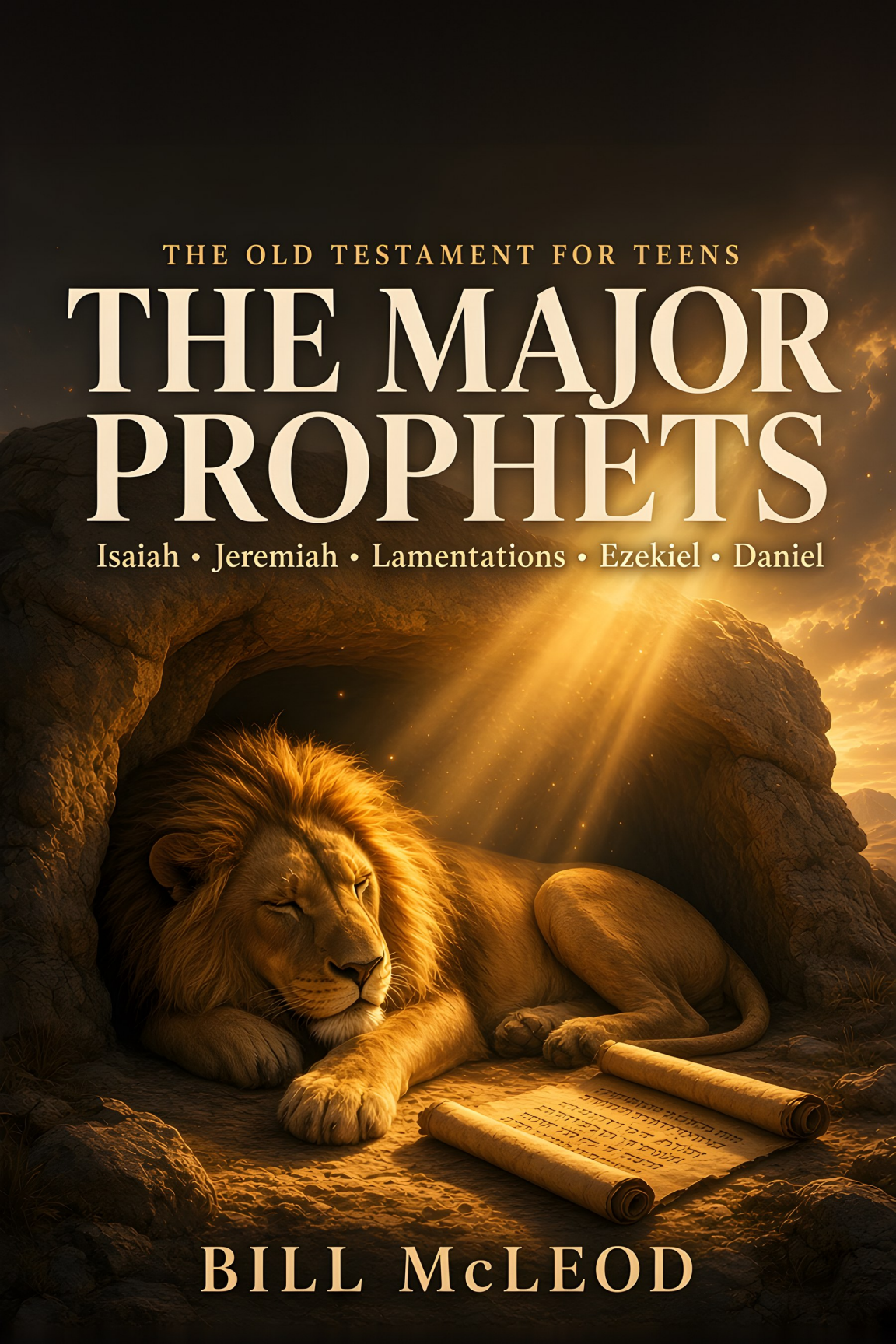
THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

THE MAJOR PROPHETS

Isaiah • Jeremiah • Lamentations • Ezekiel • Daniel



BILL McLEOD

THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

The King Isaiah Saw

Isaiah, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Isaiah Saw: The Book of Isaiah, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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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

If you've ever been to a Christmas service, you've heard Isaiah. A child is born. Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace. If you've been to an Easter service, you've probably heard him too. He was pierced for our transgressions. And if you've ever seen a poster with an eagle soaring over a mountain, you've seen Isaiah's words on a wall.

But most people have never actually read Isaiah. It's long, sixty-six chapters, and it's full of strange names, ancient empires, and poetry that jumps from judgment to joy and back again. It can feel like walking into the middle of a conversation.

This book is your guide. Isaiah was a prophet who lived about seven hundred years before Jesus, in a time of fake religion, corrupt leaders, terrifying superpowers, and people who had stopped listening to God. Sound familiar? He saw God on His throne, and it changed his life. Then he spent decades telling people the truth, warning them, comforting them, and pointing them to a coming King who would set everything right.

Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Isaiah in eight chapters: fake religion and the throne room (Isaiah 1–6), a child is born (7–12), empires, pride, and the highway (13–35), Hezekiah under siege (36–39), comfort and eagles' wings (40–48), the Suffering Servant (49–53), free grace and true fasting (54–59), and good news and new creation (60–66).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what a prophet actually is, how Isaiah is organized, and why an ancient scroll found in a cave matters so much. 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 who wrote the later parts of Isaiah or how to read certain prophecies, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Isaiah often 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 twenty-third 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.

Isaiah is the first of the Major Prophets, and one of the most quoted Old Testament books in the New Testament. This book explains what a biblical prophet actually was, a covenant truth-teller rather than a fortune-teller, and walks through Isaiah's three main sections, the Great Isaiah Scroll from the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the major messianic passages, including Immanuel, the child of Isaiah 9, the shoot of Jesse, and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53.

Where sincere believers differ, the book presents views fairly. That includes authorship (one Isaiah, or Isaiah plus later disciples writing in his tradition), the meaning of the Hebrew word almah in Isaiah 7:14, the identity of the Servant (Jewish readers often see Israel; Christians see Jesus, and many see both), and whether Isaiah 14 describes Satan or the king of Babylon. Real Talk boxes address fake religion, anxiety, fear, idols, injustice, and a brief, healthy note on fasting that encourages teens with any history of disordered eating to skip food fasts and talk with a parent or doctor.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows why Isaiah is sometimes called the Fifth Gospel and how its hopes converge on Jesus, while respecting that Jewish readers treasure Isaiah in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, 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 the King Isaiah saw, high and lifted up, and also pierced for them, and will answer as Isaiah did: Here I am.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Is a Prophet?

When people hear the word prophet, they often think of a fortune-teller, someone who predicts the future. Biblical prophets sometimes did speak about the future, but that wasn't their main job. A prophet was a messenger who spoke God's word to God's people. Think of them as covenant truth-tellers. God had made a covenant, a binding relationship, with Israel, with promises and responsibilities on both sides. When the people broke the covenant by worshiping idols, oppressing the poor, or trusting in armies instead of God, the prophets called them back. They said the hard truth: Here's what you're doing, here's where it leads, and here's how to turn around. And they also gave hope: God hasn't given up on you. Most of what prophets said was about the present. The predictions were there to show that God was in control of history and would keep His promises.

Who Was Isaiah?

Isaiah son of Amoz lived in Jerusalem in the 700s BC. His name means the LORD saves, which is a summary of his whole message. He prophesied during the reigns of four kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, over a span of about forty years or more. He seems to have had access to the royal court, and he was married to a woman he called the prophetess, and they had at least two sons with symbolic names. Jewish tradition says he was killed

under the evil king Manasseh, and some think Hebrews 11 alludes to that when it mentions people who were sawn in two.

The World of Isaiah

Isaiah lived in a dangerous neighborhood. To the northeast, the brutal Assyrian Empire was swallowing nation after nation. In 722 BC, Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. A few decades later, it nearly destroyed Judah too. Further off, Babylon was rising. Little Judah was caught between superpowers, and its kings were tempted to make alliances with Egypt or Assyria instead of trusting God. Meanwhile, at home, the rich were getting richer by crushing the poor, and the temple was busy with religious ceremonies that had no heart behind them.

A Book in Three Parts

Isaiah has sixty-six chapters, and readers often notice that it falls into three main parts. Chapters 1–39 focus mostly on Isaiah's own time, with warnings of judgment against Judah and the nations, and flashes of hope about a coming King. Chapters 40–55 shift to comfort, speaking to God's people as if they were exiles in Babylon, about 150 years later, promising that God will bring them home and introducing a mysterious Servant. Chapters 56–66 speak to people who have returned but are still struggling, and end with a vision of new heavens and a new earth. Some people have noticed that the Bible has sixty-six books, thirty-nine in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New, and Isaiah's second part begins at chapter 40 with a voice in the wilderness, just as the New Testament begins with John the Baptist. That's a fun coincidence, since chapter divisions were added much later, but it's a memorable way to see the book's shape.

Who Wrote It?

Christians and Jews have traditionally held that Isaiah wrote the whole book, with God revealing to him events far in the future, including the name of Cyrus, the Persian king who would free the exiles. The New Testament quotes passages from all three parts and names Isaiah as the speaker. Many scholars today think that chapters 40–66 were written later by disciples of Isaiah who carried on his message and wrote in his name and tradition, during and after the exile, pointing to changes in setting and style. Others answer that a prophet's style can change over a long ministry and that God can reveal the future. Christians hold different views on this, but all agree on what matters most: the whole book is God's word, and it holds together around one great theme, the Holy One of Israel, a phrase that appears throughout all three parts.

The Great Isaiah Scroll

In 1947, a young shepherd looking for a lost goat near the Dead Sea threw a rock into a cave and heard something shatter. Inside were clay jars holding ancient scrolls, the first of what became known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. One of them was a complete copy of Isaiah, about twenty-four feet long, copied around 125 BC. It was about a thousand years older than the oldest Hebrew copies of Isaiah known before then. When scholars compared it with later manuscripts, they found that, apart from small differences in spelling and some minor variations, the text had been preserved remarkably well. You can see the Great Isaiah Scroll today in the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem, and it's online too. It's a powerful reminder that the words you're about to read have been carefully copied and treasured for thousands of years.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Isaiah 1–6): Fake religion and the throne room.

Chapter 2 (Isaiah 7–12): A child is born.

Chapter 3 (Isaiah 13–35): Empires, pride, and the highway.

Chapter 4 (Isaiah 36–39): Hezekiah under siege.

Chapter 5 (Isaiah 40–48): Comfort and eagles' wings.

Chapter 6 (Isaiah 49–53): The Suffering Servant.

Chapter 7 (Isaiah 54–59): Free grace and true fasting.

Chapter 8 (Isaiah 60–66): Good news and new creation.

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CHAPTER 1

Fake Religion and the Throne Room

Isaiah 1–6

Isaiah opens like a courtroom drama. God calls the whole universe as His witness. “Hear, heavens, and listen, earth; for the LORD has spoken: I have nourished and brought up children and they have rebelled against me.”

God speaks like a heartbroken parent. He raised these kids, and they turned their backs on Him. Then He says something almost insulting, to make a point. “The ox knows his owner, and the donkey his master’s crib; but Israel doesn’t know.” Even farm animals know who feeds them. God’s people had forgotten.

But here’s the surprising thing. The people Isaiah was talking to weren’t atheists. They were very religious. The temple was packed. Sacrifices were offered constantly. The festivals were on the calendar. And God says He’s sick of it. “What are the multitude of your sacrifices to me?” He asks. “Bring no more vain offerings.” He says He can’t stand their gatherings, and when they lift their hands in prayer, He won’t listen, because their hands are full of blood.

REAL TALK **Fake Religion**

It's possible to go to church every week, know all the songs, post Bible verses, and still have a heart that's far from God. Isaiah would later quote God saying that His people honor Him with their lips while their hearts are far away. Fake religion is when faith becomes a performance, something you do to look good or feel good, without letting it change how you treat people. The cure isn't to stop going to church. It's to let God into the parts of your life that no one sees: your thoughts, your phone, how you treat your siblings, and how you talk about people behind their backs. God isn't impressed by religious activity. He wants your heart.

So what does God want instead? He tells them plainly. "Wash yourselves. Make yourself clean. Put away the evil of your doings from before my eyes. Cease to do evil. Learn to do well. Seek justice. Relieve the oppressed. Defend the fatherless. Plead for the widow."

Orphans and widows were the most vulnerable people in the ancient world. They had no one to protect them. God says that real worship shows up in how you treat people who can't do anything for you.

Then comes one of the most famous invitations in the Bible. God says, Come now, let's reason together. And He makes an incredible offer: "Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Scarlet and Crimson**

Scarlet and crimson dyes in the ancient world were made from insects and were famous for being permanent. Once cloth was dyed red, it stayed red. You couldn't wash it out. That's the picture of sin Isaiah uses: a stain you can't remove yourself. But God promises to do what's impossible, to make the stain disappear completely, leaving the fabric as white as fresh snow or clean wool. In a land where snow was rare, a snowfall on the hills around Jerusalem would have been a breathtaking sight.

REAL TALK **Let's Reason Together**

God's invitation in Isaiah 1:18 starts with Come now, and let's reason together. God isn't afraid of your questions or your thinking. Faith doesn't mean turning off your brain. Christianity has a long history of people who loved God with their minds: scientists, writers, philosophers, and students. If you have doubts or questions about God, the Bible, or Christianity, bring them into the open. Talk to a pastor, a youth leader, or a parent, read thoughtful books, and keep asking. God invites honest reasoning, and He has nothing to hide.

Chapter 2 gives a glimpse of a beautiful future, when people from every nation will stream to God's mountain to learn His ways. "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." A plowshare is the blade of a plow. Weapons will be turned into farm tools. War will end. A sculpture inspired by this verse stands outside the United Nations building in New York.

Right after that vision, Isaiah adds an invitation: come, let's walk in the light of the LORD. That's how the future breaks into the present. You can't end every war in the world, but you can start walking in God's light today, at your school, in your family, and online. Every time you choose peace over revenge, or kindness over cruelty, you're beating a tiny sword into a plowshare.

REAL TALK **Status Symbols**

Isaiah 3 describes the wealthy women of Jerusalem walking with their noses in the air, showing off jewelry, perfume, fancy clothes, and accessories, a long list of the luxury items of the day. Isaiah's point isn't that jewelry or nice clothes are evil. It's that the people were using status symbols to feel superior while the poor around them were being crushed. Today's status symbols might be designer brands, the newest phone, expensive shoes, or a certain

look online. It's fine to enjoy nice things. But if they become the way you measure your worth, or a way to look down on others, Isaiah's warning applies. God cares more about your heart than your labels.

But chapters 3 through 5 return to the present. Isaiah warns against pride, greed, and injustice. He describes wealthy people adding house to house and field to field until there's no room for anyone else. He warns, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness." In chapter 5, he sings a sad song about a vineyard. God planted it carefully and did everything for it, but it produced only wild, sour grapes. The vineyard is Israel. God looked for justice and found bloodshed. He looked for righteousness and heard cries of distress.

REAL TALK **Calling Evil Good**

Isaiah's warning about calling evil good is surprisingly relevant. It happens when cruelty is called being honest, when cheating is called being smart, when mocking someone is called just joking, or when greed is called success. It also happens the other way around, when kindness is called weakness, or honesty is called being judgmental. Part of growing in wisdom is learning to see things as God sees them, even when the culture around you has the labels mixed up.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Song of the Vineyard**

Isaiah 5 starts like a love song about a friend who planted a vineyard on a fertile hill. He cleared the stones, planted the best vines, built a watchtower, and dug a winepress. Then he waited for good grapes, but the vineyard produced only bad, sour ones. The audience would have been nodding along, thinking, What a terrible vineyard! Then Isaiah springs the trap: you are the vineyard. In Hebrew there's a clever wordplay at the end. God looked for mishpat, justice, and found mispach, bloodshed. He looked for tsedaqah, righteousness, and heard tseaqah, a cry of distress. Jesus told a parable

about a vineyard in the Gospels that echoes this song, and He later called Himself the true vine.

Then, in chapter 6, everything changes. Isaiah tells us about the moment that defined his life. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple."

King Uzziah had reigned for over fifty years. He was a strong king, and his death would have left people anxious about the future. Right when the earthly throne was empty, Isaiah saw the true throne, and it was not empty at all.

The robe of the King filled the whole temple. Above Him were seraphim, fiery angelic beings. Each had six wings. With two they covered their faces, because even angels can't look directly at God's glory. With two they covered their feet. With two they flew. And they called out to each other, "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of Armies! The whole earth is full of his glory!"

BACKGROUND CHECK **Holy, Holy, Holy**

In Hebrew, repeating a word is a way of emphasizing it. Saying something twice makes it strong. Saying it three times makes it the ultimate. This is the only quality of God that the Bible repeats three times like this. Holy means set apart, completely other, pure, and perfect. God isn't just a bigger, better version of us. He's in a category all by Himself. The phrase LORD of Armies, sometimes translated LORD of hosts, means God is the commander of all the armies of heaven. Many Christians also see in the three-fold holy a hint of the Trinity, though the main point is God's overwhelming holiness. The seraphim's song is still sung in churches all over the world.

The doorposts shook. Smoke filled the temple. And Isaiah fell apart. "Woe is me! For I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips

and I live among a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Armies!"

Notice that Isaiah didn't say, Wow, cool. He said, I'm ruined. When you see how holy God really is, you suddenly see how unholy you are. Isaiah had spent five chapters pronouncing woes on other people. Now he pronounces one on himself. And he focuses on his lips, his words, maybe because a prophet's job was to speak, and he realized his own mouth wasn't clean.

Then something amazing happens. One of the seraphim flies to him with a burning coal taken from the altar and touches his lips with it. "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin forgiven."

The altar was where sacrifices were offered. The coal came from the place of sacrifice. Isaiah didn't clean himself up. God cleaned him, through a sacrifice.

Then Isaiah heard God's voice. "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And Isaiah, who moments before thought he was ruined, answered, "Here I am. Send me!"

> **REAL TALK** **Here I Am**
>
> Notice the order in Isaiah 6. First, Isaiah sees God's holiness. Second, he sees his own sin. Third, he receives forgiveness. Fourth, he answers God's call. You can't skip to step four. Serving God doesn't start with being impressive. It starts with being forgiven. And once you've been forgiven, saying Here I am becomes a joyful response, not a burden. God might not send you to be a prophet. He might send you to sit with a lonely kid at lunch, to stand up for someone being bullied, to help at home without being asked, or to tell a friend about Jesus. The question is whether you'll say, Here I am.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Year King Uzziah Died**

Uzziah, also called Azariah, was one of Judah's most successful kings. He built towers, strengthened the army, developed farming, and became famous. But 2 Chronicles 26 says that when he became strong, his heart was lifted up in pride. He walked into the temple to burn incense, something only priests were allowed to do. When the priests confronted him, he became furious, and leprosy broke out on his forehead. He lived the rest of his life in isolation. So when Isaiah says he saw the Lord high and lifted up in the year Uzziah died, there may be a contrast. The king whose heart was lifted up in pride was gone. The true King, who really is high and lifted up, was still on the throne.

REAL TALK **But I'm Not Ready**

Many people in the Bible felt unqualified when God called them. Moses said he wasn't a good speaker. Jeremiah said he was too young. Gideon said he was the least in his family. Isaiah said he had unclean lips. If you feel like you're too young, too shy, too messed up, or too ordinary for God to use, you're in good company. God doesn't call people because they're impressive. He makes them ready. Paul told young Timothy not to let anyone look down on him because of his youth, but to set an example. You don't have to wait until you're older for your life to matter to God.

God warned Isaiah that his job would be hard. Many people wouldn't listen. But God also promised that, like a tree cut down to a stump, a holy seed would remain. God's story with His people wasn't over.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Isaiah's Children**

Isaiah gave his sons names that were messages. One son was named Shear-jashub, which means a remnant will return. Another was named Maher-shalal-hash-baz, which means quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil, a warning that Assyria was about to attack. Imagine walking around town with a name like that! Every time people called the boys, they heard God's word. Isaiah said that he and his children were signs to Israel. Their very lives preached a message of judgment and hope.

It's worth pausing on how Isaiah 1 through 6 is arranged. Most people would expect a prophet's call story to come first, at the start of the book. But Isaiah puts it in chapter 6, after five chapters describing how sinful God's people were. Maybe that's on purpose. By the time you get to chapter 6, you've heard Isaiah say woe to everyone else. Then, standing before God, he says woe to himself. It's a reminder that the people who speak most clearly about sin should be the first to admit their own.

The throne room vision also shows the two sides of God that run through the whole book. He is the Holy One, high and lifted up, so pure that angels hide their faces. And He is the forgiving One, who sends a coal to cleanse a sinner's lips. Isaiah uses the title the Holy One of Israel about twenty-five times, more than the rest of the Old Testament combined. The Holy One isn't distant. He's the Holy One of Israel, the Holy One who belongs to His people and binds Himself to them.

> **REAL TALK** **Unclean Lips**
>
> Isaiah realized his words weren't clean. Most of us could say the same. Think about the words you used this week: in conversations, texts, comments, group chats, and under your breath. Were they kind? True? Helpful? Or did they include gossip, mockery, lies, swearing, or cruelty? God doesn't just want to clean up your vocabulary. He wants to change your heart, because Jesus said the mouth speaks what fills the heart. The good news is that the same God who cleansed Isaiah's lips can cleanse yours. Confess it honestly, receive His forgiveness, and ask Him to help you use your words to build people up.

Isaiah 1 through 6 leaves you with a question: What will you do when you see God clearly? Some people run from Him. Some people try to impress Him with religious activity. Isaiah shows a better way. Let Him show you your sin, let Him cleanse you, and

then let Him send you. That's not a one-time event. Christians have been walking that path, again and again, for thousands of years.

KEY VERSE

Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

Isaiah 1:18 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What does fake religion look like today? Where are you tempted toward it?
2. Why do you think God cared so much about orphans and widows?
3. What do you think it would feel like to see God the way Isaiah did?
4. Why does it matter that Isaiah was forgiven before he was sent?

TRY THIS *Read Isaiah 6:1-8 slowly. Then spend a few minutes praying through the four steps: worship God for His holiness, confess your sin, thank Him for His forgiveness, and tell Him, Here I am.*

CHAPTER 2

A Child Is Born

Isaiah 7–12

Isaiah 7 begins with a crisis. Two kings, the king of Aram and the king of the northern kingdom of Israel, have teamed up to attack Jerusalem. King Ahaz of Judah is terrified. The Bible says his heart and the hearts of his people shook like trees in the wind.

God sends Isaiah to meet Ahaz with a message: Don't be afraid. These two kings are like smoldering stubs of firewood. Their plan won't succeed. Then Isaiah adds a warning. "If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established." In other words, if you don't stand firm in faith, you won't stand at all.

God even offers Ahaz a sign, anything he wants, as deep as the grave or as high as the heavens. But Ahaz refuses, pretending to be humble. Really, he had already decided to ask the Assyrian Empire for help instead of trusting God.

So Isaiah says that God will give a sign anyway. "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin will conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Immanuel and the Virgin**
>
> Immanuel means God with us. The Hebrew word translated virgin here is almah, which means a young woman of marriageable age, typically assumed to be unmarried and a virgin. The Greek translation made by Jewish scholars

centuries before Jesus translated it with a word that clearly means virgin, and Matthew quotes that translation when describing Jesus' birth. Readers understand the prophecy in different ways. Many Jewish readers and some Christians think it first referred to a child born in Ahaz's day, as a sign that the threat would pass before the boy was old enough to know right from wrong, which is what Isaiah goes on to say. Many Christians believe it was always ultimately about Jesus, and many see both: a near sign for Ahaz and a far fulfillment in Jesus, the one who is truly God with us. Matthew writes that Jesus' birth fulfilled this word, and that the name means, "God with us."

The next chapters get darker. Because Ahaz trusted Assyria instead of God, Assyria would eventually flood the land like a river. Isaiah warns the people not to fear what everyone else fears, but to fear the LORD instead. He tells them to turn to God's word.

And then, in chapter 9, light breaks through. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. The light has shined on those who lived in the land of the shadow of death."

This promise is especially for the region of Galilee in the north, the first area to be crushed by Assyria. Centuries later, Jesus would grow up in Galilee and begin His ministry there. Matthew points out the connection.

Then comes the most famous Christmas verse in the Old Testament. "For a child is born to us. A son is given to us; and the government will be on his shoulders. His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Four Names**

Each of the four names tells us something about this coming King. Wonderful Counselor: His wisdom is beyond anything human, a counselor who never gives bad advice. Mighty God: an astonishing title for a human child, one Isaiah uses for God Himself in the next chapter. Everlasting Father: He cares

for His people like a father, forever. Prince of Peace: He brings shalom, a Hebrew word meaning not just the absence of war but wholeness, flourishing, and everything being as it should be. Isaiah adds that His government and peace will never end, and He will reign on David's throne forever. Many Jewish readers have connected this passage to King Hezekiah or to a future Messiah. Christians see it fulfilled in Jesus, the child born in Bethlehem who is also God.

REAL TALK **Wonderful Counselor**

Who do you go to for advice? Friends? Search engines? Social media? Some of those can be helpful, but none of them is perfect. Jesus is called Wonderful Counselor. He knows you completely, He loves you completely, and His wisdom never fails. You can bring Him your questions about friendships, decisions, worries, and the future. Reading the Gospels is a great way to hear His counsel. And He often speaks through wise people He puts in your life too, like parents, pastors, and mentors. If you're feeling anxious or overwhelmed, talking to a counselor or trusted adult is also wise. Jesus isn't against human help. He often works through it.

REAL TALK **Mediums and Horoscopes**

In Isaiah 8, people were consulting mediums and spiritists, people who claimed to talk with the dead or predict the future. Isaiah asks, Shouldn't a people consult their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? He tells them to turn to God's word instead. Today, the same temptation shows up as horoscopes, tarot cards, astrology apps, psychic readings, and Ouija boards. They can seem harmless or fun. But the Bible consistently warns against looking to them for guidance, because they pull our trust away from God and can open doors to spiritual confusion. If you want guidance, go to the One who actually holds the future. Read His word, pray, and ask wise believers for advice.

Chapter 10 warns that Assyria, the very empire God was using to discipline His people, would also be judged for its pride. The Assyrian king boasted that he had conquered everyone by his own

strength. Isaiah says that's like an ax bragging that it's stronger than the person swinging it.

> **REAL TALK** **Trusting the Wrong Rescuer**
>
> Ahaz sent a huge payment to the king of Assyria, asking for protection. It worked for a while, but Assyria eventually turned on Judah and nearly destroyed it. That's often how false rescuers work. Things that promise to save you from stress, loneliness, or pain, like substances, unhealthy relationships, or endless distractions, may seem to help at first. But over time they take more than they give. If you're leaning on something that's starting to control you, please talk to a trusted adult. Real help exists, and God offers a better rescue.

Then, in chapter 11, Isaiah gives another picture of the coming King. "A shoot will come out of the stock of Jesse, and a branch out of his roots will bear fruit."

Jesse was King David's father. By Isaiah's time, the royal family of David was like a once-mighty tree that would be chopped down to a stump. But from that stump, a new shoot would grow. And this King would be filled with God's Spirit. "The LORD's Spirit will rest on him: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD."

He would judge fairly, not by appearances or rumors, but with justice for the poor and the meek. And His kingdom would bring a peace so complete that even nature would be transformed. "The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat, the calf, the young lion, and the fattened calf together; and a little child will lead them."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Wolf and the Lamb**
>
> Isaiah's picture of predators and prey living together is one of the most beautiful images in the Bible. Some read it literally, as a picture of creation

itself being healed in the age to come. Others read it as poetry about the end of violence between people, enemies becoming friends. Many see both. Either way, it's a picture of a world where nothing hurts or destroys, because, as Isaiah says, the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. Isaiah returns to this picture at the very end of his book.

Notice how many times in these chapters Isaiah talks about a remnant. God's people would be cut down by judgment, like a forest chopped by an ax, but a remnant would remain and return to God. Isaiah's son was even named for it. The idea of a remnant runs through the Bible. Even when most people turn away, God always keeps a faithful few, and He works through them. Being part of a small group of people who follow God at your school isn't a sign of failure. It can be exactly how God has always worked.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Spirit on the Branch**

Isaiah 11:2 lists the ways God's Spirit will rest on the coming King: wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the LORD. Christians have often counted these as the gifts of the Spirit. At Jesus' baptism, all four Gospels describe the Spirit coming down on Him like a dove. Isaiah also says the King won't judge by what His eyes see or His ears hear. He won't be fooled by appearances or rumors. He'll judge the poor with fairness. That's the kind of leader the world has always needed and rarely had.

REAL TALK **Light in the Overlooked Places**

Galilee was the region people looked down on. It was far from Jerusalem, mixed with foreigners, and the first part of Israel to be crushed by Assyria. Isaiah 9 says that's exactly where the great light would shine first. Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a small Galilean town so unimpressive that someone once asked whether anything good could come from there. If you feel like you come from a nowhere place, a small town, a struggling school, or a family people overlook, remember that God loves to shine His light in the places others ignore.

Chapter 12 is a short song of praise for the day when all this comes true. “Behold, God is my salvation. I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD, the LORD, is my strength and song; and he has become my salvation.” That’s a song worth learning by heart.

> **REAL TALK** **When You’re Afraid**
>
> King Ahaz was so afraid that his heart shook like trees in the wind. Fear can do that. It can make you grab for the wrong kind of help. Ahaz trusted Assyria because it seemed stronger than God’s promise, and it ended up hurting his country badly. When you’re afraid, you might be tempted to grab for control, to lie, to hide, to numb yourself, or to trust someone who isn’t safe. Isaiah’s advice is to stand firm in faith. That doesn’t mean pretending you aren’t scared. It means taking your fear to God first and letting Him guide your next step.

The child of Isaiah 9 is also described as carrying the government on His shoulders. That’s an interesting picture. Most rulers want power so that others will carry their burdens. This King carries the weight Himself. Jesus later said, Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. The One who carries the government of the universe can carry what you’re carrying too.

It’s remarkable how much of Christmas comes from these few chapters of Isaiah. A virgin conceiving. A child named Immanuel. A great light shining in Galilee. A son given. A shoot from the stump of Jesse. When you hear Christmas carols that mention the Prince of Peace, the rose from Jesse’s stem, or Emmanuel, they’re quoting or echoing Isaiah. Isaiah was writing in a dark time, when the royal family was failing and enemies were closing in. Yet he could see a light coming. Christmas is the moment that light arrived.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Handel's Messiah**

In 1741, the composer George Frideric Handel wrote Messiah, one of the most famous pieces of music ever composed. Much of its text comes straight from Isaiah, including Comfort ye my people, Every valley shall be exalted, For unto us a child is born, He was despised, and Surely he hath borne our griefs. Handel reportedly wrote the whole thing in about twenty-four days. When it's performed today, audiences traditionally stand for the Hallelujah chorus. If you've never listened to it, look it up. You'll be hearing Isaiah sung.

These chapters also show that God's promises often grow out of the darkest places. The Immanuel sign came to a frightened, faithless king. The great light shone on the region crushed first by Assyria. The shoot sprang from a stump, the leftover of a chopped-down tree. If your life feels like a stump right now, cut down by disappointment or loss, Isaiah's message is that God specializes in bringing new life out of stumps.

KEY VERSE

For a child is born to us. A son is given to us; and the government will be on his shoulders. His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Ahaz trusted Assyria instead of God? What do people trust instead of God today?
2. What does the name Immanuel, God with us, mean to you personally?
3. Which of the four names in Isaiah 9:6 do you most need right now?
4. What would a world where nothing hurts or destroys look like?

TRY THIS *Pick one of the names in Isaiah 9:6 and pray it each day this week. For example: Jesus, You are my Prince of Peace. Bring peace to this situation.*

CHAPTER 3

Empires, Pride, and the Highway

Isaiah 13–35

Chapters 13 through 23 are a series of messages to the nations around Israel: Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, Egypt, Tyre, and more. Isaiah calls them oracles, or burdens. They might seem like a strange thing to include in a book for God's people. Why talk to nations who weren't even listening?

Because Isaiah wants Judah to understand something important. God isn't just Israel's local God. He rules over every nation, every empire, and every king. The superpowers that seemed so terrifying were in His hands. Their pride would be humbled. And some of them, astonishingly, would one day worship Him. Isaiah 19 even says that Egypt and Assyria, Israel's worst enemies, will one day worship God alongside Israel, and God will call them My people.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Oracles Against the Nations**
>
> Many prophets, including Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos, have sections of messages to foreign nations. These usually focus on pride, cruelty, and violence. God holds every nation accountable for how it treats people. But these chapters also contain surprising hope. Isaiah sees a day when people from every nation will be welcomed. It's an early glimpse of the gospel going to the whole world.

The most famous of these oracles is in chapter 14, a taunt song against the king of Babylon. Isaiah imagines the proud king going

down to the grave, where other dead kings mock him. "How you have fallen from heaven, shining one, son of the dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, who laid the nations low!"

The king had boasted, "I will ascend into heaven! I will exalt my throne above the stars of God!" and even, "I will make myself like the Most High!" But Isaiah says he would be brought down to the grave instead.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Lucifer in Context**

The phrase shining one, son of the dawn, refers to the morning star, the planet Venus, which shines brightly before sunrise and then fades as the sun comes up. When the Bible was translated into Latin, the word for morning star was lucifer, meaning light-bearer, and the King James Version kept it as a name: How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer. Over time, many Christians came to read this passage as describing Satan's fall from heaven. Readers today understand it in different ways. In context, Isaiah 14 is clearly a taunt against the king of Babylon, a human ruler. Many interpreters believe it is only about that king, using poetic imagery from ancient stories. Others believe that the king's pride mirrors a deeper, spiritual rebellion, and that the passage looks behind the human king to Satan, often reading it alongside Ezekiel 28. Whichever view you take, the lesson is the same: pride that tries to grab God's place always ends in a fall. It's also worth knowing that Lucifer is never used as a name for Satan anywhere in the Bible itself.

REAL TALK **Pride Comes Before the Fall**

The king of Babylon's five I will statements are a perfect picture of pride. I will ascend. I will exalt my throne. I will make myself like the Most High. Pride is wanting to be at the center, to be admired, and to answer to no one. It shows up in small ways too, like refusing to admit you're wrong, needing to win every argument, or looking down on people. Jesus showed the opposite. Instead of grabbing a higher place, He came down, became a servant, and humbled Himself. And God lifted Him up.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Isaiah's Sign Acts**

Prophets sometimes acted out their messages. In Isaiah 20, God told Isaiah to take off his sackcloth and sandals and walk around barefoot, dressed like a prisoner of war, for three years. It was a living warning to Judah not to trust Egypt and Cush for help, because Assyria would soon lead those nations away as captives, dressed just like that. Jeremiah wore a yoke. Ezekiel lay on his side for months. These strange actions grabbed attention in a world without screens. They made God's message impossible to ignore.

Chapters 24 through 27 zoom out even further to the whole world. Some call this section Isaiah's apocalypse. It describes God judging the whole earth, and then hosting a great feast for all peoples on His mountain. And then comes a breathtaking promise. "He has swallowed up death forever! The Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces."

Paul quoted this verse when he wrote about the resurrection, and Revelation echoes it in its final chapters. Imagine a world where God personally wipes away every tear.

Isaiah 26 adds a promise for anxious hearts. "You will keep whoever's mind is steadfast in perfect peace, because he trusts in you." In Hebrew, perfect peace is literally peace, peace, the same repetition that makes something the ultimate.

REAL TALK **Perfect Peace**

Anxiety is one of the biggest struggles teenagers face today. Your mind can race with worries about grades, friendships, your future, your family, and the news. Isaiah 26:3 doesn't promise that you'll never feel anxious. It promises peace when your mind keeps returning to God. That might look like praying when you feel worry rising, memorizing a verse, writing your fears down and giving them to God, or taking a walk outside and noticing His creation. If anxiety is constant or overwhelming, talk to a parent, counselor, or doctor.

There's no shame in getting help. God often brings His peace through people He's placed in your life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Feast on the Mountain**

Isaiah 25 describes God preparing a feast for all peoples on His mountain, with the best food and the finest aged wine. In the ancient world, a feast was the ultimate picture of celebration and friendship. Sharing a meal meant peace between people. Jesus often described God's kingdom as a banquet, and He shared meals with outsiders and sinners, which shocked religious leaders. Revelation describes the wedding supper of the Lamb. Isaiah's picture is a reminder that God's future isn't boring. It's a party, and everyone is invited.

REAL TALK **When God Feels Slow**

Isaiah 30 says the LORD waits to be gracious to His people, and blessed are all who wait for Him. Waiting is hard, especially in a world of instant downloads and same-day delivery. You might be waiting for a prayer to be answered, a friendship to heal, a family situation to change, or a dark season to end. Isaiah doesn't say waiting is easy. He says God is not idle while you wait. He's preparing to be gracious. Keep praying, keep trusting, and keep doing the next right thing.

Chapters 28 through 33 return to Judah, warning against trusting Egypt for help against Assyria. Isaiah keeps saying the same thing: your strength is in trusting God. "You will be saved in returning and rest. Your strength will be in quietness and in confidence." He also promises that God will guide those who listen. "When you turn to the right hand, and when you turn to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, This is the way. Walk in it."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Assyria's Reputation**

Assyria was famous for its brutality. Its kings boasted in their records about the cruel ways they punished conquered peoples, and they often deported whole populations to other parts of the empire to break their spirit. That's

what happened to the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. Assyria's capital, Nineveh, was so feared that when God sent the prophet Jonah there, Jonah ran the other way. Knowing this helps you understand how terrifying it was for Judah to see Assyria at the gates, and how astonishing Isaiah's message of trust really was.

REAL TALK **Shortcuts**

In Isaiah 30 and 31, Judah's leaders rushed to Egypt to make a military alliance instead of trusting God. Isaiah says they were looking for help from horses and chariots instead of from the Holy One of Israel. It's the temptation to take a shortcut: to grab the solution you can see instead of trusting the God you can't. Teens face that temptation too. Cheating instead of studying. Lying instead of facing the consequences. Getting into a relationship to fill loneliness. Isaiah's words still apply: in returning and rest you will be saved, and in quietness and trust is your strength. Trusting God usually feels slower. It's always wiser.

Isaiah 28 contains a promise that the New Testament later applies to Jesus. God says He is laying in Zion a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation, and the one who trusts will not be in a hurry, or in some translations, will not be shaken. Peter quotes this when he calls Jesus the living cornerstone. Everything else might be shaky, but a life built on Him stands.

Then chapter 35 ends the first big section of Isaiah with a song of pure joy. The desert will bloom like a rose. Weak hands will be strengthened. Fearful hearts will hear, Be strong, don't be afraid. "Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame man will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will sing."

And there will be a road. "A highway will be there, a road, and it will be called 'The Holy Way'." Along this road, God's ransomed people will come home to Zion, singing.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Highway of Holiness**

In the ancient world, travel was dangerous. Roads were rough, and robbers and wild animals waited along the way. Isaiah pictures a safe, smooth highway through the desert, where no lion or dangerous beast will be found, and where even someone who isn't very smart can't get lost. It's a picture of God bringing His people home from exile. Centuries later, when John the Baptist asked whether Jesus was the one they were waiting for, Jesus answered by pointing to Isaiah's promises: the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear. Jesus was saying, the highway is open.

Notice how Isaiah's long section on the nations ends. After chapters of warnings against proud empires, Isaiah closes with a desert in bloom and a highway home. That's the pattern of the whole book. Judgment is real, but it's never the last word. God tears down what is proud so He can build up what is humble. He judges oppressors so the oppressed can go free. And He brings His people home singing.

REAL TALK **The News and the Nations**

Isaiah lived in a world of terrifying headlines: empires conquering nations, refugees fleeing, cities destroyed. You live in a world of headlines too, and sometimes the news can make you anxious or hopeless. Isaiah's chapters about the nations remind you that God is still in charge of history. No ruler is too powerful for Him, and no nation is beyond His reach. That doesn't mean you should ignore what's happening in the world. It means you can pray for the world without despairing, care about injustice without panicking, and trust that God is working toward a day when nations won't learn war anymore. If the news is making you anxious, it's okay to take breaks from it and to talk with someone you trust.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Isaiah 35 and Jesus' Miracles**

When John the Baptist was in prison, he sent messengers to ask Jesus whether He was the one they had been waiting for. Jesus didn't answer with a simple yes. He told them to report what they saw: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, and the poor have good news preached to them.

> Those were promises straight from Isaiah 35 and 61. Jesus was saying, Look at the signs. The future Isaiah described is breaking into the present.

Chapters 13 through 35 can feel like a long, rocky road, with a lot of names and places most readers don't recognize. But the big message is clear and simple. God is King over all the earth. Pride always falls. Trusting human power instead of God always disappoints. And at the end of the road, God brings His people home, singing, with everlasting joy on their heads. When you read these chapters, don't get lost in every detail. Look for the King, the warnings about pride, and the flashes of hope.

> **REAL TALK** **Everlasting Joy**
>
> Isaiah says that sorrow and sighing will flee away. Imagine sadness itself running away from you. That's the future God promises. Right now, joy and sorrow often mix together. Even good days have something hard in them. But Isaiah looks ahead to a day when joy is permanent, like a crown that never comes off. Christians call this hope, not wishful thinking, but confident expectation based on God's promises. That hope can carry you through hard days. It doesn't erase your pain, but it reminds you that pain doesn't get the last word.

KEY VERSE

Then the LORD's ransomed ones will return, and come with singing to Zion; and everlasting joy will be on their heads. They will obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Isaiah 35:10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God sent messages to nations that weren't listening?
2. What are some I will statements that pride makes today?
3. What would it look like for your mind to be steadfast on God this week?
4. Which promise in Isaiah 35 gives you the most hope?

TRY THIS *Memorize Isaiah 26:3. Write it on a card or set it as your lock screen, and pray it whenever you feel anxious this week.*

CHAPTER 4

Hezekiah Under Siege

Isaiah 36–39

In the middle of Isaiah, the poetry stops and a story begins. Chapters 36 through 39 tell about King Hezekiah, Ahaz's son, and the most terrifying moment of his reign. You can also read this story in 2 Kings 18 through 20, almost word for word.

