in ruins, and the

returning exiles were few, poor, and surrounded by neighbors who didn't want them there.

Two Languages

Most of Ezra is written in Hebrew. But two sections, 4:8–6:18 and 7:12–26, are written in Aramaic, the international language of the Persian Empire. These sections are mostly official letters and decrees, and the writer seems to have copied them in their original language, like including original documents in a history report. It's one of the reasons scholars think Ezra drew on real Persian records.

Prophets of the Return

Two short books of prophecy, Haggai and Zechariah, come from the middle of Ezra's story, when the temple rebuilding had stalled. Malachi probably comes from a little later, around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Reading them alongside Ezra helps fill in what the people were thinking and feeling.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Ezra 1–2): Let him go up.

Chapter 2 (Ezra 3): Weeping and shouting.

Chapter 3 (Ezra 4–5): Stalled.

Chapter 4 (Ezra 6): Finished.

Chapter 5 (Ezra 7–8): Ezra sets his heart.

Chapter 6 (Ezra 9–10): The hard ending.

Contents

Setting the Scene .....

1 Let Him Go Up *1–2* .....

2 Weeping and Shouting *3* .....

3 Stalled *4–5* .....

4 Finished *6* .....

5 Ezra Sets His Heart *7–8* .....

6 The Hard Ending *9–10* .....

Where This Points .....

CHAPTER 1

Let Him Go Up

Ezra 1–2

Ezra begins exactly where 2 Chronicles ends, almost word for word. In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, to fulfill what God had said through Jeremiah, "the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia," and Cyrus issued a decree. The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem. Whoever belongs to His people may go up to Jerusalem and rebuild. And whoever stays behind should help with silver, gold, supplies, animals, and gifts for the temple.

It's 538 BC. Seventy years earlier, Jeremiah had said that the exile would have an end date. Long before that, the prophet Isaiah had even named Cyrus as the one God would use, saying of Jerusalem, "She will be built," and of the temple, "Your foundation will be laid." Now a Persian emperor who doesn't worship the LORD is carrying out the LORD's plan.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Would Cyrus Do This?**
>
> Cyrus the Great was a brilliant ruler who built the Persian Empire by conquering Media, Lydia, and Babylon. Unlike the Assyrians and Babylonians before him, he had a policy of allowing conquered peoples to return home and restore their temples. The Cyrus Cylinder, a clay inscription found in Babylon and now in the British Museum, describes this policy in his own

words. Cyrus probably saw it as good politics: grateful peoples were loyal peoples, and he wanted every god in his empire praying for him. But Ezra sees something deeper. The real reason Cyrus made his decree was that the LORD stirred up his spirit. God can work through anyone, even people who don't know Him, to keep His promises.

Here's a detail that's easy to miss. Not everyone went back. After seventy years, most of the exiles had built lives in Babylon. They had houses, businesses, and families there. Jeremiah had even told them to settle down, plant gardens, and pray for the city. Going back meant leaving all that behind for a ruined city in a poor province, a journey of about nine hundred miles that would take around four months on foot.

So who went? "Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin, the priests and the Levites, all whose spirit God had stirred to go up, rose up to build the LORD's house which is in Jerusalem." The same God who stirred up Cyrus stirred up the hearts of His people. Those who went didn't just decide on their own. God moved them.

REAL TALK **When God Stirs Your Heart**

Have you ever felt a pull toward something you couldn't quite explain? A desire to get closer to God, to help someone, to change a habit, to serve, or to take a risk for something good? Sometimes that's God stirring your heart. It doesn't always come with a voice from heaven. Often it's a quiet, persistent tug. The exiles who went back had to leave comfort behind and step into something hard. Not everyone did. When you sense God stirring you, pay attention. Talk to Him about it. Talk to a wise adult. And don't be surprised if following that pull means leaving something comfortable behind.

The people who stayed in Babylon helped those who left, giving them silver, gold, supplies, livestock, and valuable gifts. Then Cyrus

does something remarkable. He brings out the gold and silver bowls, dishes, and utensils that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Solomon's temple decades earlier, and he hands them over. Ezra counts them: 5,400 items in all. They're given to a man named Sheshbazzar, called the prince of Judah, who brings them back to Jerusalem.

Think about what that meant. These were the very objects the Babylonians had carried away when they burned the temple. For seventy years, they had sat in the house of a foreign god. Now they were going home. It was a sign that the story wasn't over. What had been taken would be restored.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel**
>
> Ezra mentions two leaders of the first return: Sheshbazzar, called the prince of Judah, and Zerubbabel, who leads most of the later work. Scholars aren't sure how they relate. Some think they were the same person with two names, one Babylonian and one Hebrew, as Daniel was also called Belteshazzar. Others think Sheshbazzar was an older leader, possibly Jehoiachin's son, and Zerubbabel his nephew who took over. Either way, Zerubbabel was a grandson of King Jehoiachin, the exiled king released from prison at the end of 2 Kings. He was a son of David. The royal line was still alive, and it was leading God's people home.

There's also something worth noticing about who stayed behind. They weren't condemned for staying. Ezra simply says they helped. Not everyone is called to the same thing. Some people are called to go, and some are called to support those who go. Some families uprooted their lives and walked nine hundred miles. Others stayed in Babylon and gave generously so the travelers would have what they needed. Both were part of God's plan. The same is true today. Some people become missionaries, pastors, or volunteers who go to hard places. Others stay where they are and pray, give, encourage,

and support them. If you're not the one going, you can still be part of the story by helping the ones who are.

Chapter 2 is a long list of the people who returned, organized by family and hometown. Like the genealogies in Chronicles, it's easy to skip. But think about what it meant to be on that list. These were the people who said yes. Their names were remembered.

The list includes ordinary families, priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants. Some families couldn't prove their ancestry, and some priests whose records couldn't be found weren't allowed to serve until the question was settled. The whole group totaled 42,360 people, plus about 7,300 servants and 200 singers. They brought horses, mules, camels, and donkeys.

When they arrive, some of the family leaders give generously toward rebuilding. "They gave according to their ability." Not everyone gave the same amount, but everyone gave what they could. Then they settle in their towns, and all Israel is back in its land.

REAL TALK **A Small Beginning**

Compare the numbers. Solomon's kingdom had hundreds of thousands of fighting men. The returning group was around fifty thousand people, including servants, in a land that was mostly ruins. It must have felt small. Later, the prophet Zechariah would ask, "who despises the day of small things?" Many of the best things in life start small: a friendship, a new habit, a small group of people praying, a first step of faith. Don't despise small beginnings. God often starts with less than we'd expect.

BACKGROUND CHECK **One Scroll, Two Books**

In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah were originally a single book, and ancient Jewish writers counted them as one. They were first divided in Christian Bibles around the third century AD, and much later in printed

Hebrew Bibles too. Reading them together helps. Ezra focuses on rebuilding the temple and renewing the people's faith; Nehemiah focuses on rebuilding the city walls and the community. Both share the same themes: God keeps His promises, opposition comes, God's people need His word, and faithfulness is hard but worth it. Some of the same people even appear in both, including Ezra himself, who reads the law to the people in Nehemiah 8.

KEY VERSE

Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin, the priests and the Levites, all whose spirit God had stirred to go up, rose up to build the LORD's house which is in Jerusalem.

Ezra 1:5 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God used a foreign king like Cyrus to send His people home?
2. If you had been an exile in Babylon, do you think you would have gone back? Why or why not?
3. Has God ever stirred your heart to do something? What happened?
4. Why do you think Ezra included the long list of names in chapter 2?

TRY THIS *Write down one thing you sense God might be stirring your heart to do. Talk to Him about it every day this week, and share it with one person you trust.*

CHAPTER 2

Weeping and Shouting

Ezra 3

In the seventh month after they arrive, the people gather in Jerusalem "as one man." The seventh month was the season of Israel's most important festivals, including the Feast of Booths, when they remembered living in tents in the wilderness after leaving Egypt. Now they were living in a kind of wilderness again.

Before they build anything else, before they build houses or walls or even the temple itself, they build an altar. Jeshua the priest and Zerubbabel lead the work, and they set it up on its old foundation, "as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God." Then they begin offering sacrifices to the LORD every morning and every evening.

And they do it scared. "In spite of their fear because of the peoples of the surrounding lands, they set the altar on its base." They knew their neighbors didn't want them there. They had no walls. They had no army. They were vulnerable. And the first thing they did was worship.

> **REAL TALK** **Worship First**
>
> The returning exiles had a long list of urgent needs: houses, food, safety, farms, a city wall. And the first thing they built was an altar. They put God first, not after everything else was settled, but before. It's a challenge for anyone. When life is overwhelming, prayer and worship are often the first

> things we drop. We're too busy, too stressed, too tired. The exiles show another way. When you're afraid and everything feels uncertain, start with God. Jesus said to seek first God's kingdom. It's not that the other things don't matter. It's that everything else goes better when God is at the center.

They celebrate the Feast of Booths. They restart the regular offerings for new moons and festivals. People begin to bring freewill offerings. But the writer adds a quiet note: "but the foundation of the LORD's temple was not yet laid." They had an altar, but no temple.

So they hire stonecutters and carpenters, and they send food, drink, and olive oil to the people of Tyre and Sidon to bring cedar logs from Lebanon by sea, just as Solomon had done centuries before. Cyrus has given them permission.

In the second year after they arrive, Zerubbabel and Jeshua begin the work. They put the Levites, starting at twenty years old, in charge of the construction. Young people are leading the rebuild.

It's worth noticing that the Levites in charge started at twenty years old. Under David, the minimum age for some Levite service had been twenty-five or thirty. Now there may simply not have been enough older Levites, so younger ones were given responsibility. Whatever the reason, young adults were trusted with one of the most important jobs in the community: overseeing the rebuilding of God's house. Sometimes young people are told to wait their turn, to sit back until they're older. There's wisdom in learning from experience. But there are also moments when God puts important work into young hands. Paul told Timothy not to let anyone look down on him because he was young. If you're given responsibility, take it seriously. Your age doesn't disqualify you from doing something that matters.

When the builders finish laying the foundation, they throw a celebration. The priests stand in their robes with trumpets. The Levites, the sons of Asaph, stand with cymbals, just as David had arranged long ago. And they sing to each other, back and forth, "For he is good, for his loving kindness endures forever toward Israel." It's the same song sung when the ark came to Jerusalem and when Solomon dedicated the first temple. "All the people shouted with a great shout."

But not everyone is shouting.

"But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice. Many also shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people."

Picture that scene. The younger people, born in exile, had never seen a temple. To them, this foundation was amazing, a dream coming true. But the older people, some of whom had been children when Solomon's temple was destroyed fifty years earlier, remembered what it used to be: the gold, the size, the glory. This foundation was so much smaller. They couldn't help but weep.

Both groups were right. It was a day for joy, and it was a day for grief. And the sounds blended together so completely that no one could tell them apart.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Were the Old Men Weeping?**

Some think the older generation wept because the new foundation was so much smaller and plainer than Solomon's. The prophet Haggai later asked the people who had seen the first temple, "How do you see it now? Isn't it in your eyes as nothing?" Others think they wept from overwhelming emotion, a

mix of grief for what was lost and joy at seeing worship restored after so long. Many people who have been through loss know that feeling: the same moment can bring tears of joy and tears of sorrow at the same time. The writer doesn't criticize either group. He just lets the sounds mingle.

REAL TALK **When Joy and Grief Mix**

Maybe you've had a moment like this. A new beginning that was also an ending. A graduation that meant leaving friends. A move to a new place that meant leaving home. A blended family that was a new start but also a reminder of what was lost. A holiday after someone you love has died. It's okay to feel joy and grief at the same time. You don't have to choose. God is present in both. And if you're with people who are feeling something different from you, give them space. The young shouted, the old wept, and they did it together. If grief is weighing heavily on you, please talk to someone you trust. You don't have to carry it alone.

There's also a lesson here about generations. Older people can remember what was, and that memory is precious. Younger people can see what could be, and that hope is precious too. God's people need both: those who remember and those who dream. The healthiest communities are the ones where young and old worship together, even when they feel different things.

REAL TALK **Building on the Old Foundation**

The exiles didn't pick a new spot for the temple. They built the altar "on its base" and laid the new foundation in the same place as the old. They didn't throw out their history; they built on it. If your faith has been shaken, or you've wandered and want to come back, you don't have to start from nothing. The truths you learned as a kid, the prayers you once prayed, the people who invested in you are all still there, like an old foundation under the rubble. God can use them as you rebuild. Starting over with God isn't starting from zero.

KEY VERSE

They sang to one another in praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "For he is good, for his loving kindness endures forever toward Israel." All the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the LORD's house had been laid.

Ezra 3:11 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the exiles built the altar before anything else?
2. What would it look like for you to put God first when you're stressed or afraid?
3. Why do you think the young people shouted and the old people wept?
4. Have you ever felt joy and grief at the same time? What was that like?

TRY THIS *Talk to an older person in your family or church this week. Ask them what has changed in their lifetime, what they miss, and what they're hopeful about.*

CHAPTER 3

Stalled

Ezra 4–5

Almost as soon as the foundation is laid, trouble begins. "The adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" hear about the building and come to Zerubbabel with an offer. "Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do; and we have been sacrificing to him since the days of Esar Haddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here."

These were people the Assyrians had resettled in the old northern kingdom generations earlier. If you've read 2 Kings 17, you know that they worshiped the LORD alongside their own gods. Their offer sounds friendly. But the writer has already called them adversaries.

Zerubbabel and the leaders refuse. You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God. We'll build it ourselves, as King Cyrus commanded.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Was Zerubbabel Wrong to Say No?**
>
> Some readers find Zerubbabel's answer harsh. Weren't these people offering to help? Why turn them away? Christians have understood it in a few ways. Many think the leaders recognized that these neighbors' worship was mixed with other gods, and that letting them help shape the temple would bring back the same compromise that had led to exile. The fact that they immediately turned to sabotage suggests their motives weren't pure. Others think the exiles were too exclusive, and note that later prophets like Isaiah looked forward to a temple that would be "a house of prayer for all peoples."

> Both concerns are real. The tension between staying faithful and staying open runs through the whole book.

The response is immediate. “Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building.” They discourage the builders, frighten them, and even hire officials to work against them in the Persian court. This campaign lasts for years, all through the reign of Cyrus and into the reign of Darius.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Aramaic Letters**
>
> Starting in 4:8, the book of Ezra switches from Hebrew to Aramaic, the official language of the Persian Empire, and it stays in Aramaic until 6:18. These chapters include copies of letters sent to and from the Persian kings. Interestingly, the letters in 4:6\u201323 come from later periods, the reigns of Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes, decades after the temple was finished, and they’re about the city walls, not the temple. The writer groups them together here to show the pattern of opposition God’s people faced again and again. It’s like a history teacher saying, and this kind of thing kept happening for the next seventy years. Then in 4:24, he returns to the story of the temple.

One of these later letters, from a Persian official named Rehum, gives a taste of the accusations. Be it known to the king that the Jews have come to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. If it’s rebuilt, they’ll stop paying taxes, and the king will lose money. Check the records, and you’ll see it’s always been a rebellious city. It’s a smear campaign, mixing a little truth with a lot of fear. And it works. The king orders the work to stop.

Back to the temple story. “Then work stopped on God’s house which is at Jerusalem. It stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.” That was 520 BC. The foundation had been laid in about 536 BC. For roughly sixteen years, the foundation sat there, untouched.

What were the people doing all that time? The prophet Haggai tells us. They were building their own houses. Fine houses, with paneled walls. Haggai brings them God's question: "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies waste?" And he adds, "Consider your ways." They'd been planting a lot and harvesting little, eating but never full, earning money that seemed to disappear through holes in their pockets.

> **REAL TALK** **When You Lose Momentum**
>
> The exiles started with incredible energy: a dangerous journey, an altar built in fear, a foundation laid with shouting. Then opposition came, and they quit. Not dramatically. They just slowly drifted into focusing on their own lives, and sixteen years went by. That's how a lot of faith stalls. Not with a big rebellion, but with discouragement and distraction. You start reading your Bible, then life gets busy and you stop. You join a group, then it gets awkward and you drift away. You commit to something, then someone criticizes you and you lose heart. If that's you, Haggai's message is for you: consider your ways. It's not too late to pick up where you left off.