"Now in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all of the fortified cities of Judah and captured them." The Assyrian army swept through Judah, city after city. Only Jerusalem was left.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Sennacherib's Prism**
>
> Archaeologists have found Assyrian records describing this very campaign. A six-sided clay prism from Sennacherib's reign boasts that he conquered forty-six of Hezekiah's walled cities and shut Hezekiah up in Jerusalem like a bird in a cage. Notice what it doesn't say: that he captured Jerusalem. Assyrian kings loved to brag about their victories, so the silence is striking. Archaeologists have also found carved wall panels from Sennacherib's palace showing his siege of Lachish, one of Judah's cities. And in Jerusalem, you can still walk through Hezekiah's Tunnel, a channel he dug through solid rock to bring water inside the city walls before the siege.

Sennacherib sent his field commander, called the Rabshakeh, to stand outside Jerusalem's walls and shout up at the people. He mocked them. He said, "What confidence is this in which you

trust?" Egypt won't help you, he said. Your God won't help you. Every other nation's gods failed to save them from Assyria. Why would yours be any different? He even spoke in Hebrew, the people's own language, so everyone on the wall could hear and lose heart.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Speak in Aramaic!**

Hezekiah's officials begged the Rabshakeh to speak in Aramaic, the international language of diplomacy in that day, instead of Hebrew, so that the ordinary people on the wall wouldn't understand. He refused and shouted even louder in Hebrew. He wanted the common people to hear and panic. Aramaic later became the everyday language of many Jews, and Jesus Himself spoke it. A few parts of the Old Testament, in Ezra and Daniel, are even written in Aramaic.

It was psychological warfare. And it was working. Hezekiah tore his clothes and went to the temple. He sent messengers to Isaiah, who answered with God's word: Don't be afraid of the words you've heard. Sennacherib will hear a rumor and go home.

Then Sennacherib sent a letter, repeating his threats. And Hezekiah did something beautiful. "Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it. Then Hezekiah went up to the LORD's house, and spread it before the LORD."

REAL TALK **Spread It Before the LORD**

Hezekiah didn't pretend the letter didn't exist. He didn't panic or try to fix everything himself. He took it to God and laid it out, as if to say, God, look at this. You read it. What do we do? You can do the same thing with whatever is threatening you. A bad grade. A hurtful message. A medical test. A family crisis. A list of everything you're worried about. Literally write it down or take the screenshot, and then spread it before God in prayer. Tell Him honestly what's going on. He's not overwhelmed by what overwhelms you.

Hezekiah's prayer is a model for anyone facing something too big for them. He started with who God is. "LORD of Armies, the God of Israel, who is enthroned among the cherubim, you are the God, even you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth." Then he admitted the threat was real. Assyria really had destroyed other nations. Then he asked for help, for a bigger reason than just his own safety. "Save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you are the LORD, even you only."

God answered through Isaiah with a long poem mocking Sennacherib's pride. You think you did all this yourself, God says, but I planned it long ago. Now I'll put My hook in your nose and turn you back the way you came. He promised that Sennacherib would not shoot a single arrow into Jerusalem.

That night, "the LORD's angel went out and struck one hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the camp of the Assyrians." Sennacherib went home to Nineveh, and later, while he was worshiping in the temple of his god, two of his own sons killed him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Happened to the Army?**

The Bible says the angel of the LORD struck the Assyrian camp. How exactly that happened isn't described. Some have suggested a sudden plague. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus records a story that an Egyptian army facing Sennacherib was saved when mice overran the Assyrian camp and chewed through their bowstrings, which some think might be a distorted memory of a disaster that struck Sennacherib's army. Whatever the means, the result was clear: Jerusalem was saved, and Assyrian records never claim to have taken it. Assyrian records also confirm that Sennacherib was later murdered by his sons.

REAL TALK **When the Threat Is Real**

Notice that Hezekiah's faith didn't mean pretending the danger wasn't real. He admitted Assyria had destroyed other nations. Faith isn't denial. It's being honest about how big the problem is, and then remembering that God is bigger. If you're facing something scary, you don't have to act like you're fine. Tell God exactly how afraid you are. Then tell Him what you know is true about Him.

Chapter 38 tells a more personal story. Hezekiah became deathly ill, and Isaiah told him to set his house in order because he was going to die. Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and wept and prayed. Before Isaiah had even left the palace, God sent him back with a message: "I have heard your prayer. I have seen your tears. Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life." God even gave a sign, making a shadow go backward on a stairway used as a sundial.

REAL TALK **God Sees Your Tears**

Hezekiah's prayer wasn't polished. He turned to the wall and cried. And God said, I have seen your tears. God doesn't only respond to perfect, calm, well-worded prayers. He sees your tears too. Not every prayer for healing is answered the way Hezekiah's was, and that can be very painful. But every tear is seen. If you're facing an illness, yours or someone else's, it's okay to cry and to ask God for help. And it's okay to talk with a parent, pastor, or counselor about the fear and sadness you're feeling.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Siloam Inscription**

In 1880, a boy wading in Hezekiah's Tunnel in Jerusalem noticed writing carved into the rock wall. It turned out to be an ancient Hebrew inscription describing the moment when two teams of workers, digging from opposite ends through solid rock, finally heard each other's voices and broke through to meet. The tunnel is about 1,750 feet long and winds through the hill. Second Kings and 2 Chronicles say Hezekiah built it to bring water from the Gihon Spring into the city. The inscription, now in a museum in Istanbul, is

one of the oldest examples of Hebrew writing ever found. Today, visitors can still wade through the tunnel with flashlights.

Hezekiah also wrote a poem after he recovered, recorded in Isaiah 38. He describes feeling like a tent being pulled up, like a weaver's cloth being cut off the loom, and like a bird moaning. Then he praises God for casting all his sins behind His back. It's an honest psalm from someone who faced death and was given more time.

But the story doesn't end on a high note. In chapter 39, envoys arrived from Babylon, then a rising power, with letters and a gift for Hezekiah because they'd heard he was sick. Hezekiah was flattered. And he showed them everything. "There was nothing in his house, nor in all his dominion, that Hezekiah didn't show them."

He gave them the grand tour of his treasury, armory, and storerooms. It was a moment of pride and foolishness, trying to impress the wrong people. Isaiah came and asked what they had seen. Then he delivered a devastating message. "Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up until today, will be carried to Babylon. Nothing will be left."

And Hezekiah's response is one of the saddest lines in the book. He said the word was good, because he thought, At least there will be peace and security in my lifetime. He was relieved the disaster wouldn't happen to him.

REAL TALK **Showing Off**

Hezekiah had just experienced two miracles: God saved his city and his life. And then he turned around and showed off his wealth to impress foreign visitors. It's a reminder that pride often sneaks in right after a victory. It's easy to start bragging about your stuff, your accomplishments, or your status, especially when someone important seems impressed. Hezekiah also shows

how easy it is to care only about yourself and not about the people who come after you. Wise people think about how their choices will affect others, including future generations.

There's a sad footnote to Hezekiah's story. During his extra fifteen years, his son Manasseh was born. Manasseh became one of the most evil kings in Judah's history, leading the people into terrible idolatry. Some readers see Hezekiah's attitude in chapter 39, caring only about peace in his own lifetime, as a hint of why his son grew up the way he did. Others point out that Manasseh made his own choices, and that 2 Chronicles says he later repented. Either way, it's a reminder that the faith of one generation isn't automatically passed to the next. Each person has to choose.

These four chapters form a bridge in Isaiah. They close the Assyrian era and point toward Babylon. And the very next chapter, Isaiah 40, will speak to God's people as if Isaiah's warning has already come true, as if they're in exile in Babylon, needing comfort.

REAL TALK **The Voice Outside the Wall**

The Rabshakeh's speech is a great picture of how discouragement works. He questioned their trust. He mocked their God. He compared them with others who had failed. He spoke loudly, so everyone could hear. And he made it personal, using their own language. Discouraging voices often work the same way, whether they come from bullies, social media, or your own thoughts. Who do you think you are? God won't help you. Look at everyone else who failed. Hezekiah's people did something wise: they didn't answer him back. They went to God. When you hear a voice like that, you don't have to argue with it. Take it to God, and listen to what He says instead.

Isaiah 36 through 39 is also a reminder that faith isn't a one-time event. Hezekiah trusted God beautifully in chapter 37, and then made a foolish, prideful choice in chapter 39. Even great leaders

have ups and downs. That's true for you too. You might have a season of strong faith and then stumble. The answer isn't to give up. It's to keep coming back to God, who is faithful even when we aren't.

REAL TALK **Prayer That Starts With God**

Hezekiah's prayer begins with God, not the problem. Starting that way doesn't make the problem disappear, but it puts it in perspective. Try it this week. Before you tell God what's wrong, spend a moment telling Him who He is: Creator, King, faithful, powerful, good. Then tell Him what's going on. You may find that your prayers become less panicked and more trusting.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Isaiah and 2 Kings**

The story in Isaiah 36 through 39 appears almost word for word in 2 Kings 18 through 20. Scholars debate which came first, or whether both used a common source. Isaiah adds Hezekiah's poem in chapter 38, which isn't in 2 Kings. Second Kings adds that Hezekiah stripped gold from the temple doors to pay Sennacherib before the siege, a detail that shows he didn't always trust God perfectly. Second Chronicles 32 adds that Hezekiah encouraged the people by saying that with Sennacherib was only an arm of flesh, but with them was the LORD their God to help them and fight their battles. Reading all three accounts together gives the fullest picture.

KEY VERSE

LORD of Armies, the God of Israel, who is enthroned among the cherubim, you are the God, even you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth.

Isaiah 37:16 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What are the voices in your life, like the Rabshakeh, that try to make you lose heart?
2. What's something you need to spread before the LORD right now?
3. Why do you think pride often shows up right after a victory?
4. What does Hezekiah's reaction to Isaiah's warning teach about thinking of others?

TRY THIS *Write down the biggest thing you're worried about right now. Then, like Hezekiah, spread it before God. Start your prayer by telling Him who He is, then ask for His help.*

CHAPTER 5

Comfort and Eagles' Wings

Isaiah 40–48

After thirty-nine chapters full of warnings, Isaiah 40 opens with two words, repeated for emphasis. "Comfort, comfort my people," says your God.

The setting has shifted. These chapters speak to God's people as exiles in Babylon, far from home, their temple destroyed, wondering if God had abandoned them forever. And God's first words to them are tender. "Speak comfortably to Jerusalem," He says. Literally, speak to her heart. Tell her that her hard service is over and her sin has been paid for.

Then a voice calls out, "Prepare the way of the LORD in the wilderness! Make a level highway in the desert for our God." Every valley will be raised and every mountain made low. God Himself is coming to lead His people home. All four Gospels quote this verse about John the Baptist, the voice in the wilderness who prepared the way for Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Voice in the Wilderness**

In the ancient world, when a king was going to travel, workers would go ahead of him to prepare the road, filling in potholes, clearing rocks, and leveling the path. Isaiah pictures a road being prepared through the desert for God Himself. John the Baptist lived in the wilderness near the Jordan River and called people to prepare their hearts through repentance. Matthew

writes that he was the one Isaiah spoke of, the voice crying in the wilderness. When John saw Jesus, he pointed and said, Look, the Lamb of God.

REAL TALK **Prepare the Way**

Isaiah's highway in the desert is also a picture of preparing your heart for God. John the Baptist told people to repent, to turn around, before Jesus came. What are the potholes and roadblocks in your heart? Maybe it's a habit you know isn't good, a grudge you're holding, a secret you're hiding, or just a schedule so packed that there's no room for God. Preparing the way can be as simple as setting aside a few minutes each morning to read and pray, confessing something to God, or making something right with someone you hurt.

Isaiah 40 goes on to remind God's people how small everything else is compared to Him. People are like grass. They wither and fade. "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God stands forever." The nations are like a drop in a bucket. God measures the oceans in the hollow of His hand and calls every star by name.

BACKGROUND CHECK **He Calls Them All by Name**

Isaiah 40 invites the exiles to look up at the night sky and ask who created the stars. God brings them out like an army, Isaiah says, and calls each one by name. Astronomers today estimate that our galaxy alone contains around a hundred billion stars or more, and that there are perhaps trillions of galaxies. Isaiah couldn't have known those numbers, but his point lands even harder today. If God knows every star by name, He hasn't lost track of you. That's exactly Isaiah's argument: Why do you say, My way is hidden from the LORD? The God who names the stars knows your name too.

But this mighty God is also gentle. "He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arm, and carry them in his bosom." The God who holds the universe also carries the little lambs close to His heart.

Then comes the passage on many posters and coffee mugs, and it's worth reading in context. The exiles were saying that God had forgotten them. Isaiah answers, Haven't you heard? God doesn't get tired. "He gives power to the weak. He increases the strength of him who has no might. Even the youths faint and get weary, and the young men utterly fall; but those who wait for the LORD will renew their strength. They will mount up with wings like eagles. They will run, and not be weary. They will walk, and not faint."

REAL TALK **When You're Exhausted**

Isaiah says even young people get tired, and you probably know that's true. School, sports, jobs, activities, homework, family stress, and late nights scrolling can leave you running on empty. Isaiah's answer is to wait for the LORD. Waiting doesn't mean doing nothing. It means trusting, hoping, and depending on God instead of only on your own strength. It also means rest. God built rest into creation, and getting enough sleep is not laziness. If you feel exhausted all the time, talk to a parent or doctor, because sometimes there are physical or emotional reasons. And bring your tiredness to God. He doesn't get tired of you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Eagles' Wings**

Eagles are known for soaring. Instead of flapping their wings constantly, they ride rising columns of warm air called thermals, gliding for long distances with very little effort. That's a great picture of what Isaiah means. Those who wait on the LORD don't have to power through on their own strength. They're carried by His strength, like an eagle carried on the wind.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Word That Stands Forever**

Isaiah 40:8 says the grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever. The Great Isaiah Scroll is a living example. Empires like Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome rose and fell. Scrolls rotted, cities burned, and languages changed. Yet the words of Isaiah were copied, treasured, and read for more than twenty-five centuries, and today they're

available in thousands of languages. Peter quoted this verse to remind Christians that the good news they had heard was God's enduring word.

Then God speaks to His people with promises of His presence. "Don't you be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. Yes, I will help you."

And in chapter 43, one of the most comforting passages in the Bible. "Don't be afraid, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name. You are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned, and flame will not scorch you."

REAL TALK **Through the Waters**

Notice that God doesn't say if you pass through the waters. He says when. Hard times will come. God never promises a life without floods or fires. He promises something better: I will be with you. You won't go through it alone, and it won't destroy you. Whatever you're going through right now, the divorce, the diagnosis, the loss, the loneliness, the anxiety, God says, You are mine, and I am with you. He also tells His people, "Behold, I will do a new thing." Your story isn't finished.

REAL TALK **You Are Mine**

God says to His people, I have called you by your name. You are mine. Many teens struggle with the question, Who am I? You might try to answer it with your grades, your sport, your looks, your friends, your followers, or your mistakes. But all of those can change. Isaiah 43 gives an identity that can't be taken away. God created you, formed you, redeemed you, and calls you His. He also says, You are precious and honored in my sight, and I love you. When the voices around you or inside you say you're not enough, you can answer with what God says.

Chapter 42 introduces the Servant of the LORD for the first time, and Matthew quotes it about Jesus. We'll look at the Servant closely in the next chapter. For now, notice the contrast. The idols in these chapters can't move, speak, or save. People have to carry them around. But God says He carries His people, from birth to old age. Either you carry your gods, or your God carries you.

Chapter 44 contains one of the funniest passages in the Bible. Isaiah mocks idol-making. He describes a man who cuts down a tree. He uses half of the wood to build a fire, warm himself, and bake bread. "Aha! I am warm," he says. Then with the other half, he carves a god, bows down to it, and prays, "Deliver me, for you are my god!"

Isaiah points out the absurdity. No one stops to think, "Shall I bow down to a tree trunk?" The man worships a piece of the same log he just used to cook his lunch.

> **REAL TALK** **Modern Idols**
>
> You're probably not tempted to carve a statue and bow down to it. But an idol is anything you look to for what only God can give: meaning, security, worth, or salvation. Today's idols might be popularity, appearance, achievement, money, a relationship, sports, gaming, or your phone. Like the man with the log, we can take a good thing God made and turn it into something we worship. Isaiah says the idol-maker "feeds on ashes," and a deceived heart has led him astray. Ask yourself, What do I look to when I'm anxious, lonely, or afraid? What would I be devastated to lose? Those answers can point to your idols.

Then Isaiah names a specific foreign king who would free God's people from Babylon: Cyrus. "The LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held to subdue nations before him." God says He called Cyrus by name, even though Cyrus did not know Him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Cyrus and the Cylinder**

Cyrus the Great was king of Persia. In 539 BC, his army conquered Babylon, and soon afterward he allowed exiled peoples, including the Jews, to return to their homelands and rebuild their temples. A clay cylinder from his reign, called the Cyrus Cylinder, now in the British Museum, describes this policy. Ezra 1 records his decree allowing the Jews to go home. Isaiah calls Cyrus God's anointed, a remarkable title for a pagan king, showing that God can use anyone to accomplish His purposes. The naming of Cyrus is one of the reasons some scholars believe this part of Isaiah was written later, during the exile, while others believe it shows God revealing the future to Isaiah long in advance.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Fall of Babylon**

Isaiah 47 pictures Babylon, the proud queen of the nations, being humbled and made to sit in the dust. Babylon had said, I am, and there is no one besides me, and I will never be a widow. That's a claim only God can make. In 539 BC, Cyrus's army captured the city, reportedly with little fighting. Daniel 5 tells how, on that very night, King Belshazzar was holding a feast when a mysterious hand wrote on the wall. Babylon, which had seemed unbeatable, fell in a single night.

Chapter 48 adds a picture that's worth holding on to when life is hard. God says He has refined His people, not like silver, but in the furnace of affliction. Refining was the process of heating metal until the impurities rose to the top and could be removed. Hard seasons aren't pleasant, but God can use them to make us stronger, purer, and more like Him. That doesn't mean God causes every hard thing, or that suffering is good in itself. It means that nothing you go through is wasted in His hands.

God's point is that He alone is God and He alone controls history. "Look to me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other." The invitation is for everyone, not just Israel.

And He promises lifelong care. “Even to old age I am he, and even to gray hairs I will carry you.”

It’s worth noticing how often Isaiah 40 through 48 says Don’t be afraid. God says it again and again, to people who had every reason to be afraid. They had lost their homes, their temple, and their independence. They lived in a foreign empire. And God keeps saying, Don’t be afraid, for I am with you. The reason not to fear is never that nothing bad can happen. It’s that God is present, powerful, and faithful.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Life in Exile**

When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 586 BC, they took thousands of people, especially leaders, skilled workers, and young people from noble families, to Babylon. Daniel was one of them. The exiles lived in a huge, impressive city full of temples to Babylonian gods, like Marduk. Many must have wondered whether Babylon’s gods were stronger than the LORD. Psalm 137 captures their grief: By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept. Isaiah 40 through 48 speaks right into that situation, insisting that Babylon’s gods are just carved wood and that the LORD alone controls history.

REAL TALK **Carried**

God says that from birth to gray hair He carries His people. Maybe you’ve seen the poem about footprints in the sand, where a person notices only one set of footprints during the hardest times of life and realizes that was when God was carrying them. Isaiah said it first. If you feel like you can’t take another step, God isn’t waiting for you to pull yourself together. He’s ready to carry you.

KEY VERSE

but those who wait for the LORD will renew their strength.
They will mount up with wings like eagles. They will run,
and not be weary. They will walk, and not faint.

Isaiah 40:31 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God's first word to the exiles was comfort?
2. What does it mean to wait for the LORD in your daily life?
3. What waters or fires are you passing through right now? How does Isaiah 43:2 speak to that?
4. What modern idols are you most tempted to trust?

TRY THIS *Write Isaiah 43:1-2 on a card, putting your own name in place of Jacob and Israel. Read it every morning this week.*

CHAPTER 6

The Suffering Servant

Isaiah 49–53

In the middle of Isaiah's comfort chapters, a mysterious figure keeps appearing: the Servant of the LORD. He shows up in four special poems, often called the Servant Songs, in chapters 42, 49, 50, and 52 through 53.

In the first song, the Servant is gentle. "He won't break a bruised reed. He won't quench a dimly burning wick. He will faithfully bring justice." A bruised reed is a weak, bent plant. A dimly burning wick is a candle about to go out. The Servant doesn't crush the weak or snuff out people who are barely holding on. He's gentle with them.

> **REAL TALK** **Gentle With Bruised Reeds**
>
> The Servant is gentle with the weak. That's a model for how we treat others, and even ourselves. Some people are like bruised reeds, already bent by something hard in their lives. Others are like smoldering wicks, barely hanging on. A harsh word could break them. Followers of Jesus are called to be gentle: to notice when someone is struggling, to speak kindly, and to be patient. And if you're the bruised reed right now, Jesus isn't going to snap you in half. He's going to hold you up.

In chapter 49, the Servant speaks, and God gives Him a huge mission. Bringing Israel back isn't enough, God says. "I will also

give you as a light to the nations, that you may be my salvation to the end of the earth."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Is the Servant?**

Readers have long asked the same question an Ethiopian official asked Philip in Acts 8: "Who is the prophet talking about? About himself, or about someone else?" In some places, Isaiah calls the nation of Israel God's servant. Many Jewish interpreters understand the Servant Songs as describing Israel, or a faithful remnant within Israel, suffering among the nations. Some ancient Jewish interpreters saw the Servant as the Messiah. Christians, following the New Testament, believe the Servant Songs find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. Many Christian scholars see both: the Servant is Israel, but Israel couldn't fulfill the mission perfectly, so one faithful Israelite, Jesus, fulfilled it for them. Notice that in chapter 49, the Servant is called Israel and yet is sent to restore Israel, which suggests an individual who represents the whole nation.

REAL TALK **A Light to the Nations**

God told the Servant that saving Israel alone was too small a thing. His mission was for the whole world. Jesus later told His followers to go and make disciples of all nations, and Paul quoted Isaiah 49:6 when he explained why he was taking the gospel to non-Jewish people. You're part of that story. The good news isn't just for people who look like you, live near you, or grew up like you. It's for everyone. That might mean praying for people in other countries, getting to know classmates from different backgrounds, supporting missionaries, or simply being kind to someone who is different from you.

Chapter 49 also contains a beautiful promise for anyone who feels forgotten. God's people said, The LORD has forgotten me. God answered, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yes, these may

forget, yet I will not forget you! Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands."

REAL TALK **Engraved on His Hands**

Have you ever felt forgotten? Left out of the group chat, unseen at home, overlooked by teachers or coaches? God says even if a mother could forget her baby, He will never forget you. He says your name is engraved on His hands, like a tattoo that can't be erased. Christians have often noticed that Jesus' hands were literally marked for us, with nail scars He still carried after His resurrection. You are not forgotten. You are written on the hands of God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Servant Songs**

Here's a quick guide to Isaiah's four Servant Songs. The first, in 42:1-9, shows the Servant as gentle and Spirit-filled, bringing justice to the nations. The second, in 49:1-13, shows Him as a light to the nations. The third, in 50:4-11, shows Him listening to God each morning and enduring abuse without turning back. The fourth, in 52:13-53:12, shows Him suffering, dying, and being exalted for the sins of many. Read together, they tell a story that moves from gentle mission, to rejection, to suffering, to victory.

In the third Servant Song, the Servant suffers. "I gave my back to those who beat me, and my cheeks to those who plucked off the hair. I didn't hide my face from shame and spitting." But He sets His face like flint, determined, trusting that God will help Him.

Then chapter 52 bursts with good news. "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, Your God reigns!" Imagine a runner coming over the hills to a besieged city, bringing news that the battle is won. Paul quotes this verse about everyone who shares the gospel.

And then comes the fourth Servant Song, from Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12. It's one of the most important passages in the entire Old Testament.

It begins with a surprise. "Behold, my servant will deal wisely. He will be exalted and lifted up, and will be very high." Lifted up is the same phrase used for God on His throne in Isaiah 6. But then the Servant's appearance is "marred more than any man." People are shocked at how much He suffered.

Isaiah 53 describes Him in detail. He grew up like a tender plant out of dry ground, nothing special to look at. "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering and acquainted with disease." People turned away from Him. And they assumed God was punishing Him for His own sins.

But they were wrong. "Surely he has borne our sickness and carried our suffering; yet we considered him plagued, struck by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought our peace was on him; and by his wounds we are healed."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Substitution**
>
> The heart of Isaiah 53 is substitution: one person taking the place of others. Notice the pronouns. He was pierced. Our transgressions. He was crushed. Our iniquities. The punishment was on him. We are healed. Over and over, the Servant suffers what others deserve. Isaiah uses the language of sacrifice from the temple, calling the Servant an offering for sin. In the sacrificial system, an innocent animal died in place of a guilty person. Isaiah 53 describes a person doing that. Peter quoted this chapter when he wrote, "You were healed by his wounds." Paul summed it up this way: "For him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Then Isaiah describes why we needed this. "All we like sheep have gone astray. Everyone has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

The Servant doesn't fight back. "He was oppressed, yet when he was afflicted he didn't open his mouth. As a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and as a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he didn't open his mouth." He was taken away by an unjust trial. He was cut off from the land of the living. And His grave was assigned with the wicked and with a rich man in His death, even though He had done no violence and spoken no lies.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Isaiah 53 and the Gospels**

Christians have long been amazed at how closely Isaiah 53, written centuries before Jesus, matches His story. Jesus was rejected by His own people. He was silent before His accusers, like a lamb. He was beaten and pierced. He was executed between two criminals, counted with the transgressors, and He prayed for those who crucified Him, making intercession for them. He was buried in the tomb of a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea. Isaiah 53 was in the Great Isaiah Scroll from the Dead Sea, copied well before Jesus was born, so it wasn't written after the fact.

REAL TALK **Silence Isn't Always Right**

The Servant stayed silent before His accusers, like a lamb. That was His unique mission, choosing to suffer for others. But that doesn't mean God wants you to stay silent when you're being hurt. Jesus Himself spoke up many times against injustice and hypocrisy. If someone is abusing, bullying, or threatening you, speaking up isn't a lack of faith. It's wise and right. Tell a trusted adult. If you're being hurt at home, you can call or text Childhelp at 1-800-422-4453. If you're in danger, call 911. If you're feeling hopeless, call or text 988. Jesus suffered so that you could be free, not so that you would suffer abuse in silence.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Lamb of God**

Isaiah's picture of the Servant as a lamb led to the slaughter connects with lambs throughout the Bible. At the first Passover, a lamb's blood protected Israel's families from judgment. Every day, lambs were sacrificed at the

temple. When John the Baptist saw Jesus, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Jesus died during the Passover festival. And in Revelation, Jesus is worshiped as the Lamb who was slain and is now alive on the throne.

And then, the most astonishing turn of all. After all this suffering and death, Isaiah says the Servant "will see his offspring. He will prolong his days." "After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light and be satisfied." How can someone who died see light and live long? Christians believe there's only one answer: resurrection. The Servant who was pierced and buried would live again, and would justify many.

REAL TALK **By His Wounds**

Some people feel too guilty to come to God. Others feel like they're not that bad. Isaiah 53 speaks to both. All of us have gone astray. And the Servant took the punishment for all of it. You don't have to carry your guilt anymore. Jesus already carried it. Isaiah also says He was "a man of suffering." If you're hurting, Jesus understands. He knows what it's like to be rejected, misunderstood, mocked, and in pain. He doesn't stand far off from your suffering. He entered it.

Isaiah 53 has had a remarkable effect on readers throughout history. Many people, including some Jewish readers, have come to believe in Jesus after reading it for the first time. In some synagogues, the chapter is not read in the regular cycle of readings, which has led to many conversations about it. Whatever your background, it's worth reading slowly and asking honestly: Who is this about? The Ethiopian official in Acts 8 asked exactly that question, and Philip started with this very Scripture and told him about Jesus.

The Servant's suffering also changes how we see our own suffering. Isaiah says people looked at the Servant and assumed God was

against Him. They thought, He must have done something terrible. But they were wrong. That's a reminder not to assume that people who are suffering are being punished. And it's a reminder that, if you're suffering, it doesn't mean God has abandoned you. The Servant, the one God loved most, suffered deeply. And His suffering brought healing to the world.

When you read Isaiah 53, it's worth remembering that it was written to be heard as good news. It's not mainly a sad poem. It's a victory song. The Servant is despised, but He is exalted. He is crushed, but He sees light. He is counted with sinners, but He justifies many. The cross and the resurrection belong together. Without the suffering, there's no forgiveness. Without the resurrection, there's no hope. Isaiah 53 holds both.

> **REAL TALK** **Healed by His Wounds**
>
> Isaiah says by His wounds we are healed. Peter applies this mainly to being healed from sin, set free to live for righteousness. Some Christians also believe it includes physical healing, either now or in the resurrection, when every disease will be gone. Christians differ on how much physical healing to expect in this life, and it's painful when prayers for healing aren't answered the way we hope. But all agree on the deepest healing: Jesus heals the broken relationship between us and God, and one day He will heal everything else too. If you or someone you love is sick, it's good to pray for healing, to see doctors, and to trust God with the outcome.

KEY VERSE

But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought our peace was on him; and by his wounds we are healed.

Isaiah 53:5 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What does it mean that the Servant won't break a bruised reed? When have you felt like a bruised reed?
2. How does it feel to know you're engraved on the palms of God's hands?
3. Read Isaiah 53 slowly. Which line stands out most to you, and why?
4. Why do you think Isaiah 53 has been so important to Christians?

TRY THIS *Read Isaiah 53 aloud, and every time you read the word our or we, pause and say me. Then thank Jesus for what He did for you.*

CHAPTER 7

Free Grace and True Fasting

Isaiah 54–59

After the Servant suffers, everything changes. Isaiah 54 tells God's people to sing and to enlarge their tents, because their family is about to grow. God speaks like a husband taking back the wife who left Him. "For the mountains may depart, and the hills be removed, but my loving kindness will not depart from you, and my covenant of peace will not be removed."

Then, in chapter 55, God throws open the doors to a feast and invites everyone. It's like a street vendor calling out to the crowd, except everything is free. "Hey! Come, everyone who thirsts, to the waters! Come, he who has no money, buy, and eat! Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

Then God asks a question that cuts to the heart. "Why do you spend money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which doesn't satisfy?"

> REAL TALK **What Doesn't Satisfy**
>
> God's question in Isaiah 55:2 sounds a lot like Ecclesiastes. We spend so much money, time, and energy on things that don't satisfy: the next purchase, the next achievement, the next relationship, the next hour of scrolling. They're like junk food for the soul, filling for a moment but never nourishing. God offers something different: Himself, freely, without price. Jesus said something similar when He stood up at a festival in Jerusalem and called out,

> If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. What are you spending yourself on that isn't satisfying you?

God's grace is free, but it isn't cheap. The invitation calls for a response. "Seek the LORD while he may be found. Call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him return to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, to our God, for he will freely pardon."

And if that seems too good to be true, God explains that He doesn't think the way we do. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways." His mercy is as much higher than ours as the heavens are higher than the earth. And His word always accomplishes what He sends it to do, like rain that waters the earth and makes things grow.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Foreigners and Eunuchs Welcome**

Isaiah 56 contains a surprising promise. Foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, and eunuchs, men who could not have children and were excluded from some parts of temple worship, are promised a place in God's house and a name better than sons and daughters. God says, My house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Jesus quoted that line when He cleared the temple. It's a beautiful reminder that God's family includes people others shut out. Centuries later, an Ethiopian eunuch, a foreigner, read Isaiah 53, believed in Jesus, and was baptized. Isaiah's promise came true for him.

REAL TALK **Sing, You Who Feel Left Out**

Isaiah 54 begins by telling a woman who could never have children to sing and shout for joy, because her family will grow beyond what she can imagine. In the ancient world, being unable to have children brought deep sadness and often shame. God's message is that people who feel left out, overlooked, or unwanted are the very ones He welcomes and blesses. If you've ever felt like you don't fit, at school, in your family, or even at church, Isaiah 54 and 56 are for you. God makes room in His house for people others leave out.

Isaiah 57 adds another beautiful picture of God's nearness. The high and lofty One who lives forever says He dwells in the high and holy place, and also "with him also who is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble." God lives at the top of the universe and in broken hearts at the same time.

Then chapter 58 tackles fake religion again, this time focused on fasting. God's people were fasting, going without food as a spiritual practice, and complaining that God wasn't noticing. "Why have we fasted," they asked, "and you don't see?"

God's answer is blunt. On the very days you fast, He says, you do whatever you want and oppress your workers. You fast while quarreling and fighting. You bow your heads and put on sackcloth and ashes, but you think that's what I want? "Isn't this the fast that I have chosen: to release the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Isn't it to distribute your bread to the hungry, and that you bring the poor who are cast out to your house?"

> **REAL TALK** **Performative Faith**
>
> Performative means doing something for show. Isaiah 58 describes performative fasting, looking super spiritual while treating people badly. Jesus warned about the same thing, telling His followers not to make sad faces when they fast so people will notice, but to fast secretly for God alone. Performative faith can look like posting spiritual content while being cruel in the group chat, praying loudly but ignoring the kid nobody likes, or going on a mission trip mostly for the photos. God says the kind of worship He wants shows up in how we treat the hungry, the poor, the oppressed, and our own families.

REAL TALK **A Healthy Note on Fasting**

Fasting is a real spiritual practice in the Bible. Jesus fasted, and He assumed His followers would too. But for teenagers, whose bodies are still growing, long food fasts usually aren't wise. Many Christians your age fast in other ways: from social media, video games, a favorite snack, or music for a day or a week, using that time to pray instead. If you want to try fasting from food, talk with a parent or doctor first. And if you have ever struggled with an eating disorder, restricting food, or body image, please don't fast from food at all. Choose a different kind of fast, and talk to someone you trust. The point of fasting is drawing near to God, not punishing your body.

Then God makes beautiful promises to people who live out true worship. "Then your light will break out as the morning, and your healing will appear quickly." "If you pour out your soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul, then your light will rise in darkness." God promises to guide them continually, satisfy them in dry places, and make them "like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters don't fail."

REAL TALK **When You Don't Understand God**

God says His thoughts aren't our thoughts and His ways aren't our ways. That can be comforting and frustrating at the same time. There will be times you don't understand why God allowed something or didn't answer the way you hoped. Isaiah doesn't ask you to pretend you understand. He invites you to trust that God's thoughts are higher, and that His word will accomplish what He intends, even when you can't see how. It's okay to bring your questions to God. The Psalms and Job are full of honest questions. Faith isn't having all the answers. It's trusting the One who does.

Chapter 58 also talks about the Sabbath, calling it a delight, a day to stop chasing your own interests and enjoy God. Rest is a gift, not a burden.

REAL TALK **Rest Isn't Laziness**

Many teens feel guilty when they rest, as if they're falling behind. But God commanded rest because He knows we need it. Even Jesus took time away from crowds to pray and rest. Getting enough sleep, taking breaks from screens, spending time outside, and enjoying friends and family aren't wasted time. They're part of living the way God designed you. If you feel like you can never slow down, talk to someone about what's driving you.

Chapter 59 explains why God's people felt far from Him. It wasn't that God's arm was too short to save or His ear too dull to hear. "But your iniquities have separated you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you." Isaiah describes a society where truth stumbles in the streets and justice stands far off. And then God Himself puts on righteousness like armor and salvation like a helmet, and comes to rescue. A Redeemer will come to Zion, to those who turn from their sins.

REAL TALK **Justice Starts Close to Home**

Isaiah 58 ends one of its lists with a surprising phrase: don't hide yourself from your own flesh. In other words, don't ignore your own family. Sometimes it's easier to care about people far away than people right in front of you. You might feel passionate about global issues but be unkind to your siblings, or care about the poor but ignore the lonely kid in your class. True worship starts close to home. It looks like helping at home without being asked, including someone who's left out, speaking up when someone is being mistreated, and sharing what you have with people nearby who need it.

REAL TALK **Come Thirsty**

Isaiah 55 invites everyone who is thirsty, not everyone who is good, put together, or religious enough. The only qualification is thirst. If you feel empty, restless, tired of chasing things that don't satisfy, you're exactly who God is calling. You don't need to bring anything. You don't need money. You don't need to clean yourself up first. You just come. Jesus made the same

offer to a Samaritan woman at a well, promising living water that would become a spring welling up to eternal life.

Isaiah 54 through 59 holds two big ideas together: grace and justice. God's grace is free, poured out on anyone who is thirsty. And God's people are called to live justly, caring for the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed. Some people emphasize only grace and forget justice. Others emphasize only justice and forget grace. Isaiah refuses to separate them. Grace changes us, and changed people pour out their lives for others.

Isaiah 59 pictures God putting on righteousness like body armor and salvation like a helmet. Paul borrows this image in Ephesians 6, when he tells Christians to put on the armor of God, including the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation. The armor isn't something we make. It's God's own armor, which He shares with His people so they can stand firm against evil.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Sabbath as Delight**

Isaiah 58:13-14 tells God's people to call the Sabbath a delight, not chasing their own pleasures or talking idly, but finding joy in the LORD. The Sabbath was a weekly day of rest given in the Ten Commandments. Christians have different views on how the Sabbath applies today, and many observe Sunday as a day of worship and rest. But almost everyone agrees on the principle: humans need rest, and regularly stepping away from work, screens, and busyness to enjoy God, family, and creation is a gift. Try taking a few hours each week to unplug and rest. You might be surprised how much you need it.

Isaiah 56 also has a strong message about who belongs. Some people in Isaiah's day thought foreigners could never be part of God's people, and that people with certain physical conditions were second class. God says no. Anyone who holds fast to Him, keeps His covenant, and loves His name is welcome. The church at its best is a

community where people from every background, ability, and story find a home. If your church or youth group has people who seem left out, you can be the one to welcome them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **My House Shall Be Called a House of Prayer**

When Jesus entered the temple in Jerusalem near the end of His ministry, He found the outer courts filled with merchants and money changers. That outer court was the area where non-Jewish people were allowed to pray. Jesus drove out the sellers, quoting Isaiah 56:7, My house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples, and Jeremiah 7, saying they had made it a den of robbers. He was angry that the one place set aside for outsiders to seek God had been turned into a marketplace.

KEY VERSE

Seek the LORD while he may be found. Call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him return to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, to our God, for he will freely pardon.

Isaiah 55:6–7 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What are you spending money or energy on that doesn't satisfy?
2. Why do you think God's grace is free but still calls for a response?
3. What does performative faith look like at your school or online?
4. What would a fast like Isaiah 58 describes look like in your life this week?

TRY THIS *Choose a healthy fast for one day this week, like no social media or no gaming. Use that time to pray, and do one practical act of kindness for someone in need.*

CHAPTER 8

Good News and New Creation

Isaiah 60–66

The last section of Isaiah begins with a sunrise. "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the LORD's glory has risen on you!" Darkness covers the earth, but God's glory is rising on His people like the dawn. "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising."

Isaiah pictures people from every nation streaming to Jerusalem, bringing gifts, and the city's gates staying open day and night. And then he looks even further ahead. "The sun will be no more your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon give light to you, but the LORD will be your everlasting light." Revelation quotes this picture when it describes the New Jerusalem, where the glory of God is its light and the Lamb is its lamp.

Then, in chapter 61, someone speaks in the first person, someone filled with God's Spirit. "The Lord GOD's Spirit is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the humble. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to those who are bound, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor."

He will comfort all who mourn, and give them "a garland for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of

heaviness." People who mourned with ashes on their heads will wear crowns of beauty instead.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Year of the LORD's Favor**

The year of the LORD's favor probably refers to the Year of Jubilee from Leviticus 25. Every fiftieth year, slaves were to be set free, debts canceled, and land returned to the families who originally owned it. It was a year of fresh starts and freedom. Isaiah pictures God's Anointed One bringing an ultimate Jubilee, freedom for everyone held captive by sin, sorrow, and oppression. The word anointed in Hebrew is related to the word Messiah, and the Greek equivalent is Christ.

Centuries later, Jesus came to His hometown of Nazareth and went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. Luke writes, "The book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him." Jesus unrolled the scroll, found this passage, and read it aloud. Then He rolled up the scroll, handed it back, and sat down. Everyone was staring at Him. And He said, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Where Jesus Stopped Reading**

When Jesus read Isaiah 61 in Nazareth, He stopped in the middle of a sentence, right after the year of the LORD's favor, and didn't read the next phrase, the day of vengeance of our God. Many Christians believe that's significant. Jesus' first coming was about mercy, good news, and freedom. The day of judgment is real, but it was postponed, giving people time to turn to Him. The New Testament says God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

REAL TALK **Beauty for Ashes**

Isaiah 61 is a promise for people who are hurting. The brokenhearted, the captives, the mourners, people with a spirit of heaviness. Maybe that describes you today. Jesus said this is exactly why He came: to bind up broken hearts, to set captives free, and to trade ashes for beauty. That doesn't always happen instantly, and it's okay to grieve and to get help from

people who love you. If heaviness has settled over you and won't lift, please talk to a trusted adult or counselor, or call or text 988 any time. Jesus came for the brokenhearted, and He often sends people to help carry the weight.

REAL TALK **A New Name**

In Isaiah 62, God's people are given new names. Once they were called Forsaken and Desolate. Now they'll be called My Delight Is in Her, and Married. Maybe you've been given names you didn't choose: nicknames, labels, insults, or things you call yourself in your head. Stupid. Ugly. Loser. Too much. Not enough. God doesn't call you by those names. In Christ, He calls you beloved, forgiven, chosen, and His delight. Revelation even promises that God will give His people a new name. If cruel labels are sticking to you and dragging you down, talk to someone you trust about them. And let God's names for you be louder than anyone else's.

Chapters 62 through 64 alternate between joy and longing. God promises His people new names. They won't be called Forsaken anymore, but My Delight Is in Her. God says, "As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so your God will rejoice over you." But the people also cry out honestly. They confess their sins. "All our righteousness is like a polluted garment," they admit. Even our best efforts aren't clean enough. And they plead with God, Oh that You would tear open the heavens and come down!

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hard Passage: The Winepress in Isaiah 63**

Isaiah 63 pictures God as a warrior coming from Edom with garments stained red, like someone who has been treading grapes in a winepress. It's a picture of God's judgment on evil, and it can be disturbing to read. It helps to remember that the Bible pictures God's judgment not as cruelty but as the defeat of everything that destroys His creation, like oppression, violence, and evil itself. Revelation 19 uses this same imagery for Jesus returning as King. Christians hold together two truths: God is patient and merciful, and God will one day put a final end to evil. Right after this passage, Isaiah 63 turns to a

prayer remembering God's kindness and compassion, and how in all His people's distress, He was distressed too.

And then, in chapters 65 and 66, God answers with the grandest promise in the book. "For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things will not be remembered, nor come into mind."

REAL TALK **Your Work Isn't Wasted**

In Isaiah 65, people build houses and live in them, plant vineyards and eat the fruit, and their work isn't in vain. Under the sun, as Ecclesiastes said, so much work seems to slip away. But in God's new creation, nothing good is wasted. Paul said the same thing at the end of 1 Corinthians 15: your labor in the Lord is not in vain. The homework you do faithfully, the kindness no one notices, the prayers that seem unanswered, God sees all of it, and none of it is lost.

Isaiah describes this new creation with ordinary, joyful pictures. No more weeping or crying in the city. No more babies dying young. People will build houses and live in them, plant vineyards and eat their fruit. Their work won't be wasted. And Isaiah returns to his picture from chapter 11. "The wolf and the lamb will feed together. The lion will eat straw like the ox." "They will not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain," says the LORD.

BACKGROUND CHECK **New Heavens and a New Earth**

Many people imagine eternity as floating on clouds. But Isaiah, and later Revelation, picture something much more solid: a renewed creation, with cities, gardens, homes, work, and feasting, but with all the sin, pain, and death removed. Christians differ on some details of how and when this happens, and on how to read some of Isaiah's images, like people living to a hundred, which may be poetry for long, full lives. But the big picture is clear: God isn't abandoning His creation. He's making it new. Revelation 21 describes John seeing "a new heaven and a new earth," and God promising that "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more."

REAL TALK **Hope for the Future**

A lot of teens feel anxious about the future: climate, wars, the economy, technology, and whether the world is getting worse. Those concerns are real, and caring for God's world is part of being faithful. But Isaiah 65 gives a hope that doesn't depend on headlines. God has promised to make all things new. That hope doesn't make you passive. It frees you to work for good now, planting trees, caring for people, and seeking justice, because you know that God will finish what He started. If worry about the future is overwhelming you, talk to someone you trust about it.

The last chapter of Isaiah reminds us of God's greatness once more. "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool." No temple can contain Him. Yet He looks to the humble and contrite, who tremble at His word. And He promises to comfort His people tenderly. "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you."

BACKGROUND CHECK **God Like a Mother**

Isaiah uses some of the Bible's most tender images of God. In chapter 49, God compares Himself to a nursing mother who can't forget her child. In chapter 66, He says, As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you. The Bible usually speaks of God as Father, and Jesus taught His followers to pray Our Father. But these motherly pictures show that God's love includes all the tenderness, nearness, and comfort that the best mothers give. For anyone who has a hard relationship with a parent, these verses are a reminder that God's love is better than even the best human parent's.

Isaiah's book also ends right where it began. In chapter 1, God called on the heavens and the earth as witnesses against His rebellious people. In chapters 65 and 66, He promises new heavens and a new earth, where His people will worship Him forever. The same heavens and earth that once testified against them will be remade for them. That's the story of grace.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hard Passage: Isaiah's Final Verse**

The very last verse of Isaiah is sobering. It pictures the bodies of those who rebelled against God, where their worm doesn't die and their fire isn't quenched. Jesus used this verse when He warned about hell. It's a hard way to end such a hopeful book, and in Jewish tradition, when Isaiah is read aloud in the synagogue, the second-to-last verse is often repeated at the end so the reading closes on a note of hope. Christians understand the verse in different ways, but all agree that it's a serious warning: God's new creation is offered to everyone, but rejecting Him has real consequences. Isaiah's whole book, from chapter 1's invitation to come and reason together to chapter 55's free feast, is God pleading with people to come to Him while there's time.

Isaiah's book began with a rebellious people and fake religion. It ends with a renewed people from every nation worshiping God in a new creation. Everything in between shows how God gets them from one to the other: through judgment and mercy, through a child born, a Servant pierced, and a King who reigns forever.

It's also worth noticing that the very last chapters of Isaiah have a strong focus on the humble. God says He looks to the one who is humble and contrite and trembles at His word. He lives with the lowly. He gives good news to the poor. In a world that celebrates the powerful, popular, and impressive, Isaiah keeps saying that God's eyes are on the humble. That's good news if you've ever felt small, overlooked, or unimportant. God sees you.

REAL TALK **Arise, Shine**

Isaiah 60 begins with a command: Arise, shine, for your light has come. Notice that the light isn't your own. It's God's glory rising on you, like the sun shining on the moon. You don't have to generate your own light or be impressive to shine. You just have to reflect His. Jesus told His followers that they are the light of the world and should let their light shine so that others see their good

works and praise God. That can happen in small ways: kindness, honesty, generosity, courage, and joy in a world that often feels dark.

As you finish Isaiah, think about how big his vision is. It starts in a small, rebellious kingdom and ends with all nations worshiping God in a renewed creation. It moves from a throne room in Jerusalem to a cross outside it, and then to a new heavens and a new earth. It shows a God who is too holy to ignore sin and too loving to leave sinners alone. Isaiah's name means the LORD saves. By the end of his book, you can see just how far that salvation reaches.

KEY VERSE

The Lord GOD's Spirit is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the humble. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to those who are bound,

Isaiah 61:1 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Jesus chose Isaiah 61 for His first sermon in Nazareth?
2. Which phrase in Isaiah 61:1-3 speaks most to your life right now?
3. How is Isaiah's picture of the new creation different from how people usually imagine heaven?
4. What would it look like for you to bring good news to someone this week?

TRY THIS *Read Isaiah 65:17-25 and Revelation 21:1-5 side by side. Write down three things you're looking forward to in God's new creation.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Isaiah is quoted in the New Testament more than almost any other Old Testament book. That's why Christians sometimes call it the Fifth Gospel. Read it alongside Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and you start to see the lines converge, like streets all leading to one city square. Jewish readers treasure Isaiah in their own rich ways, as a book of God's faithfulness to Israel, of comfort in exile, and of hope for a world made right. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, saw all of that hope coming together in one Person.

Isaiah promised a sign: a child called Immanuel, which Matthew explains means "God with us." He promised a son who would be called Mighty God and Prince of Peace, sitting on David's throne forever. He promised a shoot from Jesse's stump, filled with the Spirit. He promised a voice in the wilderness preparing the way, and all four Gospels say that was John the Baptist pointing to Jesus. He promised a Servant who would be a light to the nations, who would be pierced and crushed for others, and who would see light after His suffering. When an Ethiopian official was reading Isaiah 53 in his chariot, Philip "preached to him about Jesus." When Jesus stood up in His hometown synagogue and read Isaiah 61, He said, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And John tells us that Isaiah "saw his glory, and spoke of him." The King Isaiah saw on the throne is the same King who wore a crown of thorns. And Isaiah's final vision, new heavens and a new earth, is

exactly where the Bible ends. Revelation hears God say, "Behold, I am making all things new."

Here's what that means for you, 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 has called you by name.

> *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.

Isaiah says we've all gone astray like sheep, each of us turning to our own way. 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 holy, 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 was pierced for you.

Jesus is the Servant Isaiah saw. He was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities, and then He rose again.

> *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live to righteousness. You were healed by his wounds.* **1 Peter 2:24 (WEB)**

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

Isaiah invites everyone who is thirsty to come and buy without money. 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 Here I am.

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. Isaiah's prayer in the throne room was only a few words long. You can talk to God right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *Holy God, like Isaiah, I'm a person of unclean lips, and I've gone my own way. I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus was pierced for my sins and crushed for my wrongs, and that by His wounds I can be healed. Thank You that He rose again. Forgive me, wash me white as snow, and make me Yours. Help me wait on You and find new strength. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. Here I am. Send me. 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 Isaiah 53, then Luke 4 and Acts 8, and watch how the New Testament reads Isaiah.

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

Be sent. Ask God to show you one person who needs good news this week, and be kind to them.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Isaiah's first response to God was Woe is me. Keep asking questions. Keep reading. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Isaiah is right, the King on the throne was pierced for you, and He is calling your name.

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God stands forever.

Isaiah 40:8 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

The King Who Writes on Hearts

Jeremiah, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Writes on Hearts: The Book of Jeremiah, Unfiltered

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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

Here's a fact most people don't know: Jeremiah was probably a teenager when God called him. He said so himself. When God told him he would be a prophet to the nations, his first answer was basically, I can't. I'm just a kid.

God's answer to that kid is one of the best things in the Bible. And what followed was one of the hardest, bravest lives in Scripture. Jeremiah spent about forty years telling his nation the truth when nobody wanted to hear it. He was mocked, beaten, locked up, thrown into a muddy pit, and called a traitor. He cried a lot, which is why people call him the weeping prophet. He argued with God, honestly and loudly. And he never quit.

Jeremiah also wrote some of the most hopeful words in the Bible: a letter to refugees promising a future, a prophecy of a New Covenant written on human hearts, and the story of buying a field while an enemy army surrounded the city. If you've ever felt too young, too scared, too sad, or too alone to matter, Jeremiah is for you.

Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Jeremiah in eight chapters: Jeremiah's call (Jeremiah 1), broken cisterns and the temple sermon (2–10), the weeping prophet's confessions (11–20), the potter's house and fake peace prophets (18–19, 23, 27–28), the letter to the exiles (29), the

New Covenant (30–33), the burned scroll and the fall of Jerusalem (36–45), and the nations and one quiet spark (46–52).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains who Jeremiah was, why his book isn't in strict time order, and who his loyal friend Baruch was. Read it first. It'll save you a lot of confusion.

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, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Jeremiah 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 twenty-fourth 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.

Jeremiah is a powerful book for young readers, because Jeremiah himself was called as a youth. This book highlights God's words to him, Don't say, I am a child, and explains why the book isn't arranged in strict chronological order and how Baruch the scribe helped preserve it.

Jeremiah is also honest about despair. His confessions include cursing the day he was born. A compassionate Real Talk box on Jeremiah 20:14–18 encourages any reader who feels hopeless to talk to a trusted adult or counselor and lists 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Other boxes address peer pressure, fake religion, lucky-charm faith, discerning truth from lies, being a good presence wherever you live, and how to read Jeremiah 29:11 in its original context, a promise made to exiles facing seventy years in Babylon.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how Jesus named Jeremiah's New Covenant at the Last Supper and wept over Jerusalem as Jeremiah did, while respecting that Jewish readers

treasure Jeremiah in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, 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 young reader will hear what God told young Jeremiah: Don't be afraid, for I am with you.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

Called as a Teenager

Jeremiah was the son of a priest named Hilkiah, from the small town of Anathoth, a few miles north of Jerusalem. God called him in the thirteenth year of King Josiah, around 627 BC. When God called him, Jeremiah said he was only a child, using a Hebrew word, na'ar, that can describe anyone from a young boy to a young man. Most scholars think he was somewhere in his teens or early twenties. He went on to serve for about forty years, through the reigns of five kings, until after Jerusalem fell to Babylon in 586 BC. God also told him not to marry or have children, as a sign of the hard times coming, which made his life even lonelier.

A Nation on the Edge

Jeremiah grew up during a hopeful time. King Josiah, who became king at eight years old, led a great reform, tearing down idols and restoring the temple. But after Josiah died in battle in 609 BC, his sons reversed most of it. Meanwhile, the world was changing fast. Assyria collapsed, and Babylon, under King Nebuchadnezzar, became the new superpower. Judah's leaders kept trying to play Babylon and Egypt against each other. Jeremiah's message was unpopular: Babylon is God's instrument of judgment, so surrender and live. To many people, that sounded like treason.

Why Isn't It in Order?

If you try to read Jeremiah like a novel, you'll get confused fast. A chapter set under King Zedekiah might be followed by one set years earlier under King Jehoiakim. That's because Jeremiah isn't arranged mainly by time. It's arranged more like a collection, grouping messages by theme and type: poetic sermons, stories about Jeremiah's life, prophecies of hope, and messages to the nations. Some scrolls were also rewritten and expanded over time, as chapter 36 describes. The ancient Greek translation of Jeremiah is about one-eighth shorter than the Hebrew and places the messages to the nations in the middle of the book, and fragments of both versions were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, which suggests the book circulated in more than one edition. Christians hold that God guided the whole process. The trick to reading it is to watch for the king's name at the start of each section. That tells you when you are.

Meet Baruch

Jeremiah didn't work alone. His friend Baruch son of Neriah was a professional scribe who wrote down Jeremiah's messages, read them aloud in the temple when Jeremiah was banned from going, hid from an angry king, rewrote a burned scroll, and went with Jeremiah into Egypt at the end. Jeremiah 45 is a short, personal message from God to Baruch, who was discouraged. In 1975, a clay seal impression, called a bulla, surfaced on the antiquities market bearing the words belonging to Berekyahu son of Neriyahu the scribe, which many scholars think belonged to Baruch himself, though others have questioned whether it's authentic. Either way, Baruch reminds us that behind every bold voice there are faithful friends doing quiet, essential work.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Jeremiah 1): Don't say, I am a child.

Chapter 2 (Jeremiah 2–10): Broken cisterns and the temple sermon.

Chapter 3 (Jeremiah 11–20): The weeping prophet's confessions.

Chapter 4 (Jeremiah 18–19, 23, 27–28): The potter's house and fake peace prophets.

Chapter 5 (Jeremiah 29): Letter to the exiles.

Chapter 6 (Jeremiah 30–33): The New Covenant.

Chapter 7 (Jeremiah 36–45): The burned scroll, the muddy cistern, and 586 BC.

Chapter 8 (Jeremiah 46–52): Nations and one quiet spark.

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7 The Burned Scroll, the Muddy Cistern, and 586 BC *36–45* .....

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Where This Points .....

CHAPTER 1

Don’t Say, I Am a Child

Jeremiah 1

The book of Jeremiah begins with a family tree and a timeline. Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiah, a priest from the little town of Anathoth. God’s word came to him in the thirteenth year of King Josiah, and kept coming for about forty years, until Jerusalem was carried away into exile.

Then God speaks, and His first words to Jeremiah are about who Jeremiah is, not what he does. “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I sanctified you. I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Before Jeremiah did anything, before he took his first breath, God knew him. Sanctified means set apart for a special purpose. Jeremiah’s calling didn’t start when he felt ready. It started before he was born.

> REAL TALK **Known Before You Were Born**
>
> Jeremiah 1:5 is about Jeremiah’s specific calling as a prophet. But the Bible teaches the same deep truth about every person: God forms each of us, knows us, and has purposes for us. Psalm 139 says God knit you together in your mother’s womb. That means you’re not an accident. Your life isn’t random. Even if you’ve been told you were a mistake, or you feel like nobody planned for you, God did. He knew your name before anyone else did.

Then comes Jeremiah's answer. "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I don't know how to speak; for I am a child."

Jeremiah wasn't being humble in a fake way. He was scared. He was young, probably a teenager. He wasn't a trained speaker. And he was being asked to deliver hard messages to kings, priests, and the whole nation. He probably thought, Who's going to listen to me?

God's answer is gentle but firm. "Don't say, 'I am a child;' for you must go to whomever I send you, and you must say whatever I command you. Don't be afraid because of them, for I am with you to rescue you."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Na'ar**
>
> The Hebrew word Jeremiah uses for child is na'ar. It can mean a baby, a boy, a teenager, or a young man not yet established in adult life. Samuel was called a na'ar when he served in the tabernacle as a boy. David was called a na'ar when he faced Goliath. Joseph was a na'ar at seventeen. So Jeremiah may not have been a little kid, but he was young, inexperienced, and without the status that would make older people listen to him. Jewish tradition and many scholars place him in his late teens.

Jeremiah's excuse also had two parts. I don't know how to speak, and I'm too young. One was about ability, and one was about age. Lots of people use the same two excuses today. I'm not good enough, and I'm not old enough. God answered both. To the first, He said, I'll put My words in your mouth. To the second, He said, Don't say you're a child. God doesn't need your ability or your age. He needs your yes.

Notice what God doesn't say. He doesn't say, You're not a child. He doesn't say, You're actually a great speaker. He says, Don't let your youth be your excuse. And then He gives Jeremiah the real reason he can do it: I am with you.

REAL TALK **Too Young?**

Have you ever felt too young to matter? Maybe adults don't take you seriously. Maybe you think you need to wait until you're older to do anything important for God. Jeremiah's story says otherwise. Samuel heard God as a boy. David faced a giant as a teenager. Josiah became king at eight and started seeking God at sixteen. Mary was probably a teenager when she said yes to God. Paul told young 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." You don't have to wait to be faithful. You can start today, right where you are.

Then God did something physical. "Then the LORD stretched out his hand and touched my mouth. Then the LORD said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth." Jeremiah worried he didn't know how to speak. God's answer was, You don't have to come up with the words. I'll give them to you.

God then described Jeremiah's job in six verbs: to uproot and to tear down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. Four of the six are about tearing down. Jeremiah's ministry would be mostly hard news. But notice the last two. Build and plant. God's goal was never just destruction. He tears down what is rotten so He can build something new.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Almond Branch**

God showed Jeremiah two visions. First, a branch of an almond tree. Then God said, You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it. That's a wordplay in Hebrew. The word for almond is shaqed, and the word for watching is shoqed. The almond tree is one of the first trees to bloom in Israel, waking up while winter is still ending, so it was nicknamed the watching tree. God was saying, I'm awake. I'm watching. What I've said will happen. The second vision was a boiling pot tipping from the north, a

warning that disaster would come from the north, which is the direction Babylon's armies would come from.

God also warned Jeremiah that this wouldn't be easy. Kings, officials, priests, and ordinary people would all oppose him. But God would make him strong, like a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls. "They will fight against you, but they will not prevail against you; for I am with you, says the LORD, to rescue you."

Notice that God didn't promise Jeremiah an easy life. He promised His presence. Jeremiah would be attacked many times over the next forty years. He'd be beaten, imprisoned, and nearly killed. But he would not be destroyed. God kept His word.

REAL TALK **Fortified City, Iron Pillar**

God told Jeremiah He would make him like a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls. Those images are about strength that comes from God, not from personality. Jeremiah wasn't naturally tough. He was sensitive and often cried. But God made him strong in the ways that mattered: steady, unshakable in truth, and impossible to silence. You don't have to be loud or naturally confident to stand firm. Some of the strongest people are quiet, gentle, and deeply rooted in God.

REAL TALK **When You Feel Alone in Your Faith**

Jeremiah was going to stand against almost everyone around him. Maybe you know a little of what that's like. You might be the only Christian on your team, or the only one in your friend group who won't join in when everyone mocks someone, or the only one in your family who goes to church. That can feel lonely and scary. God's promise to Jeremiah is the same promise He gives you: I am with you. You don't need to be loud or perfect. You just need to stay faithful, one day at a time. And look for others who share your faith. Even Jeremiah had friends like Baruch.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Priest's Son**

Jeremiah came from a family of priests in Anathoth. Many scholars think his family may have descended from Abiathar, a priest who served King David but was banished to Anathoth by Solomon for supporting a rival to the throne. If so, Jeremiah's family had been on the outside of Jerusalem's power for centuries. Jeremiah grew up hearing the stories of Israel's faith but not part of the religious elite. Maybe that's one reason he could see the temple establishment so clearly, and why it disliked him so much.

Jeremiah's call reminds us that God doesn't look for impressive people. He looks for willing people and then makes them strong. If you feel unqualified, you're in exactly the right place for God to work.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Josiah and Jeremiah**

Jeremiah and King Josiah were close in age, and both started serving God young. Josiah became king at eight, began seeking God at sixteen, and started tearing down idols at twenty. Jeremiah was called a year after that. A few years later, workers repairing the temple found a forgotten scroll of the law, and Josiah led a national revival. Jeremiah must have been encouraged to see a young king who loved God. When Josiah was killed in battle in 609 BC, Second Chronicles says Jeremiah wrote laments for him. After that, Jeremiah would serve under kings who mostly opposed him.

It's worth noticing that God didn't wait for Jeremiah to stop being afraid. He called him while he was still scared, and kept reassuring him for forty years. Courage isn't the absence of fear. It's choosing to obey while you're afraid, because you trust the One who is with you. Jeremiah would feel fear, grief, anger, and loneliness many times. But he would keep going, because God kept saying, I am with you.

Notice also that God told Jeremiah he would be a prophet to the nations, not just to Judah. That's a huge calling for a young man

from a small town. God often gives big callings to small people. He loves to show that the power comes from Him, not from us. Your life might feel small right now, but in God's hands, it can matter far more than you imagine.

> **REAL TALK** **God Gives the Words**
>
> Maybe you've wanted to share your faith or stand up for something, but you froze because you didn't know what to say. Jeremiah felt the same way. God promised to put His words in his mouth. Jesus made a similar promise to His followers, telling them not to worry about what to say when they were put on trial, because the Spirit would give them the words. You don't need a perfect speech. You can start with something simple and honest, like, Jesus has really helped me, or, I don't think that's right. God can use simple words.

KEY VERSE

But the LORD said to me, "Don't say, 'I am a child;' for you must go to whomever I send you, and you must say whatever I command you. Don't be afraid because of them, for I am with you to rescue you," says the LORD.

Jeremiah 1:7–8 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What excuses do you sometimes give for not doing what God wants?
2. How does it feel to know that God knew you before you were born?
3. Why do you think God answered Jeremiah's fear with I am with you, instead of telling him how talented he was?
4. Who are some young people in the Bible or in history who did brave things for God?

TRY THIS *Write down one thing you think you're too young to do for God. Then write Jeremiah 1:7-8 underneath it, and take one small step toward it this week.*

CHAPTER 2

Broken Cisterns and the Temple Sermon

Jeremiah 2–10

Jeremiah's first sermons sound like a heartbroken husband talking about a wife who left. God remembers the early days of His relationship with Israel, when she followed Him through the wilderness like a devoted bride. And then He asks, What did your ancestors find wrong with Me, that they went so far away?

Then God makes a stunning comparison. "For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the spring of living waters, and cut out cisterns for themselves: broken cisterns that can't hold water."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Springs and Cisterns**

In ancient Israel, water was life, and there were two main ways to get it. The best was a spring, called living water because it flowed fresh and clean from the ground, never running dry. The other was a cistern, a pit dug into rock and plastered to catch rainwater. Cisterns were hard work to dig, the water was stale and still, and if the plaster cracked, all the water would leak out. Imagine having a fresh, flowing spring in your backyard and choosing instead to spend all your energy digging a leaky hole in the ground. That's what God says His people did.

The two evils go together. First, they left God, the spring. Second, they tried to replace Him with things they made themselves. Idols, alliances with Egypt and Assyria, wealth, and power. And none of it could hold water.

> **REAL TALK** **Your Broken Cisterns**
>
> What do you go to when you're thirsty for love, worth, comfort, or meaning? Maybe it's a relationship. Popularity. Achievement. Your phone. Gaming. Food. Shopping. A particular friend group. Some of those things are good in their place. But when you dig them out as your main source of life, they crack. They leak. They leave you thirstier than before. Jesus said that whoever drinks the water He gives will never thirst again. The question isn't whether you'll be thirsty. Everyone is. The question is where you'll go to drink.

Jeremiah's early sermons are full of vivid pictures. Israel is like a wild donkey sniffing the wind, chasing after anything. Like a thief caught in the act. Like a bride who has forgotten her wedding dress. "Can a virgin forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet my people have forgotten me for days without number."

God sends Jeremiah through Jerusalem's streets to look for even one person who does justice and seeks truth. If he can find one, God says, He'll pardon the city. Jeremiah looks among the poor and among the rich. He can't find anyone.

And the religious leaders weren't helping. "They have healed also the hurt of my people superficially, saying, 'Peace, peace!' when there is no peace." It's like a doctor putting a bandage on a serious infection and saying, You're fine. The prophets and priests told people what they wanted to hear, and the wound got worse.

> **REAL TALK** **Peace, Peace**
>
> It's tempting to want people who will only tell you what you want to hear. Friends who say everything you do is great. Influencers who say you deserve

whatever you want. Voices that say, Don't worry about it, it's fine. But real love tells the truth, even when it's hard. A friend who warns you that you're heading toward trouble is a better friend than one who cheers you all the way off a cliff. Be grateful for people who love you enough to be honest. And try to be that kind of friend.

Then, in chapter 7, God sends Jeremiah to the gate of the temple to preach one of the boldest sermons in the Bible. People were streaming in to worship. And Jeremiah stood at the entrance and said, "Don't trust in lying words, saying, 'The LORD's temple, the LORD's temple, the LORD's temple, are these.'"

The people believed that as long as the temple stood in Jerusalem, God would never let the city fall. The temple was like a lucky charm. They could live however they wanted, as long as they showed up for services. Jeremiah exposed that lie.

He asked them, Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, lie, and worship idols, "then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered,' that you may do all these abominations?" God asks, "Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?"

BACKGROUND CHECK **Shiloh and the Den of Robbers**

In the same sermon, Jeremiah told the people to go look at Shiloh, the town where the tabernacle had stood centuries earlier, in the days of Eli and Samuel. Shiloh had been destroyed, and the Ark had been captured. The point was clear: a holy building is no guarantee of safety if the people's hearts are far from God. Six hundred years later, Jesus quoted this very sermon when He cleared the temple, saying, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of robbers!" A den of robbers is where thieves hide out after committing crimes. The temple had become a hideout where people felt safe from the consequences of their sins.

REAL TALK **Lucky-Charm Faith**

Lucky-charm faith treats God like a good-luck bracelet. Maybe it's going to church, praying before a test, wearing a cross necklace, or saying grace before meals, while living however you want the rest of the time. Those things aren't bad. Church, prayer, and Christian symbols can be beautiful. But they're not magic. They can't protect a heart that is running away from God. What God wanted from Judah wasn't more temple visits. He said, "Listen to my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people." God wants a real relationship with you, not a ritual.

The sermon nearly got Jeremiah killed. Chapter 26 tells what happened next. The priests and prophets grabbed him and said he deserved to die. But some officials and elders defended him, remembering that the prophet Micah had preached a similar message a century earlier and had not been killed. A man named Ahikam protected Jeremiah. Even in the most dangerous moments, God provided people to stand with him.

REAL TALK **Standing Up When It's Risky**

Jeremiah preached the temple sermon knowing it might get him killed. Ahikam and others stood up to protect him. Courage often comes in both forms: speaking the truth, and standing with someone who speaks the truth. You might not face a mob, but you might face a group chat that turns on someone, or a friend group that mocks a classmate's faith. You can be the one who says, That's not okay. And if you see someone else being brave, you can stand with them. One voice of support can change everything.

Chapters 8 through 10 are full of Jeremiah's grief. "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" Gilead was famous for a healing ointment, but nothing could heal his people because they refused to turn back. And then Jeremiah cries, "Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a spring of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!"

That's why he's called the weeping prophet. Jeremiah didn't enjoy delivering bad news. It broke his heart.

These chapters also contain a reminder of what matters most. "Don't let the wise man glory in his wisdom. Don't let the mighty man glory in his might. Don't let the rich man glory in his riches. But let him who glories glory in this, that he has understanding, and knows me." The greatest thing you can boast about isn't your brains, strength, or money. It's knowing God.

> **REAL TALK** **Is There No Balm?**
>
> Jeremiah's question, Is there no balm in Gilead? is a cry for healing. An old African American spiritual answers it: There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. That song was born out of the suffering of enslaved people who found hope in Jesus as the healer of broken hearts. If you feel wounded, by sin, by others, or by life, Jeremiah's question is a good one to bring to God. And the gospel's answer is yes. There is healing in Christ, though it may come slowly, and often through the help of people who love you.

Chapter 10 ends this section by mocking idols, much like Isaiah did. People cut down a tree, decorate it with silver and gold, and nail it down so it won't fall over. Idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field. They can't speak. They have to be carried. "But the LORD is the true God. He is the living God, and an everlasting King."

> **REAL TALK** **Boasting**
>
> Jeremiah 9:23-24 says the wise shouldn't boast in their wisdom, the strong in their strength, or the rich in their riches. Today, boasting often happens online. Highlight reels, flexing, showing off grades, followers, or stuff. It's fine to celebrate good things. But God says the thing most worth being proud of is that you know Him, the God who delights in kindness, justice, and righteousness. If those are the things God delights in, they're worth delighting in too.

Jeremiah's early sermons also show God's heart. He isn't an angry judge looking for an excuse to punish. He's like a heartbroken husband and a grieving parent. Over and over He says, Return to Me. I'm merciful. I won't stay angry forever. Just admit what you've done. The warnings were real, but they were warnings from love. God would rather His people come home than be destroyed.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Queen of Heaven**
>
> Jeremiah 7 describes whole families joining in idol worship: children gathering wood, fathers lighting the fire, and mothers kneading dough to make cakes for the queen of heaven. This was probably a goddess like Ishtar or Astarte, worshiped across the ancient Near East as a goddess of love, fertility, and war. Jeremiah would confront the same worship again years later, in Egypt. It's a sad picture of a whole family teaching each other to turn away from God.

Jeremiah 2 through 10 can be hard to read, because it's mostly warnings. But read slowly and you'll hear the sound of a broken heart, both God's and Jeremiah's. God isn't just angry. He's hurt. He remembers when His people loved Him like a young bride. He calls them back again and again. And Jeremiah weeps because he loves the very people who are rejecting him. That's what real love looks like when people you care about are heading toward disaster. It tells the truth, and it weeps.

KEY VERSE

For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the spring of living waters, and cut out cisterns for themselves: broken cisterns that can't hold water.

Jeremiah 2:13 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What broken cisterns are people your age most tempted to dig?
2. Why do you think people prefer to hear peace, peace, even when it isn't true?
3. What does lucky-charm faith look like today?
4. What would it look like to boast in knowing God rather than in your achievements?

TRY THIS *Draw two pictures: a flowing spring and a cracked cistern. Under the cistern, write the things you sometimes run to for life. Under the spring, write one way you can drink from God this week.*

CHAPTER 3

The Weeping Prophet's Confessions

Jeremiah 11–20

Chapters 11 through 20 let us see inside Jeremiah's heart. Scattered through these chapters are several passages often called Jeremiah's confessions. They aren't confessions of sin. They're raw, honest prayers where Jeremiah pours out his pain, anger, and confusion to God. They're some of the most emotional words in the Bible.

The first shock came from home. Jeremiah discovered that the men of his own hometown, Anathoth, were plotting to kill him. Some may even have been relatives. "But I was like a gentle lamb that is led to the slaughter. I didn't know that they had devised plans against me." They told him to stop prophesying in the LORD's name, or else.

> **REAL TALK** **When Home Isn't Safe**
>
> It's painful when the people who should support you the most are the ones who hurt you. Jeremiah's own neighbors and family turned against him. Jesus experienced something similar when people in His hometown of Nazareth tried to throw Him off a cliff. If people close to you are mocking your faith, that's hard, and it's okay to grieve it. But if anyone at home is threatening you, hurting you, or making you feel unsafe, that's serious. Please talk to a trusted adult, like a teacher, school counselor, or pastor. You can

also call or text Childhelp at 1-800-422-4453 any time, or call 911 if you're in danger.

Jeremiah brought his complaint straight to God. "You are righteous, LORD, when I contend with you; yet I would like to plead a case with you. Why does the way of the wicked prosper?"

That's a question people still ask today. Why do bad people seem to win? God's answer to Jeremiah is surprising. He doesn't explain. Instead, He says, "If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses?" In other words, Jeremiah, this is just the beginning. Things are going to get harder. I'm preparing you for more.

That might sound harsh, but it's also a kind of respect. God was treating Jeremiah like a trusted athlete in training, someone strong enough to hear the truth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jeremiah's Object Lessons**

God often had Jeremiah act out his messages. In chapter 13, Jeremiah bought a linen belt, wore it, and then hid it in a rock crevice by a river. Much later, he dug it up, and it was ruined. God said His people, who were meant to cling to Him like a belt clings to a person, had become just as useless. In chapter 16, God told Jeremiah not to marry, have children, attend funerals, or go to parties, as a living sign of the disaster coming. Jeremiah's whole life became a message.

REAL TALK **Running With Horses**

God's answer to Jeremiah, If you've raced with people on foot and they've worn you out, how will you compete with horses? might sound tough. But it's also a vote of confidence. God was saying, I'm growing you for something bigger. Hard things now can build strength for harder things later. Athletes know that training is uncomfortable, but it makes them ready for the big game. If you're going through something difficult, God may be strengthening

you in ways you can't see yet. That doesn't make the hard thing good, but it means it isn't wasted.

Jeremiah's confessions get darker. In chapter 15, he cries, "Woe is me, my mother, that you have borne me, a man of strife, and a man of contention to the whole earth!" Everyone curses him. And yet, in the same chapter, he remembers how much he loved God's word. "Your words were found, and I ate them. Your words were to me a joy and the rejoicing of my heart."

But then he asks God a terrible question. "Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable, which refuses to be healed? Will you indeed be to me as a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?" Remember chapter 2, where God called Himself a spring of living waters? Now Jeremiah is asking whether God is actually more like a desert stream that dries up when you need it most.

That's an honest, painful question, and God didn't strike him down for asking it. Instead, God called him back. If you return, I'll restore you. I'll make you like a bronze wall again. I'm with you.

REAL TALK **Honest Prayers**

Jeremiah's confessions show that you can be completely honest with God. You can tell Him you're angry, confused, hurt, or disappointed with Him. You can ask hard questions. That's not a lack of faith. It's a kind of faith, because you're still talking to Him. The Psalms are full of prayers like this too. God would rather have your honest heart than your polite pretending.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Can the Leopard Change Its Spots?**

In Jeremiah 13, God asks, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?" The point isn't about skin color or animals. It's that people who have gotten used to doing evil can't change themselves on their own, any more than a leopard can change its spots. Habits of sin become part of who we are. That sounds hopeless, but it sets up Jeremiah's great promise in

chapter 31. People can't change their own hearts, but God can, by writing His law on them. The bad news of chapter 13 makes the good news of chapter 31 even better.

Chapter 17 contains two well-known passages. One describes a person who trusts in the LORD as a tree planted by water, with roots reaching down to the stream. When heat comes and drought lasts, its leaves stay green and it keeps bearing fruit. The other says something hard about human nature. "The heart is deceitful above all things and it is exceedingly corrupt. Who can know it?" Our hearts can fool us. That's why we need God's word and His Spirit.

REAL TALK **Don't Trust Your Heart?**

Jeremiah 17:9 says the heart is deceitful above all things. That's very different from what many movies and songs say: Follow your heart. Your heart isn't always wrong, and God gave you emotions for good reasons. But feelings can mislead you. You can feel sure something is right and be completely wrong. You can feel worthless when you're deeply loved. That's why it's wise to check your heart against God's word, to pray, and to listen to wise people who love you. Don't ignore your heart. But don't let it be your only guide.

Then, in chapter 20, things get physical. A priest named Pashhur, who was in charge of the temple, heard Jeremiah's prophecies and had him beaten and locked in the stocks at one of the temple gates. The stocks were a wooden frame that held a person's feet, hands, or neck in a painful position, often on public display. Jeremiah spent the night there, humiliated in front of everyone.

When he was released the next day, he gave Pashhur a new name, Terror on Every Side. But inside, Jeremiah was falling apart.

He prayed one of the most famous confessions. "LORD, you have persuaded me, and I was persuaded. You are stronger than I, and have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day. Everyone

mocks me." He felt like God had tricked him into this job. He was mocked all day long for speaking God's word.

So he tried to quit. He decided he wouldn't speak God's word anymore. But he couldn't. "If I say that I will not make mention of him, or speak any more in his name, then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones. I am weary with holding it in. I can't."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Fire in My Bones**
>
> Jeremiah's words describe something many people have felt: a truth or calling so deep inside that you can't keep it in. Jeremiah wanted to stop. He was tired, hurt, and mocked. But God's word burned inside him like a fire that had to get out. Later, God said through Jeremiah, Isn't my word like fire, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? Many people since have described their calling this way. It doesn't mean they always felt excited. Often they felt exhausted. But they couldn't walk away.

Then, in the same breath, Jeremiah sings praise. "But the LORD is with me as an awesome mighty one." He remembers God's promise from chapter 1. And then, just a few verses later, he crashes again.

"Cursed is the day in which I was born. Don't let the day in which my mother bore me be blessed." He wishes he had never been born. He asks, "Why did I come out of the womb to see labor and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?"

> **REAL TALK** **When You Wish You'd Never Been Born**
>
> Jeremiah 20:14-18 is one of the darkest passages in the Bible. A faithful prophet wished he had never been born. If you've ever felt that way, please know you're not alone, and you're not a bad person or a bad Christian. Jeremiah loved God deeply, and he still felt this. Job felt it too. The Bible includes these words because God knows people feel this way, and He wants us to bring those feelings to Him. But please don't carry them by yourself.

> Talk to a trusted adult today, like a parent, school counselor, pastor, coach, or doctor. A counselor or therapist can help you work through despair, depression, or grief, and getting help is a sign of strength, not weakness. If you're having thoughts of hurting yourself or ending your life, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. If you're in immediate danger, call 911. Notice that Jeremiah's story didn't end in chapter 20. God still had decades of purpose for him, and some of the most hopeful words in the Bible were still to come. Your story isn't over either.

Jeremiah's experience also shows that following God faithfully doesn't guarantee that people will like you. Jesus told His followers that the world would hate them as it hated Him, and that they would be blessed when people insulted them for His sake, because the prophets before them were treated the same way. Jeremiah is one of those prophets. Being mocked for doing right isn't a sign that you're doing something wrong. Sometimes it's a sign you're doing something right.

It's important to notice the order of chapter 20. Pain, then honesty, then fire, then praise, then despair. Jeremiah's emotions swing wildly. That's what real grief and pressure can feel like. Faith doesn't mean you'll always feel steady. It means you keep bringing your swinging heart back to God.

> **REAL TALK** **Tree by the Water**
>
> Jeremiah 17 compares a person who trusts in the LORD to a tree planted by water. When heat comes, the tree doesn't panic, because its roots reach the stream. That's a picture of what faith can do in hard times. It doesn't stop the heat or the drought. But it gives you a deep source of strength. You grow roots by spending time with God: reading His word, praying, worshiping with others, and obeying in small things. Roots grow slowly, and you can't see them. But when the drought comes, you'll be glad they're there.

Jeremiah's confessions are a gift to anyone who has ever felt like faith is hard. They show that being faithful doesn't mean always feeling happy, confident, or strong. Jeremiah was faithful while feeling lonely, mocked, exhausted, and angry. He kept talking to God even when he was furious with Him. And God kept answering, kept restoring him, and kept using him. If your faith feels messy right now, you're in good company.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jeremiah and Jesus**

Jeremiah's life has striking parallels to Jesus' life. Both were rejected by their hometowns. Both preached against the temple becoming a den of robbers. Both wept over Jerusalem. Both were accused of being traitors, beaten, and put on trial. Jeremiah described himself as a gentle lamb led to the slaughter, and Isaiah used the same image for the Servant. When Jesus asked His disciples who people said He was, some said Jeremiah. Jeremiah's suffering foreshadowed the suffering of the One who would bring the New Covenant.

KEY VERSE

If I say that I will not make mention of him, or speak any more in his name, then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones. I am weary with holding it in. I can't.

Jeremiah 20:9 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God let Jeremiah's raw, angry prayers be included in the Bible?
2. Have you ever asked God why the wicked prosper? What did you do with that question?
3. What do you think it means to have God's word like a fire in your bones?
4. If a friend told you they wished they had never been born, what would you do?

TRY THIS *Write an honest prayer to God about something that is hard right now. Don't clean it up. Then end it with one thing you know is true about God.*

CHAPTER 4

The Potter's House and Fake Peace Prophets

Jeremiah 18–19, 23, 27–28

One day, God told Jeremiah to go to a potter's workshop. "Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause you to hear my words."

Jeremiah went and watched the potter working at his wheel, shaping a lump of wet clay. But something went wrong. "When the vessel that he made of the clay was marred in the hand of the potter, he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it."

The potter didn't throw the clay away. He squashed it back into a lump and started over, shaping it into something new.

Then God spoke. "House of Israel, can't I do with you as this potter?" says the LORD. "Behold, as the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, house of Israel."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Potter's Wheel**
>
> Ancient potters worked at a wheel made of two stone discs. The potter spun the lower one with his feet, and the upper one turned as he shaped the clay with his hands. Wet clay is soft and responsive. If a pot developed a flaw while it was still wet, the potter could reshape it. But once a pot was fired in the

kiln, it was hard. If it was flawed then, it couldn't be reshaped. It could only be broken. That difference is the key to understanding Jeremiah 18 and 19.

In chapter 18, God explains that His announcements of judgment aren't fixed fate. If a nation He has warned turns from evil, He will relent. And if a nation He has promised to bless turns to evil, He'll reconsider the good He planned. While the clay is soft, there's still hope. God was inviting Judah to turn back and be reshaped.

But the people answered, It's no use. We'll follow our own plans. Each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil hearts.

REAL TALK **Soft Clay**

The potter's house is a hopeful picture. God can take a life that's been marred, by mistakes, sin, or hurt, and reshape it into something beautiful. It's never too late while your heart is soft. But it's also a warning. The longer we resist God, the harder our hearts can become, like clay drying out. If you feel God tugging at your heart about something, don't wait. Stay soft in His hands. Let Him shape you.

So in chapter 19, God gave Jeremiah another object lesson. This time, he bought a finished clay jar, one that had already been fired. He took some elders and priests out to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, a place where terrible idol worship had happened, including child sacrifice. There, in front of everyone, Jeremiah smashed the jar on the ground. And he said that God would break the people and the city just like that jar, which could never be repaired.