Haggai's message has an interesting twist. He tells the people that their struggles, the poor harvests, the money that never stretched far enough, were connected to their neglect of God's house. That doesn't mean every hardship is a punishment for something you did. The Bible is clear that bad things happen to good people too; just read Job. But Haggai's point is that when we put our own comfort first and leave God for later, we often find that the things we chased don't satisfy. We work hard for things that don't last, and we're left feeling empty. Jesus said it this way: seek first God's kingdom, and the other things will be added. Haggai was calling the people to get their priorities back in order.

Then God sends two prophets. "Now the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who

were in Judah and Jerusalem." Haggai was probably an older man; he may even have seen the first temple. Zechariah was young. Together, an old prophet and a young prophet stir up the people.

Haggai tells them to go up to the mountains, bring wood, and build the house, and God will take pleasure in it. When people complain that the new temple will be nothing compared to Solomon's, Haggai brings God's encouragement: "Yet now be strong, Zerubbabel," says the LORD. "Be strong, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land," says the LORD, "and work, for I am with you." Zechariah brings a famous promise to Zerubbabel: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD of Armies.

And it works. Zerubbabel and Jeshua "rose up and began to build God's house which is at Jerusalem; and with them were the prophets of God, helping them." The prophets didn't just preach. They picked up tools.

Almost immediately, a new Persian governor named Tattenai shows up and asks who gave them permission to build. But "the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews," and the officials don't stop the work while they write to King Darius to check.

The Jews' answer, recorded in Tattenai's letter, is wonderful. "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth and are building the house that was built these many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished." They honestly admit that their ancestors provoked God and were exiled. And they explain that Cyrus himself authorized the rebuilding. Tattenai asks the king to search the royal archives to see if it's true.

The Persian officials could have simply shut everything down while they waited for a reply. They didn't. The writer gives the credit to God: His eye was on the elders. That's a comforting picture. The returning exiles were small and powerless, surrounded by officials who could ruin them with a single letter. But they weren't invisible. God was watching over them. Whatever you're facing, you're not invisible either. The same God whose eye was on the elders of the Jews sees you.

> **REAL TALK** **Not by Might**
>
> Zechariah's message to Zerubbabel, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," was perfect for a leader who had no army, little money, and powerful enemies. The temple wouldn't be finished because the people were strong enough or rich enough. It would be finished because God's Spirit was at work. That's good news when you feel weak. Whatever God is calling you to do, you don't have to rely only on your own strength, talent, or popularity. Ask for His help. He loves to work through people who know they need Him.

KEY VERSE

Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak rose up and began to build God's house which is at Jerusalem; and with them were the prophets of God, helping them.

Ezra 5:2 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the opposition worked so well at first?
2. Why do you think the people put their own houses ahead of God's house for so long?
3. Is there something you started for God that has stalled? What would it take to start again?
4. Why do you think God sent both an older prophet and a younger one?

TRY THIS *Pick one thing you used to do to grow closer to God that you've let slide. Restart it this week, even in a small way.*

CHAPTER 4

Finished

Ezra 6

King Darius orders a search of the royal archives. In Babylon, nothing turns up. But in the fortress of Ecbatana, in the province of Media, where the Persian kings spent their summers, officials find a scroll. It's a memo of Cyrus's original decree: "Concerning God's house at Jerusalem, let the house be built." It even gives the measurements and says the royal treasury will pay the costs. The gold and silver vessels Nebuchadnezzar took are to be returned.

Tattenai had hoped to stop the work. Instead, his letter backfires spectacularly. Darius writes back with new orders. "Leave the work of this house of God alone." Not only that, but the costs must be paid in full from the royal taxes of the very region Tattenai governs. The Jews are to be given whatever animals, wheat, salt, wine, and oil they need for sacrifices, every day, without fail, so they can pray for the king and his sons. And anyone who interferes will have a beam pulled from his house and be impaled on it, and his house turned into a garbage heap.

Imagine being Tattenai, reading that reply. He tried to shut down the project, and now he has to pay for it.

REAL TALK **When Opposition Backfires**

The enemies of the Jews spent years trying to stop the temple. In the end, their efforts led to an official royal search that confirmed the Jews' right to build and forced the opposition to fund the project. It's a pattern you'll see throughout the Bible, from Joseph's brothers to the cross: what people mean for harm, God can use for good. Paul wrote, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose." That doesn't mean everything that happens is good, or that opposition won't hurt. It means God is never out of moves. If people are working against you for doing the right thing, keep going. God sees, and He can turn it around.

Tattenai and his officials obey "with all diligence." And with the prophets' encouragement, "the elders of the Jews built and prospered, through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They built and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia." Notice the order. First the command of God. Then the decrees of kings. The kings thought they were in charge, but they were carrying out God's plan.

The temple is finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of Darius, which was the spring of 516 BC. That's about seventy years after Solomon's temple was destroyed in 586 BC. Some scholars think this is another fulfillment of Jeremiah's seventy years: seventy years without a temple.

"The children of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy." They offer a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, and four hundred lambs. That's a lot of animals for a poor community, but nothing like the tens of thousands Solomon offered. They also offer a sin offering "for all Israel, twelve male goats, according to the

number of the tribes of Israel." Even though most of the people who had returned were from Judah and Benjamin, they made an offering for all twelve tribes. They hadn't forgotten their scattered brothers and sisters. They still thought of themselves as one family.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Second Temple**

The temple finished in 516 BC is called the Second Temple. It stood for nearly six hundred years, longer than Solomon's temple. It was simpler at first, and it had no ark of the covenant, which was lost when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem. About five hundred years later, King Herod the Great expanded and rebuilt it on a massive scale, making it one of the most impressive buildings in the Roman world. That's the temple Jesus knew. When the New Testament talks about Jesus teaching in the temple, overturning the tables of the money changers, or the veil being torn when He died, it's talking about this temple, the one Zerubbabel's struggling community began. The Romans destroyed it in AD 70. Its western retaining wall, the Western Wall, still stands in Jerusalem today, and Jewish people from all over the world pray there.

Think about who was at that dedication. Some of the old people who had wept at the foundation twenty years earlier might still have been alive, now very old. Some of the young people who had shouted were now middle-aged, with children of their own. A whole generation had grown up during the long stall. Now, finally, they could see the finished building. The temple might not have had Solomon's gold, but it was theirs, built through hardship, opposition, and delay. God had kept His word. There's a particular kind of joy that comes from finishing something hard after a long wait. It's deeper than the joy of an easy win, because you know what it cost.

A few weeks later, on the fourteenth day of the first month, they celebrate the Passover. The priests and Levites have purified themselves, and they slaughter the Passover lambs for everyone.

And there's a significant detail: those who eat it include "the children of Israel who had returned out of the captivity, and all who had separated themselves to them from the filthiness of the nations of the land to seek the LORD, the God of Israel."

That second group matters. These were people who weren't part of the returning exiles, people already living in the land, possibly including some with foreign backgrounds, who chose to turn away from idol worship and join God's people to seek the LORD. And they were welcomed to the Passover table. The door was open to anyone willing to seek God with a whole heart. Hold on to that. It will matter when we get to the end of the book.

They celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread for seven days "with joy; because the LORD had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, to strengthen their hands in the work of God." (Assyria here is probably an old name for the region the Persian king now ruled.) Back in chapter 4, the enemies had weakened the people's hands. Now God has strengthened them. The joy isn't something they manufactured. The LORD made them joyful.

> **REAL TALK** **Finish What You Started**
>
> It took around twenty-two years from the first return to the finished temple, including sixteen years when nothing happened. But they finished. There's something powerful about finishing. Many people start things with enthusiasm and never complete them: projects, commitments, books, practices, friendships. Finishing usually requires pushing through the boring middle, the discouraging setbacks, and the voices telling you to quit. If you have something worth finishing, take the next step today. And if you're helping someone else finish something, be a Haggai or a Zechariah: encourage them and grab a tool.

Notice how Ezra 6 ends: with joy. The word joy, or joyful, shows up again and again in this chapter. After years of fear, discouragement, opposition, and delay, the people finally celebrated. The joy didn't come from having an easy life. They were still poor, still under Persian rule, still surrounded by people who didn't like them. It came from seeing God keep His promise and from worshiping Him together. That's a kind of joy that doesn't depend on circumstances. Nehemiah, a few years later, would tell the people, "the joy of the LORD is your strength."

KEY VERSE

The children of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy.

Ezra 6:16 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. How did the opposition's letter end up helping the Jews? Have you ever seen something like that happen?
2. Why do you think the people offered sin offerings for all twelve tribes, even though most of the tribes weren't there?
3. Who was welcomed to the Passover in 6:21? Why does that matter?
4. What's something you've started that you need to finish?

TRY THIS *Choose one unfinished project or commitment. Write down the next small step, and do it within three days.*

CHAPTER 5

Ezra Sets His Heart

Ezra 7–8

Chapter 7 begins with "Now after these things." That little phrase covers almost sixty years. The temple was finished in 516 BC. Ezra arrives in 458 BC, in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. In between, back in Persia, the events of the book of Esther take place, when a young Jewish woman became queen and helped save her people from destruction.

Now we finally meet the man the book is named after. Ezra comes from a long line of priests, all the way back to Aaron, Moses' brother. The writer lists his family tree to show that he's the real thing. "This Ezra went up from Babylon. He was a skilled scribe in the law of Moses." A scribe was more than someone who copied documents. He was a scholar and teacher of God's law.

The journey from Babylon to Jerusalem takes four months, "according to the good hand of his God on him." And then comes the verse that sums up Ezra's life: "For Ezra had set his heart to seek the LORD's law, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel."

Look at the order. First, seek: Ezra studied God's word. Then, do it: he obeyed what he learned. Then, teach: he shared it with others. Many people get the order wrong. Some study the Bible without

ever letting it change how they live. Some try to teach others what they haven't practiced themselves. Ezra did all three, in the right order, and it all started with his heart.

> **REAL TALK** **Seek, Do, Teach**
>
> Ezra's pattern is a great one for anyone who wants to grow in faith. Seek: read and study God's word, not just once in a while, but with your heart set on it. Do: put what you learn into practice. James wrote, "But be doers of the word, and not only hearers, deluding your own selves." Teach: share what you've learned with others, whether that's a younger sibling, a friend, a small group, or someone who asks you a question. You don't have to be an expert to share what God is teaching you. Start small. Read one chapter. Find one thing to obey. Tell one person.

The writer includes a copy of the letter Artaxerxes gave Ezra, again in Aramaic. The king authorizes any Israelite in his empire who wants to go to Jerusalem to go with Ezra. He sends silver and gold for sacrifices, gives Ezra access to the royal treasury, frees the temple workers from taxes, and appoints Ezra to set up judges who know God's law and to "teach him who doesn't know them." The king even seems a little nervous about God's anger: "Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done exactly for the house of the God of heaven; for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Would Artaxerxes Help?**
>
> Persian kings often supported local religions in their empire, partly to keep the peace and partly out of genuine respect or fear of local gods. Artaxerxes I also had practical reasons to want a stable, loyal province in Judah, since Egypt, just to the south, was in revolt around this time. A well-organized Jewish community governed by its own law would be good for the empire. But Ezra sees God's hand behind it all. Kings have their reasons, and God has His.

Ezra's heart was set before he ever left Babylon. That's important. He didn't become a man of God's word when he arrived in Jerusalem and got an important job. He spent years in exile studying, practicing, and preparing, in a foreign land where no one was handing out awards for knowing the law of Moses. By the time the king gave him an assignment, Ezra was ready. A lot of what God does in a person's life happens in hidden seasons of preparation. The habits you build now, when no one is watching, shape who you'll be when the opportunity comes. You don't become faithful overnight. You become faithful one ordinary day at a time.

At this point, the book shifts into first person. Ezra starts telling his own story. His first words are praise. "Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart." He says he took courage because the LORD's hand was on him, and he gathered leaders to go with him.

Think about how many people are part of this journey who never get famous. The leaders of families who agreed to go. The Levites who were recruited at the last minute. The temple servants. The mothers carrying small children on a four-month trek. The priests who carried the gold and silver the whole way and had to account for every ounce at the end. Ezra gets the book named after him, but none of it would have happened without hundreds of ordinary people saying yes. God's work is always a team effort.

Ezra gathers the travelers at a canal called the Ahava, and they camp there for three days. While reviewing the group, he notices a problem. There are no Levites. Remember, the Levites were the ones who served in the temple. Ezra sends a team to a place called Casiphia to recruit some, and they come back with about forty

Levites and 220 temple servants. Even then, recruiting people to give up their lives in Babylon to serve in Jerusalem wasn't easy.

Then Ezra faces a dilemma. The road from Babylon to Jerusalem was dangerous, and they were carrying a fortune in gold and silver. The normal thing would be to ask the king for an armed escort. But Ezra had already told the king, "The hand of our God is on all those who seek him, for good." Now he says, "For I was ashamed to ask of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the way." He had talked a big game about God's protection, and he didn't want to look like he didn't believe it.

So instead, he does something else. "Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a straight way for us, for our little ones, and for all our possessions." The whole group, including families with small children, stops eating and prays. "So we fasted and begged our God for this, and he granted our request."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Was It Wrong to Ask for an Escort?**

Thirteen years later, when Nehemiah traveled to Jerusalem, he accepted a royal escort of army officers and horsemen, and the Bible doesn't criticize him for it. So it's not that asking for help is a lack of faith. Ezra's situation was specific: he had publicly declared that God would protect those who sought Him, and he wanted his actions to match his words. Both men trusted God. One showed it by accepting help, the other by going without. The lesson isn't that one approach is always right. It's that your actions should match what you say you believe.

REAL TALK **Fasting and Praying**

Fasting means choosing to go without food, or sometimes something else, for a period of time in order to focus on God and pray. In the Bible, people fasted when they faced big decisions, danger, grief, or a need for God's help. Jesus fasted, and He assumed His followers would too. If you want to try it, start

> small. You might skip one meal or give up something like social media for a day, and use that time to pray. If you have any health conditions, or if you've ever struggled with eating or with your body image, please don't fast from food; talk to a parent, doctor, or trusted adult first, and choose something else to give up instead. Fasting isn't about earning God's favor. It's about humbling yourself and making room to seek Him.

Before they leave, Ezra carefully weighs out the silver, gold, and precious vessels and puts twelve leading priests in charge of them, saying, you are holy to the LORD, and so are these things. Guard them until you weigh them out again in Jerusalem. He was trusting God, but he was also being responsible. Faith and wisdom go together.

They leave the Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month. "The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and the bandits by the way." They arrive safely in Jerusalem. Everything is weighed and recorded, and every ounce is accounted for. Then the returning exiles offer sacrifices: twelve bulls for all Israel, and twelve male goats as a sin offering. Once again, all twelve tribes are remembered.

Ezra's arrival marks a turning point in the history of God's people. Before the exile, Israel's life centered on the temple, the priests, and the king. After the exile, there was no king, and the people were scattered across many lands. What held them together increasingly was the word of God: reading it, studying it, teaching it, and living by it. Jewish tradition remembers Ezra as the one who helped make that shift. He is often honored as a second Moses, the man who brought the Torah back to the center of the people's lives. Many traditions credit him with gathering and organizing the Scriptures.

The synagogue, where Jesus would later read and teach, grew out of this focus on God's word.

KEY VERSE

For Ezra had set his heart to seek the LORD's law, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.

Ezra 7:10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the order of Ezra's priorities matters: seek, then do, then teach?
2. Which of the three is hardest for you right now?
3. Why was Ezra ashamed to ask the king for soldiers? Do you think he made the right choice?
4. Have you ever fasted or given something up to focus on God? What was it like?

TRY THIS *Use Ezra's pattern this week. Read one passage of the Bible, pick one thing to put into practice, and share what you learned with one person.*

CHAPTER 6

The Hard Ending

Ezra 9–10

Ezra has only been in Jerusalem a few months when some of the leaders come to him with a report. The people, including priests and Levites, have married women from the surrounding peoples, peoples whose practices the law of Moses called detestable. And the leaders and officials have been the worst offenders.

Ezra's reaction is intense. He tears his clothes, pulls out hair from his head and beard, and sits down in shock. People who tremble at God's word gather around him, and he sits there, stunned, until the evening sacrifice.

Then he gets up, falls on his knees, spreads out his hands to God, and prays one of the most honest prayers of confession in the Bible. "My God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have increased over our head, and our guiltiness has grown up to the heavens."

Notice that Ezra says we and our. He didn't commit this sin himself, but he identifies with his people. He doesn't stand above them pointing fingers. He kneels with them.