Soft clay can be reshaped. A hardened jar can only be shattered. Judah had hardened its heart, and judgment was coming.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Valley of Ben Hinnom**

The Valley of Ben Hinnom, just outside Jerusalem's walls, was where some of Judah's kings had sacrificed children to the gods Molech and Baal, one of the most horrifying practices in the ancient world. King Josiah later desecrated

the site so it couldn't be used for worship. In later Jewish writings, the valley's name, Gehinnom, became a word for the place of final judgment. In the New Testament, Jesus uses the Greek form, Gehenna, when He warns about hell.

It's also worth noticing the difference between what God did with the soft clay and the hardened jar. God is patient. He gave Judah decades of warnings, through Jeremiah and many other prophets. He kept saying, Turn back. Even the shattered jar was meant to shake people awake. God's judgment is never His first move. It comes after long patience, when every invitation has been refused.

Jeremiah's biggest opponents weren't atheists or foreign kings. They were other prophets, men who claimed to speak for God but told people only what they wanted to hear. Chapter 23 is God's message about them. "Don't listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They teach you vanity. They speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the LORD."

These prophets kept saying, You'll have peace. No harm will come to you. But God says He never sent them. They were making it up.

In the same chapter, God makes a beautiful promise. Although the kings of Judah had failed as shepherds, God would raise up "a righteous Branch" from David's family, a King who would reign wisely and do what is just and right. His name would be "The LORD our righteousness."

REAL TALK **How to Spot a False Prophet**

How can you tell if someone is speaking God's truth? Jeremiah gives some clues. False prophets often say exactly what people want to hear. They promise success and comfort without calling for change. They don't line up with what God has already said in His word. Their own lives don't show faithfulness. And they often get rich or famous from what they say. Today, you'll hear lots of voices online claiming to speak for God, or telling you what

God wants. Test them. Does what they say match the Bible? Do they point to Jesus or to themselves? Do they call people to love God and others, or just to feel good? Ask a pastor or mature Christian if you're not sure.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Righteous Branch**

Jeremiah 23:5-6 promises a righteous Branch from David's family whose name will be The LORD our righteousness. Isaiah had used similar language, calling the coming King a shoot from Jesse's stump. Ironically, the last king of Judah was named Zedekiah, which means the LORD is righteous, but he was a weak and unfaithful king. Jeremiah seems to promise a true King who would actually live up to that name. Christians see this promise fulfilled in Jesus, who is called the Son of David, and who gives His righteousness to all who trust Him.

Then comes a dramatic showdown. In chapter 27, God told Jeremiah to make a wooden yoke, the kind used to harness oxen together for plowing, and wear it on his neck. It was a sign that Judah and the surrounding nations should submit to Babylon. Babylon's rule was God's judgment, and resisting it would only make things worse.

Imagine walking around the city every day with an ox yoke on your shoulders. People must have stared and laughed. But Jeremiah did it.

Then, in chapter 28, a prophet named Hananiah confronted Jeremiah in the temple in front of the priests and all the people. Hananiah announced that God had broken Babylon's yoke, and that within two years, everything Babylon had taken would be returned. Then he did something dramatic. "Then Hananiah the prophet took the bar from off the prophet Jeremiah's neck, and broke it." He said that God would break Babylon's yoke the same way.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jeremiah's Response**

Jeremiah's first response to Hananiah is surprising. He said, Amen! May the LORD do it! Jeremiah didn't want disaster. He would have loved for Hananiah to be right. But he reminded Hananiah that prophets who promise peace prove they're true only when their words come to pass. Then Jeremiah simply walked away. He didn't argue, fight, or try to win the crowd. He waited for God.

Later, God sent Jeremiah back with a message. Hananiah had broken a wooden yoke, but God would replace it with a yoke of iron. Then Jeremiah said, "Listen, Hananiah! The LORD has not sent you, but you make this people trust in a lie." Jeremiah said that Hananiah would die that year for speaking rebellion against God. "So Hananiah the prophet died the same year in the seventh month."

REAL TALK **When the Crowd Believes a Lie**

Hananiah's message was far more popular than Jeremiah's. People wanted to believe that everything would be fine in two years. Jeremiah's message, that they'd have to endure a long hard season, was not what anyone wanted to hear. Sometimes the truth is unpopular. You might be the only one in your friend group willing to say that something is wrong, or the only one who won't believe a rumor. Jeremiah shows a wise way to handle it: say what's true, don't get into a shouting match, and trust God with the outcome. You don't have to win every argument. You just have to stay faithful.

Jeremiah 23 also contains one of the Bible's strongest pictures of God's word. "Isn't my word like fire?" says the LORD; "and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" False prophets offered dreams and comfortable words. God's word is different. It burns away what's false, and it breaks through hard hearts. That's why Jeremiah couldn't hold it in. That's also why it's worth reading, even when it's uncomfortable.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Submitting to Babylon**

Jeremiah's message to submit to Babylon sounds strange. Wasn't Babylon wicked? Yes, and Jeremiah later prophesied that Babylon would be judged. But God was using Babylon as His instrument to discipline Judah for years of idolatry and injustice. Resisting Babylon meant resisting God's discipline, which would lead to far worse destruction. Jeremiah urged surrender not because he loved Babylon, but because he loved his people and wanted them to live. His advice was ignored, and the result was the destruction of Jerusalem.

REAL TALK **Testing What You See Online**

Today, anyone can post a video claiming to have a word from God, a secret prophecy, or a shortcut to blessing. Some promise that if you give money, God will make you rich. Others predict the date of the end of the world. Jeremiah's experience gives some simple tests. Does the message match the Bible? Does it point to Jesus or to the speaker? Does it call people to holiness and love, or just to comfort and success? Does the speaker's life show integrity? Is the speaker accountable to a church? And did their past predictions come true? Hananiah's two-year prediction failed. Be wise, and talk to trusted Christians before believing something just because it sounds spiritual.

The potter's house also reminds us who's in charge. Clay doesn't tell the potter what to make. That can feel uncomfortable, because we like being in control. But it's also a relief. You don't have to shape your whole life on your own. You can trust the One whose hands are skilled and loving, who knows exactly what He's making.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Yokes in the Ancient World**

A yoke was a wooden bar fitted over the necks of two oxen so they could pull a plow or cart together. Leather straps or wooden pegs held it in place. In the Bible, a yoke often stands for submission or servitude to someone else. When Jeremiah wore a yoke, he was acting out Judah's coming servitude to Babylon. Centuries later, Jesus used the same image in a beautiful way,

inviting people to take His yoke upon them, because His yoke is easy and His burden is light.

KEY VERSE

"House of Israel, can't I do with you as this potter?" says the LORD. "Behold, as the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, house of Israel."

Jeremiah 18:6 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What does it mean to stay soft clay in God's hands?
2. How is a potter reshaping clay different from breaking a fired jar?
3. What voices today tell people peace, peace when there is no peace?
4. How can you test whether a message really comes from God?

TRY THIS *Get a lump of clay or play dough and shape something from it. Then squash it and reshape it. As you do, pray, asking God to reshape any part of your life that has been marred.*

CHAPTER 5

Letter to the Exiles

Jeremiah 29

In 597 BC, about ten years before Jerusalem was destroyed, the Babylonians attacked the city and carried away thousands of people, including the young king Jehoiachin, the royal family, officials, craftsmen, and skilled workers. They were taken hundreds of miles away to Babylon. Daniel and his friends had been taken a few years before that, and the prophet Ezekiel was among this group.

Imagine being one of them. Your home was gone. Your friends and family were scattered. You were living in a giant foreign city full of strange gods, strange food, and a strange language. And the false prophets were telling you, Don't unpack. This will all be over in two years. You'll be home soon.

Then a letter arrived from Jeremiah. It's in chapter 29, and its message was the opposite of what everyone hoped to hear.

"Build houses and dwell in them. Plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and father sons and daughters." Jeremiah told them to settle down. Get married. Have kids. Grow gardens. They were going to be there a long time.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Seventy Years**
>
> Jeremiah had already prophesied that the nations would serve the king of Babylon for seventy years. In the letter, God says, "After seventy years are

accomplished for Babylon, I will visit you and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place." Scholars count the seventy years in slightly different ways, for example from Babylon's first conquests around 605 BC to the first return of exiles around 538 BC, or from the temple's destruction in 586 BC to its rebuilding in 516 BC. Either way, the number meant a lifetime. Most of the adults who received this letter would die in Babylon. Daniel later read Jeremiah's prophecy and began praying as the seventy years neared their end.

Then Jeremiah told them something even more surprising. "Seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace."

Babylon was the enemy. Babylon had destroyed their homes and killed their families. And God told them to pray for it. To work for its good. To be a blessing to the city where they now lived.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Shalom**

The Hebrew word translated peace here is shalom. It means much more than the absence of conflict. Shalom means wholeness, flourishing, well-being, and things being as they should be. God told the exiles to seek the shalom of Babylon, to help it flourish, because their own flourishing was bound up with it. That's a radical idea. It means God's people are meant to be a blessing wherever they live, even among people who don't share their faith.

REAL TALK **Seek the Peace of Your City**

You might feel like you're living in exile sometimes, like your school, your town, or your culture doesn't share your values. It's tempting to either hide from it or fight against it. Jeremiah's letter offers a third way: be a blessing. Pray for your school, your teachers, your town, and your leaders, even the ones you disagree with. Work for the good of the people around you. Volunteer. Be kind to your neighbors. Do excellent work. Be the kind of

person who makes any place better because you're in it. Christians living this way have changed cities throughout history.

REAL TALK **Bloom Where You're Planted**

Jeremiah told the exiles to build, plant, marry, and multiply right where they were, even though it wasn't where they wanted to be. Maybe you're in a place that doesn't feel like home: a new school, a blended family, a town you didn't choose, or a season that feels like waiting. It's easy to put your life on hold, telling yourself that real life will start later. Jeremiah's advice is to start living faithfully now. Make friends. Join something. Do good work. Serve. Your life isn't on pause. God is with you in this place too.

Jeremiah also warned the exiles not to listen to the false prophets among them who were telling them it would be over soon. God hadn't sent them.

And then comes one of the most famous verses in the Bible. "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."

You've probably seen that verse on graduation cards, posters, mugs, and social media posts. It's often used to mean something like: God has a great plan for your life, so everything's going to work out the way you want. But when you know the context, the verse becomes something deeper and even stronger.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jeremiah 29:11 in Context**

Jeremiah 29:11 was written to a whole community of refugees, not just to one person, and the you is plural in Hebrew, like saying y'all. It was written to people who had lost almost everything and were being told they would spend seventy years in exile. Many of them would never see home again. God wasn't promising them that their lives would be easy or that their dreams would come true soon. He was promising that, even in exile, even through decades of hardship, He hadn't forgotten them. His thoughts toward them were for

their peace, their shalom, and He would give them a future and a hope, even if that future would come to their children and grandchildren. So is it wrong to apply the verse to your own life? Not at all. God's character doesn't change, and His thoughts toward His people are still thoughts of peace. But the context makes the promise stronger, not weaker. It isn't a promise that you'll get into your dream school or that nothing bad will happen. It's a promise that God is with you in the hard places, that He's working for your good over the long haul, and that your story ends in hope.

REAL TALK **Hope in Your Exile**

Maybe you're in a hard season right now. Your parents divorced. You moved and don't know anyone. Someone you love died. You're dealing with an illness, anxiety, or a family situation that won't change. It might last a long time. Jeremiah 29:11 is for you, not as a quick-fix slogan, but as a promise that God's thoughts toward you are good, even when your circumstances aren't. You can build, plant, and live faithfully right where you are, trusting that He has a future and a hope for you. And if your hard season feels unbearable, please talk to a trusted adult or counselor, or call or text 988.

REAL TALK **Using Verses Well**

Jeremiah 29:11 isn't the only verse that gets pulled out of context. Philippians 4:13, I can do all things through Christ, is often printed on sports gear as if it means God guarantees you'll win the game. But Paul wrote it from prison, talking about being content whether he had a lot or a little. Learning the context of a verse doesn't take away its power. It gives it roots. A good habit is to read the whole chapter around any verse you love. Ask who it was written to, what was going on, and what it meant to them. Then ask how it applies to you.

The very next verses are just as important. "You shall call on me, and you shall go and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You shall seek me and find me, when you search for me with all your heart."

The hope God promises isn't just better circumstances. It's Himself. The future He promises includes a restored relationship with Him. He wants to be found by His people.

There's a dramatic footnote to the letter. A false prophet in Babylon named Shemaiah wrote back to Jerusalem demanding that Jeremiah be locked up for telling people to settle down. Jeremiah responded with another message from God: Shemaiah had made the people trust in a lie, and his family would not live to see the good God would do.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Daniel Reads Jeremiah**

Decades after Jeremiah's letter, Daniel was an old man in Babylon. Daniel 9 says he was reading the books and realized from Jeremiah's prophecy that the seventy years of desolation were nearly complete. So Daniel prayed, confessing the sins of his people and asking God to keep His promise. Around that time, Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and soon allowed the exiles to go home. Jeremiah's letter had been kept, copied, and treasured for all those years, and it gave Daniel hope.

Jeremiah's letter is a great example of what it means to be faithful in a long, hard season. Don't give up. Don't pretend everything is fine. Settle in. Live well. Seek the good of those around you. Pray. And trust that God has not forgotten you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Exiles Who Listened**

Many of the exiles did follow Jeremiah's advice. Archaeologists have found Babylonian business records, called the Murashu archive, from a later period, showing Jewish families living in the region, running businesses, and taking part in local life. A town called Al-Yahudu, meaning the city of Judah, appears in clay tablets from this time, showing exiles living, working, marrying, and raising families. Many stayed even after they were allowed to return, and Babylon remained an important center of Jewish life for centuries. Daniel

served in Babylon's government, and the book of Esther tells of Jews living throughout the Persian Empire.

Jeremiah's letter also challenges the idea that faith means escaping the world. Some of the exiles probably wanted to keep to themselves, avoid Babylonians, and wait for rescue. God told them to engage. Build. Plant. Pray for the city. Jesus later prayed for His followers, not that God would take them out of the world, but that He would keep them from evil while they lived in it. You're called to be in your world, loving people and seeking their good, while staying faithful to God.

REAL TALK **Praying for People You Disagree With**

God told the exiles to pray for Babylon, the city that had conquered them. That's hard. Today, it might mean praying for leaders you didn't vote for, a teacher you find difficult, a classmate who has been unkind, or a neighbor whose values are very different from yours. Praying for them doesn't mean you approve of everything they do. It means you want God's best for them. Jesus took it even further, telling His followers to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. Prayer has a way of softening your own heart too.

KEY VERSE

"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."

Jeremiah 29:11 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God told the exiles to build houses and plant gardens instead of waiting to go home?
2. What would it look like for you to seek the peace of your school or town?
3. How does knowing the context of Jeremiah 29:11 change how you read it?
4. What does it mean to seek God with all your heart?

TRY THIS *Pick one place you spend a lot of time, like your school, team, or neighborhood. Pray for it every day this week, and do one practical thing to make it better.*

CHAPTER 6

The New Covenant

Jeremiah 30–33

In the middle of a book full of judgment, chapters 30 through 33 burst with hope. Some people call this section the Book of Comfort. God told Jeremiah to write these words in a book, because the day was coming when He would bring His people home.

These chapters are full of tenderness. God says, "Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love. Therefore I have drawn you with loving kindness." He promises that the young women will dance again, the young men and old men will celebrate together, and He will turn their mourning into joy.

But there's also deep grief in these chapters. "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." Rachel was one of Israel's founding mothers. Jeremiah pictures her weeping from her grave as her descendants are led away into exile. Matthew later quotes this verse when King Herod killed the baby boys of Bethlehem. And right after Rachel's weeping, God says, Stop your crying, for your children will return. There is hope for your future.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Rachel Weeping**

Ramah was a town north of Jerusalem, near where tradition said Rachel was buried. Jeremiah 40 tells us that Ramah was also the place where the Babylonians gathered captives before marching them off to Babylon. So the image is powerful: the mother of the nation weeping over her children at the very spot where they were being led away in chains. But God's answer is hope. The grief is real, but it won't be the end of the story.

Then, in chapter 31, comes one of the most important promises in the entire Old Testament. "Behold, the days come," says the LORD, "that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah."

A covenant is a binding relationship with promises and responsibilities. God had made a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai after bringing them out of Egypt. He gave them the law written on stone tablets. But they broke that covenant again and again, even though God had been like a faithful husband to them.

So God promised something new. "I will put my law in their inward parts, and I will write it in their heart. I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Stone Versus Heart**

Under the old covenant, God's law was written on tablets of stone. It told people what was right, but it couldn't change their hearts. People knew what to do but didn't want to do it. The New Covenant would be different. God would write His law on their hearts, changing them from the inside so that they would want to obey. The prophet Ezekiel describes something similar: God would take out their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh, and put His Spirit within them. Paul later wrote that believers are like letters "written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tablets of stone, but in tablets that are hearts of flesh."

God also promised that, under the New Covenant, people wouldn't need to teach each other to know Him, "for they will all know me, from their least to their greatest." Everyone, young and old, rich and poor, would know God personally, not just through priests or prophets.

And the New Covenant would rest on forgiveness. "For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

> **REAL TALK** **Remember Their Sin No More**
>
> Do you ever feel like your past mistakes define you? Maybe you replay something embarrassing or shameful over and over. Maybe you worry that God is keeping a list. The New Covenant says that God, who knows everything, chooses not to hold your sins against you. When God remembers your sin no more, it doesn't mean He has a bad memory. It means He will never bring it up against you again. If you belong to Him, your record is clean. You can stop replaying it. You're free.
>
> **REAL TALK** **The Law on Your Heart**
>
> Following God isn't meant to feel like obeying a list of rules you don't care about. The New Covenant means God changes your desires. Over time, you start wanting what He wants. That doesn't happen all at once, and you'll still struggle. But if you've ever found yourself caring about something God cares about, like justice, kindness, honesty, or worship, that's His law being written on your heart. Keep reading His word, praying, and staying close to His people. He's still writing.

Notice that the promise of the New Covenant comes from a prophet who had seen the old covenant fail over and over. Jeremiah watched kings ignore God, priests lie, prophets deceive, and ordinary people worship idols. He knew that rules alone couldn't fix people. That's why his promise is so remarkable. God wasn't going to lower His standards. He was going to change people's hearts so they would want to meet them.

Then chapter 32 tells one of the strangest real estate deals in history. Jerusalem was under siege by the Babylonian army. Jeremiah was locked up in the courtyard of the guard because King Zedekiah didn't like his prophecies. Everyone knew the city was about to fall. And God told Jeremiah to buy a field.

Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel came to the prison and offered to sell him a family field in their hometown of Anathoth, which was already in enemy territory. Under Israel's law, family land was supposed to stay in the family, so a relative had the right and duty to buy it. And Jeremiah bought it. "I bought the field that was in Anathoth of Hanamel my uncle's son, and weighed him the money, even seventeen shekels of silver."

He signed the deed, had witnesses sign it, sealed one copy, and gave both copies to Baruch, telling him to put them in a clay jar so they would last a long time. Why? Because God said, "Houses and fields and vineyards will yet again be bought in this land."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Deeds in Clay Jars**

In the ancient world, important documents were often written in two copies. One was rolled up and sealed with clay so it couldn't be tampered with, and the other was left open for reference. Storing documents in sealed clay jars helped preserve them for many years. That's exactly how the Dead Sea Scrolls survived for two thousand years, in clay jars in caves. Jeremiah's purchase was a bold act of faith: putting real money on God's promise that, one day, life would return to normal and the land would be inhabited again.

REAL TALK **Buying a Field in a War Zone**

Jeremiah's purchase looked crazy. Who buys land in a war zone? But it was a way of saying, I believe God's promises more than I believe the headlines. Sometimes faith looks like investing in the future when everything around you looks hopeless. It might look like studying for a future you can't see yet, choosing kindness in a family that's struggling, praying for a friend who

seems far from God, or planting seeds of hope when everyone else is giving up. Jeremiah's field is a reminder that God's promises outlast the crisis.

Jeremiah's purchase also teaches that faith isn't just a feeling. It's an action. Jeremiah weighed out real silver, signed real documents, and called real witnesses. Faith often shows up in practical choices: giving when money is tight, forgiving when it's hard, staying honest when lying would be easier, or keeping a commitment when you'd rather quit. Those choices say, I believe God is real and His promises are true.

After buying the field, Jeremiah prayed, and even he seemed a little unsure. He began with faith: "Ah Lord GOD! Behold, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for you." But then he basically said, The city is about to fall, and You told me to buy a field?

God's answer echoed Jeremiah's own words back to him. "Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is there anything too hard for me?" Yes, the city would fall. But God would bring His people back and give them one heart and one way, to fear Him forever.

In chapter 33, God adds, "Call to me, and I will answer you, and will show you great and difficult things, which you don't know." He promises again that He will raise up a righteous Branch from David's line, and that His covenant with day and night is as unbreakable as His promises to His people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Anathoth**

Jeremiah's hometown, Anathoth, was where the men had once plotted to kill him. Yet God told him to buy a field there, as a sign of hope. It's a beautiful twist. The place of his deepest betrayal became the place of his boldest faith. Ezra 2 records that 128 men of Anathoth were among the first exiles to return

> home from Babylon. Jeremiah's field was a promise, and the promise came true.

The Book of Comfort also contains a promise about creation itself. God says that if the sun, moon, and stars ever stop doing what He has ordered them to do, then Israel will stop being His people. In other words, His promises are as dependable as sunrise. Every morning when the sun comes up, it's a reminder that God keeps His word.

> **REAL TALK** **Nothing Too Hard**
>
> Jeremiah prayed, There is nothing too hard for you, and then God asked him, Is there anything too hard for me? It's one thing to say it. It's another to believe it when an army is outside the walls. What feels impossible in your life right now? A broken relationship? A habit you can't break? A family situation? A fear? God doesn't promise to fix everything the way you want, on your schedule. But nothing is beyond His power or His care. You can bring the impossible to Him.

When Christians take communion, also called the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist, they remember Jesus' words about the New Covenant. Different churches understand communion in different ways, but all of them connect it to that night when Jesus took the cup and named Jeremiah's promise. Every time you take communion, you're celebrating the fulfillment of a promise God gave to a weeping prophet in a besieged city six hundred years before Jesus was born.

KEY VERSE

"But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days," says the LORD: "I will put my law in their inward parts, and I will write it in their heart. I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

Jeremiah 31:33 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between a law written on stone and a law written on hearts?
2. How does it feel to know that God will remember your sin no more?
3. Why do you think God told Jeremiah to buy a field during a siege?
4. What is something in your life that seems too hard? How does Jeremiah 32:17 speak to it?

TRY THIS *Write down something you've been ashamed of. Then write Jeremiah 31:34 over it, and tear it up or throw it away as a reminder that God remembers your sin no more.*

CHAPTER 7

The Burned Scroll, the Muddy Cistern, and 586 BC

Jeremiah 36–45

Chapter 36 takes us back to the fourth year of King Jehoiakim, around 605 BC, the same year Babylon defeated Egypt and became the world's superpower. God told Jeremiah to write down every message He had given him over the past twenty-three years, since the days of Josiah. Maybe, God said, when the people hear all of it together, they'll turn back, and I'll forgive them.

"Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah; and Baruch wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah all the LORD's words, which he had spoken to him, on a scroll of a book." Jeremiah was banned from the temple, so he sent Baruch to read the scroll aloud there on a fast day, when crowds would be present.

Baruch read it. A young man named Micaiah heard it and ran to tell the royal officials. They called Baruch in and had him read it to them. When they heard it, they were afraid. They told Baruch to go hide, along with Jeremiah, and not to tell anyone where they were. Then they took the scroll to the king.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Scrolls and Scribes**

In Jeremiah's day, books were written on scrolls made from animal skin or papyrus, a paper-like material made from reeds. Scrolls were written in columns and rolled up. Writing a long scroll by hand could take weeks. Scribes like Baruch were trained professionals who could read and write, which many people couldn't. Archaeologists have found clay seal impressions from this period with names of officials mentioned in Jeremiah 36, including Gemariah son of Shaphan, in whose room Baruch read the scroll.

"Now the king was sitting in the winter house in the ninth month, and there was a fire in the brazier burning before him." It was cold, probably around December. An official named Jehudi read the scroll aloud. And every time he read three or four columns, the king took a small knife, cut off that section, and tossed it into the fire. He kept doing it until the whole scroll was burned.

Some officials begged him not to burn it, but he wouldn't listen. And the Bible notes something chilling. "The king and his servants who heard all these words were not afraid, and didn't tear their garments." Decades earlier, when Jehoiakim's father, Josiah, heard God's word read from a scroll, he tore his clothes in grief and led the nation in repentance. His son cut God's word into pieces and burned it.

REAL TALK **Cutting Out What You Don't Like**

Jehoiakim's knife is a picture of what people still do with God's word. We cut out the parts we don't like and keep the parts we do. We might ignore what the Bible says about forgiveness, generosity, honesty, sexuality, money, or loving enemies, because it's inconvenient. But cutting out God's word doesn't make it go away. It just means we don't get to hear what He's saying. When you read something in the Bible that's hard, don't reach for the knife. Wrestle with it. Ask questions. Talk to someone wise. And ask God to help you obey.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Young Micaiah**

It's easy to miss a young man in Jeremiah 36. When Baruch read the scroll in the temple, Micaiah son of Gemariah heard it and went straight to the royal officials to report it. His grandfather was Shaphan, the royal secretary who had read the rediscovered scroll of the law to King Josiah decades earlier. Micaiah's family had a history of taking God's word seriously. His quick action meant the officials heard the message, and it set off the events of the chapter. Sometimes young people are the first to recognize that God is speaking.

The king ordered Jeremiah and Baruch arrested, but the Bible says, "the LORD hid them." Then God told Jeremiah to do something simple and stubborn: write it again. "Then Jeremiah took another scroll, and gave it to Baruch the scribe, the son of Neriah, who wrote therein from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire; and many similar words were added to them."

You can burn a scroll, but you can't burn God's word. It came back longer.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Baruch's Discouragement**

Chapter 45 is a short, personal message to Baruch from around the same time. Baruch was discouraged, saying that God had added sorrow to his pain and that he was worn out with groaning. God's answer was honest. The nation was about to be torn down. "Do you seek great things for yourself? Don't seek them." But God promised that Baruch's life would be preserved wherever he went. It's a reminder that faithful work often goes unrecognized, and that God sees the people doing quiet, behind-the-scenes work.

Years later, under King Zedekiah, the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem. Jeremiah kept telling people that the city would fall and that surrendering to Babylon was the way to survive. The officials were furious. They beat him and threw him into a dungeon for

many days. Then they went to the king and said Jeremiah should be put to death because he was weakening the soldiers' morale.

Zedekiah, a weak king, said, He's in your hands. So they took Jeremiah and lowered him with ropes into a cistern in the courtyard. "In the dungeon there was no water, but mire; and Jeremiah sank in the mire."

Jeremiah, who had once preached about broken cisterns that can't hold water, was now stuck in one, sinking in mud, left to starve.

Then an unexpected hero appeared. "Now when Ebedmelech the Ethiopian, a eunuch, who was in the king's house, heard that they had put Jeremiah in the dungeon…" Ebed-Melech was a foreigner from Cush, a region south of Egypt. He was a palace official, perhaps a servant with little power. But he went straight to the king, in public, at the city gate, and said that these men had done evil and that Jeremiah would die of hunger down there.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Ebed-Melech**
>
> Ebed-Melech's name means servant of the king. He came from Cush, in the region of modern-day Sudan and Ethiopia. As a eunuch and a foreigner, he would have been an outsider in Jerusalem. Yet he was the one person in the palace brave enough to stand up for Jeremiah. Speaking up against powerful officials in a city at war was a huge risk. Ebed-Melech did it anyway. He's one of the Bible's quiet heroes, and his story reminds us that courage and compassion can come from people others overlook.

The king changed his mind and told Ebed-Melech to take thirty men and pull Jeremiah out before he died. And then Ebed-Melech did something tender. He went to a storeroom and grabbed old rags and worn-out clothes, and lowered them down with the ropes. He told Jeremiah to put the rags under his arms so the ropes wouldn't cut

into him. "So they lifted Jeremiah up with the cords, and took him up out of the dungeon."

> **REAL TALK** **Be an Ebed-Melech**
>
> Ebed-Melech didn't just do the right thing. He did it kindly. He thought about the ropes cutting into Jeremiah's arms and brought padding. That's what compassion looks like: noticing the details of someone else's pain. You might know someone who's stuck in a pit right now, like a classmate being bullied, a friend struggling with depression, or a kid no one talks to. You can be the one who speaks up, and you can do it gently. Tell a trusted adult if someone is in danger. Stand up for people being mistreated. And remember the rags: small kindnesses make a big difference.

God sent a message to Ebed-Melech through Jeremiah. When the city fell, God would rescue him. "For I will surely save you. You won't fall by the sword, but you will escape with your life, because you have put your trust in me," says the LORD.

> **REAL TALK** **Weak Leaders**
>
> King Zedekiah is a picture of a weak leader. He secretly asked Jeremiah for God's word several times, but he was too afraid of his officials to obey it. He let them throw Jeremiah into the cistern, then let Ebed-Melech pull him out. He was always trying to please whoever was in front of him. In the end, his fear of people led to disaster. Leadership isn't just about having power. It's about having the courage to do what's right, even when people disapprove. You'll have chances to lead, in class projects, on teams, in your friend group, or in your family. Be the kind of leader who listens to truth and acts on it.

And then the city fell. In 586 BC, after a siege of about eighteen months, with famine inside the walls, the Babylonians broke through. King Zedekiah tried to escape by night but was captured. His sons were killed, and he was blinded and taken in chains to Babylon. The Babylonian commander burned the temple, the

palace, and the houses of Jerusalem, and tore down the city walls. Most of the remaining people were taken into exile.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Lachish Letters**
>
> In the 1930s, archaeologists digging at the ruins of Lachish, a fortress city southwest of Jerusalem, found letters written in ink on pieces of pottery. They seem to date from the final days before Babylon conquered Judah. In one, a military officer writes that they're watching for the signal fires of Lachish, but they can't see the fires of Azekah. Jeremiah 34 mentions that Lachish and Azekah were the last fortified cities left in Judah besides Jerusalem. The letter may capture the moment Azekah fell.

Jeremiah's words had all come true. But the Babylonians treated him well. The commander released him from his chains and let him choose where to live. Jeremiah chose to stay with the poor people left in the land, under a governor named Gedaliah.

But the tragedy wasn't over. Gedaliah was assassinated. The remaining people panicked, fearing Babylon's revenge. They asked Jeremiah to pray and promised to obey whatever God said. God answered: Stay in the land, and I will build you and plant you. Don't go to Egypt. But the people refused. They accused Jeremiah of lying, and they went to Egypt anyway, dragging Jeremiah and Baruch with them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Gedaliah's Seal**
>
> Gedaliah, the governor Babylon appointed after Jerusalem fell, was the grandson of Shaphan and the son of Ahikam, the man who had protected Jeremiah years before. At Lachish, archaeologists found a clay seal impression reading belonging to Gedaliah, who is over the house, which many think belonged to him. The family of Shaphan appears again and again in Jeremiah's story as faithful friends who protected him and respected God's word.

In Egypt, Jeremiah kept preaching, warning the people against worshiping the queen of heaven, a goddess they credited with their past prosperity. As far as we know, Jeremiah died there, far from home, still faithful.

REAL TALK **When People Won't Listen**

Jeremiah spent forty years warning people, and almost no one listened. Even at the very end, the people who asked him for God's word refused to obey it. That's discouraging. Maybe you've tried to help a friend, warn a sibling, or share your faith, and they ignored you. Jeremiah's story shows that faithfulness isn't measured by how many people listen. God called Jeremiah to speak, not to control the results. Keep speaking the truth in love, keep praying, and trust God with the rest.

Notice too how God provided for Jeremiah during the siege. When he was in the court of the guard, the king ordered that he be given a loaf of bread each day from the bakers' street, until all the bread in the city was gone. In a city starving under siege, God made sure His prophet had daily bread. And when the city fell, the Babylonian commander treated him kindly and let him go free. God kept His promise from chapter 1. They fought against Jeremiah, but they did not prevail.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Dragged to Egypt**

Jeremiah 43 says the people went to Tahpanhes, a city in the eastern Nile Delta. There, God told Jeremiah to bury large stones in the brick pavement at the entrance of Pharaoh's palace, as a sign that Nebuchadnezzar would one day set up his throne there. Archaeologists have identified Tahpanhes with a site called Tell Defenneh, where a large fort from this period was excavated. Babylonian records say Nebuchadnezzar did invade Egypt around 568 BC. Even in Egypt, Jeremiah kept doing what he'd always done: speaking God's word, whether people listened or not.

KEY VERSE

"For I will surely save you. You won't fall by the sword, but you will escape with your life, because you have put your trust in me," says the LORD.

Jeremiah 39:18 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Jehoiakim burned the scroll instead of listening to it?
2. What parts of God's word are you tempted to cut out?
3. What do you admire most about Ebed-Melech?
4. Who do you know who might be stuck in a pit right now? How could you help?

TRY THIS *This week, be an Ebed-Melech. Notice someone who is hurting or left out, and do one specific, thoughtful kindness for them.*

CHAPTER 8

Nations and One Quiet Spark

Jeremiah 46–52

Remember what God said when He called Jeremiah? “I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Chapters 46 through 51 are Jeremiah’s messages to those nations: Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Kedar, Elam, and finally, at great length, Babylon.

These chapters show that God isn’t just the God of one small nation. He’s King over every empire. Egypt, which Judah kept trusting for help, would be defeated. Moab’s pride would be humbled. And even Babylon, the empire God used to judge Judah, would one day fall.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Battle of Carchemish**

Jeremiah 46 describes a famous battle in 605 BC at Carchemish, on the Euphrates River in modern-day Turkey. The Egyptian army, led by Pharaoh Neco, faced the Babylonian army, led by young crown prince Nebuchadnezzar. Babylon won decisively, and from then on, it was the region’s superpower. Babylonian records, called the Babylonian Chronicles, also describe this battle. It was one of the turning points of ancient history, and Jeremiah saw what it meant before most people did.

REAL TALK **Caring About the World**

Jeremiah’s messages to the nations show that God cares about what happens everywhere, not just to His own people. He notices pride, cruelty, and injustice in every nation, and He also offers mercy to every nation. You can

care about the world too, by praying for countries in the news, learning about people who are suffering, supporting those who help refugees and the poor, and remembering that God loves people of every nation. The gospel is for the whole world.

The messages to the nations also contain surprising notes of mercy. God says He will restore the fortunes of Moab, Ammon, and Elam in the latter days. Even nations under judgment aren't beyond His mercy.

The longest message is against Babylon. God says Babylon will be judged for its pride and cruelty. In chapter 51, Jeremiah wrote all the messages against Babylon on a scroll and gave it to an official named Seraiah, Baruch's brother, who was traveling to Babylon. He told Seraiah to read the scroll aloud there, then tie a stone to it and throw it into the Euphrates River, saying, Thus will Babylon sink, and will not rise again.

REAL TALK **No Empire Lasts Forever**

Babylon seemed unstoppable. It was the most powerful nation on earth. But within seventy years, it fell to the Persians in a single night. Every superpower in history, from Assyria to Rome, eventually fell. That's a reminder that no human power, whether a government, a company, a celebrity, or a social media platform, lasts forever. Only God's kingdom is eternal. You don't have to be intimidated by powerful people or systems. And you don't have to put your ultimate trust in them either.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Edom and Moab**

Moab and Edom were neighbors of Israel with long, complicated histories. The Moabites were descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew. Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David, was a Moabite. The Edomites were descendants of Esau, Jacob's twin brother. Both nations often fought with Israel, and Edom especially was remembered for cheering when Jerusalem fell. Jeremiah's messages condemn their pride and cruelty. Yet God's promise to

restore Moab in the latter days echoes the story of Ruth, a Moabite welcomed into God's family.

Chapter 51 ends with the words, "Thus far are the words of Jeremiah." Then chapter 52 adds a historical appendix, written by someone else, describing the fall of Jerusalem again, almost exactly as 2 Kings 25 tells it. It describes the burning of the temple, the bronze pillars broken into pieces, the temple treasures carried off, and the leaders executed.

It would be easy to end there, in the ashes. But the book of Jeremiah ends with a strange, quiet scene.

Thirty-seven years after King Jehoiachin was taken to Babylon as a young man, a new Babylonian king named Evil-Merodach came to the throne. And he did something unexpected. He released Jehoiachin from prison. "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."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jehoiachin's Rations**

Archaeologists excavating Babylon found clay tablets listing food rations given to prisoners and foreigners living in the royal court. Several tablets, dated to the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, mention Ya'ukin, king of the land of Yahud, along with his five sons, receiving rations of oil. Ya'ukin is the Babylonian form of Jehoiachin, and Yahud is Judah. It's a fascinating real-world glimpse of the king whose release ends the book of Jeremiah.

Why end the book this way? Because it's a spark of hope. Jehoiachin was a descendant of King David. God had promised David that his family would rule forever. When Jerusalem fell, it looked like that promise was dead. But here, at the very end, David's heir is alive, out of prison, wearing new clothes, and eating at the king's table.

It's a small thing. But it's a sign that God hasn't forgotten His promise.

> **REAL TALK** **Small Signs of Hope**
>
> Sometimes hope doesn't arrive as a big, dramatic rescue. Sometimes it's a small sign: a kind word, a door opening a crack, a friend showing up, a good day after many bad ones. Jeremiah ends with that kind of hope. The exile wasn't over. The temple was still in ruins. But a prisoner had been given a seat at the table. If you're in a hard season, look for those small signs. They're often God's way of saying, I'm still here, and I'm not done.

> **REAL TALK** **God's Timing**
>
> Jehoiachin waited thirty-seven years in prison. The exiles waited seventy years. God's people waited six centuries for the New Covenant to arrive. God's timing often feels slow. But it's never late. If you're waiting for something, an answered prayer, a change in your family, a healing, or a hope, Jeremiah's story is a reminder that God keeps His promises in His time. Keep trusting. Keep praying. Keep living faithfully while you wait.

Jeremiah's life seemed like a failure in many ways. Hardly anyone listened. He was rejected, imprisoned, and dragged to Egypt. He never saw the exiles return. But his words were preserved, copied, and read for thousands of years. Daniel read them in Babylon and prayed. The exiles held on to them. And six hundred years later, Jesus took a cup at a table and quoted Jeremiah's greatest promise. Faithfulness is never wasted, even when you can't see the results.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Book of Lamentations**
>
> Right after Jeremiah in most Bibles comes Lamentations, five sad poems about the destruction of Jerusalem. Jewish and Christian tradition have long linked them to Jeremiah, though the book itself doesn't name its author. Lamentations is raw with grief, but in its center is one of the most hopeful passages in Scripture, saying that God's loving kindness never ceases and His

> mercies are new every morning. Great is His faithfulness. Even in the ashes of Jerusalem, hope survived.

The end of Jeremiah connects with the end of 2 Kings, which closes with the very same scene. Both books leave the story unfinished, with David's heir eating at a foreign king's table, waiting. The next part of the story would come with the return from exile, told in Ezra and Nehemiah. And the final chapter would come centuries later, when a descendant of David, born in Bethlehem, would invite people to eat at His own table and say, This cup is the new covenant in my blood.

> **REAL TALK** **A Seat at the Table**
>
> Jehoiachin had been a prisoner for thirty-seven years. Then, suddenly, he was given new clothes and a seat at the king's table for the rest of his life. That's a picture of grace. He didn't earn it. It was given. The gospel offers something even better. Jesus invites sinners, outsiders, and people who feel like prisoners of their past to sit at His table, to be clothed in His righteousness, and to belong. You don't have to earn your seat. It's been prepared for you.

Jeremiah's story also shows that God keeps working even when His people fail. The kings failed. The priests failed. The prophets failed. The people failed. Even the remnant that survived the fall of Jerusalem disobeyed. And yet God kept His promises. He preserved a remnant. He brought exiles home. He kept David's line alive. And eventually, He sent the Branch, the King who would never fail. God's faithfulness doesn't depend on ours.

> **REAL TALK** **Faithfulness Without Applause**
>
> Jeremiah never had a big success story in his lifetime. No revival broke out because of his preaching. No king repented. Most people ignored him. Yet today he's one of the most respected figures in the Bible. Faithfulness often goes unseen. The friend who keeps showing up, the student who keeps doing

the right thing, the young person who keeps praying for their family, none of them may get applause. But God sees. And like Jeremiah, your faithfulness may matter far more than you'll ever know in this life.

KEY VERSE

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.

Jeremiah 52:32–33 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the book of Jeremiah includes so many messages to other nations?
2. What powerful people or systems are you tempted to fear or trust too much?
3. Why is Jehoiachin's release such a meaningful ending to Jeremiah?
4. What small signs of hope have you seen in a hard season?

TRY THIS *Keep a hope journal this week. Each day, write down one small sign of God's faithfulness, even if it seems tiny.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Jeremiah spent his life watching his people break their covenant with God, and he wept over his city as it fell. But in the middle of the ruins, God gave him a promise: a New Covenant. Not written on stone tablets this time, but on human hearts. A covenant where everyone, from the least to the greatest, would know God personally. A covenant where God says, "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Jewish readers treasure Jeremiah as the faithful prophet who suffered with his people and pointed to God's unbreakable love. About six hundred years later, Jesus sat at a table with His disciples on the night before He died. He took a cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." Every one of His disciples was Jewish, and they would have known exactly what promise He was naming. The letter to the Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31 in full and says Jesus is "the mediator of a better covenant." And like Jeremiah, Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Luke writes, "When he came near, he saw the city and wept over it." Some people even thought Jesus was Jeremiah come back. But Jesus did what Jeremiah never could. Jeremiah could warn people and weep for them. Jesus died for them, rose again, and sent His Spirit to write God's law on their hearts.

Here's what that means for you, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. Before He formed you in the womb, He knew 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 sinned.

Jeremiah says the human heart is deceitful above all 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 holy, 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 made the New Covenant.

Jesus poured out His blood to make the New Covenant Jeremiah promised. He died for our sins and rose again, so God remembers our sin no more.

> *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live to righteousness. You were healed by his wounds.* **1 Peter 2:24 (WEB)**

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

The New Covenant is God's promise, not our achievement. 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 with all your heart.

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. God told the exiles, You will seek me and find me, when you search for me with all your heart. You can talk to God right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, You knew me before I was born. I've tried to fill my life with broken cisterns, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus poured out His blood to make a New Covenant, and that He rose again. Forgive me, and remember my sin no more. Write Your ways on my heart, and help me know You for real. When I feel too young or too afraid, remind me that You are with 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 Jeremiah 1 and 31, then Luke 22 and Hebrews 8, and see the New Covenant from both sides.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized, and when you take communion, remember the New Covenant.

Find your Baruch. Ask God for one faithful friend who will stand with you, 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. Jeremiah argued with God for years. Keep asking questions. Keep reading. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Jeremiah is right, God has thoughts of peace toward you, and He wants to write His love on your heart.

Ah Lord GOD! Behold, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for you.

Jeremiah 32:17 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

The King Whose Mercies Are New

Lamentations, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Whose Mercies Are New: The Book of Lamentations, Unfiltered

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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

Lamentations is the saddest book in the Bible. It's five poems written after the worst disaster in Israel's history, when Jerusalem was burned, the temple was destroyed, and thousands of people were killed or dragged away as captives. It's full of tears, ruins, hunger, and hard questions.

So why would anyone want to read it? Because sooner or later, everyone faces grief. Someone you love dies. Your family breaks apart. A friendship ends. You move away from everything you know. Or you just wake up one morning feeling heavy and empty, and you can't explain why. When that happens, a lot of people think they have to hide their sadness, especially from God.

Lamentations says the opposite. It shows that God has room for your tears in His book. It gives you words when you don't have any. And right in the middle of all that darkness, it holds one of the most hopeful lines ever written: His mercies are new every morning.

Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Lamentations in five chapters, one for each of its five poems: how lonely sits the city (Lamentations 1), pour out your heart like water (2), great is your faithfulness (3), how the gold has become dim (4), and restore us, LORD (5).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what happened in 586 BC, how these poems were built letter by letter,

who may have written them, and how Jewish communities still read them today. 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 talk over with someone you trust; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as who wrote Lamentations, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Lamentations 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 twenty-fifth 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, and gently, with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Lamentations is a book of grief, and this book treats it that way. It explains the historical setting, the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, and the careful acrostic structure of the poems, which gives shape to overwhelming sorrow. It presents authorship views fairly: the poems are anonymous, though tradition links them to Jeremiah.

Because Lamentations describes the horrors of war and siege, some verses are very difficult. This book handles them honestly but without graphic detail, including Lamentations 4:10, which is described only in general terms. A compassionate Real Talk box on grief and depression in chapter 3 encourages readers to talk to a trusted adult or counselor and lists 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Other boxes address loss, lament as prayer, comforting grieving friends, and hope that doesn't deny pain.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, wept over Jerusalem, took the ashes of sin on the cross, and rose at dawn with mercies new every morning, while respecting

that Jewish readers treasure Lamentations in their own rich ways, reading it each year on Tisha B'Av. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

Some readers may be carrying fresh grief as they read. The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion, and they may be best talked through with a parent or trusted leader. Don't rush anyone toward the happy ending. Lamentations doesn't.

My prayer is that every reader will learn to bring their sorrow to God, and will find that His mercies really are new every morning.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Happened in 586 BC

For about a year and a half, the Babylonian army surrounded Jerusalem. No food could get in. People starved. Then, in the summer of 586 BC, the walls were broken through. The Babylonians captured the king, burned the temple Solomon had built nearly four hundred years earlier, burned the palace and the houses, and tore down the city walls. Thousands died, and most of the survivors were marched hundreds of miles to Babylon as captives. The prophets, especially Jeremiah, had warned for decades that this would happen if the people kept turning from God. Now it had. Lamentations is what grief sounds like the day after.

Five Funeral Poems

Lamentations is made of five poems, one per chapter. In Hebrew, the book is called Eikhah, which means How! or Alas!, the first word of chapters 1, 2, and 4. It was a cry people used at funerals. Many of the poems use a limping rhythm called the qinah meter, in which each line has a longer first half and a shorter second half, like a sob catching in your throat. These poems are funeral songs, not for a person, but for a whole city.

A to Z Grief

Four of the five poems are acrostics. That means each verse, or group of verses, begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which has twenty-two letters. Chapters 1, 2, and 4 have twenty-two

verses, one for each letter. Chapter 3 is a triple acrostic, with sixty-six verses, three for each letter. Chapter 5 has twenty-two verses but isn't an acrostic. Why write grief in alphabetical order? Some think it was a way to say, We're grieving from A to Z, completely. Others think it helped people memorize the poems. Many readers see something else too: when grief feels chaotic and endless, giving it a shape helps. The alphabet puts a boundary around sorrow. It has a beginning, and it has an end.

Who Wrote It?

Lamentations doesn't name its author. Jewish and Christian tradition have long said that Jeremiah wrote it. The Greek translation adds a note at the beginning saying Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented over Jerusalem, and Second Chronicles mentions Jeremiah writing laments. Jeremiah witnessed the fall of Jerusalem, and many phrases in Lamentations sound like him. Many scholars today think the poems were written by one or more other eyewitnesses, pointing to differences in style and to lines that seem to praise people Jeremiah opposed. Christians hold different views on this, and the book's message doesn't depend on settling it. Either way, these are the words of someone who saw it all and wept.

Tisha B'Av

Jewish communities still read Lamentations every year on Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, usually in late July or August. It's a day of mourning and fasting that remembers the destruction of the first temple by Babylon in 586 BC and the second temple by Rome in AD 70, along with other tragedies in Jewish history. On that evening, many synagogues dim the lights, people sit on the floor or on low stools like mourners, and Lamentations is

chanted to a slow, sorrowful melody. It's a powerful example of a community grieving together, honestly, before God.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Lamentations 1): How lonely sits the city.

Chapter 2 (Lamentations 2): Pour out your heart like water.

Chapter 3 (Lamentations 3): Great is your faithfulness.

Chapter 4 (Lamentations 4): How the gold has become dim.

Chapter 5 (Lamentations 5): Restore us, LORD.

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1 How Lonely Sits the City 1

2 Pour Out Your Heart Like Water 2

3 Great Is Your Faithfulness 3

4 How the Gold Has Become Dim 4

5 Restore Us, LORD 5

Where This Points 6

CHAPTER 1

How Lonely Sits the City

Lamentations 1

Lamentations begins with a cry. In Hebrew, the first word is eikhah, How! It's the sound someone makes at a funeral when the shock finally hits. "How the city sits solitary, that was full of people! She has become as a widow, who was great among the nations!"

The poet pictures Jerusalem as a woman. Once she was a princess, full of life, noise, and people. Now she sits alone, like a widow who has lost everything. "She weeps bitterly in the night. Her tears are on her cheeks. Among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Daughter Zion**
>
> Throughout Lamentations, Jerusalem is pictured as a woman, often called the daughter of Zion. Zion was the hill where the temple stood, and the name came to stand for the whole city and its people. Picturing the city as a grieving woman makes the loss personal. It's not just buildings that were destroyed. It's a family, a home, a community, and a life. The poet sometimes speaks about her, and sometimes she speaks for herself.

The phrase no one to comfort her shows up again and again in chapter 1, five times in all. That's the deepest pain of grief. Not just the loss itself, but the loneliness that comes with it. Jerusalem's lovers, the foreign nations she trusted instead of God, had abandoned her. Her friends had turned into enemies.

The poem walks through the ruins. The roads to Zion are empty, because no one comes to the festivals anymore. The gates are deserted. The priests groan. The young women grieve. The children have been taken away as captives. The leaders are like deer that can't find pasture, running away exhausted.

> **REAL TALK** **Grief Is Real**
>
> Grief is what we feel when we lose something or someone we love. It can come from a death, a move, a breakup, a divorce, a lost friendship, a serious illness, or a dream that didn't come true. Grief doesn't follow a schedule. It can show up as sadness, anger, numbness, tiredness, trouble sleeping, or not wanting to be around people. Sometimes it comes back suddenly, triggered by a song, a smell, or a date on the calendar. All of that is normal. Lamentations shows that grief deserves to be taken seriously, not rushed or hidden.

Lamentations doesn't pretend the disaster came out of nowhere. The poet is honest about why it happened. "Jerusalem has grievously sinned." The city had ignored God's warnings for generations. Prophets like Jeremiah had pleaded with the people to turn back from idols and injustice, and they had refused.

But notice something. The poet doesn't say, They deserved it, so stop crying. He holds both truths together. Yes, we sinned. And yes, this hurts terribly. Confession and grief sit side by side.

Halfway through the poem, Jerusalem herself begins to speak. And she says one of the most heartbreaking lines in the Bible. "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look, and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow."

People were walking past the ruins without stopping. Nobody seemed to care. That's one of the loneliest feelings in the world, when you're falling apart and everyone else just keeps scrolling.

REAL TALK **Is It Nothing to You?**

When someone you know is grieving, it's easy to walk past. Maybe you don't know what to say, so you say nothing. Maybe it feels awkward. But Jerusalem's cry is a reminder that people who are hurting notice when others ignore them. You don't need perfect words. You can say, I'm so sorry. I'm thinking about you. Can I sit with you? You can send a text, bring a snack, or just show up. Paul wrote, "Weep with those who weep." Being present matters more than being eloquent.

Jerusalem keeps speaking. "For these things I weep. My eye, my eye runs down with water, because the comforter who should refresh my soul is far from me." And then she does something brave. She takes responsibility. "The LORD is righteous, for I have rebelled against his commandment."

She doesn't blame God for being unfair. She admits her own sin. But she also asks God to see her pain. "Look, LORD; for I am in distress. My heart is troubled. My heart turns over within me, for I have grievously rebelled."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Confession in Lamentations**

Confession means telling the truth about what you've done wrong. Lamentations is full of it. The poet doesn't say every sad thing in life is a punishment for sin. Many people suffer for reasons that have nothing to do with their own choices, as Job and Jesus Himself show. But in this case, the fall of Jerusalem had been clearly warned about for years as the consequence of the nation's unfaithfulness. So the poems mix grief with honest confession, and they bring both to God.

REAL TALK **Not Every Sorrow Is Your Fault**

Lamentations describes a disaster that came because of a nation's sin. But please don't take that to mean that every bad thing in your life is your fault, or a punishment from God. If a parent left, if someone died, if you've been hurt or abused, if you're struggling with depression or anxiety, that is not God

punishing you. Jesus said that a man who was born blind was not suffering because of anyone's sin. Sometimes we need to confess. Sometimes we simply need to grieve. God welcomes both.

Chapter 1 ends without a happy resolution. Jerusalem is still crying, still alone, still asking God to see. But here's what's remarkable: she's talking to God. Even in the ruins, even feeling abandoned, she turns toward Him. That's where lament begins.

REAL TALK **Why Write Grief Down?**

The poet of Lamentations didn't just feel his grief. He wrote it down, carefully, letter by letter. Many counselors today recommend something similar. Writing about what hurts can help you understand your feelings, notice patterns, and release some of the pressure inside. You don't have to write poetry. You can keep a journal, write a letter to someone you've lost, or make a list of what you miss. Some people write their prayers. Others draw. Whatever you choose, putting grief into words is one way of giving it shape, just as the alphabet gave shape to Lamentations.

KEY VERSE

"Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look, and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which is brought on me, with which the LORD has afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger.

Lamentations 1:12 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the poet keeps repeating that Jerusalem had no one to comfort her?
2. Have you ever felt like people were walking past your pain? What did you need from them?
3. What's the difference between grief and confession? How can they go together?
4. Who in your life might be grieving right now?

TRY THIS *Think of someone who is grieving or going through something hard. This week, reach out to them with a simple message, a note, or a visit, just to say you care.*

CHAPTER 2

Pour Out Your Heart Like Water

Lamentations 2

The second poem is even more intense than the first. It begins with the same cry, How! And then it describes the disaster from a different angle: as an act of God's discipline. "How has the Lord covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in his anger!"

That's hard to read. The poet says that God Himself had acted like an enemy. He had torn down the walls, rejected His altar, and abandoned His temple. The festivals and Sabbaths were forgotten. The king and priests were gone. The prophets received no visions from God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **God's Discipline**

Lamentations 2 describes the fall of Jerusalem as God's judgment. That can be uncomfortable. But it helps to remember the bigger story. For centuries, God had made a covenant with Israel. He had promised blessing for faithfulness and warned of exile for persistent rebellion. Through prophet after prophet, He had pleaded with His people to turn back. Lamentations 2:17 says, "The LORD has done that which he planned. He has fulfilled his word that he commanded in the days of old." In other words, this was not God losing His temper. It was God keeping His word, after long patience. And as the next poem will say, God does not afflict willingly. His discipline aims at restoration.

Then the poet's own heart breaks. "My eyes fail with tears. My heart is troubled." What breaks him most is seeing the children. Little ones were fainting from hunger in the streets, asking their mothers for bread, and there was none.

Then the poet speaks to Jerusalem directly, like a friend trying to find the right words at a funeral. "What shall I compare to you, that I may comfort you, virgin daughter of Zion? For your breach is as big as the sea. Who can heal you?" Her wound was as big as the ocean. No ordinary comfort could cover it.

> **REAL TALK** **When There Are No Words**
>
> Sometimes grief is so big that there's nothing anyone can say to fix it. The poet of Lamentations knew that. He asked, What can I compare you to? Who can heal you? It's okay to admit that you don't have the right words for someone who is hurting, or that nothing anyone says is helping you. Job's friends did the best thing they ever did in the first seven days, when they just sat with him in silence. Sometimes presence is the only comfort there is. And sometimes the deepest healing takes a long time.

Then the poet points to one of the reasons this disaster happened. "Your prophets have seen false and foolish visions for you. They have not uncovered your iniquity, to reverse your captivity."

The false prophets had a chance to warn the people. Their job was to uncover sin, to bring it into the open so people could turn back and be saved. Instead, they covered it up. They told people what they wanted to hear. Peace, peace, when there was no peace, as Jeremiah said. And because they hid the truth, the people never turned back.

> **REAL TALK** **People Who Tell You the Truth**
>
> The false prophets in Lamentations 2 did the opposite of what love does. Love sometimes tells you hard things, because it wants you to be okay. A good

friend might say, I'm worried about you, or, I don't think that's a good idea. A parent might set a rule you don't like because they see danger you don't. A counselor might help you face something you've been avoiding. Those conversations can be uncomfortable. But people who only tell you what you want to hear aren't always your real friends. Value the people who love you enough to be honest.

People passing by mocked the ruined city. They clapped their hands, hissed, and shook their heads, saying, Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty? Enemies gloated. And the poet admits that it all happened just as God had warned.

But then comes a turn. The poet tells the city's walls to weep, day and night. And then he says something that has given words to grieving people for thousands of years. "Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches! Pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord. Lift up your hands toward him for the life of your young children."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Night Watches**

In the ancient world, the night was divided into watches, shifts when guards stayed awake to protect the city. At the beginning of the watches meant at the start of each shift, all night long. The poet is saying, Don't stop praying. Cry out to God every few hours, through the whole night. It's a picture of desperate, persistent prayer. Jesus told a parable about a widow who kept coming to a judge until he answered, to teach His disciples that they should always pray and not give up.

Pour out your heart like water. Think about what that means. When you pour out a glass of water, you don't hold anything back. It all comes out. The poet says, Bring everything to God: your tears, your fear, your anger, your questions, your sorrow for others. Don't hold back. Don't clean it up. Pour it all out before Him.

> **REAL TALK** **Lament Is Prayer**
>
> A lament is a prayer that cries out to God in pain. About a third of the Psalms are laments, and Lamentations is a whole book of them. Laments usually include honest complaint, a request for help, and some kind of trust, even if it's small. Many people think they need to be calm and positive when they pray. But the Bible shows that God welcomes honest sorrow. You can tell Him, This hurts. I don't understand. Why did this happen? Where are You? That isn't a lack of faith. It's faith that refuses to stop talking to God, even when it hurts. Try writing your own lament sometime. You might be surprised how much it helps.

The poem ends with Jerusalem crying out to God, asking Him to look at what has happened. It's raw and unfinished. But the poet has shown us the way forward: not running from God, but pouring out our hearts to Him.

KEY VERSE

Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches!
Pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord.
Lift up your hands toward him for the life of your young
children, who faint for hunger at the head of every street.

Lamentations 2:19 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Lamentations is honest about God's discipline instead of hiding it?
2. What does it mean that the false prophets didn't uncover sin? Why was that so harmful?
3. What would it look like for you to pour out your heart like water before God?
4. Why do you think the Bible includes so many prayers of lament?

TRY THIS *Write your own lament. Tell God honestly what hurts, ask Him for help, and end with one sentence of trust, even if it's small.*

CHAPTER 3

Great Is Your Faithfulness

Lamentations 3

The third poem is the longest and most personal. It's a triple acrostic: sixty-six verses, three for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. And it starts at the very bottom. "I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath."

The speaker is an individual now, not the city. He describes feeling like God has led him into darkness. Like he's been walled in, chained, and trapped. Like his prayers bounce off the ceiling. Like a bear or a lion is waiting for him. Like he's being used as target practice. He says God has filled him with bitterness and covered him with ashes.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Is the Man?**
>
> Readers have wondered who the man in Lamentations 3 is. Some think it's Jeremiah, describing his own suffering, which included being beaten, imprisoned, and thrown into a muddy cistern. Others think the poet is speaking for the whole community, as if Jerusalem were one person. Others think it's a representative sufferer, someone whose story many people could see themselves in. Whatever the original meaning, millions of readers have found their own feelings in his words. Many Christians also hear in him a faint echo of the Servant in Isaiah, who suffered and was then lifted up.

Then he describes what this feels like. “You have removed my soul far away from peace. I forgot prosperity. I said, My strength has perished, along with my expectation from the LORD.”

He can’t remember what it was like to be happy. He’s lost his strength and his hope. And then, “Remember my affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the bitterness. My soul still remembers them, and is bowed down within me.” Wormwood is a bitter plant. His whole life tastes bitter, and his soul is bent over with the weight of it.

REAL TALK **Grief, Depression, and Getting Help**

The man in Lamentations 3 describes something many people know: darkness that won’t lift, feeling trapped, losing strength and hope, and forgetting what it was like to be happy. That might be grief. It might also be depression, a real health condition that affects how you think, feel, sleep, and eat, and it isn’t a sign of weak faith or a character flaw. If you’ve felt down, numb, hopeless, or exhausted most days for a couple of weeks or more, or if you’ve lost interest in things you used to enjoy, please talk to someone. Tell a parent, school counselor, pastor, coach, or doctor. A counselor or therapist can help, and sometimes a doctor can too. Getting help is a sign of strength and wisdom. If you’re having thoughts of hurting yourself or ending your life, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. If you’re in immediate danger, call 911. The man in Lamentations 3 found hope. You can too, and you don’t have to find it alone.

And then, right in the middle of the poem, right in the middle of the whole book, something changes. Not his circumstances. His thinking.

“This I recall to my mind; therefore I have hope.”

He doesn't feel better yet. Nothing outside him has changed. But he remembers something. He calls it to mind on purpose. And what he remembers gives him hope.

"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."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hesed**

The phrase loving kindnesses translates the Hebrew word hesed. It's one of the most important words in the Old Testament, and it's hard to translate with just one English word. Hesed means steadfast, loyal, covenant love, the kind of love that keeps its promises no matter what. It's the love of someone who says, I'm not going anywhere. The poet says it's because of God's hesed that the people haven't been completely destroyed. Even in judgment, God's covenant love was holding them. The word mercies here is related to the Hebrew word for womb, suggesting the tender compassion of a mother.

Notice where this verse appears. Lamentations has five poems. This is the third, the middle one. And within chapter 3, these verses come right at the center. Surrounded by ruins, hunger, tears, and darkness on every side, the heart of the book is a glowing ember of hope. It doesn't deny the darkness. It shines in the middle of it.

REAL TALK **New Every Morning**

God's mercies are new every morning. That means yesterday's failures don't use them up. You can't run out of God's mercy. Every morning, there's a fresh supply. If you messed up yesterday, if you had a terrible day, if you went to bed crying, the morning brings new mercy. It doesn't mean your problems disappear overnight. But it means God meets you again, every single day, with steadfast love. The famous hymn Great Is Thy Faithfulness, written in 1923, is based on these verses. Many people sing it at funerals, because it holds grief and hope together.

The poet keeps going. "The LORD is my portion, says my soul. Therefore I will hope in him." A portion was an inheritance, your share of land or goods. He's lost everything else. But he still has God. And that's enough to hope.

"The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that a man should hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD." Sometimes faith looks like waiting, quietly, trusting that God will act.

Then he says something tender about God's heart. "For the Lord will not cast off forever. For though he causes grief, yet he will have compassion according to the multitude of his loving kindnesses. For he does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Not From His Heart**
>
> The phrase he does not afflict willingly is literally, he does not afflict from his heart. God's discipline was real, but it didn't come from a heart that enjoyed causing pain. It came from a heart of love that wanted His people back. That's a crucial truth for anyone who wonders whether God is cruel. Lamentations insists that God's compassion is deeper than His anger, and that His anger has a limit, while His steadfast love doesn't.

The rest of the poem moves between hope and pain. The poet calls the people to examine their ways and return to God. He describes being trapped in a pit, with water closing over his head, sure he was about to die. But then: "I called on your name, LORD, out of the lowest dungeon. You heard my voice." "You came near in the day that I called on you. You said, Don't be afraid."

From the lowest pit, God came near.

REAL TALK **Hope Is Something You Do**

Look at how hope came to the man in Lamentations 3. He didn't wait until he felt hopeful. He called something to mind on purpose. He chose to remember who God is, even while everything still hurt. Hope in the Bible isn't wishful thinking or pretending to be okay. It's holding on to what God has promised, even in the dark. Some days, all you can do is remember one true thing about God. That counts. Write down times God has been faithful to you or to people you know, and look back at that list when the darkness comes.

KEY VERSE

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.

Lamentations 3:22–23 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What do you think the poet called to mind that gave him hope?
2. Why does it matter that the book's greatest hope appears right in the middle of its darkest poems?
3. How does it change your day to know God's mercies are new every morning?
4. What would it look like for the LORD to be your portion?

TRY THIS *Write Lamentations 3:22-23 on a sticky note and put it where you'll see it first thing each morning. Every day this week, read it before you look at your phone.*

CHAPTER 4

How the Gold Has Become Dim

Lamentations 4

The fourth poem begins with the same funeral cry. “How the gold has become dim! The most pure gold has changed! The stones of the sanctuary are poured out at the head of every street.”

Gold doesn’t tarnish. That’s part of what makes it valuable. But the poet says Jerusalem’s gold had gone dull. The holy stones of the temple were scattered in the streets like rubble. And then he explains what he really means. “The precious sons of Zion, comparable to fine gold, how they are esteemed as earthen pitchers, the work of the hands of the potter!”

The real treasure of the city wasn’t its buildings. It was its people. And now those precious people were being treated like cheap clay pots, used and thrown away.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Clay Pots**
>
> In the ancient world, clay pots were everyday objects. They were cheap, easy to make, and easy to replace. When one broke, people tossed it and got another. Archaeologists find broken pottery, called potsherds, almost everywhere in Israel. The poet is saying the people of Jerusalem, who were worth more than gold, were being treated as if they were disposable. That’s what war does. It treats human beings as if they don’t matter. But to God, every person is precious.

Chapter 4 is the poem that looks most directly at the human cost of war. The poet describes what the siege did to ordinary people, especially the most vulnerable. “The tongue of the nursing child clings to the roof of his mouth for thirst. The young children ask for bread, and no one breaks it for them.”

People who had once eaten fancy food were now starving in the streets. Those who had worn fine clothes were digging through trash heaps. The city’s princes, who had once looked healthy and strong, were so thin that nobody recognized them. The poet even says that those who died quickly in battle were better off than those who slowly starved.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What a Siege Was Like**
>
> A siege happened when an army surrounded a walled city and cut it off from the outside world. No food, supplies, or help could get in. The attackers simply waited until the people inside grew too weak to resist. Jerusalem’s siege lasted about eighteen months. As food ran out, prices soared, people grew desperate, and disease spread. Second Kings says that by the end, there was no bread for the people. Ancient sieges were among the most terrible experiences human beings could go through.

Verse 10 describes something so terrible that it’s hard even to talk about. It records that, in the worst moments of the famine, some starving people did unthinkable things that no one should ever have to imagine. The poet mentions it only briefly, and we don’t need the details. What matters is what it tells us: the siege pushed human beings to the very edge, beyond anything they could ever have imagined doing. Moses had warned centuries earlier that such horrors could happen if the people abandoned God and faced the full consequences of war.

REAL TALK **When the News Is Too Much**

Lamentations 4 describes real horrors. Today, through phones and screens, you might see images of war, disasters, or violence from all over the world, often without warning. It's normal to feel sad, scared, angry, or overwhelmed by it. It's also okay to take breaks from the news and social media when it becomes too much. Talk with a parent or trusted adult about what you've seen and how it makes you feel. You can pray for people who are suffering, and you might find a way to help, like giving to a relief organization. Lamentations shows that caring deeply about other people's suffering is part of loving God's world.

Why does the Bible include something so painful? Maybe because God refuses to look away from human suffering. Lamentations doesn't turn war into a heroic adventure or reduce victims to a number. It names the cost. It grieves for the children. It insists that every person was precious. And in doing so, it reminds us that God sees every single person who suffers, even the ones the rest of the world forgets.

The poet also returns to the question of why this happened. "The LORD has accomplished his wrath. He has poured out his fierce anger. He has kindled a fire in Zion, which has devoured its foundations." And he names those responsible: the prophets and priests who had shed innocent blood. The leaders who should have protected the people had betrayed them instead.

Even the king, whom the people had trusted to protect them, was captured. The poet calls him "the breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the LORD." They had thought they would live safely under his shadow. But King Zedekiah was caught while trying to escape.

REAL TALK **When Leaders Fail**

In Lamentations 4, the prophets, priests, and king all failed the people they were supposed to protect. Sadly, that still happens. Sometimes leaders, including parents, coaches, teachers, or church leaders, misuse their power or hurt the people in their care. If an adult is hurting you, threatening you, or making you feel unsafe, it's not your fault, and you don't have to keep it secret. Tell a trusted adult who will listen and act. You can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453 any time. If you're in immediate danger, call 911. God cares deeply about people who are harmed by those who should have protected them.

But chapter 4 ends with a surprising glimmer. In the last verse, the poet speaks to Jerusalem: "The punishment of your iniquity is accomplished, daughter of Zion. He will no more carry you away into captivity."

The punishment is complete. It has an end. The exile won't last forever. And the poet says that Edom, the neighboring nation that had cheered when Jerusalem fell, would face justice too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Edom**

Edom was a nation southeast of Judah, descended from Esau, Jacob's brother. That made the Edomites relatives of Israel. But when Babylon attacked Jerusalem, Edom celebrated, and some Edomites even helped capture fleeing survivors. The tiny book of Obadiah condemns Edom for this, saying they should not have looked down on their brother in the day of his misfortune. Lamentations 4:21-22 promises that Edom's cruelty would not go unanswered.

Like the gold that was dimmed, the people of Jerusalem had been treated as worthless. But God hadn't stopped seeing their worth. Their suffering had a limit. And their story wasn't over.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fair Questions: Does God Cause Every Disaster?**

Lamentations describes the fall of Jerusalem as God's judgment, because the prophets had clearly warned about it for years as the result of the covenant being broken. But Christians are careful not to assume that every war, earthquake, or tragedy today is a direct punishment for a specific sin. Jesus warned against that assumption when He talked about people killed when a tower fell in Siloam, asking whether they were worse sinners than everyone else, and answering no. Christians hold a range of views on how God's sovereignty and human evil fit together. But all agree on this: God hates evil, grieves over suffering, and will one day set everything right.

KEY VERSE

The punishment of your iniquity is accomplished, daughter of Zion. He will no more carry you away into captivity.

Lamentations 4:22 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What do you think the poet meant by comparing the people to gold and clay pots?
2. Why do you think the Bible includes such painful descriptions of war?
3. How can you care about people suffering in the world without being overwhelmed?
4. Why is it significant that chapter 4 ends by saying the punishment is complete?

TRY THIS *Pray this week for one place in the world affected by war or disaster. If you can, talk with your family about one practical way to help.*

CHAPTER 5

Restore Us, LORD

Lamentations 5

The fifth poem is different from the other four. It still has twenty-two verses, the same number as the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. But it isn't an acrostic. The verses don't begin with the letters in order. And it's much shorter, with brief lines rather than the long, limping lines of the earlier poems.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Chapter 5 Breaks the Pattern**
>
> Why would the poet drop the acrostic in the last poem? No one knows for sure, and scholars offer different explanations. Some think the pattern breaks because the grief has become too much to hold in order. The structure collapses, like the city did. Others think the final poem was written by someone else or meant to be used differently, as a community prayer. Others notice that keeping twenty-two verses still gives it a sense of completeness, even without the alphabet. Many readers see the change as meaningful: the earlier poems describe the disaster; this one turns entirely to God in prayer. It's no longer a funeral song. It's a plea.

The prayer begins, "Remember, LORD, what has come on us. Look, and see our reproach." This is the whole community speaking now, using the word we. They describe their lives after the disaster. Their land has been given to foreigners. "We are orphans and fatherless. Our mothers are as widows." They have to pay for their own water

and firewood. They work like slaves. They risk their lives just to get bread.

They admit, "Our fathers sinned, and are no more. We have borne their iniquities." The generation that had refused to listen to the prophets was gone, and their children were left to live with the consequences.

> **REAL TALK** **Living With Someone Else's Choices**
>
> Sometimes you have to live with the results of choices other people made: a parent's divorce, a family's money problems, a sibling's addiction, a move you didn't choose. That can feel deeply unfair, and Lamentations 5 doesn't pretend it isn't. The good news is that the Bible also says each person is responsible for their own choices before God. Ezekiel 18 makes that clear. You don't have to repeat the past. With God's help, you can start something new. And if you're struggling with what's happening at home, please talk with a trusted adult, a school counselor, or a pastor. You don't have to carry it alone.

The poem describes how life had fallen apart. Elders no longer sat at the city gate. Young men no longer played music. "The joy of our heart has ceased. Our dance is turned into mourning. The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned!"

And then, after all that loss, the community looks up. "You, LORD, remain forever. Your throne is from generation to generation."

Everything else had fallen. The city, the temple, the king, the crown. But God hadn't. His throne was still standing. That's the solid ground they stand on to pray.

But faith and pain still sit side by side. The next verse asks, "Why do you forget us forever, and forsake us for so long a time?" They know God reigns. They still feel forgotten. Both are true for them at the same time.

Then they pray the most important prayer of the whole poem. "Turn us to yourself, LORD, and we will be turned. Renew our days as of old."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Turn Us and We Will Be Turned**
>
> The prayer turn us to yourself, and we will be turned is a confession of need. The people had tried to fix things on their own and failed. Now they admit they can't even turn back to God without His help. They're asking God to do the turning. Jeremiah had used similar words. And this is the same hope as the New Covenant Jeremiah promised, when God would write His law on their hearts. Renewal doesn't start with us. It starts with God's grace drawing us back.

And then comes the last verse of the book. "But you have utterly rejected us. You are very angry against us."

That's it. That's how Lamentations ends. No resolution. No happy ending. The final line is a fear that maybe God has rejected them for good. Some translations make the verse a question, asking whether God has utterly rejected them. Either way, the book closes with the question still hanging in the air.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Repeating Verse 21**
>
> Because Lamentations ends with such a painful line, there's a beautiful Jewish custom. When Lamentations is read aloud in synagogues on Tisha B'Av, the congregation doesn't end with verse 22. After reading the final verse, they repeat verse 21: Turn us to yourself, LORD, and we will be turned. Renew our days as of old. The same thing is done at the end of a few other biblical books that end on a hard note, like Isaiah, Ecclesiastes, and Malachi. It's a way of saying, We won't let despair have the last word. We'll end with a prayer for hope.

REAL TALK **When the Ending Isn't Happy Yet**

It's tempting to rush from pain to a neat lesson. But Lamentations shows that faith can sound unfinished. Sometimes you pray, and things don't get better right away. Sometimes grief lasts longer than you thought it would. Sometimes you still have questions. That doesn't mean your faith has failed. God included this honest, unfinished ending in His book. He's not afraid of your questions. And just because the story hasn't resolved yet doesn't mean it never will. Lamentations ends with a question. The rest of the Bible answers it.

Did God reject His people forever? No. About seventy years after Jerusalem fell, as Jeremiah had promised, God brought His people home. They rebuilt the temple and the walls. Ezra and Nehemiah tell that story. God's mercies really were new every morning, even on the mornings when the people couldn't feel them.

REAL TALK **Comforting a Grieving Friend**

Lamentations shows what grieving people need. Here's what often helps: showing up, listening more than talking, saying the name of the person who died, remembering hard dates like birthdays and anniversaries, and offering practical help, like bringing food or doing a task together. Here's what often doesn't help: telling someone how they should feel, saying everything happens for a reason, comparing their loss to yours, or expecting them to be over it by now. Grief can last a long time. Keep checking in, even months later. And if a friend talks about not wanting to live or seems in danger, tell a trusted adult right away, and help them reach 988.

KEY VERSE

Turn us to yourself, LORD, and we will be turned. Renew our days as of old.

Lamentations 5:21 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the final poem isn't an acrostic?
2. How can someone believe God reigns forever and still feel forgotten?
3. What does it mean to ask God to turn us to Himself?
4. Why do you think synagogues repeat verse 21 after verse 22? What does that say about hope?

TRY THIS *Make Lamentations 5:21 your prayer this week. Each night, ask God to turn your heart toward Him and renew your days.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Lamentations ends without an answer. The city is still in ruins. The people are still asking whether God has rejected them forever. And yet, right in the center of the book, the poet remembers that God's mercies never fail. They are new every morning.

Jewish readers treasure Lamentations as a sacred way to grieve, and they have kept hope alive through centuries of loss by holding on to its center and its final prayer. Six hundred years after the poet wept over Jerusalem, another man came near the same city. Luke writes, "When he came near, he saw the city and wept over it." Isaiah had described the coming Servant as "a man of suffering," often translated the Man of Sorrows. Jesus knew grief. At His friend's tomb, "Jesus wept." On the cross, He cried out with words from the Psalms: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Like the poet of Lamentations, He felt abandoned. But Jesus wasn't suffering for His own sin. He was taking the ashes of ours. The judgment Lamentations describes fell on Him. And then, "on the first day of the week, at early dawn," His friends found the tomb empty. Mercy rose with the sun. Because of Him, the mercies of God really are new every morning, and one day, as Revelation promises, God will wipe every tear from our eyes.

Here's what that means for you, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. His mercies toward you are new every morning.

> *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.

Lamentations says honestly, We have sinned. 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 holy, 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 took the ashes.

Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, took the ashes of our sin on Himself at the cross. Then He rose at dawn, so mercy gets the last word.

> *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live to righteousness. You were healed by his wounds.* **1 Peter 2:24 (WEB)**

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

Mercy is a gift, not a wage. 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 to 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.

> *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. Lamentations shows you can come to God with tears, questions, and even anger. You can talk to God right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I bring You my sorrow and my sin. I've gone my own way, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, wept for this broken world, took the ashes of my sin on the cross, and rose again at dawn. Forgive me, and make me Yours. When I'm grieving, help me pour out my heart to You, and remind me that Your mercies are new every morning. Turn me to Yourself, and I will be turned. 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 Lamentations 3, then Luke 19:41-44 and John 20, from tears to an empty tomb.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized. Grief is lighter when it's shared.

Start each morning with mercy. Before you check your phone, thank God for one new mercy.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Lamentations is full of hard questions, and God let them stay in His book. Keep asking. Keep reading. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Lamentations is right, even in the ashes, God's mercies don't run out. Tomorrow morning, there will be new ones waiting for you.

The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves those who have a crushed spirit.

Psalm 34:18 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

The King Who Breathes Life

Ezekiel, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Breathes Life: The Book of Ezekiel, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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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

Ezekiel might be the strangest book in the Bible. It has spinning wheels covered with eyes, creatures with four faces, a prophet who eats a scroll, lies on his side for more than a year, shaves his head with a sword, and watches a valley full of skeletons stand up and breathe. If you've ever thought the Bible was boring, you haven't read Ezekiel.

But Ezekiel isn't weird for the sake of being weird. He was speaking to people whose whole world had collapsed. They had been dragged hundreds of miles from home. Their temple was about to be destroyed. Many of them felt hopeless, cut off, and dead inside. Some were sure God had abandoned them. Others refused to believe anything bad could happen at all.

Ezekiel's wild visions and dramatic object lessons were God's way of breaking through. They showed that God was bigger than anyone imagined, that sin was more serious than anyone admitted, and that God's grace was more powerful than anyone dared to hope. Ezekiel promises that God can take out a heart of stone and give a new heart. He can breathe life into dry bones. And He promises a day when the name of the city will be The LORD is there.

Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Ezekiel in seven chapters: wheels within wheels (Ezekiel 1-3), street theater and the departing glory (4-11),

not trapped by your parents' mistakes (12-24), proud empires and the Good Shepherd (25-34), a new heart and the valley of dry bones (36-37), Gog and Magog (38-39), and the river of life (40-48).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains who Ezekiel was, where he lived, and why his messages look so unusual. Read it first. It will make the rest of the book make much more sense.

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 talk over with someone you trust; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as Gog and Magog or the meaning of the temple in chapters 40-48, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Ezekiel 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 twenty-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, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Ezekiel is vivid, symbolic, and sometimes difficult. This book explains its historical setting among the exiles in Babylon, its visions and symbolic actions, and its great promises of a new heart, new life, and God's presence. Chapters 16 and 23, which use harsh, adult imagery to describe Israel's unfaithfulness, are summarized in age-appropriate terms without graphic detail.

Where Christians hold different views, this book presents them fairly. That includes the identity of Gog and Magog, where the main Christian views are explained without endorsing any one timeline, and the visionary temple of chapters 40-48, where literal and symbolic readings are both described. The emphasis stays on what all these views share: God's final victory over evil and His promise to dwell with His people.

Real Talk boxes address personal responsibility and family patterns, grief and loss in connection with the death of Ezekiel's wife, pride, toxic leadership, and hope when you feel dead inside. Where relevant, readers are encouraged to talk to a trusted adult or

counselor, and resources such as 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, and the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline are listed.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how Jesus fulfills Ezekiel's hopes as the Good Shepherd, the source of living water, the giver of the Spirit and a new heart, and Immanuel, God with us. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

My prayer is that every reader will discover that God can breathe life into whatever feels dead, and that He is there.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

A Priest in Exile

In 597 BC, about ten years before Jerusalem was destroyed, the Babylonians captured the city and carried away the king, Jehoiachin, along with thousands of leaders, craftsmen, and priests. One of those priests was a young man named Ezekiel. He was taken to Babylon and settled in a village of exiles beside the Kebar Canal, which the WEB calls the river Chebar, an irrigation channel near the city of Nippur. Five years later, when he was about thirty, the age when priests usually began serving in the temple, God called him to be a prophet instead. He would never serve in the temple in Jerusalem. But he would see God's glory in a foreign land.

Two Groups of People

Ezekiel spoke to two groups. The exiles in Babylon kept hoping they'd go home soon, and many believed Jerusalem could never fall because God's temple was there. Back in Jerusalem, those left behind thought they were the lucky ones and that God had rejected the exiles. Ezekiel's first job was to shatter those false hopes: Jerusalem would fall. Then, after the news came in 586 BC that the city had been destroyed, his message turned to hope. God would give His people new hearts, bring them back to life, and dwell with them again.

Wild Visions and Street Theater

Why does Ezekiel use such strange visions and acts? Partly because the people had stopped listening. They had heard the same warnings for years and tuned them out. So God had Ezekiel act out his messages, like living billboards, to grab attention and make people ask, What are you doing? These symbolic actions are sometimes called sign acts. The visions, filled with bright images, fire, and motion, are a kind of writing called apocalyptic, which uses symbols to reveal spiritual realities that ordinary words can't fully capture. Ezekiel stretches language to its limits because the God he saw was bigger than language.

Son of Man

God calls Ezekiel son of man more than ninety times. In Hebrew, the phrase simply means human being or mortal. It reminded Ezekiel that he was small and fragile next to the overwhelming glory of God. Later, Jesus used Son of Man as His favorite title for Himself, drawing especially on the book of Daniel, where one like a son of man receives an everlasting kingdom.

The Refrain

One phrase appears in Ezekiel more than sixty times: Then they will know that I am the LORD. It's the drumbeat of the whole book. Whether God was judging or saving, His goal was the same: that people would know Him, not just know about Him. The disasters, the visions, and the promises all point to that one purpose. Ezekiel is ultimately a book about God making Himself known.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Ezekiel 1-3): Wheels within wheels.

Chapter 2 (Ezekiel 4-11): Street theater and the glory departs.

Chapter 3 (Ezekiel 12-24): You're not trapped by your parents' mistakes.

Chapter 4 (Ezekiel 25-34): Proud empires and the Good Shepherd.

Chapter 5 (Ezekiel 36-37): A new heart and the valley of dry bones.

Chapter 6 (Ezekiel 38-39): Gog and Magog in context.

Chapter 7 (Ezekiel 40-48): The river of life and The LORD is there.

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Where This Points

CHAPTER 1

Wheels Within Wheels

Ezekiel 1–3

Imagine you're thirty years old. Your whole life, you've trained to be a priest. You've studied the rules for the temple sacrifices, memorized the rituals, and looked forward to the day you'd finally serve in God's house in Jerusalem. And then an enemy army drags you hundreds of miles away to a muddy canal in a foreign country. The temple is out of reach. Your dream is dead.