He remembers their history: since the days of our ancestors, we have been guilty, and that's why we were handed over to foreign kings, to the sword, to exile, and to shame. Then he remembers

God's grace. "Now for a little moment grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape." "For we are bondservants; yet our God has not forsaken us in our bondage." God had moved the kings of Persia to let them rebuild. And now, after all that, he asks, shall we break Your commandments again? He ends with no excuses at all. "Behold, we are before you in our guiltiness; for no one can stand before you because of this."

While Ezra is praying and weeping in front of the temple, a huge crowd of men, women, and children gathers around him, and they weep bitterly too. Then a man named Shecaniah speaks up. We have been unfaithful to our God. "Yet now there is hope for Israel concerning this thing." He proposes that the men make a covenant to send away their foreign wives and the children born to them. "Arise, for the matter belongs to you and we are with you. Be courageous, and do it."

Ezra makes the leaders swear to do it. A proclamation goes out: all the returned exiles must gather in Jerusalem within three days, or lose their property and their place in the community. They gather in the square in front of the temple, trembling, in the pouring rain of winter. Ezra tells them they have been unfaithful and must separate from the peoples of the land and from their foreign wives. The assembly agrees, but asks for time, since it's raining and there are many cases. A few men oppose the plan. Over the next three months, the leaders investigate each case. The book ends with a list of the men who had married foreign women, and its final sentence is quiet and painful: "Some of them had wives by whom they had children."

That's how Ezra ends. No celebration. No neat conclusion. Just a list of names and a hint of the heartbreak behind them.

REAL TALK **A Hard Passage**

This is one of the most difficult passages in the Old Testament, and it deserves careful thought. First, it's important to understand what the concern was. It was not about race or ethnicity. The law of Moses warned Israel not to marry people from the nations around them because "that would turn away your sons from following me, that they may serve other gods." The issue was idolatry. Israel's history had proven the danger: Solomon's foreign wives turned his heart to other gods, and Ahab's marriage to Jezebel brought Baal worship to Israel. The exile had come because of idolatry, and this tiny, fragile community was terrified of losing its faith again. And foreigners who turned to the LORD were welcomed. Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabite both joined Israel, and both are named in the family tree of Jesus. Even in Ezra 6, people from the land who separated themselves from idolatry to seek the LORD were welcomed to the Passover. Second, Christians and scholars disagree about how to evaluate what Ezra did. Some believe this was a necessary, God-honoring act of repentance for that specific moment, preserving the community that would one day bring the Messiah into the world. Others believe it was a painful human overreaction. They note that the plan came from Shecaniah, not from a word of the LORD; that the law forbade new intermarriages but never commanded divorcing existing spouses; that some men objected; and that around the same time, the prophet Malachi condemned men who "dealt treacherously" with their wives and recorded God saying, "One who hates and divorces," "covers his garment with violence!" Still others believe the right answer is somewhere in between: the concern was right, but the cost was tragic. In the New Testament, Paul gives very different instructions to believers married to unbelievers: "if any brother has an unbelieving wife, and she is content to live with him, let him not leave her." Most Christians today agree that Ezra 10 is a description of what happened in a unique situation, not a command for believers today. Talk this through with your family and church.

> **SAFETY NOTE** **If Your Family Is Divorced or Mixed-Faith**
>
> If your parents are divorced, or if one parent follows Jesus and the other doesn't, this chapter might be hard to read. Please hear this: you are not a mistake. Your family's story doesn't make you any less loved by God or any less welcome in His family. Paul wrote that children in mixed-faith families are "holy," set apart and loved by God. Divorce is painful, and if it's happened in your family, it's okay to feel sad, angry, or confused about it. It is never your fault. If you're struggling with your family situation, please talk to a trusted adult, a pastor, school counselor, or relative. And if you're ever in danger at home, call 911, or call or text the Childhelp hotline at 1-800-422-4453. If you're feeling hopeless, call or text 988. God promises, "I will in no way leave you, neither will I in any way forsake you."

It's also worth noticing what Ezra did not do. He didn't round people up or punish them in anger. He prayed, wept, and confessed. The people came to him. The plan came from one of them, and the leaders took time to investigate each case individually instead of acting all at once. Some scholars point out that the list at the end is relatively short, around a hundred names, suggesting that many marriages may have been examined and found acceptable, perhaps because the wives had turned to the LORD, as Ruth had. We don't know for sure. But the slow, careful process is a reminder that even in a painful situation, the community tried to act with deliberation rather than rage.

So what do we take from this hard ending? Maybe this: the people of Ezra's day took sin seriously. When they realized they were drifting back toward the same compromise that had destroyed their nation, they didn't shrug it off. They grieved, confessed, and acted. Whether or not you think they acted rightly in every detail, their seriousness about following God is a challenge to a culture that often takes sin lightly.

And maybe this too: the Old Testament doesn't pretend to have all the answers. Ezra ends unresolved, with a broken community trying to be faithful and not fully succeeding. Nehemiah, which picks up the same story, shows that the problem came back again a few years later. The law, the temple, and even the most dedicated leaders couldn't fully change the human heart. God's people needed something more.

> **REAL TALK** **Who Influences Your Heart?**
>
> The real issue in Ezra 9 wasn't who people married. It was what would happen to their faith. That's still an important question. The people closest to you, your friends, the people you date, and someday perhaps the person you marry, will shape your heart more than almost anyone else. Paul warned believers, "Don't be unequally yoked with unbelievers," which many Christians understand as wise advice for choosing a spouse who shares your faith. That doesn't mean you can't be friends with people who believe differently. Jesus was a friend to all kinds of people. But it's worth asking whether the relationships closest to your heart are helping you follow God or pulling you away from Him.

The book of Ezra ends with a problem, but the Bible doesn't. The story continues in Nehemiah, where the walls are rebuilt, Ezra reads God's law to the whole people, and they make a new covenant. And it continues beyond that, through the prophets and the long centuries of waiting, until a child is born in Bethlehem to a family of David's line. The struggle in Ezra 9 and 10 was ultimately about keeping God's people faithful long enough for His promise to arrive. When it did, that promise opened the door wide: in Jesus, people from every nation are welcomed into God's family, not by abandoning their families, but by turning to Him.

KEY VERSE

For we are bondservants; yet our God has not forsaken us in our bondage, but has extended loving kindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to set up the house of our God, and to repair its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.

Ezra 9:9 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Ezra prayed "we" and "our" when he hadn't committed the sin himself?
2. Why was the community so afraid of intermarriage? How does knowing their history help you understand it?
3. Do you think Ezra's response was right, wrong, or somewhere in between? Why?
4. Who are the people most influencing your heart right now?

TRY THIS *Read Ezra 9:5–15 slowly, and write your own prayer of confession for yourself and for your community, using "we" like Ezra did.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Ezra tells the story of the Second Temple, a smaller, humbler building than Solomon's, finished by a struggling community of returned exiles. The old men wept when they saw its foundation. But the prophet Haggai made a startling promise about it: "'The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former,' says the LORD of Armies." How could a plain building be more glorious than Solomon's golden temple?

Jewish readers honor Ezra as a second Moses, the great scribe who taught the Torah and helped shape the life of God's people around Scripture for centuries to come. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, saw Haggai's promise come true in a way no one expected. Centuries later, in that same Second Temple, an old man named Simeon took a baby in his arms and said, "for my eyes have seen your salvation." That baby, Jesus, would teach in the temple's courts and say, "one greater than the temple is here." He would speak of His own body as the true temple: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." And through Him, the walls that divided people would come down. Paul wrote that in Jesus, people from every nation are "no longer strangers and foreigners," but are being "built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit." The God who built again in Ezra's day is still building.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. He gives second chances, and He's in the business of rebuilding.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all sinned.

Ezra prayed that his people's guilt had grown up to the heavens. The Bible says all of us have sinned.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. Exile was the cost of Israel's sin. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the true temple.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. In Him, God lives among His people, and the way home is open.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

The exiles didn't earn their way home; a king's decree set them free. Salvation is a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Come home.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You for giving second chances and for rebuilding what's broken. Thank You that Jesus gave His life for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. Forgive me, and build my life on Him. Help me set my heart to seek Your word, to do it, and to share it. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Ezra 3 and 7, then Haggai 2, and Luke 2, where Simeon meets Jesus in the Second Temple.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Seek, do, teach. Like Ezra, start a habit of reading God's word, practicing one thing you learn, and sharing it with someone else.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Ezra's people stalled for sixteen years before they finished what they started. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Ezra is right, the God who built again from ruins is still building, and He can build something new in you.

Those who sow in tears will reap in joy.

Psalm 126:5 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

The King Who Is Our Strength

Nehemiah, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Is Our Strength: The Book of Nehemiah, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

Copyright © 2026 Bill McLeod. All rights reserved.

Published by Papa Bill Books.

Scripture quotations are from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, which is in the public domain.

All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” Nehemiah is the story of a guy with a great job, a comfortable life, and a broken heart. When he heard that Jerusalem was still in ruins, he couldn’t stop thinking about it. So he risked everything to go fix it.

Most of Nehemiah is written in the first person. It reads like a journal: honest, fast-moving, and full of personality. You’ll see Nehemiah pray, plan, organize, lead, get mocked, get threatened, refuse to quit, stand up for the poor, celebrate, and lose his temper. He isn’t a polished hero. He’s a real person trying to do something hard for God.

So why read it? Because Nehemiah shows what it looks like to care about something enough to act, to pray and work at the same time, and to keep going when people laugh at you. And its ending shows something just as important: walls can be rebuilt in fifty-two days, but hearts take a lot longer.

Let’s go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Nehemiah in seven chapters: the cupbearer’s prayer (Nehemiah 1–2:8), the midnight ride and the builders (2:9–3), trowel and sword (4), the cry of the poor (5), a great work (6–7), the joy of the LORD (8–10), and the messy ending (11–13).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Nehemiah is, when it happened, and how it connects to Ezra. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as how to judge Nehemiah's harsh actions at the end of the book, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Nehemiah in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the sixteenth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Nehemiah is a natural fit for teenagers: a story about caring deeply, praying honestly, working hard alongside others, standing firm under mockery, and finishing what you start. Real Talk boxes address prayer, courage, dealing with ridicule and threats, standing up for people who are being taken advantage of, using influence well, and rest.

The book ends with Nehemiah throwing Tobiah's belongings out of the temple, shutting the city gates on the Sabbath, and, in 13:25, striking men and pulling out their hair. This book handles that ending honestly. It doesn't excuse Nehemiah's temper or hold it up as a model, and it presents fairly the different ways Christians have evaluated his actions. Above all, it shows why the book ends this way: outward reforms, however necessary, could not change the human heart on their own. A box on anger encourages healthy ways to handle frustration and points readers to trusted adults.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees Nehemiah's unfinished reform and rebuilt city pointing to Jesus, who rebuilds people from the inside out, and to the unshakable city of Revelation 21, while acknowledging that Jewish readers treasure Nehemiah in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will find in Nehemiah courage to do a great work for God, and will discover that the joy of the LORD is their strength.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Kind of Book Is This?

Nehemiah is history told mostly as a personal memoir. Large parts are written in the first person, as Nehemiah tells his own story, complete with his feelings and his short prayers to God. Other parts include lists of builders, residents, priests, and Levites, and the account of a great public Bible reading and confession. Like Ezra, it may have been assembled from Nehemiah's memoir and official records.

One Book, Two Parts

In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book. Ezra tells how the exiles rebuilt the temple and how Ezra taught God's law. Nehemiah continues the story, telling how the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt and how the community renewed its covenant with God. Ezra himself appears in Nehemiah 8, reading the law to the people.

When It Happened

Nehemiah begins in 445 BC, the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes I of Persia, about seventy years after the Second Temple was finished and thirteen years after Ezra arrived in Jerusalem. Nehemiah served as governor of Judah for twelve years, went back to Persia, and later returned to Jerusalem, probably around 430 BC. The prophet Malachi likely preached during this same period, and many of the problems he addresses show up in Nehemiah 13.

Why Walls Mattered

In the ancient world, a city without walls was barely a city. Walls protected people from raiders, wild animals, and enemy armies. They made trade and daily life possible. And a city with broken walls was a public disgrace, a sign that its people and its god were weak. Nearly 150 years after the Babylonians tore down Jerusalem's walls, they were still rubble. For Nehemiah, rebuilding them was about safety, but it was also about honor: the honor of God's people and of God Himself.

The Enemies

Nehemiah faced three main opponents. Sanballat was the governor of Samaria, the province to the north; a papyrus letter found at Elephantine in Egypt mentions him and his sons. Tobiah was an Ammonite official, probably a governor or powerful landowner east of the Jordan, with family connections to leading Jews in Jerusalem. Geshem was an Arab leader from the south, also known from ancient inscriptions. Together, they had Jerusalem surrounded on three sides.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Nehemiah 1–2:8): The cupbearer's prayer.

Chapter 2 (Nehemiah 2:9–3): Let's rise up and build.

Chapter 3 (Nehemiah 4): Trowel and sword.

Chapter 4 (Nehemiah 5): The cry of the poor.

Chapter 5 (Nehemiah 6–7): A great work.

Chapter 6 (Nehemiah 8–10): The joy of the LORD.

Chapter 7 (Nehemiah 11–13): The messy ending.

Contents

Setting the Scene .....

1 The Cupbearer's Prayer *1–2:8* .....

2 Let's Rise Up and Build *2:9–3* .....

3 Trowel and Sword *4* .....

4 The Cry of the Poor *5* .....

5 A Great Work *6–7* .....

6 The Joy of the LORD *8–10* .....

7 The Messy Ending *11–13* .....

Where This Points .....

CHAPTER 1

The Cupbearer's Prayer

Nehemiah 1–2:8

The book opens in the winter of 445 BC, in Susa, one of the royal capitals of the Persian Empire. Nehemiah is a Jew whose family never returned from exile, and he has a job most people would envy. He's the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **What's a Cupbearer?**
>
> A cupbearer wasn't just a waiter. He served the king his wine, and in a world where poisoning was a common way to get rid of a king, he often tasted it first. That meant the king had to trust him completely. Cupbearers were usually close to the king, saw him every day, and could have real influence. Nehemiah was probably well educated, well dressed, and well paid. He had a position of power and comfort in the most powerful court in the world.

One day, Nehemiah's brother Hanani arrives from Judah with some other men, and Nehemiah asks how things are going in Jerusalem. The news is terrible. The people who returned from exile are "in great affliction and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire."

It had been more than ninety years since the first exiles returned, and seventy since the temple was finished. But the city was still defenseless and humiliated. The walls the Babylonians had torn down were still lying in heaps.

Nehemiah's reaction tells you everything about him. "When I heard these words, I sat down and wept, and mourned several days; and I fasted and prayed before the God of heaven."

He didn't live in Jerusalem. He had never seen it. He had a great life in Susa. He could have said, that's too bad, and gone back to work. Instead, he let it break his heart.

> **REAL TALK** **Let It Break Your Heart**
>
> It's easy to scroll past bad news. We see so much of it that we can become numb. Nehemiah let the news about Jerusalem get to him. He cared about people he'd never met and a city he'd never seen. Some of the greatest things people have done started with a broken heart: someone who couldn't stop thinking about kids without clean water, or people stuck in poverty, or a friend who was lonely. What breaks your heart? It might be a clue to what God is calling you to do. And if bad news ever overwhelms you to the point of anxiety or despair, it's okay to step back, take a break, and talk to a trusted adult. Caring doesn't mean carrying everything alone.

Nehemiah's prayer in chapter 1 is a model of how to pray when something is wrong. He starts with who God is: "the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and loving kindness with those who love him and keep his commandments." He asks God to listen. Then he confesses sin, not just the sins of others, but his own. "I and my father's house have sinned," he says. He reminds God of His promise through Moses: if My people are scattered for their sin and then return to Me, I will gather them back. And he ends with a specific request: give me success today, and grant me mercy in the sight of this man.

This man is the king. And then the chapter ends with a little line that makes everything make sense: "Now I was cup bearer to the

king." Nehemiah has a plan, and it's going to involve risking his position, and maybe his life.

Here's something easy to miss. Chapter 1 happens in the month of Chislev, around December. Chapter 2 begins in the month of Nisan, around April. Nehemiah prayed for about four months before he did anything. He didn't rush. He waited for the right moment and prayed the whole time.