That was Ezekiel. And it's right there, in the place where his dreams had died, that God showed up.

"Now in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Thirtieth Year**

Ezekiel dates his first vision to the thirtieth year and also to the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's captivity, which was 593 BC. Most scholars think the thirtieth year was Ezekiel's own age. That matters because, according to the book of Numbers, priests began their full service at thirty. In the very year Ezekiel should have started working in the temple, God gave him a different calling. He wouldn't serve in God's house. He would see God's glory far from it.

What Ezekiel saw is one of the most dazzling and confusing scenes in Scripture. “I looked, and behold, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud, with flashing lightning, and a brightness around it.” Out of the fire came four living creatures. Each had four faces: a human, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. They had wings, and their legs gleamed like polished bronze. Beside each creature was a wheel, and it looked “as it were a wheel within a wheel.” The rims were full of eyes. The wheels could go in any direction without turning, and wherever the Spirit went, they went.

Above them was a crystal-like expanse, and above that was a throne, and on the throne was a figure like a man, glowing like fire. Around Him was a brightness like a rainbow. Ezekiel tries to describe it, but he keeps saying things like the appearance of the likeness of. Words just aren’t big enough. Finally he says, “This was the appearance of the likeness of the LORD’s glory. When I saw it, I fell on my face.”

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Four Faces**

In the ancient world, each of the four faces represented the greatest of its kind: the human was the wisest creature, the lion the strongest wild animal, the ox the strongest domestic animal, and the eagle the greatest bird. Together, they suggest that all of creation serves God. Later, Ezekiel identifies these creatures as cherubim, the same kind of beings whose images stood over the Ark of the Covenant. The book of Revelation describes similar creatures around God’s throne: like a lion, a calf, a man, and a flying eagle. Many Christians, since the early church, have connected the four faces with the four Gospels.

Why does this matter? Because the people in exile thought God lived in Jerusalem. The temple was His house. If they were far from the temple, they were far from God. Some even thought the gods of Babylon had beaten Him.

But Ezekiel's vision blows that idea apart. God's throne had wheels. It could go anywhere, in any direction, instantly. It had eyes everywhere, seeing everything. God wasn't trapped in a building in Jerusalem. He was right there in Babylon, by a muddy canal, with a bunch of homesick exiles.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fair Questions: Was It a Spaceship?**

Some people have claimed that Ezekiel's vision describes a spacecraft or a UFO, and in the 1970s, an engineer even wrote a book trying to design the machine Ezekiel saw. It's a fun idea for a sci-fi movie, but it misses the point. Ezekiel isn't describing technology. He's describing the indescribable: the living, holy God, surrounded by creatures who serve Him, moving with total freedom and power. That's why he keeps saying it looked like or it was the appearance of. Ancient readers would have recognized many of these images, like fire, storm, cherubim, and a throne, from other places in the Bible where God reveals Himself, such as Mount Sinai and Isaiah's vision in the temple.

REAL TALK **God Isn't Stuck Somewhere Else**

Maybe you've moved to a new city. Maybe your family has changed, or you've landed somewhere you never wanted to be: a hospital room, a new school, a hard season. It's easy to feel like God is back where things used to be good, and you're on your own now. Ezekiel's vision says otherwise. God's throne has wheels. He isn't limited to church buildings or good days or the places you feel close to Him. Wherever you are right now, He's there too.

Then God spoke. "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you." The Spirit came into Ezekiel and set him on his feet. And God gave him a hard assignment. "Son of man, I send you to the children of Israel, to a nation of rebels." God told him plainly that the people might not listen. His job was not to make them listen. His job was to speak. "You shall speak my words to them, whether they will hear or whether they will refuse."

God also told him not to be afraid of them, even though, God said, he would feel like he was living among briers, thorns, and scorpions. That's a vivid picture of how prickly and painful the people around him would be.

Then a hand reached out to Ezekiel holding a scroll. It was written on the front and back with words of mourning, grief, and woe. And God told him to eat it.

"Son of man, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your belly and your bowels with it. Then I ate it. It was as sweet as honey in my mouth."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Eating the Scroll**

Eating the scroll was a vivid way of showing that God's words needed to become part of Ezekiel, not just something he read or repeated. He had to digest them. Jeremiah had said something similar, that when he found God's words, he ate them, and they became his joy. In Revelation, John also eats a scroll that is sweet in his mouth but bitter in his stomach. God's word can be sweet even when its message is hard, because it comes from Him.

The scroll was full of sad messages, yet it tasted sweet. That's a strange combination. But it tells us something about God's word. Even when it's hard to hear, even when it confronts us, it's good. It's sweet because it's true and because it comes from the God who loves us.

REAL TALK **Awe**

When Ezekiel saw God's glory, he fell on his face. That's what awe does. It makes you feel small, but in a good way, like standing at the edge of the ocean or looking up at a sky full of stars. A lot of people today rarely feel awe. We're busy, distracted, and constantly looking at small screens. But awe is good for your soul. It reminds you that the world isn't all about you and that

God is bigger than your problems. Try going outside at night, away from city lights, and looking up. Read Ezekiel 1 slowly. Let yourself be amazed.

REAL TALK **Make It Yours**

It's possible to know a lot about the Bible without letting it sink in. You can hear verses in church, scroll past them online, or even memorize them for a class, and they never really change you. Ezekiel had to eat the scroll. That means taking time to read slowly, think about what it says, ask questions, and let it shape the way you live. Try picking one verse and carrying it with you all day. Think about it at lunch. Pray it before bed. Let it become part of you.

Afterward, the Spirit lifted Ezekiel and took him to the exiles at a place called Tel Aviv, which means hill of spring grain. He sat there among them for seven days, overwhelmed. He didn't say a word. He just sat with the people he would serve.

Then God gave him a title. "Son of man, I have made you a watchman to the house of Israel. Therefore hear the word from my mouth, and warn them from me."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Watchmen**

Ancient cities had watchmen who stood on the walls and looked out for danger. If they saw an enemy coming, they blew a trumpet to warn the people. If they fell asleep or stayed silent, the city could be destroyed. God told Ezekiel that he was a spiritual watchman. If he warned people and they ignored him, they were responsible for their choices. But if he never warned them, he would share the responsibility. Ezekiel 33 repeats this calling later in the book.

God also told Ezekiel he would be unable to speak except when God gave him a message. For years, Ezekiel was mostly silent, speaking only God's words. That silence would last until the day news came that Jerusalem had fallen.

REAL TALK **Speaking Up**

Sometimes you notice a friend heading toward real danger: drugs, self-harm, an unsafe relationship, or a choice that could wreck their life. It can feel awkward or scary to say something. But being a watchman means caring enough to speak up. You can't control what your friend decides. That's not your job. But you can tell them you're worried, and you can tell a trusted adult. If a friend talks about hurting themselves or ending their life, don't keep it secret. Tell a trusted adult right away, and help them call or text 988.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Ezekiel and Daniel**

Ezekiel wasn't the only young Israelite serving God in Babylon. About eight years before Ezekiel arrived, a teenager named Daniel had been taken to Babylon and trained in the king's palace. The two may never have met, since Daniel lived at the royal court and Ezekiel lived in a village of exiles. But Ezekiel knew Daniel's reputation. In Ezekiel 14, God mentions Noah, Daniel, and Job as examples of righteous people. Daniel was probably still a young man at the time, yet he was already famous for his faithfulness. God was at work among the exiles in the palace and in the mud villages alike.

Ezekiel's reaction to his calling is honest. He says, "So the Spirit lifted me up, and took me away; and I went in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit; and the LORD's hand was strong on me." He wasn't excited. He was upset. Maybe he was angry about his people's rebellion. Maybe he was overwhelmed by the job ahead. Maybe he was grieving the priestly life he'd never have. The Bible doesn't hide that. And God didn't take back the calling. He stayed with Ezekiel, and His hand was strong on him.

REAL TALK **When God's Plan Isn't Your Plan**

Ezekiel trained his whole life for one thing, and God called him to something completely different. Maybe you've had a plan fall apart too: you didn't make the team, didn't get into the school you wanted, lost an opportunity, or had to move away. It's okay to be disappointed. Ezekiel was. But sometimes the

> place where your plans die is exactly where God shows up. Ezekiel never served in the temple, but he saw God's glory in a way no temple priest ever did. Your story isn't over just because your plan changed.

Notice, too, that Ezekiel's job wasn't to be successful. God told him from the beginning that many people wouldn't listen. His success would be measured by faithfulness, not results. That's freeing. You're not responsible for how other people respond to the truth. You're responsible for being faithful with what God gives you.

Notice one more detail. Before Ezekiel said a single word to the exiles, he sat with them for seven days. He listened. He watched. He felt their pain. Good messengers do that. People are more willing to hear hard truth from someone who has first sat with them in their sorrow. Ezekiel's ministry began with presence before it began with preaching.

KEY VERSE

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman to the house of Israel. Therefore hear the word from my mouth, and warn them from me.

Ezekiel 3:17 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God showed Ezekiel His glory before giving him a hard job?
2. What does the throne with wheels say about where God can be found?
3. What would it look like for you to eat God's word instead of just hearing it?
4. Is there someone in your life who needs a watchman right now?

TRY THIS *Pick one verse from this chapter and carry it with you for a whole day. Read it in the morning, at lunch, and before bed, and notice how it shapes your thinking.*

CHAPTER 2

Street Theater and the Glory Departs

Ezekiel 4–11

Ezekiel had a message: Jerusalem is going to fall. But the exiles didn't want to hear it. So God turned Ezekiel into a one-man street performance.

First, God told him to take a clay tile, which was basically a mud brick, and draw a picture of Jerusalem on it. Then he had to build a tiny siege around it, with ramps, camps, and battering rams, like a model or a diorama. He set an iron pan between himself and the city, like a wall. It was a living sign. Anyone who walked by would see Ezekiel acting out the siege of Jerusalem.

Then God told him to lie on his left side for 390 days, and then on his right side for 40 days, bearing the sins of Israel and Judah. Each day represented a year of the people's rebellion. During that time, he had to eat a small daily ration of bread made from a mixture of grains, like wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet, and spelt, and drink a small amount of water. It was a picture of the starvation that would come during the siege.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Ezekiel's Bread**

The mixed grain bread in Ezekiel 4 wasn't a health food recipe, although some companies today sell bread named after it. It was a famine ration. When food runs low, people mix together whatever scraps of grain they can find. God first told Ezekiel to bake it over human waste, a disgusting picture of how unclean life in exile would be. Ezekiel, a priest who had always kept the purity laws, protested. And God listened, letting him use cow dung instead, which was a common fuel in the ancient world. Even in this strange moment, God showed patience with His servant's conscience.

Then Ezekiel had to shave his head and beard with a sword, weigh the hair, and divide it into three parts. He burned one third, chopped one third with the sword, and scattered one third to the wind. It was a picture of what would happen to the people of Jerusalem: some would die in the siege, some by the sword, and some would be scattered. But God also told him to tuck a few hairs into the folds of his robe. A small remnant would survive.

Why would God ask Ezekiel to do such bizarre things? Because people had heard so many sermons that they'd stopped listening. Words alone weren't breaking through. A man lying on his side for over a year? That got people's attention. People would ask, What is he doing? And then Ezekiel could tell them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The 390 and 40 Days**

Why 390 days on one side and 40 on the other? Ezekiel says each day stood for a year of punishment for the sins of Israel and Judah. Scholars have suggested different ways to add up the years, such as counting from the building of Solomon's temple or from the division of the kingdom, but no explanation has won everyone over. The number 40 also echoes Israel's forty years in the wilderness. Whatever the exact count, the message was clear: the people's rebellion had gone on for a very long time, and its consequences would be heavy. Ezekiel didn't lie on his side every minute of every day, since

he also had to cook his food. Most think he did it for part of each day in public view.

REAL TALK **When You Stop Listening**

It's possible to get so used to hearing about God that it stops affecting you. You've heard the stories a hundred times. You know the right answers. Your mind drifts during the sermon. The people in Ezekiel's time had the same problem, and God went to great lengths to break through to them. If you've noticed that you've tuned God out, that's worth paying attention to. Try reading a part of the Bible you've never read before. Ask honest questions. Talk to someone about what you're really thinking. God wants to get your attention because He loves you.

In chapter 8, Ezekiel had another vision. He says God took him "by a lock of my head" and carried him in a vision all the way to Jerusalem, to the temple. There, God showed him what was happening behind closed doors.

At the gate stood an idol that provoked God to jealousy. Inside a hidden room, seventy elders were burning incense to images of creatures painted on the walls. They said, "The LORD doesn't see us. The LORD has forsaken the land." At the gate, women were weeping for Tammuz, a Babylonian god. And in the inner court, between the porch and the altar, about twenty-five men had turned their backs on God's temple and were bowing down to worship the sun.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Secret Idolatry**

The elders in Ezekiel 8 were worshiping idols in the dark, thinking no one could see them. They believed God had either stopped watching or had left. But Ezekiel's vision showed that God saw everything, even what happened in secret. Tammuz was a god of fertility and vegetation in Mesopotamian religion, whose death was mourned every year. The men turning their backs on the temple to face the sun were deliberately rejecting God. Their posture said it all.

REAL TALK **In the Dark**

The elders said, The LORD doesn't see us. Maybe you've been tempted to think that about something you do in secret, like what you look at online, what you say in private chats, or a habit no one knows about. But secrets have a way of growing in the dark. God sees, and He sees because He cares about you, not because He's looking for a reason to punish you. If there's something you're hiding that's hurting you, bringing it into the light with God and a trusted adult can be the first step toward freedom.

In chapter 9, Ezekiel saw a man dressed in linen go through the city and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieved over the evil being done there. Those who were marked would be spared. God noticed the people who still cared.

Then came the saddest scene in the whole book. Ezekiel watched God's glory, the bright, burning presence that had filled the temple since the days of Solomon, begin to move. "The LORD's glory went out from over the threshold of the house and stood over the cherubim." The living creatures lifted their wings, and the wheels rose with them. The glory moved to the east gate. And then, "The LORD's glory went up from the middle of the city, and stood on the mountain which is on the east side of the city."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Glory Leaves**

The glory of the LORD was the visible sign of God's presence. It filled the tabernacle in Moses' day and the temple in Solomon's day. In Ezekiel 10-11, God's glory slowly leaves the temple, pausing at the threshold, then at the east gate, then over the mountain east of the city, which is the Mount of Olives. It's as if God was leaving reluctantly, giving the people every chance to turn back. Once His presence was gone, the temple was just an empty building, and nothing could protect it from destruction. Later in Ezekiel, the glory returns from the east. Many Christians note that Jesus ascended from

the Mount of Olives and that the prophet Zechariah describes the LORD standing there on a coming day.

But even as the glory was leaving, God gave a promise. He told the exiles that He Himself would be a sanctuary for them in the lands where they had been scattered. They weren't as cut off as they thought.

And then came the first promise of something new. "I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them. I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh."

A stony heart is cold, hard, and unresponsive. You can't change a stone by trying harder. It needs to be replaced. God promised to do the replacing Himself, giving His people a living, tender heart that would respond to Him. That promise comes back even stronger in chapter 36.

REAL TALK **The People Who Still Care**

In Ezekiel 9, God told the man in linen to mark everyone who sighed and cried over the evil around them. In a city full of corruption, a few people still cared. They didn't go along with the crowd. They grieved what was happening. God saw every one of them. If you've ever felt like the only person in your friend group, school, or even family who cares about doing right, God sees you too. Your quiet faithfulness is not invisible to Him.

Why did the people in Jerusalem think they were safe? Because the temple was there. They believed God would never let His own house be destroyed, so they could do whatever they wanted. They treated the temple like a lucky charm. Jeremiah had preached against this same idea in his famous temple sermon. Ezekiel's vision showed what they didn't want to see: God's presence wasn't a possession they controlled. If they rejected Him, He would leave, and the building would be just stone.

But God's words to the exiles in chapter 11 turned everything upside down. The people in Jerusalem said the exiles were far from God. God said, "yet I will be to them a sanctuary for a little while in the countries where they have come." The people who thought they were closest to God were furthest away, and the people who felt furthest away had God with them. God isn't impressed by location. He looks at the heart.

REAL TALK **Do You Know Him or Just Know About Him?**

You can know a lot about a famous person without knowing them at all. You might know their birthday, their favorite food, and every song they've released, but if you showed up at their door, they wouldn't know who you are. Many people relate to God that way. They know facts about Him, but they've never actually talked to Him, trusted Him, or followed Him. The whole point of Ezekiel's refrain is that God wants to be known personally. He doesn't just want fans. He wants a relationship with you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Then They Will Know**

In chapters 4-11, the refrain Then they will know that I am the LORD shows up again and again, mostly connected with judgment. That can sound harsh. But think about it. The people had ignored God's love, His prophets, His warnings, and His patience for generations. Finally, the disaster would make them see what they'd refused to see: that God is real, that His word is true, and that He is not an idol they could manipulate. Later in the book, the same refrain shows up with God's promises of rescue. Whether through discipline or mercy, God's goal is that His people would truly know Him.

REAL TALK **God Leaves Slowly**

Did you notice how slowly God's glory left? It paused at the threshold. It paused at the east gate. It paused over the mountain. It was as if God kept looking back, giving the people one more chance. That tells you something about God's heart. He doesn't storm off. He doesn't give up on people quickly. The Bible says He is slow to anger and full of steadfast love. Even His

judgment comes reluctantly, after long patience. If you've wandered from God, He's not looking for an excuse to leave. He's looking for you to turn around.

KEY VERSE

I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them. I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes, and keep my ordinances, and do them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

Ezekiel 11:19–20 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God used street theater instead of just sermons?
2. What does Ezekiel 8 show about the danger of secret sin?
3. How do you think Ezekiel felt watching God's glory leave the temple?
4. What's the difference between a heart of stone and a heart of flesh?

TRY THIS *Ask God this week to show you any area where your heart has become hard. Write it down, and pray each day for Him to soften it.*

CHAPTER 3

You're Not Trapped by Your Parents' Mistakes

Ezekiel 12–24

In chapter 12, God gave Ezekiel another street performance. He packed a bag like someone going into exile, carried it out in broad daylight, and then, in the evening, dug a hole through the wall of his house and climbed out with his bag on his shoulder and his face covered. The people watched and asked what he was doing. Ezekiel explained: this is what will happen to King Zedekiah and the people of Jerusalem. They would try to escape through the wall at night, and they would be captured.

That's exactly what happened a few years later. Second Kings records that Zedekiah fled at night through a gap in the wall, was captured by the Babylonians, and was taken to Babylon blinded, a place he would never see.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Prophecy That Came True**
>
> In Ezekiel 12:13, God says the prince would be brought to Babylon, yet he would not see it, even though he would die there. That sounds like a riddle. But in 586 BC, King Zedekiah was captured, his eyes were put out by the Babylonians, and he was carried to Babylon in chains, where he died. He was brought to Babylon but never saw it. The people around Ezekiel kept saying that the prophets' warnings were for far in the future. God answered, "I will

> speak, and the word that I speak will be performed. It will be no more deferred."

Chapters 12-24 are full of warnings, parables, and pictures. Ezekiel told the story of a vine. A vine's wood is useless for building. It's only good for fruit. And if it doesn't bear fruit, it's only good for burning. He told a parable about two eagles and a cedar tree, picturing Babylon, Egypt, and the kings of Judah. But at the end of that parable, God promised to take a tender twig from the top of the cedar and plant it on a high mountain, where it would grow into a great tree, and "birds of every kind will dwell in the shade of its branches." Many readers see that as a promise of the coming Messiah from David's family, whose kingdom would shelter people from every nation.

Two chapters, 16 and 23, are among the hardest in the Bible. They use the picture of marriage to describe Israel's unfaithfulness, and the imagery is intense and adult. Here's the heart of what they say, in age-appropriate terms.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Ezekiel 16 and 23**
>
> In chapter 16, God describes Jerusalem as an abandoned baby girl, left alone in a field on the day she was born. No one cared for her. But God passed by and said to her, "Live!" He cared for her, raised her, and eventually made her His beautiful bride, a queen. But she used all His gifts to chase after other lovers, the false gods and foreign nations she trusted instead of Him. Chapter 23 tells a similar story about two sisters, representing Samaria and Jerusalem, who were unfaithful. These chapters use strong, uncomfortable images on purpose, to shock people into seeing how deeply their idolatry hurt God, the way betrayal hurts in a marriage. But even chapter 16 ends with grace. God says, "Nevertheless I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you." His faithfulness outlasts her unfaithfulness.

Then comes chapter 18, one of the most important chapters for teenagers in the whole Old Testament.

The exiles had a saying, a proverb everyone repeated. “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” In other words: Our parents messed up, and we’re paying for it. It’s not our fault. We’re stuck. Nothing we do matters.

God said, Stop saying that. “Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine. The soul who sins, he shall die.”

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Sour Grapes**
>
> The sour grapes proverb was a way of blaming the previous generation. The exiles knew their parents and grandparents had worshiped idols and ignored the prophets. They believed they were suffering because of those choices, and in a sense, they were. Generations do affect each other. But the proverb turned into an excuse: if our fate was already decided by our parents, why bother changing? God’s answer in Ezekiel 18 is that each person stands before Him on their own. The past shapes you, but it doesn’t have to define you.

God then walked through an example. Imagine a good man who does what is right. He doesn’t worship idols, he treats people fairly, he feeds the hungry and gives clothes to people who need them. He will live. Now imagine his son becomes violent and wicked. The son can’t hide behind his father’s goodness. He’s responsible for his own choices. Now imagine that wicked man has a son who sees his father’s sins and chooses a different path. That son will live. He won’t be punished for his father’s sins. “The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son.”

And God went further. Even a wicked person who turns away from evil and does what is right "shall surely live. He shall not die." The past doesn't have the final word. Change is possible.

> **REAL TALK** **You're Not Trapped**
>
> Maybe your family has a pattern you're scared of repeating: addiction, anger, divorce, abuse, or something else. Maybe people have said you'll turn out just like your mom or dad. Ezekiel 18 says you don't have to. Your family's story affects you, and that's real, but it doesn't decide who you become. With God's help, you can make different choices and start a new pattern. Breaking a cycle isn't easy, and you don't have to do it alone. Talk to a trusted adult, a pastor, or a counselor. And if something unsafe is happening at home right now, it's not your fault. Tell someone you trust, or call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453. If you're in immediate danger, call 911.

The chapter ends with God's heart on full display. "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked? says the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should return from his way, and live?" And finally: "For I have no pleasure in the death of him who dies, says the Lord GOD. Therefore turn yourselves, and live!" God isn't looking for reasons to punish. He's pleading with people to come back.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Fair Questions: Doesn't the Bible Say Sins Pass Down?**
>
> Some readers notice that the Ten Commandments speak of God visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Him. Does Ezekiel 18 contradict that? Most interpreters say no. The commandment describes how sin's consequences ripple through families, especially when children continue in the same rebellion. Ezekiel 18 addresses the guilt of each person before God, insisting that no one is condemned for someone else's sin. Both truths are real. Families shape us, for good and bad. But each person is free to turn to God, and God judges each person fairly.

REAL TALK **Not Your Fault, Still Your Choice**

Ezekiel 18 doesn't mean that everything bad in your life is because of your choices. If you've been hurt by others, that's on them, not you. And it doesn't mean you have to fix yourself by yourself. Ezekiel 18 tells people to get a new heart, but chapter 36 shows that God is the one who gives it. Both are true: you're responsible for how you respond, and God gives you the grace to respond well. You're not stuck.

In chapter 22, God said He looked for someone who would "stand in the gap before me for the land," but He found no one. Then in chapter 24, on the very day Babylon began the final siege of Jerusalem, God told Ezekiel to write down the date. And then God gave him the hardest assignment of his life.

"Son of man, behold, I will take away from you the desire of your eyes with one stroke; yet you shall neither mourn nor weep." God told him not to perform the usual public mourning rituals. Ezekiel writes, "So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Desire of His Eyes**

Ezekiel called his wife the desire of his eyes. He loved her. Her sudden death was a real and terrible loss. God told him not to do the public mourning rituals, like loud wailing, taking off his turban, and eating special mourners' bread, as a sign to the people. When the people asked why he wasn't mourning, he explained that soon they would lose the temple, which was the desire of their eyes, along with their families in Jerusalem, and they would be too stunned to mourn. Notice that God told him to sigh, but not aloud. His grief was real, even if it was quiet. This passage is hard, and it shows how costly Ezekiel's calling was.

In chapter 20, God reviewed Israel's whole history, from Egypt to the wilderness to the promised land. At every step, the people rebelled. And at every step, God says, "I worked for my name's

sake," and kept His promises anyway. The chapter ends with this: "You will know that I am the LORD, when I have dealt with you for my name's sake, not according to your evil ways." That's grace. God didn't treat them as their sins deserved.

REAL TALK **Stand in the Gap**

In Ezekiel 22, God says He searched for someone who would "stand in the gap before me for the land," but found no one. Standing in the gap means stepping into the broken place, praying for others, speaking up for people who are hurting, and doing what's right when everyone else is silent. You might be the only person in your friend group who prays for your school, or who refuses to join in when someone is being mocked. That matters. God is still looking for people who will stand in the gap. You can be one of them.

REAL TALK **When Someone You Love Dies**

Ezekiel's story in chapter 24 is unusual. God asked him to hold back his public mourning for a specific reason, as a prophetic sign. That doesn't mean God wants you to hide your grief. The Bible is full of people who wept openly: Abraham for Sarah, David for his son, and Jesus at the tomb of His friend Lazarus. If someone you love has died, it's okay to cry, to be angry, to feel numb, or to miss them for a long time. Talk to someone you trust about how you're feeling. A school counselor or grief support group can help too. And if grief ever makes you feel like you can't go on, call or text 988 any time.

In chapter 13, God confronted the false prophets who told people what they wanted to hear. He said they were "saying, Peace; and there is no peace." Ezekiel compared them to people who build a flimsy wall and then cover it with whitewash to make it look strong. When the storm comes, the wall falls down, and everyone sees that the paint was hiding cracks. Their comforting words were like that wall. They looked good but couldn't hold up when trouble came.

REAL TALK **Whitewash**

A whitewashed wall looks fine from the outside, but it's still cracked and weak underneath. People can do that too, covering up problems with a smile, a filter, or a highlight reel online. Friends can do it for each other, saying everything's fine when it isn't. Real friendship and real faith don't just paint over cracks. They face them honestly. If there's something in your life that looks good on the surface but is crumbling underneath, don't just cover it up. Talk to God and someone you trust. Strong walls are built on truth.

In chapter 14, God said that even if Noah, Daniel, and Job lived in Jerusalem, their righteousness would save only themselves. That's another way of saying the same thing as chapter 18: no one can ride on someone else's faith. You can't be saved by your parents' prayers, your grandparents' church attendance, or your friend's devotion. Each person must turn to God personally.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Until He Comes**

In Ezekiel 21, God announced that the crown would be taken from Judah's king. "Remove the turban, and take off the crown. This will not be as it was." He added that the kingdom would be overturned until "he comes whose right it is." Many Jewish and Christian readers have seen this as a promise that the rightful King from David's line would one day come and receive the crown. Christians believe that promise points to Jesus, the Son of David, who was born about six centuries later.

KEY VERSE

The soul who sins, he shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be on him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be on him.

Ezekiel 18:20 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the sour grapes proverb was so popular?
2. Is there a family pattern you hope to break? What would help?
3. What does Ezekiel 18:32 show about God's heart toward people who have done wrong?
4. How do you think Ezekiel felt after his wife died? What does his story say about the cost of following God?

TRY THIS *Write down one pattern from your family or past that you want to leave behind, and one new pattern you want to start. Pray about it, and share it with someone you trust.*

CHAPTER 4

Proud Empires and the Good Shepherd

Ezekiel 25–34

After the warnings to Israel, Ezekiel turned toward the nations around them. Chapters 25-32 are messages to Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon, and Egypt. Some of these nations had celebrated when Jerusalem fell. Others had tempted Judah to trust them instead of God. All of them would answer to Him.

The two biggest targets were Tyre and Egypt, and the main charge against both was pride.

Tyre was a wealthy trading city on the Mediterranean coast, built partly on a rocky island just offshore. Its ships sailed everywhere. Its merchants were rich, and its walls seemed unbreakable. Ezekiel 27 describes Tyre as a magnificent ship loaded with treasure from all over the world, and then shows that ship sinking in the sea.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Fall of Tyre**
>
> Ezekiel said that many nations would come against Tyre like waves, and that it would become “a bare rock” where fishermen spread their nets. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon besieged Tyre for thirteen years, and Ezekiel 29 acknowledges that this siege didn’t bring him much plunder. Then, in 332 BC, Alexander the Great built a causeway out to the island, using rubble from the old mainland city, and conquered it. Over time, the old island city’s site was

reshaped by the sea and the causeway. Scholars discuss how the details of the prophecy were fulfilled, but Tyre's proud independence was broken.

In chapter 28, God spoke to the ruler of Tyre. "Because your heart is lifted up, and you have said, I am a god, I sit in the seat of God, in the middle of the seas; yet you are man, and no god." Tyre's ruler was so proud of his wealth and wisdom that he thought he was divine. God reminded him that he was mortal.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fair Questions: Is Ezekiel 28 About Satan?**

In Ezekiel 28:12-19, God gives a lament over the king of Tyre, saying, "You were in Eden, the garden of God," and calling him "the anointed cherub who covers." Because this description seems bigger than any human king, many Christians, since early church writers, have read it as describing Satan's fall from glory through pride, with the king of Tyre as an example of the same pride. Others read it as poetic language comparing the king to Adam in Eden, or to a guardian figure, to show how far he fell. Many hold both together: the passage is about the human king, but it reveals the deeper spiritual pattern behind all pride. Christians agree on the main point: pride leads to a fall. As verse 17 says, "Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty."

Egypt was the ancient superpower to the south. Judah kept trusting Egypt to rescue them from Babylon instead of trusting God. God described Pharaoh as a great monster lying in the Nile who said, "My river is my own, and I have made it for myself." Imagine claiming you created a river. That's the kind of pride that forgets every good thing is a gift from God.

REAL TALK **The Problem With Pride**

Pride isn't just feeling good about something you did well. It's when you start to believe you're the source of your own success and don't need God or anyone else. The ruler of Tyre thought he was a god. Pharaoh thought he'd made the Nile. Today, pride might look like building your identity around followers, grades, looks, or athletic success, and looking down on people who

don't measure up. The truth is that your talents, your opportunities, and even your next breath are gifts. Gratitude is the antidote to pride. Try thanking God every day for specific gifts, and you'll find it harder to believe you made them yourself.

In chapter 33, God renewed Ezekiel's calling as a watchman. And God answered the exiles who said, "Our transgressions and our sins are on us, and we pine away in them. How then can we live?" God swore by His own life and said, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why will you die, house of Israel?"

Then the news came. A survivor arrived from Jerusalem and said, "The city has been defeated!" Everything Ezekiel had warned about had happened. That evening, God opened Ezekiel's mouth, and he could speak freely again. From that moment, his message began to change from judgment to hope.

God also warned Ezekiel that people would come to hear him the way they'd go to a concert. "You are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they don't do them." They enjoyed listening, but nothing changed.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Happened to Egypt?**

Ezekiel said that Egypt would become "the lowest of the kingdoms" and would "no longer rule over the nations." Before this, Egypt had been one of the greatest powers in the world for well over a thousand years. But after Babylon defeated it, Egypt was ruled in turn by Persia, then by the Greeks under Alexander and his successors, and then by Rome. It never again became the great empire it had been in the days of the pharaohs who built the pyramids. The nation that said, My river is my own, learned that only God rules forever.

REAL TALK **More Than a Good Song**

Ezekiel 33:32 describes people who loved hearing sermons but never acted on them. It's possible to enjoy worship music, like inspirational posts, and watch great talks without letting any of it change your life. Jesus told a story about two builders: one who heard His words and did them, building on rock, and one who heard and didn't, building on sand. The question isn't whether you enjoy hearing God's word. It's whether you're doing anything with it.

And then comes chapter 34, where God turns His attention to the leaders of Israel. He calls them shepherds, and He's furious with them. "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Shouldn't the shepherds feed the sheep?"

The leaders had used the people for their own benefit. God listed their failures. "You haven't strengthened the diseased. You haven't healed that which was sick. You haven't bound up that which was broken. You haven't brought back that which was driven away. You haven't sought that which was lost, but you have ruled over them with force and with rigor."

So God fired them. "Behold, I am against the shepherds. I will require my sheep at their hand."

REAL TALK **Toxic Leaders**

Ezekiel 34 describes leaders who used their power to help themselves instead of the people in their care. Sadly, that still happens, in families, schools, teams, and even churches. A good leader serves, protects, and cares for the weak. A toxic leader uses people, demands loyalty, shames people who ask questions, or harms those under their authority. If a leader is hurting you or making you feel unsafe, it's not your fault, and you don't have to stay silent. Talk to a trusted adult outside that situation. If you're being abused, call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453, and if you're in danger, call 911. God takes the abuse of power seriously.

And then God made one of the most beautiful promises in the Old Testament. If the shepherds wouldn't care for the sheep, He would do it Himself. "Behold, I myself, even I, will search for my sheep, and will seek them out." "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will cause them to lie down, says the Lord GOD."

God would search for the lost, bring back the strays, bandage the injured, and strengthen the weak. Everything the bad shepherds failed to do, He would do.

Then God added, "I will set up one shepherd over them, and he will feed them, even my servant David." David had been dead for four hundred years. This was a promise of a new king from David's family, a shepherd-king who would care for God's people the way God does.

REAL TALK **You Can Lead Like a Shepherd**

You might not think of yourself as a leader, but you probably lead someone: a younger sibling, a teammate, a friend group, a club, or the kids you babysit. Ezekiel 34 gives a picture of good leadership. Notice the weak. Help the hurting. Go after the one who's been left out. Use your influence to protect people, not to use them. Being a good leader isn't about being in charge. It's about caring for people the way God cares for them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **God and David as Shepherd**

In Ezekiel 34, God says both that He Himself will shepherd His sheep and that His servant David will be their shepherd. How can both be true? Jewish readers have understood this as a promise of a future king from David's line, through whom God would care for His people. Christians see it fulfilled in Jesus, who is both the Son of David and God in the flesh. When Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd," He was claiming the role God promised to take Himself in Ezekiel 34.

Ezekiel's messages to the nations weren't just about pride. Some of them were about how those nations treated Judah when it was suffering. God said to Ammon, "Because you have clapped your hands, stamped with the feet, and rejoiced with all the contempt of your soul against the land of Israel." They celebrated Judah's downfall. Edom and Philistia took revenge. God noticed every bit of it.

REAL TALK **Celebrating Someone's Downfall**

It can feel satisfying when someone you don't like gets in trouble, loses a game, or gets embarrassed online. It's tempting to share the screenshot or laugh along. But Ezekiel 25 shows that God takes gloating seriously. Proverbs says not to rejoice when your enemy falls. Jesus told us to love our enemies and pray for them. When you see someone having a hard time, even someone who hurt you, you don't have to pretend it didn't happen. But you can choose not to pile on. That's what it looks like to have a heart of flesh instead of stone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Judge Other Nations?**

Why would Israel's prophets spend so many chapters on other nations? Because the God of Israel isn't a local god. He's the Creator of the whole world, and every nation answers to Him. These messages also gave hope to God's people. The empires that seemed so powerful weren't in control. God was. And they showed that the same standards of justice apply to everyone. God judged His own people first, and then the nations. No one gets a pass for cruelty or pride.

The promise in chapter 34 ends with a picture of peace. God would make "a covenant of peace" with His sheep. Wild animals would be removed, so the sheep could sleep safely even in the woods. "There will be showers of blessing." The rain would come in its season, the trees would bear fruit, and no one would make the sheep afraid. And God sums it all up: "You my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are

men, and I am your God." That's the relationship God wants with you. Not a boss and an employee. A shepherd and a beloved flock.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Lost Sheep**

Jesus told a parable that sounds a lot like Ezekiel 34. "Which of you men, if you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them, wouldn't leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that was lost, until he found it?" In the story, the shepherd searches until he finds the lost sheep, puts it on his shoulders, and throws a party. Jesus told that parable when religious leaders complained that He welcomed sinners. In other words, Jesus was acting like the Shepherd Ezekiel promised, going after the lost when the religious leaders wouldn't.

KEY VERSE

I will seek that which was lost, and will bring back that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick

Ezekiel 34:16 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think pride was such a big problem for Tyre and Egypt?
2. Where are you tempted to take credit for things that are really gifts?
3. What are the marks of a good shepherd or leader in Ezekiel 34?
4. How does it feel to know that God searches for lost sheep Himself?

TRY THIS *Think of someone who seems lost, hurting, or left out. This week, do one thing to care for them the way a good shepherd would.*

CHAPTER 5

A New Heart and the Valley of Dry Bones

Ezekiel 36–37

After Jerusalem fell, the exiles were crushed. Their city was gone. Their temple was gone. Their king was blind and in chains. And their hope was gone too. They said, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost. We are completely cut off.”

Have you ever felt like that? Not just sad, but empty, like something inside you has died. Like there’s no point in trying anymore. Ezekiel 36 and 37 were written for people who feel exactly that way.

In chapter 36, God speaks to the mountains of Israel, which had been left desolate and mocked by the surrounding nations. He promises they will bloom again, that people will return, and that the ruined cities will be rebuilt. One day, people would look at the land and say, “This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden.”

> BACKGROUND CHECK **For My Holy Name**
>
> In Ezekiel 36:22, God says, “I don’t do this for your sake, house of Israel, but for my holy name.” That can sound cold at first. But it’s actually great news. If God’s rescue depended on how good the people were, they’d have no hope. Instead, God rescues them because of who He is. His reputation is tied to His

promises. The nations had looked at the exiles and concluded that Israel's God was weak or unfaithful. By restoring His people, God would show the whole world His holiness, power, and faithfulness. Your hope rests on God's character, not your performance.

Then God makes the promise that sits at the very heart of Ezekiel. First, He promises to gather His people from the nations and bring them home. Then He promises to make them clean. "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols."

And then: "I will also give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you. I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Like the Garden of Eden**

In Ezekiel 36, God promises that people will say the ruined land "has become like the garden of Eden." That's a big claim. Eden was the place where everything was good, where humans lived in harmony with God, each other, and creation. When God restores His people, He doesn't just patch things up. He brings them back toward Eden. The whole Bible moves in that direction, from a garden lost in Genesis to a garden city in Revelation. God promises, "I, the LORD, have built the ruined places and planted that which was desolate. I, the LORD, have spoken it, and I will do it."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Heart in Hebrew**

In Hebrew thinking, the heart wasn't just the center of feelings. It was the center of the whole person: thoughts, choices, desires, and will. A heart of stone means a person who is unresponsive to God, unable to love Him or follow Him from the inside. A heart of flesh is alive, soft, and able to respond. In Ezekiel 18, God told people to make themselves a new heart. In Ezekiel 36, God promises to give it. That's the difference between law and grace. We can't transplant our own hearts. God does it.

Notice what God promises. Not just forgiveness for the past, although cleansing is part of it. Not just new rules, although walking in His ways is part of it. He promises a heart transplant. And He promises to put His own Spirit inside His people, so they'll have the desire and power to follow Him.

This was the same hope Jeremiah had described as the New Covenant, when God would write His law on people's hearts. Ezekiel adds that God's Spirit would live within them.

> **REAL TALK** **When You Can't Change Yourself**
>
> Maybe you've tried hard to change something about yourself: a habit, an attitude, a way of treating people. You made promises. You set goals. And you kept slipping back. That can feel discouraging. Ezekiel 36 says real change starts with God giving you a new heart and His Spirit. That doesn't mean you do nothing. It means you depend on Him instead of only your willpower. Ask God for help every day. Find people who will encourage you and hold you accountable. And if you're struggling with something like addiction, self-harm, or an eating disorder, please talk to a trusted adult and get professional help. God often works through doctors, counselors, and friends.

Then, in chapter 37, Ezekiel had his most famous vision. "The LORD's hand was on me, and he brought me out in the LORD's Spirit, and set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones."

It was like an old battlefield. Bones everywhere. Very many, and very dry. No flesh, no life, nothing left. Then God asked a question. "Son of man, can these bones live?"

What would you say? Obviously not. Dead is dead. But Ezekiel gave a wise answer. "Lord GOD, you know."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Breath, Wind, and Spirit**

In Ezekiel 37, the Hebrew word ruach appears again and again. It can mean breath, wind, or spirit, depending on the context. Ezekiel uses all three meanings in the same passage. The bones need breath to live. The breath comes from the four winds. And God says, "I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live." It's a play on words that ties together the breath of life God gave Adam in Genesis, the wind of God, and the Holy Spirit. Life comes from God's breath.

Then God told Ezekiel to preach to the bones. That sounds ridiculous. But Ezekiel obeyed. "You dry bones, hear the LORD's word." And as he spoke, there was a rattling noise. The bones came together, bone to bone. Then tendons appeared, then muscles, then skin. But there was still no breath in them. They were bodies, but they weren't alive.

So God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath. "Come from the four winds, breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." And Ezekiel writes, "the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up on their feet, an exceedingly great army."

REAL TALK **When You Feel Dead Inside**

Sometimes people describe depression as feeling dead inside, like their bones are dry and hope is gone. That's exactly how the exiles described themselves. If you feel that way, please know you're not alone and you're not beyond hope. God breathed life into a valley full of dry bones. But please don't just wait it out alone. Talk to a parent, school counselor, pastor, or doctor about how you're feeling. Depression is real and treatable, and asking for help is a brave and wise thing to do. If you're having thoughts of hurting yourself or ending your life, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. If you're in immediate danger, call 911.

God explained the vision. "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel." The nation felt dead. But God would open their

graves and bring them back to their land. “I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live.”

Many Jewish and Christian readers see in this passage not only the return from exile but also a glimpse of something even bigger: God’s power to raise the dead. Later prophets and New Testament writers talk about a future resurrection, when God will raise His people bodily from the grave. The valley of dry bones is one of the earliest and most vivid pictures of that hope.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Dem Bones**

The vision of the dry bones inspired a famous African American spiritual, often called Dem Bones or Dry Bones, which became popular in the early twentieth century. You might have heard its lines about the toe bone connected to the foot bone. It’s easy to treat it as a silly children’s song, but it grew out of a community that knew suffering and longed for freedom. For enslaved people and their descendants, Ezekiel’s vision was a powerful promise that God could bring life and liberation to people the world had treated as dead.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Two Sticks**

After the vision, God gave Ezekiel another sign act. He took two sticks. On one he wrote the name of Judah, the southern kingdom. On the other he wrote the name of Joseph, or Ephraim, representing the northern kingdom of Israel. Then he held them together so they looked like one stick in his hand. Israel had been split into two kingdoms for over three hundred years, since the days of Solomon’s son Rehoboam. The northern kingdom had been destroyed by Assyria over a century before. But God promised, “They will no longer be two nations. They won’t be divided into two kingdoms any more at all.”

Then God promised that David, His servant, would be king over them, and they would have one shepherd. He promised an everlasting covenant of peace. And He promised, “My tent also will be with them. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

From dry bones to living people. From two broken kingdoms to one united family. From exile to God living among them. That's the kind of hope only God can give.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Born of Water and Spirit**

Centuries later, a respected Jewish teacher named Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Jesus told him, "unless one is born of water and Spirit, he can't enter into God's Kingdom." Nicodemus was confused. But Jesus seemed surprised that a teacher of Israel didn't understand. Many scholars think Jesus was pointing to Ezekiel 36, where God promised to sprinkle clean water on His people and put His Spirit within them. Being born again is the new heart Ezekiel promised.

Notice how Ezekiel's vision works. The bones came together because Ezekiel spoke God's word. But the bones didn't live until the breath came. There are two stages. Some people look good on the outside. They know the right answers, go to church, and follow the rules. But they don't have God's life inside them. Bodies without breath. What they need isn't just better structure, but God's Spirit.

REAL TALK **Speak Life**

God told Ezekiel to speak to dead bones. That sounds pointless, but God used Ezekiel's words to bring life. You can't breathe life into anyone the way God does. But your words matter more than you think. Proverbs says death and life are in the power of the tongue. A word of encouragement, a prayer, a reminder of God's love, or a simple I'm here for you might be exactly what a friend with dry bones needs. Don't underestimate what God can do through the words you speak.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jesus and the Dead**

Jesus didn't just teach about resurrection. He demonstrated it. He raised a widow's son during a funeral procession, a synagogue leader's daughter from her bed, and His friend Lazarus from a tomb after four days. And then He Himself rose from the dead on the third day. Christians see the valley of dry

bones as a promise that Jesus fulfills, both in giving new spiritual life now and in the future bodily resurrection of all who belong to Him.

God ended the vision with a promise and a signature: "you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it." There's that refrain again. When the bones live, everyone will know who did it. Not the prophet. Not the people. God.

REAL TALK **Signs of a Softer Heart**

How can you tell if God is softening your heart? You might notice that you care more about people who are hurting. You feel sorry when you've done wrong, instead of just being sorry you got caught. You want to pray, even a little. You find yourself forgiving someone you used to hold a grudge against. You're more honest. A heart of flesh isn't a perfect heart. It's a heart that's alive to God and to other people. If you see even small signs like these, thank God. He's at work.

The promise of a new heart also explains why the gospel is good news and not just good advice. Good advice says, Try harder. Good news says, God has done something for you that you could never do for yourself. Ezekiel's promise is that God Himself would clean, renew, and fill His people. Christians believe that promise was opened to the whole world when Jesus died and rose again and poured out His Spirit at Pentecost.

KEY VERSE

I will also give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you. I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh.

Ezekiel 36:26 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why is it good news that God acts for the sake of His name?
2. What's the difference between trying to change yourself and asking God for a new heart?
3. Why do you think Ezekiel answered, Lord GOD, you know?
4. What part of your life feels like dry bones right now?

TRY THIS *Read Ezekiel 37:1-14 out loud. Then pray for one area of your life, or someone else's, that feels dead, asking God to breathe new life into it.*

CHAPTER 6

Gog and Magog in Context

Ezekiel 38–39

Chapters 38 and 39 are some of the most debated chapters in Ezekiel. They describe a massive army from the far north, led by a figure named Gog, from the land of Magog, attacking God's people in the latter days. People have argued about these chapters for centuries, and some have tried to match them to the news headlines of their own time.

Let's look at what the text actually says, then lay out the main ways Christians have understood it.

God tells Ezekiel, "Son of man, set your face toward Gog, of the land of Magog, the prince of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal, and prophesy against him." Gog gathers a huge alliance of nations, including Persia, Cush, Put, Gomer, and Beth Togarmah. They come against Israel at a time when the people have been regathered from the nations and are living securely in "the land of unwalled villages," with no defenses.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Are Gog and Magog?**

No one knows for sure who Gog was. Some ancient scholars connected him with a king named Gyges of Lydia, in what is now Turkey. Magog appears in Genesis 10 as one of the sons of Japheth, so it probably refers to a people group in the far north. Meshech and Tubal were regions in Anatolia, also modern Turkey. The word Rosh can be translated as the name of a place, as

the WEB does, or as the word chief, as many translations do, so that Gog is the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal. Some popular writers have linked Rosh to Russia and Meshech to Moscow, but most scholars think those connections are based on sound-alike words, not on the Hebrew. The nations listed come from all directions, showing a gathering of the whole world's hostile powers.

The attack seems unstoppable. But God steps in. There's an earthquake. The attackers turn on each other. God sends disease, hailstones, fire, and sulfur. The great army collapses. The people of Israel spend seven years burning the enemy's weapons as firewood, and seven months burying the dead to cleanse the land. Birds and animals are invited to a great feast.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fair Questions: How Do Christians Read Gog and Magog?**

Christians have understood these chapters in several main ways. Some read them as a prediction of a specific future battle in the last days, before or during the end of the age, involving the modern nation of Israel and an alliance of nations from the north. Some of those readers connect it with particular events or nations, though they often disagree about which ones. Others see Gog as a symbol of all the forces of evil that oppose God's people throughout history, with the battle representing God's final victory, rather than a specific military event. Others see these chapters as fulfilled partly in past events and pointing forward to the final defeat of evil described in Revelation 20, where Gog and Magog appear as the nations Satan gathers for a last rebellion. Some combine these views. Sincere, Bible-loving Christians hold each of these views. This book doesn't endorse one timeline. What they all agree on is that God wins.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Latter Days**

Ezekiel says Gog's attack would happen "in the latter days" and "after many days." In the Old Testament, the latter days often means the time when God finally fulfills His promises, but it doesn't always mean the very end of history. The prophets sometimes saw future events like mountain peaks, one behind

another, without showing the valleys of time in between. That's part of why Christians interpret prophecies like these in different ways. What's clear is that Ezekiel 38-39 looks beyond the immediate return from exile to a future time when God's people would be regathered and secure.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Apocalyptic Language**

Ezekiel 38-39 uses apocalyptic language, a style of writing found in parts of Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation. Apocalyptic writing uses vivid symbols, huge numbers, cosmic events, and dramatic battles to reveal spiritual realities and God's ultimate victory. It's not meant to be read like a newspaper report, and it's not meant to be decoded like a puzzle that tells you exactly what will happen next year. Its main purpose is to give hope to people who are suffering, showing them that God is in control and evil will not win.

So what's the point of these chapters? Ezekiel tells us directly. God says, "I will magnify myself and sanctify myself, and I will make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they will know that I am the LORD."

There's that refrain again. The battle isn't really about geography or politics. It's about God showing who He is. The whole world will see that the God of Israel is holy, powerful, and faithful. And His people will finally be safe.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Seven Years and Seven Months**

Ezekiel says the people would burn the enemy's weapons for seven years and bury the dead for seven months. In the Bible, the number seven often represents completeness. Some readers take these numbers literally. Others see them as symbols showing that the victory would be total and the land completely cleansed. Either way, the picture is striking: the weapons of war become firewood for ordinary life. It echoes Isaiah's famous promise that people will beat their swords into plowshares. God's victory turns instruments of death into fuel for warming homes and cooking meals.

REAL TALK **Fear and the End Times**

Sometimes people talk about the end of the world in ways that make you scared. Maybe you've seen videos claiming that a certain war or world leader fulfills Bible prophecy, or heard people predict specific dates. Over the centuries, many confident predictions about Gog and Magog have turned out to be wrong. Jesus said no one knows the day or the hour, and He told His followers not to be alarmed. The purpose of prophecy isn't to make you anxious. It's to give you hope that evil won't have the last word. If thinking about the end times makes you afraid, talk to a parent, pastor, or youth leader. Focus on what's clear: God is in control, Jesus is coming back, and He will make everything right.

The section ends with one of the most comforting promises in the book. God says His people will know that He sent them into exile and also brought them back, and He will not leave any of them behind. "I won't hide my face from them any more, for I have poured out my Spirit on the house of Israel, says the Lord GOD."

Notice how chapters 38-39 fit into the flow of Ezekiel. Chapters 36-37 promise new hearts, new life, and God living among His people. Chapters 38-39 show that even the greatest future threat can't undo that promise. And chapters 40-48 will show what life with God at the center looks like. The battle is not the end of the story. God's presence is.

REAL TALK **Christians Under Pressure**

In many countries today, Christians face serious danger for their faith. Some are arrested, attacked, or forced to leave their homes. For believers in those places, prophecies like Ezekiel 38-39 aren't just theories about the future. They're a lifeline of hope that God sees them and will one day defend His people completely. You can pray for persecuted believers by name, learn about their stories, and remember that the global church is your family. When

you face smaller pressures, like being mocked for your faith, remember that you're part of a long line of people who have trusted God in hard places.

REAL TALK **When Evil Seems Huge**

Ezekiel 38-39 describes an evil that seems unstoppable, coming from every direction. Sometimes the world can feel that way: wars, injustice, violence, and problems too big for anyone to fix. Sometimes your own life can feel that way too. These chapters don't pretend evil is small. But they insist that God is bigger. He doesn't win by a narrow margin. He wins completely. That gives you courage to keep doing good, even when it feels like the bad guys are winning.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Gog and Magog in Revelation**

Revelation 20 describes Satan being released at the end of a thousand-year period, and says he "will come out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to the war." In Revelation, Gog and Magog aren't a specific country. They're the nations from the four corners of the earth, a picture of all the world's rebellion against God. Fire comes down from heaven and ends the battle instantly. Whatever view Christians take on Ezekiel 38-39, Revelation uses Gog and Magog as a symbol of the final defeat of evil.

These chapters also echo themes from the rest of Ezekiel. God says, "I will make my holy name known among my people Israel. I won't allow my holy name to be profaned any more." Back in chapter 36, God said His people had profaned His name among the nations. Now the nations will see His holiness. And God says, "Now I will reverse the captivity of Jacob and have mercy on the whole house of Israel." The point of the battle isn't destruction for its own sake. It's the final protection of a people God has made new.

REAL TALK **Don't Believe Everything You See Online**

Social media is full of videos that claim to have decoded prophecy, often with dramatic music and confident voices. Some say a war, earthquake, or world

leader proves the end is days away. Before you believe or share something like that, ask a few questions. Does this match what the Bible actually says, in context? What do trusted pastors and scholars say? Is the goal to make me afraid or to point me to Jesus? Has this person made predictions that didn't come true before? Wise people test what they hear. Paul praised the Bereans for checking the Scriptures to see if what they were taught was true.

REAL TALK **Reading Hard Prophecy Well**

When you come to a confusing passage like Ezekiel 38-39, here are a few tips. First, read the whole passage, not just one verse. Second, ask what it meant to the first people who heard it, exiles who had lost everything. Third, look for how the rest of the Bible, especially the New Testament, uses the same ideas. Fourth, hold your conclusions humbly, especially where faithful Christians disagree. And fifth, focus on what is clear. In these chapters, what's clear is that God protects His people, defeats evil, and makes Himself known. You don't need to have every detail figured out to trust the God who wins.

Think about how these chapters must have sounded to Ezekiel's first listeners. They were a small, defeated people living as refugees in the capital of the world's greatest empire. They had no army, no king, no temple, and no land. To them, the nations of the world must have seemed overwhelming. Ezekiel's vision told them that even if every nation on earth came against them, God would still protect them. That's a message for anyone who feels small in a big, scary world.

KEY VERSE

I will magnify myself and sanctify myself, and I will make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they will know that I am the LORD.

Ezekiel 38:23 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think people have tried so often to connect Gog and Magog to current events?
2. What do all the different views of these chapters agree on?
3. How does the refrain Then they will know that I am the LORD shape the meaning of these chapters?
4. How can thinking about God's final victory give you courage instead of fear?

TRY THIS *Read Revelation 21:1-5 this week. Write down three things God promises to do when He finally defeats evil.*

CHAPTER 7

The River of Life and The LORD Is There

Ezekiel 40–48

Twenty-five years after Ezekiel was taken into exile, and fourteen years after Jerusalem fell, God gave him one last great vision. He was taken to a very high mountain in the land of Israel. A man who looked like bronze, holding a measuring rod and a linen cord, gave him a guided tour of a new temple.

Chapters 40-48 are full of measurements: gates, walls, courtyards, rooms, altars, and doorways. It can feel like reading a blueprint. But the details had a purpose. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. The exiles might have wondered whether God would ever live among them again. This vision said yes, and it showed a place where everything was in perfect order, holy and whole.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Second Temple**

When some of the exiles returned to Jerusalem around 538 BC, they rebuilt the temple, finishing it in 516 BC. That Second Temple was much smaller and plainer than Solomon's had been. The book of Ezra says older people who remembered the first temple wept when they saw the foundation. And there's no record that God's glory filled the Second Temple in the visible way it had filled Solomon's temple. Many readers saw that as a sign that Ezekiel's vision hadn't been fully fulfilled yet. They kept waiting for the day when God's glory

would return. Christians believe it returned in a surprising way, when Jesus, God in the flesh, walked into that temple.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fair Questions: A Literal or Symbolic Temple?**

Christians and Jews have understood Ezekiel's temple in different ways. Some Jewish readers see it as a blueprint for a future third temple to be built in the messianic age. Some Christians also read it literally, as a temple that will exist during a future thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. Other Christians read it as symbolic, picturing God's perfect presence with His people, fulfilled in Jesus, who called His body a temple, in the church, which the New Testament calls God's temple, and finally in the new creation, where John saw no temple, because "the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple." Some note that the returning exiles did not try to build Ezekiel's temple exactly, which suggests they saw it as more than a construction plan. Sincere Christians hold each of these views. All agree it points to God dwelling with His people.

Then came the most important moment of the tour. Ezekiel saw the glory of God returning. Years earlier, in chapters 10 and 11, he had watched it leave the temple and go east. Now he watched it come back from the east. "His voice was like the sound of many waters; and the earth was illuminated with his glory." "The LORD's glory came into the house by the way of the gate which faces toward the east." And "the LORD's glory filled the house."

God said, "Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place of the soles of my feet, where I will dwell among the children of Israel forever."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Faithful Priests**

In Ezekiel 44, God gives special honor to the priests descended from Zadok, because they "performed the duty of my sanctuary when the children of Israel went astray." Zadok had been the faithful high priest in the days of David and Solomon. While other priests and Levites joined in idolatry, his family stayed

faithful. In Ezekiel's vision, faithfulness is remembered. That would have meant a lot to Ezekiel, who was a priest himself and who had watched so many leaders fail.

Why all the measurements? God told Ezekiel, "show the house to the house of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities; and let them measure the pattern." The perfect design of the temple would show the people how far they had fallen, and also how carefully God planned for their future. Every wall and gate said that God takes holiness seriously, and that He had not given up on living among His people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Shut Gate**

In Ezekiel 44, God says the east gate, through which His glory entered, must remain shut, because the LORD had come in through it. Today, the Golden Gate in the eastern wall of Jerusalem's Old City has been sealed for centuries. It was sealed by Muslim rulers long ago, and many people connect it with Ezekiel's vision and with traditions about the Messiah entering Jerusalem. Christians, Jews, and Muslims all have traditions related to this gate. The present gate isn't the same gate Ezekiel saw, but it has become a powerful symbol of hope.

Then, in chapter 47, the man brought Ezekiel back to the entrance of the temple. And Ezekiel saw water trickling out from under the threshold, flowing east.

The man measured a thousand cubits, about a third of a mile, and led Ezekiel through the water. It was ankle deep. Another thousand cubits, and it was knee deep. Another thousand, and it was waist deep. Another thousand, and "it was a river that I could not pass through, for the waters had risen, waters to swim in, a river that could not be walked through."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Dead Sea**

The river in Ezekiel's vision flows east into the Arabah, the deep valley around the Jordan River, and into the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is about ten times saltier than the ocean, one of the saltiest bodies of water on earth. Nothing much can live in it except a few tiny microbes. That's why it's called dead. In Ezekiel's vision, the river flows into the Dead Sea and makes its waters fresh. Fish fill it, like the fish of the Mediterranean. Fishermen spread their nets along the shore from En Gedi to En Eglaim. The deadest place in the land becomes full of life.

The guide explained, "These waters flow out toward the eastern region and will go down into the Arabah. Then they will go toward the sea and flow into the sea which will be made to flow out; and the waters will be healed." And then: "everything will live wherever the river comes."

Along the banks, trees grow that never lose their leaves and produce fruit every month. "Its fruit will be for food, and its leaf for healing."

Notice how the river gets deeper the farther it goes. It starts as a trickle. It ends as a flood. That's what God's life is like. It starts small, but it keeps growing, and it brings healing wherever it reaches.

REAL TALK **Ankle Deep or All In?**

In Ezekiel 47, the river starts ankle deep and grows until Ezekiel can't touch the bottom. Many people treat faith like wading at the edge. They stay where they can still touch the ground, where they feel in control. But the river keeps calling you deeper, into trust, surrender, and real life with God. What would it look like for you to go a little deeper this year? Maybe reading the Bible regularly, praying honestly, joining a small group, or serving people in need. You don't have to jump into the deep end all at once. But don't stay ankle deep forever.

Interestingly, God also says the swamps and marshes would not be healed, but would be left for salt. Even salt had a purpose in the ancient world, for preserving food and seasoning. The vision is realistic about the world, but full of hope.

The final chapter divides the land among the twelve tribes, including generous space for foreigners who lived among them, a detail that goes back to chapter 47. And then the book of Ezekiel ends with the name of the city.

Not Jerusalem. Not Zion. A new name.

"The LORD is there."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Name of the City**

In Hebrew, the name in Ezekiel 48:35 is just two words: God's personal name, which the WEB prints as LORD, followed by shammah, which means there. It's the perfect ending for Ezekiel. The book began with a priest in exile, far from the temple, seeing God's glory in a foreign land. It continued with the glory leaving Jerusalem. And it ends with God returning to live among His people forever. The greatest gift isn't the temple, the land, or the river. It's God Himself, present with His people.

Ezekiel had spent his whole ministry far from home, surrounded by rebellion, grief, and loss. He had lost his wife. He had watched his nation fall. But his final vision was of a city where God would never leave again. Whatever you're facing, that's where the story is going too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Rivers From Eden to Revelation**

The river in Ezekiel 47 connects to a bigger story. In Genesis, a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and the tree of life grew there. A psalm sings, "There is a river, the streams of which make the city of God glad." In Zechariah, living waters flow out from Jerusalem. And at the very end of the Bible, John sees "a river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the

throne of God and of the Lamb," with the tree of life on both sides, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. The Bible begins and ends with a river and a tree. Ezekiel's vision sits right in the middle, pointing forward to the day when everything is made new.

Here's another surprising detail. When God divided the land among the tribes, He told Israel to give an inheritance "to the aliens who live among you." The foreigners who had settled among Israel would receive land just like the native-born. In God's new city, outsiders become family. That echoes the promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him, and it points forward to Jesus, who has "other sheep" and promised that they would become one flock with one shepherd.

REAL TALK **You Can Be Part of the River**

In Ezekiel's vision, the river brings life wherever it goes, and the trees along its banks give food and healing. Jesus said that whoever believes in Him would have rivers of living water flowing from within them. That means God doesn't just want to heal you. He wants His life to flow through you to other people. When you include someone who's left out, stand up for someone being bullied, listen to a hurting friend, or serve people in need, you're part of the river. God's healing reaches the world through ordinary people like you.

REAL TALK **Where Is God Right Now?**

Ezekiel's final vision is about a future city where God lives with His people forever. But you don't have to wait for that day to experience God's presence. Jesus promised His followers, I am with you always. The Holy Spirit lives within everyone who trusts in Jesus. That means the LORD is there: in your bedroom when you can't sleep, in the hallway at school, in the hospital waiting room, in the car on the way to a hard conversation. You might not see His glory like Ezekiel did. But He's there. Try praying a simple prayer at different moments of the day: God, You're here. Help me notice You.

KEY VERSE

and the name of the city from that day shall be, 'The LORD is there.'

Ezekiel 48:35 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the return of God's glory was so important to Ezekiel?
2. What does the river healing the Dead Sea say about what God can do?
3. Are you ankle deep, knee deep, or swimming in your relationship with God?
4. Why is The LORD is there such a powerful name for a city?

TRY THIS *Draw or describe the river in Ezekiel 47 as it gets deeper. Then write down one step you can take this week to go deeper with God.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Ezekiel ends with a promise: a new temple, a healing river, and a city named The LORD is there. Jewish readers treasure these promises of restoration and God's presence. Christians believe they come to their fullest meaning in Jesus.

Ezekiel saw God fire the selfish shepherds and promise to shepherd His sheep Himself. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Ezekiel saw water flowing from the temple, bringing life wherever it went. Jesus stood up at a festival and cried out, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink!" And John's vision at the end of the Bible shows "a river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb," with the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. Ezekiel heard God promise to put His Spirit within His people and give them a new heart. After rising from the dead, Jesus breathed on His disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit!" just as the breath entered the dry bones. And Ezekiel watched the glory of God leave the temple and promised it would return. John writes, "The Word became flesh and lived among us. We saw his glory." Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. In Him, the LORD is there.

Here's what that means for you, 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 Shepherd who comes looking for His lost sheep.

> *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.

Ezekiel says our hearts can turn hard as stone. 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 holy, 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 is the Good Shepherd.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd Ezekiel promised. He laid down His life for the sheep, died for our sins, and rose again, so dry bones can live.

> *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live to righteousness. You were healed by his wounds.* **1 Peter 2:24 (WEB)**

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

A new heart is God's gift, not our achievement. 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 live.

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, and you don't need to clean yourself up first. God is the one who gives the new heart. You can talk to God right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, my heart has been hard, and I've gone my own way. I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, laid down His life for me and rose again. Forgive me. Take away my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh. Put Your Spirit within me, and breathe life into every part of me that feels dead. 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 Ezekiel 36-37, then John 10, from dry bones to the Good Shepherd.

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

Ask for the Spirit's help. Each day, ask God to soften your heart and lead you.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Ezekiel's visions are strange, and his questions are big. Keep asking. Keep reading. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Ezekiel is right, God can make dry bones live. And no heart is too hard for Him to make new.

I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live.

Ezekiel 37:14 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF DANIEL

The King on the Clouds

Daniel, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King on the Clouds: The Book of Daniel, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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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 probably know at least one story from Daniel. Maybe it's the lions' den. Maybe it's three guys in a blazing furnace. Maybe it's a mysterious hand writing on a wall. They're some of the most famous stories in the Bible, and they show up in kids' Bibles, cartoons, and Sunday school felt boards everywhere.

But here's something a lot of people miss: when Daniel's story begins, he and his three best friends are teenagers. Probably around fourteen to sixteen. They were ripped away from their families, marched hundreds of miles to a foreign empire, given new names, enrolled in a pagan university, and pressured to fit in. Everything about Babylon was designed to make them forget who they were and whose they were.

They didn't forget. And the way they stayed faithful, respectfully, courageously, and wisely, is one of the best guides you'll ever find for living out your faith in a world that doesn't share it.

Then the second half of Daniel shifts into wild visions of beasts, horns, angels, and a mysterious figure coming on the clouds. It's some of the most debated writing in Scripture. But its message is simple: empires rise and fall, and God's kingdom lasts forever.

Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Daniel in seven chapters: new names and the same faith (Daniel 1), the giant statue and the uncut stone (2),

the fiery furnace (3), a humbled king and the writing on the wall (4-5), the lions' den (6), four beasts and the Son of Man (7-8), and prayer, seventy weeks, and shining like stars (9-12).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains who Daniel and his friends were, how the book is organized, why part of it is written in a different language, and how scholars date 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 talk over with someone you trust; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as when Daniel was written or how to understand the Seventy Weeks, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Daniel 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 twenty-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, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Daniel is uniquely suited to teenagers. Its heroes were teenagers when the story began, facing intense pressure to conform in a culture that didn't share their faith. This book highlights the respectful, wise, and courageous way they stayed faithful, without encouraging needless defiance of authority or self-righteousness.

The book explains the structure of Daniel: stories in chapters 1-6 and apocalyptic visions in chapters 7-12, along with the Aramaic section in 2:4-7:28. It briefly and fairly presents the main views on when Daniel was written, and on how to interpret the visions, including the Seventy Weeks of Daniel 9, without pushing any single chart or timeline.

Real Talk boxes address peer pressure, identity, praying with friends, anxiety about the future, pride, faithful habits, standing up for your faith respectfully, and fear about the end times. Where relevant, readers are encouraged to talk with a trusted adult, and 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, is listed for anyone feeling overwhelmed.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how Jesus took Daniel's title Son of Man as His own, declared before the high priest that He was the one who would come with the clouds, and established the everlasting kingdom Daniel foresaw. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

My prayer is that every reader will stay faithful wherever they are planted, and trust that the Most High rules.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

Teenagers in Babylon

In 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, the young crown prince and soon king of Babylon, defeated Egypt at the battle of Carchemish and took control of Judah. He carried off some of the best and brightest young people from Jerusalem's royal and noble families to serve in his court. Among them were Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. The Hebrew word used for them means youths, and ancient sources suggest that students were trained for royal service from around age fourteen. So Daniel and his friends were probably fourteen to sixteen years old. That's eight years before Ezekiel was taken to Babylon, and nineteen years before Jerusalem was destroyed.

Two Halves

Daniel has two very different halves. Chapters 1-6 are stories about Daniel and his friends living faithfully under foreign kings, told mostly in the third person. Chapters 7-12 are visions that Daniel saw, told mostly in the first person, using vivid symbols like beasts, horns, and angels. This kind of writing is called apocalyptic, from a Greek word meaning revealing or unveiling. The stories show how to live faithfully in exile. The visions show why: because God rules history, and His kingdom will outlast every empire.

A Book in Two Languages

Most of the Old Testament is written in Hebrew. But Daniel switches languages in the middle of chapter 2, verse 4, when the Babylonian wise men speak to the king. From there until the end of chapter 7, the book is written in Aramaic, the international language of the Babylonian and Persian empires. Then it switches back to Hebrew for chapters 8-12. The Aramaic section focuses on God's rule over the nations, so it fits that it's written in the language of the nations. The overlap means the two halves of the book are woven together.

When Was It Written?

Christians hold different views on when Daniel was written. The traditional view, held by many Christians and Jews, is that Daniel himself or someone close to him wrote it in the sixth century BC, and that its visions predict events centuries ahead. Many scholars think the book reached its final form around 165 BC, during the persecution of Jews by the Greek king Antiochus IV, using older stories about Daniel to encourage people suffering in that crisis. Others hold positions between these. Reasons given include the book's languages, historical details, and its detailed prophecies in chapter 11. Sincere Christians hold different views on this. Either way, Jesus treated Daniel as Scripture and called him a prophet.

Where Daniel Sits

In Christian Bibles, Daniel is placed with the major prophets, after Ezekiel. In the Hebrew Bible, it's in the section called the Writings, along with books like Psalms and Esther. Some think that's because Daniel served as a government official rather than a prophet who preached to Israel. Either way, Daniel's influence is huge. The New

Testament draws heavily on it, especially the book of Revelation and Jesus' own words about the Son of Man.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Daniel 1): New names, same faith.

Chapter 2 (Daniel 2): The giant statue and the uncut stone.

Chapter 3 (Daniel 3): The fiery furnace.

Chapter 4 (Daniel 4-5): A humbled king and the writing on the wall.

Chapter 5 (Daniel 6): The lions' den.

Chapter 6 (Daniel 7-8): Four beasts and the Son of Man.

Chapter 7 (Daniel 9-12): Prayer, seventy weeks, and shining like stars.

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Where This Points .....

CHAPTER 1

New Names, Same Faith

Daniel 1

Picture this. You're fifteen. An enemy army has surrounded your city. Your king has surrendered. And soldiers come to your house and take you away, along with other teenagers from the best families in town. You're marched about five hundred miles across the desert to the most powerful city on earth. You may never see your parents again.

That's how Daniel's story begins. "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it." Nebuchadnezzar took some of the sacred vessels from God's temple and put them in the treasure house of his own god. It looked like Babylon's gods had won.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Babylon**

Babylon was the capital of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, on the Euphrates River in what is now Iraq. Under Nebuchadnezzar, it became one of the most magnificent cities in the ancient world. It had massive double walls, a grand processional road, the famous blue-glazed Ishtar Gate decorated with lions and dragons, and enormous temples. Ancient writers later described its Hanging Gardens as one of the Seven Wonders of the World, though archaeologists still debate where they were. For a teenager from Jerusalem, arriving in Babylon must have felt like walking into the biggest, flashiest, most overwhelming city imaginable.

Nebuchadnezzar had a plan. He ordered his chief official, Ashpenaz, to select young men from Israel's royal family and nobility, "youths in whom was no defect, but well-favored, skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding science." They would be trained for three years in "the learning and the language of the Chaldeans," and then serve in the king's court.

It was a smart strategy. Take the brightest young people from conquered nations, give them the best education, and turn them into loyal Babylonians. Within a generation, they'd forget where they came from.

The first step was new names. "The prince of the eunuchs gave names to them: to Daniel he gave the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What's in a Name?**
>
> The friends' Hebrew names all honored the God of Israel. Daniel means God is my judge. Hananiah means the LORD is gracious. Mishael means Who is like God? Azariah means the LORD has helped. Their new Babylonian names honored Babylonian gods instead. Belteshazzar probably meant something like Bel, protect his life. Abednego meant servant of Nebo, another Babylonian god. Shadrach and Meshach are harder to pin down, but they may have been connected to Babylonian gods too. Changing their names was a way of changing their identity, telling them they belonged to Babylon now.

Notice what Daniel and his friends didn't do. They didn't refuse their new names. They didn't refuse to learn the Babylonian language, literature, and science, even though some of it was full of Babylonian religion. They studied hard, and they excelled. They lived in Babylon and served it well.

But they drew a line somewhere. “But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the king’s delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank.”

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Fair Questions: Why the Food?**
>
> Why would Daniel draw his line at the king’s food? Scholars suggest several reasons. Some of the food may not have been kosher under the law of Moses, like pork or meat that wasn’t properly drained of blood. Some of it may have been offered to Babylonian gods first. Others suggest that eating from the king’s table created a bond of loyalty and dependence on the king that Daniel wanted to avoid. Still others note that choosing simple food was a way for Daniel to keep his identity and remember that his life came from God, not from Nebuchadnezzar. The text doesn’t say exactly, and these reasons may overlap. What’s clear is that Daniel decided ahead of time where his convictions were.

Notice the phrase purposed in his heart. Daniel made up his mind before the pressure came. He didn’t wait until the food was in front of him to decide what to do. He knew who he was and what he believed.

> **REAL TALK** **Decide Before the Pressure Hits**
>
> Some of the hardest choices you’ll face will come suddenly: at a party, in a group chat, in the back seat of a car, or when a friend asks you to do something you know is wrong. In those moments, it’s really hard to think clearly. That’s why it helps to decide ahead of time. What will you do if someone offers you a vape, drugs, or alcohol? What will you do if a conversation online starts heading somewhere unsafe? What will you do if your friends start bullying someone? Like Daniel, you can purpose in your heart now. Then, when the pressure comes, you’re not deciding. You’re just following through.

Here’s the part that makes Daniel’s courage so wise. He didn’t march into the dining hall and throw his plate on the floor. He

didn't lecture the Babylonians about how sinful they were. He went to the official in charge and asked permission respectfully.

The official was nervous. If Daniel and his friends looked worse than the others, the king might have his head. So Daniel proposed a test. "Test your servants, I beg you, ten days; and let them give us vegetables to eat and water to drink." Then compare them with the others, and decide.

BACKGROUND CHECK **God Gave Favor**

The text says, "God made Daniel find kindness and compassion in the sight of the prince of the eunuchs." Daniel's respectful request worked partly because God was at work behind the scenes. The official liked Daniel. That's a reminder that God can open doors through relationships. Daniel had obviously treated this man with respect, and the man returned it. Kindness and respect often open more doors than arguments.

At the end of ten days, Daniel and his friends looked healthier and better nourished than all the young men who ate the king's food. So the official let them keep eating vegetables.

REAL TALK **Respectful Courage**

Daniel shows that standing firm in your faith doesn't mean being rude, self-righteous, or disrespectful. He was polite. He offered a creative solution. He was willing to work within the system where he could. And he didn't judge the other students. If your faith ever puts you at odds with a teacher, coach, or friend, you can follow Daniel's example. Be humble. Ask respectfully. Look for a solution that honors God and respects the other person. You might be surprised how often people say yes. And when they don't, you can still respond with kindness.

REAL TALK **This Isn't a Diet Plan**

Some people have turned Daniel 1 into a diet, sometimes called the Daniel Fast. Choosing simple food for a time of prayer can be a good spiritual

practice for some people. But Daniel 1 isn't mainly about food rules, weight loss, or looking a certain way. It's about loyalty to God. If you're struggling with how you think about food, your body, or eating, please talk to a parent, school counselor, or doctor. Eating disorders are serious, and help is available. God cares about your whole health, not just what's on your plate.

God blessed the four friends. "Now as for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams." When the three years were up, the king interviewed all the graduates. No one compared to Daniel and his friends. The king found them "ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters who were in all his realm."

The chapter ends with a quiet line that covers a whole lifetime. "Daniel continued even to the first year of King Cyrus." That's about seventy years later. Daniel outlasted Nebuchadnezzar. He outlasted the Babylonian Empire. He was still faithful when the Persians took over. The teenager who drew a line about food became an old man who never stopped following God.

Notice, too, that Daniel's faithfulness didn't make him weird or useless. It made him excellent. He didn't have to choose between loving God and doing well in school. He did both. Some people think following God means pulling away from everything in the culture. Others think it means blending in completely. Daniel found a third way: engage the world wholeheartedly, serve it with excellence, and stay loyal to God where it counts most.

REAL TALK **Who Are You, Really?**

Babylon tried to change Daniel's name, his language, his education, and his diet, all to change his identity. Today, the pressure to change who you are comes from everywhere: social media, advertising, friends, and culture. It can

tell you you're only worth something if you look a certain way, own certain things, or get enough likes. Daniel knew his identity came from God, not from Babylon. Whatever names people call you, whatever labels they put on you, God knows your real name. You belong to Him.

REAL TALK **Far From Home**

Daniel and his friends were separated from their families as teenagers, and they never went back. Some teens today know what it's like to be far from home: kids in foster care, refugees, students whose parents are deployed, or teens whose families have been split apart. If that's you, your feelings of loss, loneliness, or anger are real. Daniel's story shows that God goes with you to unfamiliar places. It also shows the value of friends who share your faith. If you're struggling, please talk to a trusted adult, a school counselor, or a pastor. You don't have to figure out a new place alone.

KEY VERSE

But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the king's delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank. Therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.

Daniel 1:8 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What parts of Babylonian life did Daniel accept, and where did he draw the line?
2. Why do you think Daniel made up his mind ahead of time?
3. How did Daniel show respect while standing firm?
4. Where do you feel pressure to change who you are?

TRY THIS *Write down two or three convictions you want to hold firmly, and decide now how you'll respond when pressure comes. Share them with a trusted friend who can help you stay strong.*

CHAPTER 2

The Giant Statue and the Uncut Stone

Daniel 2

A few years later, King Nebuchadnezzar had a nightmare. It disturbed him so much that he couldn't sleep. So he called in all his wise men: magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers. And he made an impossible demand.

He didn't just want them to interpret his dream. He wanted them to tell him what the dream was. And if they couldn't, he said, "you will be cut in pieces, and your houses will be made a dunghill."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Dream Experts**
>
> In Babylon, dreams were taken very seriously. People believed the gods sent messages through them. Babylonian scholars kept huge collections of dream omens, written on clay tablets, which listed what different dream images supposedly meant. A wise man could look up the symbols and give an interpretation. But Nebuchadnezzar was too smart for that. If they could tell him the dream itself, he'd know their interpretation was real. If they couldn't, he'd know they were just making it up.

The wise men panicked. They told the king, "It is a rare thing that the king requires, and there is no other who can show it before the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh." No human

being could do this. Only the gods could, and the gods didn't live with people.

That was exactly the point Daniel was about to prove wrong.

The king was furious and ordered all the wise men of Babylon executed. Since Daniel and his friends were now part of that group, the soldiers came for them too. Daniel spoke with wisdom and tact to the commander of the guard and asked for a little time. Then he did something important.

"Then Daniel went to his house and made the thing known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions: that they would desire mercies of the God of heaven concerning this secret."

> **REAL TALK** **Praying With Friends**
>
> When Daniel faced a life-or-death crisis, the first thing he did was gather his friends to pray. He didn't try to handle it alone. Having friends who will pray with you is one of the greatest gifts in life. It might look like a group chat where you share prayer requests, a small group at church, or just one friend you can call when things get hard. If you don't have friends like that yet, ask God to bring them into your life, and look for people at church or youth group. And be that kind of friend for someone else. James wrote, "pray for one another, that you may be healed."

That night, God revealed the secret to Daniel in a vision. And Daniel's first response wasn't to run to the king. It was to worship. "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever; for wisdom and might are his. He changes the times and the seasons. He removes kings and sets up kings. He gives wisdom to the wise, and knowledge to those who have understanding. He reveals the deep and secret things. He knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him."

Then Daniel went to the king. And he made sure Nebuchadnezzar knew where the answer came from. No wise man, enchanter, or magician could do this, Daniel said, "but there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets."

REAL TALK **Giving Credit**

Daniel could have taken credit for revealing the dream. It would have made him look amazing. Instead, he pointed straight to God. When you do something well, like ace a test, win a game, or create something beautiful, it's good to enjoy it. But remember who gave you the ability. Humility isn't pretending you're bad at things. It's recognizing that every gift comes from God. Daniel's humility made his success safe, because he never forgot where it came from.

Then Daniel described the dream. The king had seen a huge, dazzling statue, terrifying to look at. "As for this image, its head was of fine gold, its chest and its arms of silver, its belly and its thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet part of iron and part of clay."

Then, as the king watched, a stone was cut out, but not by human hands. It smashed into the statue's feet of iron and clay, and the whole statue crumbled. The gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay were all broken to pieces and blew away like chaff from a threshing floor. "The stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Four Kingdoms**

Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar, "You are the head of gold." After Babylon would come three more kingdoms, each represented by a different metal. Many Christian interpreters identify them as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. Many scholars, especially those who date Daniel later, identify them as Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece. Either way, the pattern is the same. The metals decrease in value but increase in strength, and the feet are a weak mix

> of iron and clay, a kingdom that wouldn't hold together. Every human empire, no matter how impressive, would eventually fall.

Then Daniel explained the stone. "In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, nor will its sovereignty be left to another people; but it will break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it will stand forever."

The statue was huge, shiny, and impressive. The stone was small and plain. But the stone wasn't made by human hands. It came from God. And it didn't just defeat the statue. It grew into a mountain that filled the whole earth.

Notice something about the statue's feet. They were part iron and part clay. Iron is strong. Clay is brittle. You can't make them stick together. The most impressive statue in the world was standing on a weak foundation. Every human kingdom, no matter how glorious it looks, has feet of clay. Sooner or later, it cracks. That's not just true of empires. It's true of anything we build our lives on besides God: popularity, money, looks, or achievement. They look solid, but they won't hold.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Stone Cut Without Hands**
>
> Christians have long seen the stone in Daniel 2 as a picture of God's kingdom through the Messiah. Jesus described Himself as the stone the builders rejected, which became the cornerstone, quoting Psalm 118. He also said that God's kingdom starts small, like a mustard seed, and grows into a great tree. Jewish interpreters have also understood the stone as God's kingdom, often connected to the Messiah. The image teaches that God's kingdom doesn't come through human power, armies, or politics. It comes from God, and nothing can stop it.

Think about how this dream must have sounded to Nebuchadnezzar. He was the most powerful man in the world. His

empire seemed permanent. And God was telling him, through a teenager from a conquered nation, that his kingdom was temporary. Every empire after his would fall too. Only one kingdom would last, and it wouldn't be built by any king.

REAL TALK **When the World Feels Out of Control**

Sometimes the news is overwhelming: wars, elections, economic problems, disasters, and leaders you don't trust. It can make you anxious about the future. Daniel 2 is a reminder that God "removes kings and sets up kings." Every empire in Nebuchadnezzar's dream fell. God's kingdom didn't. That doesn't mean politics and current events don't matter. They do, and Christians should care about justice and the common good. But your ultimate hope isn't in any leader, party, or nation. It's in a kingdom that will never be destroyed. If worry about the future is taking over your thoughts, talk to a parent or trusted adult. You don't have to carry it alone.

Nebuchadnezzar was stunned. He fell on his face before Daniel and said, "Of a truth your God is the God of gods, and the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets." He promoted Daniel to rule over the whole province of Babylon and put him in charge of all the wise men. And at Daniel's request, his three friends were given important positions too.

The teenager who was dragged to Babylon was now one of the most powerful men in the empire. But he'd gotten there by praying with friends, giving God credit, and telling the truth.

REAL TALK **Using Your Gifts in Babylon**

Daniel and his friends served the king of Babylon with excellence. They didn't hide in a corner waiting to go home. They worked hard, learned well, and used their gifts to bless the people around them, even people who didn't share their faith. That's a great model for you. Your schoolwork, your job, your team, and your talents are places to serve God. Jeremiah told the exiles to

seek the peace of the city where God had sent them. You can do your best and bless others right where you are, while still keeping your loyalty to God first.