Then one day in April, Nehemiah is serving the king his wine, and his face gives him away. He'd never been sad in the king's presence before. In the Persian court, you were expected to look cheerful around the king. A sad servant could be seen as a sign of disloyalty or a hidden plot.

The king notices. "Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing else but sorrow of heart." And Nehemiah writes, "Then I was very much afraid."

He answers carefully, and respectfully. "Let the king live forever! Why shouldn't my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies waste, and its gates have been consumed with fire?" Notice that he doesn't mention Jerusalem by name. He talks about the city where his ancestors are buried, something any king would respect.

Then the king asks the question Nehemiah has been praying about for four months. "What is your request?"

And here's one of the most famous moments in the book. "So I prayed to the God of heaven." Then he answers the king.

Between the king's question and his answer, Nehemiah prayed. It must have been a split second, a silent, quick prayer, sometimes called an arrow prayer, shot up to heaven in an instant. He didn't

have time to kneel or fast. He just reached out to God in his heart, and then he spoke.

> **REAL TALK** **Arrow Prayers**
>
> Nehemiah prayed two kinds of prayers. One kind took months: weeping, fasting, confessing, and asking God day and night. The other took a second: a silent cry for help in the middle of a tense moment. Both matter. The long prayers prepared his heart. The quick prayer kept him connected to God in the moment. You can pray arrow prayers too: before a test, before a hard conversation, when you're about to lose your temper, when someone asks you a question about your faith, when you walk into a room full of people you don't know. God, help me. Give me wisdom. Give me courage. He hears those prayers just as much as the long ones.

Nehemiah asks to be sent to Judah to rebuild the city. The king, with the queen sitting beside him, asks how long he'll be gone. Nehemiah gives him a time. He's obviously thought it through. Then he asks for letters to the governors of the region so he can travel safely, and a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, for timber for the gates, the wall, and his own house. He's done his homework. He knows exactly what he needs and who controls it.

"The king granted my requests, because of the good hand of my God on me."

Nehemiah prayed and planned. He didn't think prayer meant he didn't need to prepare, and he didn't think preparation meant he didn't need to pray. He did both, and he gave God the credit.

KEY VERSE

Then the king said to me, "What is your request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

Nehemiah 2:4 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Nehemiah cared so much about a city he'd never seen?
2. What news or situation in the world breaks your heart?
3. Why do you think Nehemiah prayed for four months before acting?
4. When could you use an arrow prayer this week?

TRY THIS *Pick one situation that breaks your heart. Pray about it every day this week, and write down one practical thing you could do to help.*

CHAPTER 2

Let's Rise Up and Build

Nehemiah 2:9–3

Nehemiah travels to Judah with army officers and horsemen the king sent with him. Two officials hear about his arrival and are deeply upset: "Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant." The text says it "grieved them exceedingly, because a man had come to seek the welfare of the children of Israel." Someone who cared about the Jews was the last thing they wanted.

Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem and waits three days. He doesn't make speeches or announce his plans. Then he does something smart. "I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I didn't tell anyone what my God put into my heart to do for Jerusalem."

In the dark, riding a single animal, he goes out through the Valley Gate and inspects the walls. He sees the broken stones and burned gates. In some places, the rubble is so thick that his animal can't get through, so he goes on foot. He sees the damage with his own eyes before he asks anyone to fix it.

> **REAL TALK** **Do Your Homework**
>
> Nehemiah didn't rush in with a big announcement. He waited, looked carefully, and gathered information before he made his plan public. That's a wise way to approach a big challenge. If you want to start a project, solve a problem at school, or help a friend in a tough situation, it helps to understand the problem first. Ask questions. Look carefully. Listen. Then act. Good

> intentions are important, but good intentions plus good preparation get things done.

Then Nehemiah gathers the leaders, priests, and officials and tells them, "You see the bad situation that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come, let's build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we won't be disgraced."

Notice that he says we. Nehemiah had a comfortable life in Persia. He could have spoken as an outsider who came to fix their problem. Instead, he made their problem his own. Then he tells them his story: how God's good hand had been on him, and what the king had said.

The people respond immediately. "They said, 'Let's rise up and build.' So they strengthened their hands for the good work."

Sanballat, Tobiah, and now Geshem the Arab laugh at them. What are you doing? Are you rebelling against the king? Nehemiah's answer is short and confident. "The God of heaven will prosper us. Therefore we, his servants, will arise and build; but you have no portion, nor right, nor memorial in Jerusalem."

Then comes chapter 3, which might look like another boring list. But it's actually one of the most inspiring chapters in the book, if you read it carefully.

It lists who built each section of the wall, going counterclockwise around the city, gate by gate. And the people on this list are not professional builders. Eliashib the high priest and the other priests rebuild the Sheep Gate. Then come men from nearby towns like Jericho and Tekoa. A goldsmith named Uzziel repairs a section. Next to him, Hananiah, "one of the perfumers," makes repairs. Rulers of districts work on the wall. And "Shallum the son of

Hallohesh, the ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, he and his daughters made repairs." Merchants work together. Levites work. Temple servants work.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Everyone on the Wall**
>
> Imagine a goldsmith, used to delicate work with precious metals, hauling heavy stones. Or a perfume maker, whose hands usually mixed fragrant oils, covered in dust and ash. They weren't experts. They had no special training. They just showed up and worked. Shallum's daughters are especially notable. In the ancient world, building walls was not usually considered women's work, but here they are, named in the record. Everyone had a part. The wall was rebuilt by ordinary people, side by side.

The phrase that keeps repeating in chapter 3 is "next to him." Next to him, so-and-so repaired. Next to them, someone else. The wall went up because people worked side by side, each one doing their section.

And many of them worked on the part of the wall closest to their own homes. "Above the horse gate, the priests made repairs, everyone across from his own house." That made sense. People were motivated to protect their own families, and they could work without traveling far. It's a picture of how a lot of good work happens: people taking responsibility for what's right in front of them.

The chapter also includes one embarrassing note. The men of Tekoa made repairs, "but their nobles didn't put their necks to the Lord's work." The important people in Tekoa thought they were too good to work. But the ordinary people of Tekoa didn't let that stop them. Later in the chapter, they repaired a second section.

REAL TALK **Your Section of the Wall**

Nobody built the whole wall. Everyone built a section. That's how God's work usually happens: lots of people, each doing their part, next to each other. You don't have to do everything. You just have to do your section. That might be helping out at church, being kind to the new kid, working hard on a group project, encouraging a friend, or serving your family at home. Don't wait until you feel like an expert. The goldsmith and the perfume maker weren't experts. And don't be like the nobles of Tekoa, who thought the work was beneath them. No job done for God is too small.

It's worth stopping to notice how Nehemiah led. He didn't show up in Jerusalem with a speech about how terrible everyone was for letting the walls stay broken for so long. He didn't blame them. He looked carefully at the problem first, quietly and at night. Then he stood with the people and said, "you see the bad situation that we are in." We, not you. He included himself in the problem and in the solution. He told them how God had already been at work, and what the king had said. And he invited them to join something bigger than themselves.

That's what good leadership often looks like. It isn't bossing people around or making yourself look important. It's seeing a need clearly, caring about it deeply, telling the truth, and inviting others to work alongside you. You don't need a title to lead like that. You can do it on a team, in a club, in your family, or in your group of friends.

KEY VERSE

I told them about the hand of my God which was good on me, and also about the king's words that he had spoken to me. They said, "Let's rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work.

Nehemiah 2:18 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Nehemiah inspected the walls secretly at night?
2. Why do you think the people were so quick to say, "Let's rise up and build"?
3. Which builder in chapter 3 stands out to you most? Why?
4. What's your section of the wall right now, the part of God's work right in front of you?

TRY THIS *Find one job at home, church, or school that needs doing, especially one nobody wants. Do it this week without being asked.*

CHAPTER 3

Trowel and Sword

Nehemiah 4

As the wall goes up, Sanballat gets angry. Very angry. And he starts mocking the Jews in front of his friends and the army of Samaria. "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, since they are burned?"

Tobiah adds his own joke. "What they are building, if a fox climbed up it, he would break down their stone wall." A fox weighs about ten pounds. That's how flimsy he thinks their wall is.

> **REAL TALK** **When People Mock You**
>
> Mockery is one of the oldest weapons there is. It doesn't break bones, but it can break your spirit. Sanballat and Tobiah weren't attacking with swords yet. They were trying to make the builders feel stupid, weak, and foolish for trying. You've probably experienced that too: people laughing at your faith, your appearance, your dreams, or your effort. Online, it can be relentless. Nehemiah's response is worth noticing. He didn't fire back insults. He prayed and kept working. If you're being mocked or bullied, especially if it's constant, please tell a trusted adult. You don't have to handle it alone, and it's not a sign of weakness to ask for help. If it ever makes you feel like life isn't worth living, call or text 988 right away.

Nehemiah's response is a prayer, and it's a raw one. "Hear, our God, for we are despised. Turn back their reproach on their own head."

He asks God to deal with his enemies. It's honest, angry, and real. He doesn't take revenge himself. He hands it to God.

Then the very next line: "So we built the wall; and all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work." The whole wall was connected, all the way around the city, up to half its height. Mockery didn't stop them. They had a mind to work.

When Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the people of Ashdod hear that the gaps are being closed, they're furious. They plot to attack Jerusalem and cause confusion. Now it's not just words. It's a real threat.

Nehemiah's response is a perfect summary of his whole approach to life. "But we made our prayer to our God, and set a watch against them day and night." They prayed, and they posted guards. Faith and action, together.

But inside the city, discouragement is spreading. The people of Judah start saying, "The strength of the bearers of burdens is fading and there is much rubble, so that we are not able to build the wall." In Hebrew, it sounds like a sad little song, as if people were chanting it while they worked. They were exhausted. The job looked impossible. Meanwhile, Jews who lived near the enemies kept coming to warn them, ten times over, that they would be attacked from every direction.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Halfway Discouragement**

It's interesting that the discouragement came right at the halfway point. The wall was half done. The excitement of starting had worn off, and the end wasn't in sight yet. Many people find the middle of a project the hardest part. The same thing happens with school years, sports seasons, long-term goals,

and even faith. If you're in the middle of something hard and feeling worn out, that's normal. It doesn't mean you're failing. It means you're in the middle.

Nehemiah reorganizes. He stations people behind the lowest, most exposed parts of the wall, by families, with swords, spears, and bows. Then he looks around, stands up, and speaks to everyone. "Don't be afraid of them! Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses."

When the enemies hear that their plot is known, they back off, and everyone goes back to work. But from then on, things are different. Half of Nehemiah's men work, and the other half stand guard with spears, shields, bows, and armor. The people who carry materials do their work with one hand and hold a weapon in the other. Every builder works with a sword strapped to his side. And a trumpeter stays next to Nehemiah at all times.

Nehemiah explains the plan. The work is spread out, and we're far apart on the wall. "Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally there to us. Our God will fight for us."

They work from dawn until the stars come out. The people from outside the city stay inside Jerusalem at night so they can help guard. And Nehemiah and his men don't even change clothes. They keep their weapons with them at all times, even when they go for water.

REAL TALK **Trowel in One Hand**

The picture of builders working with one hand and holding a weapon in the other has inspired believers for centuries. It's a picture of the Christian life: we build, and we also stand guard. We work to do good, and we watch out for the things that would tear it down. For you, the sword might look like saying no to temptation, setting boundaries in a relationship, guarding your mind from

> things that drag you down, or standing up for someone. The trowel is the good work: serving, loving, learning, creating. You need both. And notice the trumpet: when one part of the wall was attacked, everyone ran to help. You weren't meant to fight alone either. When you're struggling, sound the trumpet. Tell your people.

There's one more detail in chapter 4 that's easy to miss. Nehemiah tells everyone to stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can guard the city at night and work during the day. And he and his brothers and servants and guards don't even take off their clothes to sleep, except to wash. Nehemiah didn't ask the people to do anything he wasn't doing himself. He was on the wall with them, tired with them, ready with them.

The people who kept working in Nehemiah 4 weren't fearless. They were scared, tired, and surrounded by rubble. Some of their own relatives kept coming in from nearby towns, telling them over and over that the enemy would attack from every direction. What kept them going wasn't that the danger disappeared. It was that they remembered who God was, they had each other, and they had a leader who stayed beside them. Courage isn't the absence of fear. It's doing the right thing while you're afraid, because you trust God more than you fear the threat.

KEY VERSE

I looked, and rose up, and said to the nobles, to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them! Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses."

Nehemiah 4:14 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think mockery is such an effective weapon?
2. Nehemiah prayed and set a guard. What does it look like to pray and take action at the same time?
3. Why do you think people got discouraged right at the halfway point?
4. What's your "sword" right now, something you need to guard against while you build?

TRY THIS *Identify one person you can sound the trumpet for when you're struggling. Tell them this week that you'd like them to be that person for you, and offer to do the same for them.*

CHAPTER 4

The Cry of the Poor

Nehemiah 5

In the middle of building the wall, with enemies outside, Nehemiah faces a problem inside the city that's just as dangerous. "Then there arose a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brothers the Jews."

There's a famine. Food is scarce. And the people are in crisis. Some say, our families are large, and we need grain just to stay alive. Others say, we've had to mortgage our fields, vineyards, and houses to buy grain. Others say, we've borrowed money to pay the king's taxes, putting our land up as collateral. And then the worst part: "Behold, we bring our sons and our daughters into bondage to be servants, and some of our daughters have been brought into bondage. It is also not in our power to help it, because other men have our fields and our vineyards."

Who were they borrowing from? Not foreigners. Their own people. Wealthy Jews were lending money to poor Jews at interest, taking their land when they couldn't pay, and taking their children as servants. While everyone was working on the wall together, some of the rich were profiting from the poor people working beside them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Law About Lending**

God's law for Israel had clear rules about lending to the poor. Israelites were not allowed to charge interest to a fellow Israelite in need. They were to lend generously and help their poor neighbors. Every seventh year, debts were to be canceled. And if a fellow Israelite was forced to sell himself as a servant, he was to be treated as a hired worker, not a slave, and released. The point was to keep the rich from permanently crushing the poor and to remind everyone that the land and the people belonged to God. The nobles in Nehemiah 5 were ignoring all of it.

Nehemiah is furious. "I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words." But he doesn't explode. "Then I consulted with myself," he writes. He thought it over before he acted.

Then he confronts the nobles and officials directly. "You exact usury, everyone of his brother." He calls a great public meeting. He points out the absurdity of the situation: we have been working to buy back our fellow Jews who were sold to foreigners, and now you're selling your own brothers, so that we have to buy them back again! The nobles have nothing to say.

"The thing that you do is not good," Nehemiah tells them. "Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?" Their behavior made God's people look terrible in front of the very enemies who were mocking them.

Then Nehemiah admits something. He and his own family and servants had also been lending money and grain to the poor. He doesn't say whether he had been charging interest, but he includes himself in the solution. "Please let us stop this usury." Give back their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and houses, and the interest you've been charging, today.

REAL TALK **Standing Up for People Being Taken Advantage Of**

Nehemiah could have ignored this. He had enough on his plate. The wall wasn't finished. The enemies were threatening. Confronting the most powerful people in the city was risky; he needed their support. But he wouldn't let injustice slide. Throughout the Bible, God cares deeply about how the poor and vulnerable are treated. Maybe you see people at school being taken advantage of: a kid who always gets picked on, someone being pressured or manipulated, someone left out. Standing up for them takes courage. You don't have to be loud or dramatic. Sometimes it's a quiet word to a teacher or a choice to sit with someone. And if you see something unsafe, like someone being bullied, threatened, or hurt, tell a trusted adult.

The nobles agree. "We will restore them, and will require nothing of them," they say. Nehemiah calls the priests and makes them take an oath. Then he shakes out the fold of his robe and says, may God shake out everyone who doesn't keep this promise, just like this, and leave him empty. The whole assembly says amen and praises the LORD. And the people do what they promised.

Then Nehemiah adds something about himself. For twelve years as governor, he and his relatives never took the food allowance that governors were entitled to. Previous governors had heavily taxed the people, taking food, wine, and forty shekels of silver a day, and even their servants pushed the people around. "But I didn't do so, because of the fear of God." Instead, he fed 150 officials at his own table every day, plus visitors from other nations, all at his own expense.

Why? "Because the bondage was heavy on this people." He saw how much they were struggling, and he refused to add to their burden. He also says, "We didn't buy any land." He could have taken advantage of the crisis to buy up cheap property. He didn't.

> **REAL TALK** **Using Influence Well**
>
> Nehemiah had power and could have used it to make himself rich. Instead, he gave up what he was entitled to so that others wouldn't suffer. That's the kind of leadership Jesus modeled when He said He came not to be served but to serve. You might not be a governor, but you probably have influence somewhere: in your friend group, on a team, in a club, online, or with younger siblings. How are you using it? To get what you want, or to help others? The best leaders aren't the ones who take the most. They're the ones who give the most.

The chapter ends with one of Nehemiah's short prayers that show up throughout the book: "Remember me, my God, for all the good that I have done for this people." Some people find these prayers a little self-focused. Others see them as honest: Nehemiah didn't do these things for applause, but he hoped God would see. Either way, he trusted that God noticed what no one else did.

KEY VERSE

But the former governors who were before me were supported by the people, and took bread and wine from them, plus forty shekels of silver; yes, even their servants ruled over the people, but I didn't do so, because of the fear of God.

Nehemiah 5:15 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the wealthy Jews were willing to take advantage of their own people during a famine?
2. Nehemiah "consulted with" himself before confronting the nobles. Why is that important when you're angry?
3. Why do you think Nehemiah refused the governor's food allowance?
4. Where do you have influence? How could you use it to help someone this week?

TRY THIS *Look for someone in your life who is being taken advantage of or left out. Do one thing this week to stand with them.*

CHAPTER 5

A Great Work

Nehemiah 6–7

The wall is almost finished. There are no gaps left, though the doors haven't been hung in the gates yet. Nehemiah's enemies are running out of time, so they change tactics. Mockery didn't work. Threats of attack didn't work. Now they try to get Nehemiah himself.

Sanballat and Geshem send him a friendly invitation. "Come! Let's meet together in the villages in the plain of Ono." Ono was about twenty miles northwest of Jerusalem, far from the city and close to enemy territory. Nehemiah writes, "But they intended to harm me."

His answer is one of the great lines of the Bible. "I am doing a great work, so that I can't come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and come down to you?"

They send the same invitation four times. Nehemiah gives the same answer four times.

> REAL TALK **I Can't Come Down**
>
> Distractions don't always look like enemies. Sometimes they look like invitations. Sanballat's message sounded reasonable: let's talk, let's meet, let's work this out. But Nehemiah saw what it really was, a way to pull him away from what God had given him to do. There are lots of things that can pull you down off your wall: endless scrolling, drama, arguments that go

nowhere, people who want to drag you into their mess, good things that crowd out the best things. You don't have to say yes to every invitation. Sometimes the wisest answer is, I'm doing a great work, and I can't come down. And saying no to the wrong things is how you say yes to the right ones.

The fifth time, Sanballat sends his servant with an open letter, meant to be read by anyone along the way. It says there's a rumor going around, and Geshem confirms it, that Nehemiah and the Jews are planning to rebel, that he's building the wall so he can make himself king, and that he's even hired prophets to proclaim him king in Jerusalem. The king of Persia will hear about this, the letter warns. So come, let's talk.

It's a smear campaign. Nehemiah's answer is blunt: none of this is true. You're making it up. He knows what they're trying to do. "For they all would have made us afraid, saying, 'Their hands will be weakened from the work, that it not be done.'" And then he prays one of his short arrow prayers: "But now, strengthen my hands."

REAL TALK **When People Spread Lies About You**

Rumors and lies can be devastating, especially when they spread online or through a group of friends. Nehemiah's enemies tried to destroy his reputation with a lie that sounded just believable enough. He didn't panic or spend all his energy trying to convince everyone. He stated the truth clearly, prayed for strength, and kept working. If someone is spreading lies about you, it's okay to calmly set the record straight with the people who matter. But don't let it consume you. And if rumors or online harassment are making you anxious, depressed, or unsafe, please tell a trusted adult. That's not snitching. It's getting help.

Then comes the most dangerous trap. A man named Shemaiah, who seems to be a prophet, invites Nehemiah to his house and gives him a warning. Let's meet in the temple and shut the doors, because

people are coming to kill you, maybe tonight. It sounds like a friend looking out for him.

But Nehemiah sees through it. “Should a man like me flee? Who is there that, being such as I, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in.” Nehemiah wasn’t a priest. Going into the holy parts of the temple to hide would have broken God’s law. It would also have made him look like a coward to the whole city. He realizes that God didn’t send Shemaiah at all. Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him to frighten Nehemiah into sinning, so they could ruin his reputation.

Even a prophet was on the enemy’s payroll. Even a woman prophet named Noadiah and other prophets were trying to scare him. Nehemiah prays again, asking God to remember what they’ve done.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **How Did Nehemiah Know?**
>
> How did Nehemiah know that Shemaiah’s message wasn’t from God? Because it told him to do something God’s law clearly forbade. That’s an important test for anyone who claims to speak for God. God doesn’t contradict Himself. If a message, a feeling, or advice from someone, even someone who seems spiritual, tells you to do something the Bible clearly says is wrong, it isn’t from God. The better you know God’s word, the easier it is to recognize when something doesn’t line up.

And then, in one quiet sentence, the work is done. “So the wall was finished in the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days.” Elul is around September. Nehemiah had arrived in Jerusalem only a few months earlier. Walls that had been rubble for nearly 150 years were rebuilt in less than two months.

The effect on the enemies is remarkable. “When all our enemies heard of it, all the nations that were around us were afraid, and they lost their confidence; for they perceived that this work was done by

our God." The people who mocked the feeble Jews couldn't deny it. This was God's work.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Fifty-Two Days?**
>
> Some people wonder how such a big job could be done so fast. A few things help explain it. Many sections of the old wall were damaged but not completely destroyed, so they could be repaired rather than built from scratch. Archaeologists working in Jerusalem have found sections of wall from about this time that seem to have been built quickly, using rough stones and earlier foundations. Nehemiah's wall also enclosed a smaller area than the city of earlier kings. And huge numbers of people worked at the same time, each on their own section. But Nehemiah's own explanation is simpler: this work was done by our God.

Even after the wall is finished, though, the opposition continues in a quieter way. Tobiah has family ties to some of the leading families in Judah, and many nobles are writing letters back and forth with him, telling Nehemiah about Tobiah's good deeds, and reporting Nehemiah's words back to Tobiah. Tobiah keeps sending letters to intimidate Nehemiah. Not every threat comes from outside the walls.

In chapter 7, Nehemiah sets up the gates, appoints gatekeepers, singers, and Levites, and puts his brother Hanani and a man named Hananiah in charge of Jerusalem, "for he was a faithful man and feared God above many." He gives careful instructions about when to open and shut the gates. And he notices a new problem: the city is large, but very few people live in it. A wall with no one inside to protect isn't much of a city. So he finds the list of the families who first returned from exile, the same list found in Ezra 2, and begins planning how to fill Jerusalem with people.

Looking back over chapters 1 through 7, it's striking how much of the story is about prayer and persistence rather than spectacular miracles. There's no parting sea, no fire from heaven, no voice from a burning bush. God works through a cupbearer's courage, a king's favor, careful planning, hard physical labor, and ordinary people refusing to quit. That's encouraging, because that's how God usually works in our lives too. Most of the time, His work doesn't look dramatic while it's happening. It looks like showing up, doing your part, praying short prayers in hard moments, and not coming down off the wall. Then one day you look back and realize that God was doing something great the whole time.

KEY VERSE

I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work, so that I can't come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and come down to you?"

Nehemiah 6:3 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Nehemiah's enemies switched from threats to invitations?
2. What are the things most likely to pull you down off your wall?
3. How did Nehemiah know Shemaiah's message wasn't from God? How can you tell if advice is from God?
4. Why do you think the enemies "lost their confidence" when the wall was finished?

TRY THIS *Identify one distraction that keeps pulling you away from something important. This week, practice telling yourself that you're doing a great work and can't come down, and set a limit on it.*

CHAPTER 6

The Joy of the LORD

Nehemiah 8–10

With the walls finished, the story turns from building the city to rebuilding the people. And it begins with the Bible.

In the seventh month, the month of Israel's great festivals, "All the people gathered themselves together as one man into the wide place that was in front of the water gate; and they spoke to Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses." Notice who asked. The people asked Ezra to bring the book. They were hungry for it.

Ezra, the priest and scribe we met in the book of Ezra, now an older man, brings the law before the whole assembly: men, women, and all who were old enough to understand. He stands on a wooden platform built for the occasion, with leaders standing beside him. And he reads from early morning until noon. "The ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law."

When Ezra opens the scroll, everyone stands up. He praises the LORD, and all the people lift their hands and answer, "Amen, Amen." Then they bow down with their faces to the ground and worship.

But reading alone isn't enough. Levites spread out through the crowd, helping people understand. "They read in the book, in the law of God, distinctly; and they gave the sense, so that they understood the reading."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Giving the Sense**

Many of the people listening had grown up in exile, where the everyday language was Aramaic, not Hebrew. The law of Moses was written in Hebrew. So the Levites may have been translating the reading into Aramaic, explaining what the words meant, or both. Many scholars see this as the beginning of a practice that continued for centuries: reading Scripture aloud and then explaining it in the people's own language. It's a lot like what pastors, teachers, and Bible translators still do today. It's also a reminder that understanding God's word sometimes takes help. If you find the Bible confusing, that's normal. Ask questions. Use a readable translation. Find someone who can explain it.

Then something unexpected happens. As the people understand the law, they begin to weep. They realize how far they and their ancestors have fallen from what God commanded. But Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites tell them to stop. "Today is holy to the LORD your God. Don't mourn, nor weep."

And then Nehemiah says the words this book is named for. "Go your way. Eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared, for today is holy to our Lord. Don't be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

REAL TALK **The Joy of the LORD**

Nehemiah didn't tell the people their sins didn't matter. There would be a time for confession later. But this was a holy day, a day to celebrate what God had done. Feeling sorry for your sin is good when it leads you back to God. But God doesn't want His people to stay stuck in guilt. He wants them to know His joy. Notice what kind of joy it is: the joy of the LORD. It's not joy that comes from everything going your way. It's joy that comes from God Himself, from knowing who He is and what He's done. And that joy is strength. It holds you up when life is hard. Notice also what they were told to do with their joy: share it. Send portions to people who have nothing. Real joy always spills over into generosity. And if you're in a season where joy feels far away, or

you've been struggling with sadness that won't lift, that's not a sign of weak faith. Please talk to a trusted adult or a counselor. God's joy is still real, even when you can't feel it.

The people go home to eat, drink, share food, and celebrate, "because they had understood the words that were declared to them." Understanding God's word led to joy.

The next day, the leaders gather with Ezra to study the law more closely, and they discover something they had forgotten. God had commanded Israel to live in temporary shelters, called booths, during the festival of the seventh month, to remember how their ancestors lived in the wilderness after leaving Egypt. So the people go out to the hills, gather branches of olive, myrtle, palm, and other trees, and build booths on their roofs, in their courtyards, in the temple courts, and in the city squares. The writer says the Israelites hadn't celebrated like this since the days of Joshua. "There was very great gladness." And every day of the festival, Ezra reads from the book of the law.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Feast of Booths**

The Feast of Booths, also called Tabernacles or Sukkot, was one of Israel's three great annual festivals. For seven days, families lived in shelters made of branches, remembering that God had cared for their ancestors in the wilderness, and celebrating the harvest. Jewish families still celebrate Sukkot today, building a sukkah in their yards or on their balconies and eating meals in it. For the returned exiles, it must have been especially meaningful. They knew what it was like to be wanderers who depended on God.

Later that month, the mood changes. The people gather again, this time fasting, wearing sackcloth, with dust on their heads. They stand and confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors. For a

quarter of the day they read the law, and for another quarter they confess and worship.

Then the Levites lead them in one of the longest prayers in the Bible, recorded in chapter 9. It's a sweeping retelling of Israel's whole history, and it's really a story about God. It begins with creation: "You are the LORD, even you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens." It moves to Abraham, the exodus, the parting of the sea, Mount Sinai, the manna, and the water from the rock.

Then it gets honest. Our ancestors became proud and stubborn. They refused to obey. They even made a golden calf. "But you are a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness, and didn't forsake them." That line comes back again and again. God provided for them for forty years in the wilderness, so that "They lacked nothing. Their clothes didn't grow old, and their feet didn't swell." He gave them the land. And they rebelled again and again, killing the prophets God sent. Each time, He handed them over to their enemies. Each time they cried out, He rescued them. "Nevertheless in your manifold mercies you didn't make a full end of them, nor forsake them; for you are a gracious and merciful God."

The prayer ends in the present. God has been just in everything that has happened, "for you have dealt truly, but we have done wickedly." And now, the people say, we are slaves in our own land, working to make foreign kings rich, "and we are in great distress."

> **REAL TALK** **Telling the Story Honestly**
>
> The prayer in Nehemiah 9 does something powerful. It tells the truth about the people's failures and the truth about God's faithfulness, side by side. It doesn't make the people look better than they were. It doesn't make God

> look harsher than He is. That's a healthy way to look at your own story too. You can be honest about your mistakes without being crushed by them, because the bigger story is God's mercy. Try looking back at your own life: where have you failed? Where has God been faithful anyway? You might be surprised how often the answer to the second question shows up.

In response, the people make a written covenant, signed and sealed by the leaders, priests, and Levites. Everyone else joins in with an oath "to walk in God's law." They make specific promises. They won't marry their children to people who worship other gods. They won't buy and sell on the Sabbath. They'll let the land rest every seventh year and cancel debts. They'll give a tax for the temple, bring wood for the altar, and give the firstfruits of their crops and the tithes. The chapter ends with a strong promise: "We will not forsake the house of our God."

Remember that promise. It's going to matter in the last chapter.

KEY VERSE

Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared, for today is holy to our Lord. Don't be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Nehemiah 8:10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the people asked Ezra to read the law to them?
2. Why did understanding the law make the people weep? Why did Nehemiah tell them to stop?
3. What do you think it means that "the joy of the LORD is your strength"?
4. What would it look like to tell your own story honestly, including both your failures and God's faithfulness?

TRY THIS *Read one chapter of the Bible this week with a friend or family member, and take turns explaining what you think it means. Then do something to share joy with someone who has less.*

CHAPTER 7

The Messy Ending

Nehemiah 11–13

After the covenant, the book gets busy with practical matters. Jerusalem has walls, but not enough people live there. So the leaders move to the city, and the rest of the people cast lots so that one family out of every ten will move to Jerusalem. “The people blessed all the men who willingly offered themselves to dwell in Jerusalem.” Moving to the city meant leaving farms and family land, and living in a place surrounded by enemies. It was a sacrifice, and the people honored those who made it.

Then comes the dedication of the wall, and it’s one of the most joyful scenes in the Old Testament. The Levites are gathered from all over the region to celebrate “with gladness, both with giving thanks and with singing, with cymbals, stringed instruments, and with harps.” Nehemiah organizes two huge choirs. They climb up onto the wall and march in opposite directions around the city, one led by Ezra, one followed by Nehemiah, singing the whole way, until they meet at the temple.

Imagine it. The same wall that Tobiah said a fox could knock down now has hundreds of people marching on top of it, singing.

"They offered great sacrifices that day, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; and the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even far away."

If the book ended here, it would be a perfect happy ending. But it doesn't.

Chapter 13 jumps ahead several years. Nehemiah served as governor for twelve years and then went back to Persia to report to King Artaxerxes. Sometime later, he gets permission to return to Jerusalem. And when he arrives, he discovers that almost every promise the people made in chapter 10 has been broken.

First, he finds that Eliashib, the priest in charge of the temple storerooms, has given one of the large rooms in the temple to Tobiah, the Ammonite official who had fought against Nehemiah from the very beginning. The room had been used to store the grain offerings, incense, and tithes for the priests and Levites. Now Nehemiah's old enemy had moved in, right inside the courts of God's house.

Nehemiah's reaction is immediate. "It grieved me severely. Therefore I threw all Tobiah's household stuff out of the room." He orders the rooms purified and puts the temple equipment and offerings back where they belong.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Tobiah's Room**
>
> This is a vivid scene: a governor personally dragging furniture out of a storeroom and dumping it outside. Many readers think of Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers in the temple, saying, "Don't make my Father's house a marketplace!" Both men were zealous for God's house. Eliashib's choice also shows how compromise often works. Tobiah didn't conquer the temple with an army. He moved in quietly, through a friendship with a priest. It's a reminder that the biggest threats to faith often don't come

with a battle. They come through small compromises that seem harmless at the time.

Next, Nehemiah learns that the Levites and singers haven't been given their share of the offerings, so they've had to leave the temple and go back to their fields to survive. The people had promised, "We will not forsake the house of our God." Now Nehemiah asks the leaders, "Why is God's house forsaken?" He calls the Levites back to their posts and gets the tithes flowing again.

Then he sees people working on the Sabbath: treading winepresses, loading donkeys, and bringing grain, wine, grapes, and figs into Jerusalem to sell. Merchants from Tyre are selling fish and goods on the Sabbath. Nehemiah confronts the nobles. Isn't this exactly what your ancestors did, and isn't that why God brought disaster on this city? So he orders the city gates shut at sundown before the Sabbath and posts his own servants as guards. When merchants camp outside the walls hoping to sell, he threatens to arrest them, and they stop coming.

REAL TALK **The Gift of Rest**

The Sabbath was a gift from God: one day each week to stop working, rest, and worship. Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." Christians observe a day of rest and worship in different ways, and many gather on Sunday to celebrate the resurrection. But the principle of rest still matters. A lot of people today, including teenagers, never really stop. School, practice, jobs, homework, and screens fill every hour. Rest isn't laziness. It's trusting God enough to stop. Try setting aside time each week to rest, worship, and be with people you love, without trying to get anything done.

Finally, Nehemiah discovers that some of the men have married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab, the same issue Ezra faced

years earlier, and that half their children can't even speak the language of Judah. They're losing their identity as God's people.

And here, Nehemiah loses it. "I contended with them, cursed them, struck certain of them, plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God." He reminds them of Solomon, the greatest king Israel ever had, who was loved by God and still was led into sin by his foreign wives.

> **REAL TALK** **Nehemiah's Temper**
>
> It's important to be honest about this scene. Nehemiah, the man who prayed for months, organized brilliantly, and stood strong against his enemies, ends up yelling, cursing, hitting people, and pulling out their hair. Christians have understood his actions in different ways. Some see them as righteous zeal, like the prophets' passion for God's honor, in a culture where public rebukes could be physical. Others see a good man whose frustration finally boiled over into something wrong. Many land somewhere in between: his concern was right, but his methods went too far. What's clear is that the Bible doesn't present this as a model for how to treat people. It simply tells the truth about what happened. Most of us have been angry enough to want to do something like this. James wrote, "for the anger of man doesn't produce the righteousness of God." If you struggle with anger, you're not alone, and it's not hopeless. Take a break before you react, the way Nehemiah did in chapter 5 when he consulted with himself first. Talk to God about it. Talk to a trusted adult or counselor, who can help you learn healthy ways to handle frustration. And if anyone is hurting you physically, or you're afraid you might hurt someone, please tell a trusted adult right away, or call 911 in an emergency.

The last verses are a list of Nehemiah's final reforms and his final prayer. He purifies the priests and Levites, assigns them their duties, and arranges for the wood offering and firstfruits. And he

ends the book with the same prayer he's prayed throughout: "Remember me, my God, for good."

That's it. That's the last line.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Does It End This Way?**

Nehemiah is one of the last historical books of the Old Testament, and it ends on a surprisingly downbeat note. The walls are up, the temple is standing, the law has been read, and the covenant has been signed. And yet the people have already broken their promises, and their leader is exhausted and furious. Many readers think that's exactly the point. Nehemiah had done everything a leader could do from the outside. He rebuilt the walls, reorganized the temple, enforced the Sabbath, and made the people swear oaths. But none of it could change their hearts. The problem wasn't the walls. It was the people. The prophets had already seen this. Jeremiah promised a new covenant, when God would say, "I will put my law in their inward parts, and I will write it in their heart." Ezekiel promised a new heart and God's own Spirit living inside His people. Nehemiah's ending leaves us waiting for that kind of change.

REAL TALK **Rules Can't Change Hearts**

Nehemiah tried to fix the people's problems by changing the rules and enforcing them. Shut the gates. Throw out the furniture. Make them swear. Some of that was necessary. But it couldn't make anyone love God. You've probably seen that in your own life. Rules can keep you from doing some bad things, but they can't make you want to do good ones. Willpower, resolutions, and promises often fail. That's not because rules don't matter. It's because what we really need is a new heart. That's exactly what Jesus came to give. David prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me." That's a prayer worth praying.

KEY VERSE

Remember me, my God, concerning this, and don't wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for its observances.

Nehemiah 13:14 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the people broke their promises so quickly after Nehemiah left?
2. How did Tobiah end up living in the temple? What does that teach about how compromise happens?
3. What do you think of Nehemiah's temper in 13:25? Was he right, wrong, or both?
4. Why do you think the book ends without a happy ending?

TRY THIS *Think of a rule or resolution you keep breaking. Instead of just trying harder, pray David's prayer every day this week: "Create in me a clean heart, O God."*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem in fifty-two days. But by the end of the book, the people had already broken the promises they made, and Nehemiah was throwing furniture and pulling hair. Walls could keep enemies out, but they couldn't keep sin out of people's hearts. Even the best reformer couldn't change anyone from the inside.

Jewish readers treasure Nehemiah as a model of faithful leadership and of renewing life around God's law, and they remember the walls of Jerusalem with deep love. Long before, the prophets had promised something more. Through Ezekiel, God said, "I will also give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you." The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, believed that promise came true in Jesus. Like Nehemiah, Jesus entered the temple and drove out what didn't belong there. But He also went to the cross, rose again, and sent His Spirit to rebuild people from the inside. Paul wrote, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." And Revelation describes a city Nehemiah could only dream of: "I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God," with walls that will never fall and gates that will never need to be shut, where "God himself will be with them as their God." Nehemiah's work was unfinished. Jesus finishes it.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. He cares about what's broken in your life.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all sinned.

Nehemiah's people confessed that they had done wickedly. The Bible says all of us have sinned.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The ruined walls of Jerusalem were a reminder of sin's cost. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus rebuilds from the inside.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. He doesn't just fix the outside. He gives a new heart.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Nehemiah asked God to remember his good deeds. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Rise up and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You that You are gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness. Thank You that Jesus gave His life for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. Forgive me, and rebuild me from the inside out. Give me a new heart, and let Your joy be my strength. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Nehemiah 1, 4, and 8, then Revelation 21, the city that will never fall.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Build next to someone. Nehemiah's wall went up as people worked side by side. Find a way to serve alongside other believers.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Nehemiah prayed for months before he acted. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Nehemiah is right, the God who rebuilt a broken city can rebuild a broken life, and He's inviting you to rise up and build.

I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband.

Revelation 21:2 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF ESTHER

The King Who Is Never Silent

Esther, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Is Never Silent: The Book of Esther, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

Copyright © 2026 Bill McLeod. All rights reserved.

Published by Papa Bill Books.

Scripture quotations are from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, which is in the public domain.

All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” Esther is the story of a young orphan girl, probably still in her teens, who ended up in the palace of the most powerful man on earth, and then had to decide whether to risk her life to save her people.

It has everything: a drunken king, a queen who says no, a secret identity, an assassination plot, a villain with a giant ego, a sleepless night, a parade that goes horribly wrong for the guy who planned it, and a twist ending. It reads almost like a thriller. Some parts are even funny.

But Esther also has one of the strangest features of any book in the Bible. God’s name never appears in it. Not once. No one prays out loud. No prophet speaks. No miracles happen. And yet, by the end, you can’t miss that Someone has been working behind every scene. So why read it? Because sometimes God feels silent in your life too. Esther shows that silent doesn’t mean absent.

Let’s go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Esther in six chapters: the party and the palace (Esther 1–2), the lot is cast (3), for such a time as this (4), the night the king couldn’t sleep (5–6), the great reversal (7–8), and from sorrow to gladness (9–10).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Esther is, when it happened, and why God's name is missing from it. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as how to read the violence in Esther 9, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Esther in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the seventeenth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Esther is often told as a fairy tale about a girl who won a beauty contest and became queen. The real story is darker and richer. Esther was an orphan from a minority people, taken into the harem of an absolute monarch who had just deposed his previous queen for refusing to be put on display. This book is honest about that in an age-appropriate, non-graphic way. It notes the realities of royal power and coercion in the ancient world, and includes a gentle safety box encouraging any reader who has experienced pressure, exploitation, or abuse to talk to a trusted adult, with RAINN, Childhelp, and 988 listed.

Esther 9 describes the Jews defending themselves and killing their attackers. A hard-passage box explains the background of the irrevocable Persian edict, notes that the Jews refused the plunder three times, and presents fairly how Christians have read the chapter. Other Real Talk boxes address courage, identity, pride,

prejudice, waiting on God when He seems silent, and using whatever influence God gives you.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how Esther's story of God working behind the scenes, and of a queen who risked her life before the king for her people, points to Jesus, who actually laid down His life to rescue His people, while acknowledging that Jewish readers treasure Esther and celebrate Purim in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will discover that God is never really silent, and will find the courage to act when their own moment comes.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Kind of Book Is This?

Esther is a historical story told with the skill of a great storyteller. It is full of irony, reversals, and suspense. Banquets show up again and again: there are about ten feasts in the book, and many of the key moments happen around a table. The story also explains the origin of Purim, a Jewish festival still celebrated every year.

When It Happened

The king in Esther is Ahasuerus, the Hebrew form of the name the Greeks called Xerxes. Xerxes I ruled the Persian Empire from 486 to 465 BC. He is famous for invading Greece, the war behind the battles of Thermopylae and Salamis. The story of Esther takes place roughly between 483 and 473 BC. That puts it between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7: after the Second Temple was finished, but before Ezra and Nehemiah went to Jerusalem.

The Jews Who Stayed

When Cyrus let the exiles go home in 538 BC, many Jews didn't go. They had built lives, homes, and businesses across the Persian Empire. Esther is their story: a book about God's people living as a minority far from Jerusalem, in a culture that didn't share their faith. That makes it surprisingly relevant for anyone trying to follow God in a world that doesn't.

Where God's Name Went

Esther never mentions God, prayer, the temple, or the law. People have explained this in different ways. Some think the author was deliberately showing how God works through ordinary events. Some think it reflects life in exile, where faith was often lived quietly. Later Greek versions of Esther added extra sections, including prayers by Mordecai and Esther that mention God many times. Those additions appear in the Apocrypha in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, but not in the Hebrew text Protestant Bibles follow. Interestingly, Esther is the only book of the Hebrew Bible not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Is It Real History?

Some scholars see Esther as a historical novel, pointing out that Persian records don't mention a Queen Esther and that the Greek historian Herodotus names Xerxes' queen as Amestris. Others note how accurately the book describes Persian court life, the palace at Susa, and Persian customs, and that a Persian tablet mentions an official named Marduka, possibly Mordecai, at Susa in Xerxes' time. Many Christians see no conflict, since kings often had more than one wife. You can read the evidence and decide.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Esther 1–2): The party and the palace.

Chapter 2 (Esther 3): The lot is cast.

Chapter 3 (Esther 4): For such a time as this.

Chapter 4 (Esther 5–6): The night the king couldn't sleep.

Chapter 5 (Esther 7–8): The great reversal.

Chapter 6 (Esther 9–10): From sorrow to gladness.

Contents

Setting the Scene .....

1 The Party and the Palace *1–2* .....

2 The Lot Is Cast *3* .....

3 For Such a Time as This *4* .....

4 The Night the King Couldn't Sleep *5–6* .....

5 The Great Reversal *7–8* .....

6 From Sorrow to Gladness *9–10* .....

Where This Points .....

CHAPTER 1

The Party and the Palace

Esther 1–2

The story opens with a party. Not a small one. King Ahasuerus, the ruler of an empire stretching "from India even to Ethiopia, over one hundred twenty-seven provinces," throws a celebration that lasts one hundred eighty days. For half a year, he shows off the riches of his kingdom and the splendor of his majesty to his officials and military leaders.

Then he throws a second party, a seven-day banquet for everyone in the citadel of Susa, the royal capital. The writer describes it like a reporter who can't believe what he's seeing: white and blue linen hangings, silver rods, marble pillars, couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement, and wine served in golden cups, each one different. The drinking had only one rule: no one was forced to drink, and everyone could have as much as he wanted.

Meanwhile, Queen Vashti is hosting her own banquet for the women.

On the seventh day, "when the heart of the king was merry with wine," Ahasuerus sends seven servants to bring Vashti the queen before him wearing the royal crown, "to show the people and the princes her beauty; for she was beautiful."

A drunk king wants to put his wife on display in front of a room full of drunk men. And Vashti says no.

"But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by the eunuchs. Therefore the king was very angry, and his anger burned in him."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Did Vashti Refuse?**
>
> The text doesn't tell us why Vashti refused. Some later Jewish traditions imagined that the king wanted her to appear wearing only the crown, though the Bible doesn't say that. Others think she simply refused to be treated like one more treasure in the king's collection. Either way, saying no to an absolute monarch in front of his whole court took enormous courage. Readers have seen Vashti in different ways: some as proud and disobedient, many as a woman who protected her own dignity at great cost. What's clear is that the king's request treated her as an object, and that she paid a heavy price for refusing.

The king is furious, and also, apparently, unsure what to do. So he asks his wise men. One of them, Memucan, makes it into a national crisis. If word gets out that the queen disobeyed the king, he says, every wife in the empire will start disrespecting her husband. So he proposes a royal decree, written into the laws of the Persians and Medes "so that it cannot be altered," that Vashti may never again come before the king, and that her royal position be given to someone else. Letters go out to every province, in every language, declaring that every man should be the ruler of his own house.

It's almost comical: the most powerful man in the world can't get his own wife to come to dinner, so he passes a law about it. The book of Esther is full of moments like this, where the mighty Persian Empire looks a little ridiculous. But notice that detail about Persian law. It can't be changed. That's going to matter later.

Some time later, when the king's anger cools, he remembers Vashti and what was decreed against her. His servants suggest a solution: search the whole empire for beautiful young virgins, gather them into the harem at Susa, give them beauty treatments, and let the girl who pleases the king become queen instead of Vashti.

Now the story introduces two new characters. "There was a certain Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite." His family had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. And Mordecai had raised his young cousin. "He brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter; for she had neither father nor mother." Hadassah is her Hebrew name, which means myrtle. Esther is her Persian name, which may come from the word for star.

So Esther is an orphan, a member of a minority people living in a foreign empire, raised by her older cousin. And then the king's decree goes out, and "Esther was taken into the king's house" along with the others.

> **REAL TALK** **This Wasn't a Beauty Pageant**
>
> Esther's story is sometimes told like a fairy tale, as if she entered a beauty contest and won a crown. That isn't really what happened. Esther was taken. She was probably a teenager. In the ancient world, a king like Ahasuerus had near-total power, and girls gathered into his harem didn't get a vote. Each one spent one night with the king and then went into a second harem, where she might never be called again unless the king remembered her name. Esther ended up as queen, but she started out as a young woman with very little control over her own life. The Bible doesn't say whether she wanted any of this. It simply tells what happened, and then shows God working even through a situation that was far from fair.

REAL TALK **If Someone Is Pressuring You**

Esther's story is a reminder that powerful people sometimes use their power to take advantage of others, especially young people. If anyone, whether an adult, a boyfriend or girlfriend, someone online, a coach, a relative, or anyone else, is pressuring you into something sexual, touching you in ways that aren't okay, or making you feel trapped or afraid, it's not your fault, and you don't have to handle it alone. Please tell a trusted adult, like a parent, a school counselor, or a pastor. You can also call RAINN at 1-800-656-4673 or Childhelp at 1-800-422-4453, any time. If you're feeling hopeless or thinking about hurting yourself, call or text 988. And if you're in danger right now, call 911. God sees you, and you deserve to be safe.

In the harem, Esther wins the favor of Hegai, the official in charge of the women. He gives her beauty treatments, special food, seven maids, and the best place in the house. And Esther keeps a secret. "Esther had not made known her people nor her relatives, because Mordecai had instructed her that she should not make it known." Every day, Mordecai walks back and forth in front of the court of the harem to find out how she is doing. He clearly loves her.

The preparation lasts twelve full months. Then each young woman is taken to the king. When Esther's turn comes, she asks for nothing beyond what Hegai advises. "Esther obtained favor in the sight of all those who looked at her." She is taken to the king in the seventh year of his reign. "The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she obtained favor and kindness in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown on her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti." He throws another banquet, of course, in her honor.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Esther's Secret**

Why did Mordecai tell Esther to hide that she was Jewish? The text doesn't say, but it's easy to guess. Jews were a small minority in a vast empire, and

> prejudice against them was real, as the rest of the story will show. Some readers wonder whether Esther compromised her faith by hiding her identity, eating the palace food, and marrying a pagan king. Others point out that she had very little choice in most of this. Either way, the story is building toward a moment when Esther will have to decide whether to keep hiding or to tell the truth about who she is.

Chapter 2 ends with what looks like a small side story. While Mordecai is sitting at the king's gate, which probably means he held some kind of official job there, he overhears two of the king's doorkeepers, Bigthan and Teresh, plotting to assassinate the king. He tells Esther, and Esther tells the king, giving Mordecai the credit. The plot is investigated, the two men are executed, and the whole thing is written down in the king's book of records.

And then everyone forgets about it. Mordecai saved the king's life, and he gets no reward at all. Remember that. It's not really a side story.

Look back over these two chapters and notice something. No one prays. No one mentions God. There's no prophet, no vision, no miracle. Just a drunk king, a brave queen, a decree, a beauty program, and a plot overheard at a gate. And yet, by the end of chapter 2, a Jewish orphan is queen of Persia, and her cousin has saved the king's life. Neither of those things looks important yet. They will.

KEY VERSE

He brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter; for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was fair and beautiful; and when her father and mother were dead, Mordecai took her for his own daughter.

Esther 2:7 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Vashti refused the king's command? Was she right?
2. How is Esther's real story different from the way it's sometimes told?
3. Why do you think Mordecai told Esther to keep her identity a secret? Would you have done the same?
4. Where can you already see God working in chapters 1 and 2, even though He isn't mentioned?

TRY THIS *Think about a time when something that seemed small or unfair turned out to matter later. Write it down and thank God for working in it, even if you didn't see Him at the time.*

CHAPTER 2

The Lot Is Cast

Esther 3

Chapter 3 introduces the villain. “After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes who were with him.” Haman is now second only to the king. And the king commands everyone at the king’s gate to bow down to him.

Everyone does, except one man. “But Mordecai didn’t bow down or pay him homage.”

The other officials keep asking Mordecai, day after day, why he’s disobeying the king’s command. He won’t listen. Finally, he tells them the reason: he is a Jew. They report this to Haman, to see whether Mordecai’s excuse will hold up.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Agagite vs. Benjamite**
>
> The book of Esther carefully tells us two family trees. Mordecai is a Benjamite, a descendant of Kish. Haman is an Agagite. Readers who know their Bibles will hear an echo. Kish was the father of King Saul, Israel’s first king, from the tribe of Benjamin. And Agag was the king of the Amalekites, whom Saul was commanded to destroy in 1 Samuel 15. Instead, “Saul and the people spared Agag” and the best of the livestock, and Saul lost his kingdom because of his disobedience. The Amalekites had been Israel’s enemies since they attacked the weakest Israelites in the wilderness after the exodus. Many readers think

> Esther is deliberately setting up a rematch, centuries later: a son of Kish facing a son of Agag. This time, the Benjamite won't fail.

Why wouldn't Mordecai bow? The text doesn't say exactly. Jews bowed to kings and officials in other parts of the Bible, so it probably wasn't just a rule against bowing to people. Some think Haman demanded the kind of honor that felt like worship. Others think it was about Haman's ancestry, and the long history of Amalekite hatred toward Israel. Either way, Mordecai would not give Haman what he wanted.

"When Haman saw that Mordecai didn't bow down nor pay him homage, Haman was full of wrath." But killing just Mordecai isn't enough for him. "But he scorned the thought of laying hands on Mordecai alone, for they had made known to him Mordecai's people. Therefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even Mordecai's people."

One man won't bow, so Haman decides to wipe out an entire people.

> **REAL TALK** **How Hatred Grows**
>
> Haman's story shows how hatred works. It starts with wounded pride: one man won't bow. It grows into obsession: Haman can't stop thinking about it. Then it spreads from one person to a whole group: all Jews are the problem. That pattern has repeated throughout history, from ancient empires to the Holocaust to the prejudice and hatred people still face today because of their race, religion, or background. It also shows up on a smaller scale, when someone hurts us and we start resenting everyone like them. If you notice that kind of bitterness growing in you, take it seriously, and bring it to God before it grows. And if you're being targeted or harassed because of who you are, tell a trusted adult. You don't have to face it alone.

So Haman starts planning. In the first month, Nisan, "they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, and chose the twelfth month, which is the month Adar." Casting lots was a bit like rolling dice. Haman's advisors were trying to find the luckiest day for his plan. The lot falls on a date almost a full year away.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Pur**
>
> Pur is an Akkadian word meaning lot. Archaeologists have found an ancient clay die from around this time, inscribed as the lot of an Assyrian official, which shows how lots like this were used. Haman thought he was letting fate choose the perfect day. But the Bible says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." The lot gave the Jews nearly a whole year before the attack, plenty of time for things to change. The festival of Purim, which means lots, is named after this moment. The day Haman chose for destruction became a day of celebration.

Then Haman goes to the king with a carefully worded proposal. He doesn't name the Jews. He says, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom, and their laws are different from other people's. They don't keep the king's laws. Therefore it is not for the king's profit to allow them to remain."

Notice how he mixes truth and lies. The Jews were scattered. Their customs were different. But they didn't refuse to keep the king's laws, except, in one case, the command to bow to Haman. And he makes it about money. He offers to pay ten thousand talents of silver into the king's treasury, an enormous amount, probably more than half the empire's yearly income.

The king doesn't even ask who these people are. He takes off his signet ring, gives it to Haman, and says, in effect, keep your money and do whatever you want with them.

So the decree is written, sealed with the king's ring, and sent to every province in every language. It orders everyone "to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to plunder their possessions."

It's an order for genocide.

> **REAL TALK** **Words That Kill**
>
> Haman never picked up a weapon himself. He used words: a speech to the king, a few half-truths, a letter, and a signature. Words can be powerful enough to destroy lives. Rumors, labels, stereotypes, and online posts can spread fast and do real harm. Haman's speech worked because the king didn't ask questions. Be the kind of person who asks questions before believing what you hear about a whole group of people, and who refuses to pass along words that tear people down.

The chapter ends with one of the most chilling sentences in the Bible. "The couriers went out in haste by the king's commandment, and the decree was given out in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Susa was perplexed."

The two most powerful men in the empire have just ordered the death of thousands of people, and they sit down for a drink. Meanwhile, the whole city is confused and upset. Ordinary people can see that something is terribly wrong.

And still, no one mentions God. Where is He? The Jews of Persia must have been asking that question too. But remember: Esther is

already in the palace. Mordecai's good deed is already written in the king's book. And the lot has given them eleven months. The pieces are already in place.

KEY VERSE

All the king's servants who were in the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai didn't bow down or pay him homage.

Esther 3:2 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Mordecai refused to bow to Haman?
2. How did Haman's anger at one person grow into hatred of a whole people? Where do you see that pattern today?
3. What half-truths did Haman use to convince the king? Why do half-truths work so well?
4. Where is God in chapter 3, even though He isn't mentioned?

TRY THIS *This week, notice when you hear someone talk about a whole group of people in a negative way. Ask a question instead of agreeing, or gently say something kind about that group.*

CHAPTER 3

For Such a Time as This

Esther 4

When Mordecai learns about the decree, he does what people in the ancient world did in times of grief and disaster. “Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the middle of the city, and wailed loudly and bitterly.” He goes as far as the king’s gate, but he can’t go in, because no one wearing sackcloth was allowed to enter.

He isn’t alone. “In every province, wherever the king’s commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.”

Notice the fasting. In the Bible, fasting is almost always connected to prayer. The book never says the Jews prayed, but it’s hard to imagine they didn’t.

Inside the palace, Esther doesn’t know about the decree yet. Her maids tell her that Mordecai is in sackcloth, and she’s deeply distressed. She sends him clothes to wear, but he refuses them. So she sends Hathach, one of the king’s servants assigned to her, to find out what’s going on.

Mordecai tells Hathach everything, including the exact amount of money Haman promised to pay. He gives Hathach a copy of the

decree to show Esther, and he sends her a message: go to the king, beg for mercy, and plead for your people.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Inner Court**
>
> Persian kings were surrounded by strict rules meant to protect them and to make them seem almost godlike. Ancient carvings from the Persian palaces show kings seated on their thrones with guards standing nearby. The Greek historian Herodotus says no one could approach the Persian king without being summoned. Anyone who came uninvited risked immediate death. The only exception was if the king held out his golden scepter. Even the queen wasn't exempt. And Esther knew how this king treated a queen who displeased him. Vashti had lost her crown for refusing to come when called. What would happen to a queen who came when she wasn't called?

Esther's reply is honest and afraid. Everyone knows the law, she says. Anyone who goes to the king in the inner court without being called will be put to death, unless the king holds out the golden scepter. "I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days."

Thirty days. The king hasn't asked for her in a month. Maybe she's lost his favor. Going to him now could cost her life.

Mordecai's answer is one of the most famous passages in the Bible. "Don't think to yourself that you will escape in the king's house any more than all the Jews. For if you remain silent now, then relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Who knows if you haven't come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **From Another Place**
>
> Mordecai's words are as close as the book of Esther comes to mentioning God. He's confident that deliverance will come for the Jews, even if Esther stays silent. From where? He just says, from another place. Many readers

believe that's a deliberate hint. Mordecai trusts that God will keep His promises to His people, one way or another. Some Jewish writers even noticed that place, makom in Hebrew, later became a way of referring to God. Whether or not that's in Mordecai's mind, his point is clear. God's plan doesn't depend on Esther. But Esther has the chance to be part of it.

Think about what Mordecai is saying. First, you're not safe just because you're in the palace. Hiding won't protect you. Second, God's people will be rescued with or without you. Third, maybe this is why you're here. Maybe everything that's happened to you, being orphaned, raised by Mordecai, taken into the harem, chosen as queen, was leading to this moment.

REAL TALK **For Such a Time as This**

You probably won't ever be queen of Persia. But you are where you are for a reason. Your school, your team, your family, your neighborhood, your friendships, even the hard things that have happened to you, aren't random. God may have placed you exactly where you are so that you can speak up for someone, show kindness to someone, or tell someone the truth about Jesus. Most of the time, your moments won't look dramatic. It might be sitting with the kid who's alone at lunch, standing up for someone who's being mocked, or refusing to go along with something wrong. But who knows if you haven't come to this place for such a time as this?

Esther makes her decision. "Go, gather together all the Jews who are present in Susa, and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day. I and my maidens will also fast the same way. Then I will go in to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish."

This is the turning point of the whole book. Up to now, Esther has been mostly passive. Things have happened to her. She's been taken, prepared, chosen, and crowned. She's obeyed Mordecai. Now she takes charge. She gives Mordecai instructions, and he

obeys her. “So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.”

And notice what she asks for first. Not a plan. Not a speech. A fast. She asks her people to stand with her, and she gets ready to go before the king by going, in a sense, before God.

> **REAL TALK** **If I Perish, I Perish**
>
> Esther wasn’t fearless. She was afraid, and she had good reason to be. Courage isn’t the absence of fear. It’s deciding that something matters more than your fear. Esther decided that her people mattered more than her own safety. She also didn’t try to be brave alone. She asked for help, and she prepared. When you face something hard, like telling the truth, standing up for someone, or making a choice that could cost you, it’s okay to be scared. Ask people you trust to pray for you. Prepare as well as you can. And then do the right thing, trusting God with the outcome.

It’s worth noticing how much Esther’s life had already prepared her for this moment, even the parts that hurt. Losing her parents meant she was raised by Mordecai, who taught her to listen and to care about her people. Being taken into the harem put her in the one place in the empire where she could reach the king. Even the year of waiting and the months of feeling forgotten taught her patience. None of it was easy, and some of it was deeply unfair. But none of it was wasted.

That doesn’t mean God causes every painful thing that happens to us, or that we should pretend hard things are good. It means that God is able to take the broken pieces of a story and use them for something bigger than we can imagine. Paul put it this way: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Esther couldn’t see that yet. She just had to take the next brave step.

KEY VERSE

For if you remain silent now, then relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Who knows if you haven't come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Esther 4:14 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why was Esther so afraid to go to the king? Would you have been?
2. What do you think Mordecai meant by "from another place"?
3. Where has God placed you right now? What might your "such a time as this" look like?
4. Why do you think Esther asked people to fast with her before she acted?

TRY THIS *Ask yourself where God has placed you and who around you needs someone to speak up for them. Pick one small brave thing you can do this week, ask someone to pray for you, and do it.*

CHAPTER 4

The Night the King Couldn't Sleep

Esther 5–6

Three days later, Esther puts on her royal robes and walks into the inner court of the palace. The king is sitting on his throne, facing the entrance. Everyone can see her. Everyone knows the law. For a moment, her life hangs on one man's reaction.

"When the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, she obtained favor in his sight; and the king held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. So Esther came near and touched the top of the scepter."

She lives.

The king can tell she wouldn't have risked this for something small. "What would you like, queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you even to the half of the kingdom." That was a polite way of saying, ask for anything. It wasn't meant literally, but it showed how pleased he was.

And Esther, with her people's lives on the line, invites him to dinner. "If it seems good to the king, let the king and Haman come today to the banquet that I have prepared for him."

REAL TALK **Wisdom and Timing**

Why didn't Esther just blurt out her request right there in the throne room? Because she was wise. She knew this king. She'd seen how he made decisions: at banquets, over wine, and on impulse. She knew that accusing his most powerful official in public could backfire. So she was patient. She chose the right setting and the right moment. Courage and wisdom work together. Sometimes doing the right thing means speaking up immediately. Sometimes it means waiting, planning, and choosing your moment carefully. When you need to have a hard conversation with a parent, a friend, or a teacher, think about the timing. Pray for wisdom. A good message delivered at the wrong time can be lost.

At the banquet, the king asks again: what's your request? And again Esther waits. Come back tomorrow, she says, the king and Haman both, to another banquet, and then I'll tell you.

We don't know exactly why she delayed a second time. Maybe she lost her nerve. Maybe she sensed the moment wasn't right. Maybe she was building suspense. But that one-day delay is about to change everything.

Haman leaves the banquet "joyful and glad of heart." He's just had a private dinner with the king and queen, and he's been invited back. Life is good. Then he walks past the king's gate and sees Mordecai, who doesn't stand up or even move for him. And all his joy turns to rage.

He controls himself and goes home. Then he gathers his friends and his wife, Zeresh, and he brags. He tells them about his great wealth, his many sons, his promotions, and how the king has placed him above everyone else. He even brags about the banquet. "Yes, Esther the queen let no man come in with the king to the banquet that she

had prepared but myself; and tomorrow I am also invited by her together with the king."

Then he says something revealing. "Yet all this avails me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate."

> **REAL TALK** **Never Enough**
>
> Haman had almost everything a person could want: money, power, family, fame, and the favor of the most powerful man on earth. And none of it was enough, because one man wouldn't bow to him. That's what pride does. It makes you focus on the one thing you don't have instead of all the things you do. It makes you obsessed with what other people think of you. You might know the feeling: a hundred people like your post, but you can't stop thinking about the one who left a mean comment. Haman shows where that path leads. The cure for pride isn't getting more. It's gratitude and humility, remembering that everything you have is a gift.

His wife and friends have a suggestion. Build a gallows, they say, fifty cubits high, about seventy-five feet. In the morning, ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it. Then go enjoy the banquet. Haman loves the idea. He has the gallows built that night.

And then comes the hinge of the entire book.

"On that night, the king couldn't sleep."

Of all the nights in the history of the Persian Empire, this is the one when the king can't sleep. So he does what some people do when they can't sleep: he asks for something boring to read. He orders the book of records, the official chronicles of his reign, and has it read to him.

And of all the pages in those records, the servant reads the one about Mordecai uncovering the plot of Bigthan and Teresh to assassinate the king.

The king asks, "What honor and dignity has been given to Mordecai for this?" His servants answer, "Nothing has been done for him."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Coincidence?**

Count the coincidences that come together in chapter 6. The king can't sleep on this particular night. He asks for the royal records. The servant reads the exact passage about Mordecai. Mordecai's good deed was never rewarded, years earlier, so the king can reward him now. And at that exact moment, Haman is walking into the outer court to ask permission to kill Mordecai. The book never says God did any of this. It doesn't have to. Many readers think that's the whole point of Esther. God's name is missing, but His fingerprints are everywhere. The Bible says, "Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." The king couldn't sleep. God never does.

It's early in the morning. The king asks, "Who is in the court?" And who should be standing there but Haman, who has come "to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him."

The king calls him in, and before Haman can say a word, the king asks him a question. "What shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?"

Now read Haman's thoughts, because the narrator lets us in on them. "Who would the king delight to honor more than myself?"

So Haman dreams big. Let the man wear a royal robe that the king himself has worn, he says. Let him ride a horse the king has ridden, with a royal crown on its head. Let one of the king's most noble princes dress him and lead him on horseback through the city square, shouting, "Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor!"

The king loves it. “Hurry and take the clothing and the horse, as you have said, and do this for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king’s gate. Let nothing fail of all that you have spoken.”

You can almost hear Haman’s face hit the floor.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Comedy of Esther**
>
> Esther is a serious book about life and death, but it’s also funny, and it’s meant to be. The scene in chapter 6 is pure comedy. The proud man designs his own dream parade and then has to lead his worst enemy through it, shouting his praises. Bible scholars often point out how many reversals the book contains: Haman plans honor for himself and gets humiliation; he builds a gallows for Mordecai and ends up on it; the day planned for the Jews’ destruction becomes a day of celebration. Jewish families still laugh, cheer, and boo when they hear Esther read aloud at Purim. Sometimes laughter is a way of celebrating that evil doesn’t get the last word.

So Haman takes the robe and the horse, dresses Mordecai, leads him through the city square, and shouts, “Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor!”

Afterward, Mordecai goes quietly back to the king’s gate. Haman hurries home, “mourning and having his head covered.” He tells his wife and friends everything. And this time their advice isn’t encouraging at all. “If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you will not prevail against him, but you will surely fall before him.”

Even Haman’s own family can see it. There’s something about this people that can’t be defeated.

While they are still talking, the king’s servants arrive to rush Haman to Esther’s second banquet.

KEY VERSE

On that night, the king couldn't sleep. He commanded the book of records of the chronicles to be brought, and they were read to the king.

Esther 6:1 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Esther waited until the second banquet to make her request?
2. Why wasn't all of Haman's success enough for him? Where do you see that same attitude today?
3. How many coincidences can you count in chapter 6? What do they suggest about God?
4. Has anything ever happened in your life that seemed like a coincidence but might have been God at work?

TRY THIS *Make a list of five things you're grateful for, and thank God for each one. When you're tempted this week to focus on what you don't have, read your list again.*

CHAPTER 5

The Great Reversal

Esther 7–8

"So the king and Haman came to banquet with Esther the queen." On the second day, over wine, the king asks for the third time. "What is your petition, queen Esther? It shall be granted you. What is your request? Even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed."

This is the moment. And Esther finally speaks. "If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request. For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish."

She uses the exact words from Haman's decree: destroyed, slain, perish. And she reveals her secret. She is one of the people sentenced to die. If we had only been sold as slaves, she says, I would have kept quiet. But this is death.

The king is stunned. "Who is he, and where is he who dared presume in his heart to do so?"

Esther points across the table. "An adversary and an enemy, even this wicked Haman!"

> REAL TALK **Speaking Up**
>
> After years of hiding who she was, Esther told the truth about her identity in front of the most powerful men in the empire. She said, "my people." She

stood with them instead of protecting herself. Sometimes following God means being honest about who you are and whose you are, even when it's risky. That might mean telling friends you're a Christian, standing up for someone who's being treated unfairly, or refusing to laugh along when people mock a group you belong to. Esther's courage didn't come out of nowhere. It came after three days of fasting and a lot of fear. If speaking up feels scary, you're in good company.

Haman is terrified. The king gets up in a rage and storms out into the palace garden, maybe to cool down, maybe to figure out what to do. After all, he signed the decree himself.

Haman stays behind to beg Esther for his life. And in his desperation, he falls onto the couch where she is reclining. At that exact moment, the king walks back in. "Will he even assault the queen in front of me in the house?"

It's another perfectly timed coincidence. Haman's servants had once covered Mordecai with humiliation. Now the king's servants cover Haman's face, a sign that he has been condemned.

Then one of the king's servants, Harbonah, mentions a helpful detail. There's a gallows seventy-five feet high, he says, which Haman built for Mordecai, "who spoke good for the king," standing at Haman's house right now.

"The king said, 'Hang him on it!'"

"So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king's wrath was pacified."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Caught in His Own Trap**

The Bible often describes evil people falling into the trap they set for others. The Psalms and Proverbs say it again and again: the one who digs a pit falls into it. Haman is the perfect example. He planned to kill Mordecai, and he

died on the gallows he built for him. He planned to destroy the Jews, and his own house was given to a Jewish queen. He designed a parade to honor himself, and it honored Mordecai. Joseph once told his brothers, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to save many people alive." Esther shows the same pattern. God can turn even the worst plans of evil people upside down.

That same day, the king gives Haman's estate to Esther. Esther tells the king that Mordecai is her cousin, and Mordecai is brought before the king for the first time. "The king took off his ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman." The signet ring that sealed the death decree now belongs to the man it was meant to destroy.

But there's still a huge problem. Haman is dead, but his decree is still law. On the thirteenth of Adar, people across the empire are still authorized to kill the Jews and take their property.

So Esther goes before the king again, uninvited, and falls at his feet weeping, begging him to stop Haman's evil plan. Again he holds out the golden scepter. She asks him to write a new letter reversing Haman's. "For how can I endure to see the evil that would come to my people? How can I endure to see the destruction of my relatives?"

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Law That Couldn't Be Changed**

Remember the detail from chapter 1: the laws of the Persians and Medes couldn't be changed. The book of Daniel mentions the same rule. The king explains the problem to Esther and Mordecai: "the writing which is written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, may not be reversed by any man." He can't cancel Haman's decree, even though he wants to. But he can issue a second decree. So he tells them to write whatever they want, in his name. The solution is a new law giving the Jews the right to defend

themselves. The first decree still stands, but now anyone who attacks the Jews will face armed resistance, backed by the king's authority.

Mordecai writes the new decree. It goes out to all 127 provinces, in every language, including Hebrew, carried by couriers riding the king's fastest horses. It gives the Jews in every city the right "to gather themselves together and to defend their lives" against anyone who would attack them, their children, and their wives, on that same thirteenth day of Adar.

Then Mordecai walks out of the king's presence dressed in royal blue and white, with a great golden crown and a robe of fine linen and purple. "And the city of Susa shouted and was glad." Remember how the city was "perplexed" when Haman's decree went out? Now it celebrates.

"The Jews had light, gladness, joy, and honor." Across the empire, wherever the decree arrives, the Jews hold feasts and celebrate. "Many from among the peoples of the land became Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen on them."

REAL TALK **When God Turns Things Around**

Chapter 3 ended with a decree of death, a king and Haman drinking, and a city in confusion. Chapter 8 ends with a decree of life, Mordecai in royal robes, and a city shouting for joy. It's the same city, the same king, even the same royal ring. Everything has been turned upside down. If you're in a season where everything seems to be going wrong, remember that the story isn't over. God is able to bring light out of darkness and joy out of grief. That doesn't mean every hard situation will be fixed quickly or in the way you want. But it does mean that the darkness never has the final word.

Notice, too, how the king changes in these chapters. He doesn't become a good man. He's still impulsive, still easily swayed, still ruling from banquets. He signed a decree of genocide without

asking a single question, and now he signs a decree of rescue with the same ease. The difference isn't the king. It's who is standing beside him. When Haman had his ear, he did evil. When Esther and Mordecai had his ear, he did good. The Bible says, "The king's heart is in the LORD's hand like the watercourses. He turns it wherever he desires." Even the most powerful people on earth are not beyond God's reach.

That's encouraging when it feels like the people in charge, whether at school, in government, or anywhere else, are making decisions that hurt others. Pray for them. Speak up when you can. And trust that God is still able to turn hearts.

KEY VERSE

The Jews had light, gladness, joy, and honor.

Esther 8:16 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Esther used the same words as Haman's decree when she made her request?
2. What made it so risky for Esther to reveal she was Jewish?
3. What examples of great reversal can you find in chapters 7 and 8?
4. Why couldn't the king simply cancel Haman's decree? What does that say about the limits of human power?

TRY THIS *Think of one person who might be going through a dark season. Send them a message, write a note, or spend time with them this week to remind them that their story isn't over.*

CHAPTER 6

From Sorrow to Gladness

Esther 9–10

The thirteenth of Adar arrives, the day Haman's lot had chosen. It was the day "that the enemies of the Jews hoped to conquer them," the writer says, "but it turned out that the opposite happened, that the Jews conquered those who hated them."

The Jews gather in their cities throughout the empire "to lay hands on those who wanted to harm them." No one can stand against them. Even the governors and royal officials help the Jews, because they're afraid of Mordecai, who has become powerful in the palace and famous throughout the provinces.

In Susa, the Jews kill five hundred men, including Haman's ten sons. The king tells Esther and asks if there's anything else she wants. She asks that the Jews in Susa be allowed one more day to defend themselves, and that the bodies of Haman's sons be hung on the gallows, a public warning. On the fourteenth, the Jews in Susa kill three hundred more men. In the rest of the empire, the Jews defend their lives and kill seventy-five thousand of their enemies.

And three times, the writer repeats the same phrase: "but they didn't lay their hand on the plunder."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Reading Esther 9**

This is one of the hardest chapters in Esther, and readers have understood it in different ways. A few things help put it in context. First, the Jews didn't start this fight. Haman's decree, which could not be canceled, authorized anyone in the empire to kill them on this day. The second decree gave them only the right to defend themselves against those who attacked them. The text repeatedly describes those killed as "those who hated them" and those "who wanted to harm them." Second, the second decree allowed the Jews to take their attackers' property, just as Haman's decree allowed attackers to take theirs. But three times the text emphasizes that the Jews refused the plunder. Many readers see this as a deliberate contrast with Saul, who kept the plunder from Agag's people. This wasn't a war for profit. Third, some Christians are still troubled by the scale of the killing and by Esther's request for a second day in Susa. Some see her as acting wisely to stop a remaining threat in the capital. Others think the story honestly records a moment when self-defense may have gone further than necessary. The Bible often records what people did without approving every detail. As you read, it's okay to wrestle with this chapter, and to talk about it with a parent or pastor.

REAL TALK **Self-Defense and Revenge**

The Jews in Esther had the right to defend their lives, and that's a real right. But there's a difference between protecting yourself and getting revenge. Jesus taught His followers not to repay evil with evil, and Paul wrote that we should leave vengeance to God. If someone has hurt you, you don't have to let them keep hurting you. It's right to protect yourself, set boundaries, and get help. But be careful about letting the desire for payback take over your heart. And if you're ever in danger, whether at home, at school, or anywhere else, tell a trusted adult right away, or call 911.

After the fighting is over, the Jews rest and celebrate. In most of the empire, they celebrate on the fourteenth of Adar. In Susa, where the fighting lasted an extra day, they celebrate on the fifteenth. And this is the beginning of a festival.

Mordecai writes down what happened and sends letters to Jews everywhere, near and far, telling them to celebrate both days every year, "as the days in which the Jews had rest from their enemies, and the month which was turned to them from sorrow to gladness, and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, and of sending presents of food to one another, and gifts to the needy."

"Therefore they called these days 'Purim', from the word 'Pur.'" The festival is named after the lot Haman cast to choose the day of destruction. The thing he used to plan their death became the name of their celebration.

The Jews agree to keep Purim forever. The book insists that "these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city." Esther herself writes a second letter with full authority to confirm the festival. "The commandment of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Purim Today**

Jewish communities still celebrate Purim every year, usually in February or March. The whole book of Esther is read aloud, often in a scroll called the Megillah. Every time Haman's name is read, people boo, stomp their feet, and shake noisemakers called groggers to drown him out. Kids and adults dress up in costumes. Families send gifts of food to friends, give to the poor, and share a festive meal. A popular Purim treat is a three-cornered cookie called hamantaschen. It's one of the most joyful days on the Jewish calendar, a celebration of survival and of a God who works even when He seems hidden.

The book ends with a short chapter about Mordecai. "For Mordecai the Jew was next to King Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews and

accepted by the multitude of his brothers, seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his descendants."

The man who wouldn't bow to Haman now holds Haman's position. But notice how he uses his power. He seeks the good of his people and speaks peace. That's the opposite of Haman, who used his power to destroy.

> **REAL TALK** **When God Seems Silent**
>
> Look back over the whole book. God's name never appears. No one hears His voice. No miracle splits the sky. And yet an orphan became queen at just the right time. A plot was overheard. A lot fell on a day almost a year away. A king couldn't sleep. A servant read the right page. A villain walked in at exactly the wrong moment. Isaiah once said, "Most certainly you are a God who has hidden yourself, God of Israel, the Savior." Sometimes God feels hidden in our lives too. You pray and hear nothing. You wonder if He's paying attention. Esther is in the Bible to remind you that silence doesn't mean absence. God is often doing His most important work when we can't see it. And if you're in a season of feeling far from God, or if sadness or hopelessness feel heavy, please talk to someone you trust. If you're thinking about hurting yourself, call or text 988 any time.

The story of Esther started with a party for a king's glory. It ends with a festival celebrating God's rescue of His people. In between, God never once spoke out loud, but He never stopped working.

Esther is the last of the Old Testament's historical books, and it's a fitting place to pause. Since Genesis, we've watched God make promises to Abraham and his family and keep them through slavery, wilderness, judges, kings, exile, and return. In Esther, those promises face one of their most dangerous threats: a plan to wipe out the entire people of God in a single day. If Haman had succeeded, there would have been no rebuilt Jerusalem, no line of David, and no Messiah born in Bethlehem. Esther shows that God

keeps His promises even when His people are scattered far from home, even when they hardly mention Him, and even when He seems silent.

The rest of the Old Testament, from Job through Malachi, is made up of poetry, wisdom, and prophecy, written by and for the same people whose story we've been following. As you keep reading, remember the lesson of Esther. The God who worked behind the scenes in Susa is the same God who works behind the scenes of every life, including yours.

KEY VERSE

as the days in which the Jews had rest from their enemies, and the month which was turned to them from sorrow to gladness, and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, and of sending presents of food to one another, and gifts to the needy.

Esther 9:22 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the text repeats three times that the Jews didn't take the plunder?
2. How do you think Christians should think about the violence in Esther 9?
3. Why do you think God's people were told to remember this rescue every year?
4. When has God felt silent to you? Looking back, can you see ways He might have been working?

TRY THIS *Celebrate something God has done in your life. Like the Jews at Purim, share a treat with a friend and give something to someone in need, and tell someone why you're celebrating.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

God's name never appears in Esther. But look at what happens: an orphan becomes queen at just the right moment, a man overhears a plot, a king can't sleep and reads exactly the right page, and a villain gets caught in his own trap. Every coincidence lines up. Esther teaches that God is never really silent. Even when you can't see Him, He is working.

Jewish readers treasure Esther as a story of survival and courage, and every year at Purim they read it aloud, cheering for Mordecai and drowning out Haman's name with noise. Christians love it too, and see in it a pattern that points to Jesus. Esther stood between her people and death and said, "if I perish, I perish." But she didn't perish. The king held out the scepter, and she lived. Jesus went further. He didn't just risk His life for His people. He gave it. Paul wrote that He "humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, yes, the death of the cross." Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." And because He did, we don't have to wonder whether the King will receive us. We can "draw near with boldness to the throne of grace."

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. He sees you, even when He feels silent.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all sinned.

Haman's pride and hatred are extreme, but the same seeds are in every heart. The Bible says all of us have sinned.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus gave His life to rescue us.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. Esther risked her life for her people. Jesus actually gave His.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Esther approached the king not knowing if she would live. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Come to the King.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, sometimes You feel silent, but I believe You are here. I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus didn't just risk His life for me. He gave it, and You raised Him from the dead. Forgive me, and make me Yours. Help me trust You when I can't see what You're doing, and give me courage for whatever moment You've placed me in. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Esther 4 and 6, then Philippians 2:5–11, the King who gave His life.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Don't stay silent. Esther spoke up for her people. Look for one way to speak up for someone who needs it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Esther fasted three days before she acted. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Esther is right, the God who worked behind every scene in Susa is working behind the scenes of your life too, and who knows if you haven't come to this moment for such a time as this?

Let's therefore draw near with boldness to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace for help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:16 (WEB)