KEY VERSE

In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, nor will its sovereignty be left to another people; but it will break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it will stand forever.

Daniel 2:44 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Daniel asked his friends to pray with him?
2. What does Daniel's prayer in 2:20-22 say about who God is?
3. What does the statue say about human power? What does the stone say about God's kingdom?
4. Where do you need to remember that God rules over the things that worry you?

TRY THIS *Text or talk to one friend this week and ask how you can pray for them. Then actually pray for them, and check back in a few days.*

CHAPTER 3

The Fiery Furnace

Daniel 3

Remember the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream? The one with a head of gold? Daniel had told him, You are the head of gold. Apparently, Nebuchadnezzar liked that part a little too much.

"Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its width six cubits." That's about ninety feet tall and nine feet wide, as tall as a nine-story building. Not just a golden head this time. The whole thing was gold. It was as if the king was saying, My kingdom won't fall. It will last forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Plain of Dura**

Nebuchadnezzar set up his statue on the plain of Dura, somewhere in the province of Babylon. A statue that tall, out on a flat plain, would have been visible for miles, especially gleaming in the sun. It may have been made of wood or another material and covered in gold. Its proportions, ten times taller than wide, would have made it look like a tall pillar or obelisk, possibly with a figure on top. Some think it represented Nebuchadnezzar himself, others one of his gods. Either way, bowing to it meant pledging total loyalty to the king and his religion.

The king summoned all his officials from across the empire for the dedication ceremony. A herald announced the rule. When the music started, from horns, flutes, harps, and every kind of instrument, everyone had to "fall down and worship the golden

image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up." And the penalty for refusing? "Whoever doesn't fall down and worship shall be cast into the middle of a burning fiery furnace the same hour."

The music played. Thousands of people bowed. And three young men stayed standing.

> **REAL TALK** **Standing When Everyone Bows**
>
> Imagine being one of only three people standing in a crowd of thousands. Everyone can see you. That's what peer pressure feels like at its most intense. It might not be a golden statue for you. It might be a group that expects you to laugh at a cruel joke, share an inappropriate picture, cheat on a test, or go along with something you know is wrong. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego remind you that you don't have to do what everyone else is doing. And notice: there were three of them. Having even one or two friends who share your convictions makes standing firm a lot easier.

Where was Daniel? The text doesn't say. He may have been away on official business, or his high position may have kept him separate. Some think the story deliberately focuses on his three friends to show that they could stand firm without him.

Some officials, probably jealous of these foreign young men in high positions, went straight to the king. "There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, have not respected you."

Nebuchadnezzar was furious. He had the three brought before him. But surprisingly, he gave them a second chance. If they would bow when the music played, everything would be fine. If not, into the furnace. And then he added a taunt: "Who is that god who will deliver you out of my hands?"

Their answer is one of the bravest speeches in the Bible.

"Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If it happens, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up."

BACKGROUND CHECK **But If Not**

Those three words, But if not, are some of the most powerful in Scripture. The friends were confident God could rescue them. They even believed He would. But they didn't make their obedience depend on it. Even if God chose not to save them from the fire, they still wouldn't bow. During World War II, in 1940, when British troops were trapped at Dunkirk, a naval officer reportedly sent home a three-word message: But if not. Many people in Britain recognized the reference to Daniel 3 and understood: the situation was desperate, but they would not surrender.

REAL TALK **Faith That Doesn't Depend on Outcomes**

Some people think faith means believing God will always give you what you want. If you pray hard enough, the sick person will get better, the problem will disappear, the test will be easy. Sometimes God does answer that way. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had a deeper faith. They trusted God whether He rescued them or not. That kind of faith is for the times when prayers don't get answered the way you hoped. It says: God, I know You can. I hope You will. But even if You don't, I'm still Yours. That's not weak faith. It's the strongest kind.

Nebuchadnezzar's face twisted with rage. He ordered the furnace heated "seven times more than it was usually heated." He had the three men tied up, fully dressed, and thrown in. The fire was so hot that the soldiers who threw them in were killed by the flames.

Then the king leaped to his feet in shock. "Didn't we cast three men bound into the middle of the fire?" His advisers said yes. "He answered, Look, I see four men loose, walking in the middle of the

fire, and they are unharmed. The appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods."

Think about what the three friends experienced. They expected to die. They were tied up and thrown into a fire so hot it killed the soldiers standing at its edge. And the first thing that happened in the fire was that their ropes burned away and they found themselves walking free, with someone beside them. The very thing meant to destroy them became the place where they met God most powerfully.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Fair Questions: Who Was the Fourth Man?**
> Nebuchadnezzar said the fourth figure looked "like a son of the gods." Later, he said God "has sent his angel." Many Jewish and Christian readers have understood the fourth figure as an angel sent by God. Many Christians, since early church times, have also seen it as a preincarnate appearance of the Son of God, Jesus before He was born in Bethlehem, appearing as He seems to in a few other Old Testament scenes. Others hold both possibilities open. What everyone agrees on is the heart of it: God didn't keep His servants out of the fire, but He met them in it.

The three men weren't just alive. They were loose. The ropes had burned off, but nothing else had. They were walking around in the fire, and someone was walking with them.

Nebuchadnezzar went to the door of the furnace and called, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, you servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!" They walked out. And all the officials gathered around and saw that the fire hadn't touched them. "The hair of their head wasn't singed. Their pants weren't changed. The smell of fire wasn't even on them."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Furnaces in Babylon**

Babylon used large brick kilns to fire the millions of bricks needed for its huge building projects. These furnaces may have had an opening at the top for loading and a door at the side, which would explain how Nebuchadnezzar could look in and see the men walking inside. Historical records from the ancient Near East mention burning as a punishment in some cases. Jeremiah 29 mentions two men whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire. The threat in Daniel 3 was terrifyingly real.

REAL TALK **God in the Fire**

Isaiah wrote, "When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned, and flame will not scorch you." That doesn't mean Christians never suffer. Many faithful people throughout history have suffered and even died for their faith. But it means you're never alone in the fire. Maybe your fire is a family crisis, an illness, depression, bullying, or grief. God doesn't always take the fire away immediately. But He walks into it with you. If you're in a fire right now that feels too hot to handle, please reach out to a trusted adult. And if you ever feel like you can't go on, call or text 988 any time, day or night.

Nebuchadnezzar praised the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, "who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him." He recognized that they had been willing to give up their lives rather than worship any god but their own. Then he made a decree that no one could speak against their God, "because there is no other god who is able to deliver like this." And he promoted the three friends.

Notice what happened. The king who demanded that everyone worship his image ended up praising the God of the three men who refused. Their faithfulness became a witness to the most powerful man on earth.

REAL TALK **When Faith Costs Something**

Most teens in many countries won't face a furnace for their faith. But faith can still cost something. You might lose a friend because you won't go along with something. You might be laughed at for praying or going to church. You might miss out on a party or an opportunity. Those costs are real, and it's okay to feel them. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego show that some things are worth more than comfort or popularity. And remember: they didn't stand alone. Find friends who will stand with you.

KEY VERSE

If it happens, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.

Daniel 3:17–18 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Nebuchadnezzar built a statue made entirely of gold?
2. What gave Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego the courage to stay standing?
3. What does But if not mean for your own faith?
4. Where do you need to know that God is with you in the fire?

TRY THIS *Write your own But if not prayer about something you're hoping for: God, I know You can… I hope You will… But if not, I will still trust You.*

CHAPTER 4

A Humbled King and the Writing on the Wall

Daniel 4–5

Chapter 4 is unusual. It's written as a letter from Nebuchadnezzar himself, addressed to all the peoples of the world. He wants to tell everyone what God did to him. And he starts with praise. "How great are his signs! How mighty are his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom."

Then he tells the story. He was at home in his palace, comfortable and prosperous, when he had another terrifying dream. He saw an enormous tree in the middle of the earth. It reached to the sky and could be seen from the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit fed everyone, and animals and birds found shelter under it.

Then a holy messenger came down from heaven and shouted: Cut down the tree. Strip off its branches. But leave the stump and its roots in the ground, bound with iron and bronze. And then the messenger said the strangest thing: let him be wet with the dew and live with the animals, and let his mind be changed from a man's to an animal's, until seven periods of time pass. "To the intent that the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Most High Rules**

The phrase the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, or something very close to it, appears several times in Daniel 4. It's the main point of the chapter. Nebuchadnezzar thought he ruled. He had built the greatest empire of his time. But God wanted him, and everyone else, to know that every king's power is borrowed. The Most High gives kingdoms to whomever He chooses, and He can take them away. That's true of every president, prime minister, dictator, and celebrity today.

Daniel heard the dream and was troubled. He liked Nebuchadnezzar and didn't want to deliver bad news. But he told the truth. The tree was the king. He would be driven away from people and live like an animal until he acknowledged that God rules. The stump meant his kingdom would be restored once he learned that lesson.

And then Daniel gave the king some advice. "Break off your sins by righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your tranquility."

REAL TALK **Telling Hard Truth With Love**

Daniel had to tell the most powerful man on earth that he was about to be humbled. That took courage. But notice how he did it. He was respectful. He was obviously sad about it, wishing the dream were about the king's enemies instead. And he offered a way forward: repent and show mercy. When you have to tell a friend something hard, like that they're making a bad choice or hurting someone, you can follow Daniel's example. Speak honestly, but with kindness. Show that you care. And point toward hope.

A year passed. Nothing happened. Maybe Nebuchadnezzar thought he'd escaped. Then one day, he was walking on the roof of his royal palace, looking out over the city, and he said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built for the royal dwelling place by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?"

Notice all the I, my, and my. Before he finished speaking, a voice came from heaven. "The kingdom has departed from you." Immediately, Nebuchadnezzar lost his mind. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was soaked with dew, his hair grew long like eagle's feathers, and his nails like bird's claws.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Nebuchadnezzar's Bricks**

Nebuchadnezzar really did rebuild Babylon on a massive scale. Archaeologists have found millions of bricks stamped with his name. Ancient inscriptions record him boasting about his building projects in language strikingly similar to Daniel 4:30. Some scholars have also connected the story to a fragmentary text about a later Babylonian king, Nabonidus, who spent years away from Babylon in the Arabian desert. Scholars debate how these traditions relate. Some readers note that the condition described in Daniel 4 resembles a rare mental illness in which a person believes they are an animal.

Then, at the end of the appointed time, something changed. "At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted up my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High." The moment he looked up, his sanity came back. His kingdom was restored. And he finished his letter with these words: "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven; for all his works are truth, and his ways justice; and those who walk in pride he is able to abase."

REAL TALK **Looking Up**

Nebuchadnezzar's healing began when he looked up. Pride keeps us looking at ourselves: our achievements, our image, our plans. Humility starts when we look up and remember that God is God and we're not. That's not humiliating. It's freeing. You don't have to hold the whole world together or prove your worth every day. You can rest in the fact that the Most High rules.

Pride makes you exhausting to be around and exhausted to be. Humility makes room for God and for other people.

Chapter 5 jumps ahead about twenty-three years. Nebuchadnezzar is dead. Babylon is ruled by Belshazzar. And that night, the Medes and Persians are camped outside the city.

Belshazzar didn't seem worried. "Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand." And then, as the wine flowed, he did something shocking. He ordered the gold and silver vessels from God's temple in Jerusalem to be brought out, so he and his guests could drink from them. "They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of bronze, of iron, of wood, and of stone."

REAL TALK **Treating Holy Things Lightly**

Belshazzar took cups that had been dedicated to God and used them as party props. It was a deliberate insult. Today, people can treat holy things lightly too, by mocking God, joking about faith, or using Jesus' name as a swear word. Sometimes Christians do it without thinking. Daniel 5 is a reminder that God is not a joke. That doesn't mean you can't laugh or ask hard questions. God welcomes honest questions. But it does mean treating Him, His name, and His people with respect.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Was Belshazzar?**

For a long time, critics said Belshazzar never existed, because ancient historians listed Nabonidus as the last king of Babylon. Then archaeologists discovered inscriptions naming Belshazzar as Nabonidus's son. Nabonidus spent about ten years away in Arabia, and he left Belshazzar in charge of Babylon as co-regent. That explains why Belshazzar offered Daniel the position of third ruler in the kingdom, after Nabonidus and himself. When Daniel calls Nebuchadnezzar Belshazzar's father, it likely means ancestor or predecessor, a common use of the word in the ancient world.

"In the same hour, the fingers of a man's hand came out and wrote near the lamp stand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace." The king saw the hand writing. His face went pale. His knees knocked together. The party stopped.

None of Belshazzar's wise men could read the writing. Then the queen, probably his mother or grandmother, came in and reminded him of a man who had served Nebuchadnezzar, a man with "an excellent spirit." Daniel, now probably in his eighties, was brought in.

Belshazzar offered him purple robes, a gold chain, and the third highest position in the kingdom. Daniel replied, "Let your gifts be to yourself, and give your rewards to another." He wasn't interested in rewards. But he would read the writing.

First, Daniel reminded Belshazzar of what had happened to Nebuchadnezzar. Then he said, "You, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this." Belshazzar knew the story. He just didn't care. He had praised gods that "don't see, or hear, or know," and he had not honored "the God in whose hand your breath is."

Then Daniel read the words: "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN."

BACKGROUND CHECK **MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN**

These Aramaic words were names of weights or coins, like saying pound, pound, ounce, and halves. They also sound like verbs. Daniel explained: "MENE: God has counted your kingdom, and brought it to an end. TEKEL: you are weighed in the balances, and are found wanting. PERES: your kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians." Peres, the singular of upharsin, also sounds like the word for Persians. The phrase the writing on the wall has become an English expression for a clear sign that something is about to end.

REAL TALK **Weighed and Found Wanting**

Belshazzar had all the power, money, and luxury anyone could want. But when God put him on the scale, he didn't measure up. He had treated holy things as party props and ignored the God who gave him every breath. It's a sobering reminder that what matters most isn't how impressive you look to others. It's who you are before God. The good news is that, in Jesus, God offers us His own righteousness when we fall short. We don't have to be found wanting.

That same night, the end came. "In that night Belshazzar the Chaldean King was slain." The Persian army entered Babylon. Ancient historians say they diverted the Euphrates River and entered through the riverbed while the city was celebrating. The empire that had seemed unbeatable fell in a single night, in 539 BC. Nebuchadnezzar humbled himself and was restored. Belshazzar refused and was destroyed.

REAL TALK **Parties, Pressure, and Respect**

Belshazzar's party in Daniel 5 was fueled by heavy drinking, and it led to disrespect for sacred things and terrible decisions while the enemy was literally at the gate. Alcohol and drugs can lower your judgment and make you do things you'd never normally do. If you're at a party where things are getting out of control, it's always okay to leave. Have a plan with a parent or trusted adult, like a code word you can text so they'll come get you, no questions asked. Your safety matters more than looking cool.

KEY VERSE

Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven; for all his works are truth, and his ways justice; and those who walk in pride he is able to abase.

Daniel 4:37 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What did Nebuchadnezzar say on the palace roof that showed his pride?
2. Why do you think his sanity returned when he lifted his eyes to heaven?
3. What was the difference between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar?
4. Where are you tempted to take credit for what God has given you?

TRY THIS *Each night this week, write down three things you're proud of, and next to each one, write how God made it possible. Thank Him for each one.*

CHAPTER 5

The Lions' Den

Daniel 6

Babylon had fallen. A new empire was in charge: the Medes and Persians. And the man who received the kingdom in Babylon was called Darius the Mede.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Fair Questions: Who Was Darius the Mede?**
> Darius the Mede is a puzzle, because no ancient record outside the Bible clearly mentions a ruler by that name. Scholars have proposed several solutions. Some think Darius the Mede was another name or title for Cyrus the Great himself. Others think he was Gubaru, a governor Cyrus appointed over Babylon. Others suggest Cyaxares, a Median king, or another official. Some scholars think the name reflects a later author combining traditions. Since ancient records from this period are incomplete, many Christians are content to leave the question open while trusting the story's message.

Darius reorganized the kingdom. He appointed 120 local governors, called satraps, and put three top administrators over them. Daniel was one of the three. By now, Daniel was probably in his eighties. He had served under Nebuchadnezzar, survived the fall of Babylon, and now was trusted by a brand new government.

And he was so good at his job that the king planned to put him in charge of the whole kingdom. "Then this Daniel was distinguished above the presidents and the local governors, because an excellent spirit was in him."

That made the other officials jealous. They searched for something they could use against him. But "they could find no occasion or fault, because he was faithful. There wasn't any error or fault found in him."

> **REAL TALK** **A Clean Record**
>
> Daniel's enemies dug through his record looking for dirt. They checked his work, his finances, and his behavior. They found nothing. That's an amazing compliment. Today, almost everything you do can leave a record, like your texts, your posts, your comments, and your search history. It's worth asking: if someone went looking for dirt on you, what would they find? You don't have to be perfect. Nobody is. But you can build a life of integrity, where you're the same person online and offline, in public and in private. And if there's something you regret, it's never too late to make it right and start fresh.

The officials finally concluded, "We won't find any occasion against this Daniel, unless we find it against him concerning the law of his God." The only thing they could attack was his faith.

So they came up with a plan. They went to the king and flattered him. They proposed a law: for thirty days, anyone who prayed to any god or human except King Darius would be thrown into the lions' den. They made it sound like everyone agreed, though Daniel, of course, hadn't been asked. Darius signed it. And under the law of the Medes and Persians, a signed decree couldn't be changed.

Think about what Daniel had seen in his long life. He'd been taken from home as a teenager. He'd served a king who threatened to cut people to pieces, watched his friends thrown into a furnace, seen a king lose his mind, and witnessed the fall of an empire in a single night. Through all of it, he'd kept praying. Now, at the end of his career, his faithfulness was about to be tested one more time.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Lions in the Ancient World**

Lions lived in the ancient Near East, including Mesopotamia and Persia. Kings were often shown hunting lions as a sign of their power, and Assyrian palace carvings show elaborate royal lion hunts. Some kings kept lions in captivity. A lions' den was probably a pit or underground enclosure, with an opening at the top and a stone that could be rolled over it. Being thrown in was meant to be a death sentence.

What would Daniel do? He could have prayed silently. He could have closed his windows. He could have taken a thirty-day break from prayer. Instead, "When Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house (now his windows were open in his room toward Jerusalem) and he kneeled on his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did before."

The key words are as he did before. Daniel didn't start praying because of the crisis. He didn't stage a protest. He just kept doing what he had done for decades. His prayer habit was so strong that a death threat couldn't break it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Praying Toward Jerusalem**

Why did Daniel face Jerusalem when he prayed? When Solomon dedicated the temple, he asked God to hear the prayers of His people when they were in exile, if they prayed toward the land, the city, and the temple. Daniel was doing exactly that, even though the temple was in ruins. It was a sign of his hope that God would keep His promises and bring His people home. Today, Jewish synagogues around the world are often built so that worshipers face Jerusalem during prayer.

REAL TALK **Habits That Hold You**

Daniel's courage in chapter 6 didn't come from nowhere. It grew from decades of daily prayer. When the big test came, his habits held him steady. The same is true for you. The faith you build in ordinary moments, like praying before school, reading a few verses before bed, or thanking God at

> meals, is what will carry you when hard moments come. Start small. Maybe pray for two minutes in the morning, at lunch, and at night. Put a reminder on your phone. Over time, those small habits become a strong foundation.

The officials caught Daniel praying and reported him. The king was devastated. He realized he'd been tricked, and he tried all day to find a way to save Daniel. But the law couldn't be changed. So at sunset, Daniel was thrown into the lions' den. And the king said something surprising: "Your God whom you serve continually, he will deliver you."

A stone was rolled over the opening and sealed. The king went back to his palace. He didn't eat. He didn't allow any entertainment. He couldn't sleep.

At dawn, the king hurried to the den and called out in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, is your God, whom you serve continually, able to deliver you from the lions?"

And from the darkness came Daniel's voice. "My God has sent his angel, and has shut the lions' mouths, and they have not hurt me, because innocence was found in me before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm."

Think about that night from Daniel's point of view. He was an old man in a pit, in the dark, surrounded by hungry lions. The Bible doesn't tell us what he did all night. Maybe he prayed. Maybe he slept. Hebrews 11 lists people "who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked out righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions." Daniel's faith didn't make the den any less dark. But it meant he wasn't alone in it.

REAL TALK **Respect and Faithfulness Together**

Notice how respectful Daniel still was, even after the king had signed the law that sent him to the lions. He said, O king, live forever, and told the king he had done him no harm. Daniel wasn't rebellious or bitter. He was loyal to the king in every way except the one that would have meant betraying God. That's a great model. You can respect parents, teachers, coaches, and leaders, and still say no when obeying them would mean doing something God clearly forbids. Peter and the apostles later said, We must obey God rather than men. But like Daniel, they said it respectfully.

The king was overjoyed. Daniel was lifted out of the den, "and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God." Then the men who had accused Daniel faced the punishment they had planned for him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hard Passage: The Accusers' Families**

Daniel 6:24 records that the accusers, along with their wives and children, were thrown into the lions' den. That's disturbing to read. It's important to notice that this was the Persian king's decision, not God's command, and not something Daniel asked for. Ancient empires often punished whole families to wipe out any chance of revenge. The Bible records many things it doesn't approve of. In fact, the law of Moses specifically said children should not be put to death for their parents' sins, and Ezekiel 18 repeated it. The story shows the cruelty of human empires, in contrast with the God who protects the innocent.

Darius then wrote to all the peoples of his kingdom, commanding them to honor Daniel's God. "For he is the living God, and steadfast forever. His kingdom is that which will not be destroyed. His dominion will be even to the end. He delivers and rescues."

The chapter ends simply. "So this Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian." The teenager who

arrived in Babylon seventy years earlier was still standing, still praying, still faithful.

REAL TALK **Jealousy**

The officials who plotted against Daniel were driven by jealousy. They couldn't stand that he was more successful and respected than they were. Jealousy can make people do ugly things, like spreading rumors, excluding someone, or trying to get them in trouble. If you've been the target of someone's jealousy, it's not your fault. Keep doing what's right, like Daniel did. And if you notice jealousy in your own heart, be honest with God about it. Ask Him to help you celebrate other people's success instead of resenting it.

KEY VERSE

When Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house (now his windows were open in his room toward Jerusalem) and he kneeled on his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did before.

Daniel 6:10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why couldn't Daniel's enemies find anything against him?
2. Why do you think Daniel kept praying with his windows open?
3. How did Daniel show respect for the king while still obeying God?
4. What daily habits are shaping your faith right now?

TRY THIS *Choose three times each day this week to pray, even briefly. Set reminders on your phone, and give thanks each time, like Daniel did.*

CHAPTER 6

Four Beasts and the Son of Man

Daniel 7–8

With chapter 7, Daniel changes completely. The stories are over. Now come the visions. And they're some of the wildest in the Bible.

Chapter 7 actually goes back in time, to the first year of Belshazzar, before the writing on the wall. "Daniel had a dream and visions of his head while on his bed." He saw the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea. And out of the sea came four huge beasts, each different from the others.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Sea**
>
> In the ancient world, the sea often represented chaos, danger, and forces that opposed order. Many ancient Near Eastern stories pictured monsters rising from the sea. In the Bible, God is the one who rules over the sea, setting its boundaries and calming its storms. When Daniel sees beasts coming out of the sea, it signals that these powers are chaotic and destructive. When Jesus calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee, His disciples asked, Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him? Revelation promises a new creation where there will be no more sea.

The first beast was like a lion with eagle's wings. Its wings were torn off, and it was made to stand like a human, and given a human heart. The second was like a bear, raised up on one side, with three ribs in its mouth. It was told, "Arise! Devour much flesh!" The third was like a leopard with four wings and four heads. And the fourth

was the most terrifying of all. It had huge iron teeth. It crushed and devoured its victims and trampled what was left. It had ten horns. And then a little horn came up among them, uprooting three of the others. This horn had human eyes and "a mouth speaking arrogantly."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Beasts and Empires**

An angel later told Daniel that the four beasts were four kingdoms. They match the four metals of Nebuchadnezzar's statue in chapter 2. Many interpreters connect the lion with Babylon, since lions with wings were a common symbol in Babylonian art. As with chapter 2, Christians have often identified the four kingdoms as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome, while many scholars see Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece. Notice the contrast: in chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar saw human empires as a glorious statue. In chapter 7, God shows Daniel what they're really like: beasts.

Then the scene changed. "I watched until thrones were placed, and one who was Ancient of Days sat. His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool. His throne was fiery flames, and its wheels burning fire."

A river of fire flowed from His presence. Millions served Him. "The judgment was set. The books were opened." The beasts that had seemed so terrifying were now on trial. The fourth beast was destroyed. The others lost their power.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Ancient of Days**

The Ancient of Days is a title for God, emphasizing that He has existed forever, long before any empire rose. His white hair is a sign of wisdom and age, not weakness. His throne of fire, with wheels, recalls Ezekiel's vision of God's throne-chariot. The scene shows the true reality behind history. While beasts rage on the earth, God sits calmly on His throne, and He will judge every power that has ever existed.

And then came the most important moment in the vision. "I saw in the night visions, and behold, there came with the clouds of the sky one like a son of man, and he came even to the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before him. Dominion was given him, and glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which will not pass away, and his kingdom one that will not be destroyed."

The beasts came up from the sea. This figure came with the clouds of heaven. The beasts were animals. This figure was like a human being. The beasts ruled by violence. This figure was given authority by God. And while the beasts' kingdoms ended, His kingdom would last forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **One Like a Son of Man**

In the Old Testament, riding on the clouds was something only God did. Psalms and Isaiah picture God riding on the clouds. So the figure in Daniel 7 is a mystery: He looks human, but He comes with the clouds like God, and all nations serve Him. Some Jewish interpreters understood Him as the Messiah. Others saw Him as a symbol of God's faithful people, since the angel later says "the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom." Christians believe both are true: Jesus is the Son of Man, and He shares His kingdom with His people. Jesus used Son of Man as His favorite title for Himself, more than eighty times in the Gospels.

REAL TALK **When the Beasts Seem to Be Winning**

The little horn in Daniel 7 "made war with the saints, and prevailed against them," for a time. Sometimes it feels like evil is winning: in the world, in your school, or even in your own family. Daniel's vision doesn't pretend that isn't happening. But it shows the bigger picture. The beasts are on a leash. Their time is limited. The Ancient of Days is on His throne, and the Son of Man will receive the kingdom. Hold on. Evil's victory is temporary. God's kingdom is forever.

Daniel was deeply troubled by the vision. “As for me, Daniel, my thoughts troubled me greatly, and my face was changed in me; but I kept the matter in my heart.”

Two years later, in chapter 8, Daniel saw another vision. This time it was written in Hebrew again. He saw a ram with two horns, one longer than the other, charging west, north, and south. No one could stand against it. Then a male goat came from the west, moving so fast its feet didn’t touch the ground. It had one large horn between its eyes. It smashed into the ram, broke its horns, and trampled it. But at the height of its power, the goat’s great horn was broken, and four horns grew in its place. Out of one of them came a little horn that grew powerful and attacked God’s people and sanctuary.

This time, Daniel didn’t have to guess. The angel Gabriel explained it. “The ram which you saw, that had the two horns, they are the kings of Media and Persia. The rough male goat is the king of Greece. The great horn that is between his eyes is the first king.”

BACKGROUND CHECK **Alexander and Antiochus**

The goat’s great horn fits Alexander the Great, the young Greek king who conquered the Persian Empire with stunning speed in the 330s BC, starting from the west. He died suddenly in 323 BC, at only thirty-two, and his empire was divided among four of his generals. Most interpreters identify the little horn in chapter 8 as Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a Greek king from one of those divided kingdoms, who ruled about 175-164 BC. He tried to wipe out Jewish faith, banned the Sabbath and circumcision, and set up an altar to Zeus in the temple in Jerusalem around 167 BC. The Jewish revolt that followed, led by the Maccabees, eventually rededicated the temple. Jewish families still remember that victory each year at Hanukkah. Many Christians also see Antiochus as a preview of a final antichrist figure.

The vision overwhelmed Daniel. "I, Daniel, fainted, and was sick for some days. Then I rose up and did the king's business. I wondered at the vision, but no one understood it."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fair Questions: Do the Little Horns Point Further?**

The little horn in Daniel 7 comes from the fourth beast, and the little horn in Daniel 8 comes from the goat. Are they the same figure? Many scholars think both point to Antiochus IV. Many Christians think the chapter 7 horn points to a future figure, often connected with the man of lawlessness Paul describes and the beast in Revelation, while the chapter 8 horn is Antiochus. Others see a pattern: Antiochus was a real historical enemy who also previews later enemies of God's people. Sincere Christians hold different views. What they share is confidence that every arrogant power that sets itself against God will be broken.

REAL TALK **When You Don't Understand Everything**

Even Daniel didn't understand all his visions. He was confused, overwhelmed, and sick. But then he got up and went back to work. He didn't let what he didn't understand stop him from being faithful in what he did understand. You'll find parts of the Bible confusing too, and that's okay. Ask questions. Talk to people who know more. Read good resources. But don't let confusion about the hard parts keep you from following the clear parts. Love God, love people, and keep going.

REAL TALK **How to Read Apocalyptic Visions**

Visions like Daniel 7 and 8 can feel confusing. Here are some tips. First, look for explanations in the text itself. Daniel often gets an angel to explain what he saw. Second, remember that symbols are meant to show what something is like, not to be taken literally, like a political cartoon that shows a nation as an animal. Third, focus on the big picture: human empires rise and fall, God judges evil, and His kingdom lasts forever. Fourth, be humble where Christians disagree. And fifth, remember that these visions were given to encourage God's people, not to scare them.

KEY VERSE

I saw in the night visions, and behold, there came with the clouds of the sky one like a son of man, and he came even to the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before him. Dominion was given him, and glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which will not pass away, and his kingdom one that will not be destroyed.

Daniel 7:13–14 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God showed Daniel the empires as beasts?
2. What stands out to you about the Ancient of Days?
3. How is the Son of Man different from the beasts?
4. How can Daniel 7 give you courage when evil seems to be winning?

TRY THIS *Read Daniel 7:9-14 and Mark 14:60-64 side by side. Write down every connection you notice.*

CHAPTER 7

Prayer, Seventy Weeks, and Shining Like Stars

Daniel 9–12

Chapter 9 begins in the first year of Darius, right after Babylon fell. Daniel, now an old man, was reading the scroll of Jeremiah. And he noticed something. "I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years about which the LORD's word came to Jeremiah the prophet for the accomplishing of the desolations of Jerusalem, even seventy years."

Jeremiah had written that the exile would last seventy years. Daniel had been taken to Babylon about sixty-six years earlier. The time was almost up. So what did he do? He prayed.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Reading Jeremiah**
>
> Daniel was reading Jeremiah 25 and 29, where God promised that after seventy years in Babylon He would bring His people home. Notice that Daniel treated Jeremiah's writings as God's word, even though Jeremiah had only recently died. Daniel didn't just read the Bible for information. He responded to it with prayer. And notice how God's promise moved Daniel to pray more, not less. He didn't think, God promised, so I don't need to pray. He thought, God promised, so I will ask Him to do it.

"I set my face to the Lord God, to seek by prayer and petitions, with fasting and sackcloth and ashes." Daniel's prayer is one of the greatest prayers in the Bible. He begins with praise: "Oh, Lord, the great and dreadful God, who keeps covenant and loving kindness with those who love him and keep his commandments." Then he confesses. Not their sins, but our sins. We have sinned. We have done wrong. We have rebelled. Daniel was one of the most faithful people in the Bible, and yet he included himself.

Then he pleads for mercy. "To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him." "We do not present our petitions before you for our righteousness, but for your great mercies' sake." And he ends with urgency: "Lord, hear. Lord, forgive. Lord, listen and do. Don't defer, for your own sake, my God."

> **REAL TALK** **How to Pray Like Daniel**
>
> Daniel's prayer in chapter 9 is a great model. He started with who God is, not with what he wanted. He confessed honestly, including himself with his people. He didn't ask God to act because he deserved it, but because God is merciful. And he asked boldly and specifically. You can pray like that too. Try this pattern: Praise God for who He is. Confess where you've gone wrong. Thank Him for His mercy. Ask for what you need, and for others. You don't need fancy words. Daniel's last line was just: Lord, hear. Lord, forgive. Lord, listen and do.

While Daniel was still praying, the angel Gabriel arrived. He said, "At the beginning of your petitions the commandment went out, and I have come to tell you, for you are greatly beloved." Before Daniel even finished, God had already answered. And notice what Gabriel called him: greatly beloved.

Then Gabriel gave Daniel one of the most debated prophecies in the Bible. "Seventy weeks are decreed on your people and on your holy city, to finish disobedience, to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fair Questions: The Seventy Weeks**

The Hebrew word for weeks literally means sevens. Most interpreters understand the seventy sevens as 490 years, divided into 7 sevens, 62 sevens, and 1 final seven. But Christians interpret them in very different ways. Some calculate the first 69 sevens from a Persian decree to rebuild Jerusalem, landing close to the time of Jesus, with the Anointed One being cut off pointing to His death. Some of those see a gap before the final seven, which they place in the future, connected to a final antichrist. Others see all seventy sevens fulfilled in Jesus' ministry, death, and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Many scholars see the prophecy fulfilled in the time of Antiochus IV, with the Anointed One being a high priest killed in 171 BC. Others read the numbers symbolically, as a complete period of God's plan, ten times the seventy years of exile. Different starting dates and calendars lead to different charts. This book won't push one chart. What's clear is the goal: God would deal with sin completely and bring in everlasting righteousness.

REAL TALK **Don't Miss the Point**

It's easy to get so caught up in charts, dates, and calculations that you miss what the Seventy Weeks are actually about. Look at the list in Daniel 9:24: finish disobedience, end sins, make reconciliation for iniquity, bring in everlasting righteousness. That's what God promised. Daniel had prayed for forgiveness, and God answered with a promise of complete forgiveness and righteousness. Christians believe that's exactly what Jesus came to do. The point of prophecy isn't to make you a better calculator. It's to make you trust the God who keeps His promises.

In chapter 10, Daniel was mourning and fasting for three weeks. Then he saw a dazzling figure by the Tigris River. The men with him

ran and hid. Daniel collapsed. But a hand touched him, and a voice said, "Don't be afraid, Daniel; for from the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard. I have come for your words' sake."

Then the messenger explained why it took three weeks. "But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; but, behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me."

Notice how gently the messenger treated Daniel. Daniel was shaking and couldn't speak or breathe. The messenger touched him three times, strengthening him a little more each time. God doesn't just send messages. He cares about the person receiving them. Even the most overwhelming visions in Daniel come with tender words: Don't be afraid. You are greatly beloved. Peace be to you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Spiritual Warfare**

Daniel 10 gives a rare glimpse behind the curtain of the spiritual world. The prince of Persia and the prince of Greece appear to be spiritual powers connected with those nations, opposing God's messenger. Michael is an angel who protects God's people. Paul later wrote, "our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers," and against spiritual forces of wickedness. Christians hold different views on how much detail we can know about these powers. But the Bible is clear that there is a spiritual battle, that God is far stronger than any opposing power, and that prayer matters in it. The Bible never tells us to fear these powers, or to be fascinated with them. It tells us to stand firm in God's strength.

REAL TALK **When Prayers Seem Delayed**

Daniel prayed for three weeks without seeing an answer. But his prayer had been heard on the first day. Sometimes you pray and nothing seems to happen. Days pass, then weeks. It's easy to think God isn't listening. Daniel 10 suggests that there can be more going on than you can see. Keep praying. A delay is not a denial, and silence doesn't mean God has stopped caring. The

> messenger told Daniel, “Greatly beloved man, don’t be afraid. Peace be to you. Be strong. Yes, be strong.” That’s God’s message to you too.

Chapter 11 contains a detailed prophecy of kings and wars, the king of the north against the king of the south. Most interpreters see it describing the conflicts between the Greek kingdoms that came after Alexander, leading up to Antiochus IV, with the last part either still about him or pointing ahead to a final enemy of God’s people. In the middle of all that conflict is a powerful promise: “the people who know their God will be strong and take action.”

> **REAL TALK** **The People Who Know Their God**
>
> Daniel 11:32 describes a time when a wicked ruler would flatter people into abandoning God. Some went along with it. But “the people who know their God will be strong and take action.” Notice the order. First they knew God. Then they were strong. Strength to stand firm doesn’t come from trying to look tough. It comes from knowing God personally, through prayer, Scripture, and walking with Him every day. When pressure comes, the people who know their God aren’t easily flattered or frightened.
>
> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Chapter 11 Matters**
>
> Daniel 11’s details match the history of the Ptolemies of Egypt, the king of the south, and the Seleucids of Syria, the king of the north, very closely. That’s one reason some scholars date Daniel later, believing the author wrote after these events. Christians who hold the traditional date see the same detail as evidence of genuine predictive prophecy. Christians hold different views on this. But either way, the chapter teaches that God knows history from beginning to end, and that even the darkest times are within His control.

And then comes chapter 12. “At that time Michael will stand up, the great prince who stands for the children of your people; and there will be a time of trouble, such as never was.” But God’s people will be delivered, “everyone who is found written in the book.”

And then one of the clearest promises of resurrection in the Old Testament. “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine as the brightness of the expanse. Those who turn many to righteousness will shine as the stars forever and ever.”

BACKGROUND CHECK **Resurrection**

Daniel 12:2 is one of the clearest Old Testament statements that the dead will be raised bodily. Earlier passages hint at it, like Job’s hope to see God in his flesh, Isaiah 26, and Ezekiel’s dry bones. But Daniel says it plainly: those who sleep in the dust will awake. Jesus echoed this when He said that all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out. Jesus also said, “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father,” echoing Daniel 12:3. Death isn’t the end.

REAL TALK **Hope Beyond Death**

If someone you love has died, Daniel 12:2 offers real hope. Death is described as sleep, something you wake up from. For those who belong to God, death isn’t the end of the story. That doesn’t make grief disappear. It’s still okay to miss people terribly and to cry. Paul wrote that Christians grieve, but not like people who have no hope. If you’re grieving, talk to someone you trust about how you’re feeling. And if your grief ever feels too heavy to carry, call or text 988 any time, day or night.

REAL TALK **Shine Like Stars**

Daniel 12:3 says those who are wise and who turn many to righteousness will shine like stars. You don’t have to be famous to shine. You shine when you’re kind to someone who’s lonely, when you tell the truth, when you stand up for someone being bullied, when you live out your faith with integrity, and when you point a friend toward Jesus. Paul wrote that Christians are “seen as lights in the world.” In a world that can feel dark, your faithfulness matters, now and forever.

At the end, Daniel admitted, “I heard, but I didn’t understand.” He asked how it would all end. And the angel told him, “Go your way, Daniel; for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end.” And then, the final words of the book, spoken to an old man who had been faithful since he was a teenager: “But go your way until the end; for you will rest, and will stand in your inheritance at the end of the days.”

Daniel didn’t get all the answers. But he got a promise. He would rest. And he would rise.

REAL TALK **A Lifetime of Faithfulness**

Daniel’s story covers about seventy years. He started as a frightened teenager in a foreign land and ended as a respected old man who had served four kings and three empires. He didn’t have a perfect life. He faced danger, loss, and confusion. But he stayed faithful the whole way. The choices you make now, about prayer, friends, integrity, and courage, are the beginning of your own long story. You don’t have to be perfect. Just keep turning back to God, one day at a time. That’s how a faithful teenager becomes a faithful old person.

KEY VERSE

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine as the brightness of the expanse. Those who turn many to righteousness will shine as the stars forever and ever.

Daniel 12:2–3 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What can you learn from the way Daniel prayed in chapter 9?
2. Why do you think God called Daniel greatly beloved?
3. How does Daniel 10 change the way you think about delayed answers to prayer?
4. What would it look like for you to shine like a star this week?

TRY THIS *Use Daniel's pattern this week: praise, confess, thank, and ask. Write one short prayer each day following that pattern.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Daniel's visions end with a promise: one day, God's kingdom will replace every human empire, and those who are wise will shine like the stars. Jewish readers have drawn hope from Daniel through centuries of persecution. Christians believe its hope comes to its fullest meaning in Jesus.

Daniel saw "one like a son of man" coming with the clouds to the Ancient of Days, receiving an everlasting kingdom. Jesus called Himself the Son of Man more than any other title. And when the high priest demanded to know if He was the Christ, Jesus answered, "I am. You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of the sky." He was claiming to be the figure in Daniel 7, and the high priest knew it. In the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar saw a fourth figure walking with the three friends. Many Christians have seen in that figure a glimpse of the Son of God, who doesn't always keep us out of the fire but promises to be with us in it. Jesus said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." And Daniel saw a stone cut without human hands that grew into a mountain filling the earth. Jesus began His ministry announcing, "The time is fulfilled, and God's Kingdom is at hand!" His kingdom started small, but it's still growing, and it will never be destroyed.

Here's what that means for you, 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 knows your name, even when the world tries to give you a new one.

> *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.

Daniel prayed, We have sinned. So have we. 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 holy, 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 is the Son of Man.

Jesus is the Son of Man Daniel saw. He died for our sins, rose again, and was given an everlasting kingdom that will never be destroyed.

> *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live to righteousness. You were healed by his wounds.* **1 Peter 2:24 (WEB)**

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

Daniel prayed for mercy, not because he was good enough, but because God is merciful. 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 Bow to the true 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. Daniel prayed three times a day, honestly and humbly. You can talk to God right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've lived like I'm the king of my own life, and I've gone my own way. I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus, the Son of Man, died for my sins, rose again, and rules over a kingdom that will never end. Forgive me, and make me Yours. Help me stay faithful wherever I am, even when it's hard, and be with me in the fire. 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 Daniel 7, then Mark 14:55-65, from the vision to the trial.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized. Daniel had three friends. You need yours.

Build a rhythm. Like Daniel, choose regular times each day to pray and give thanks.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Daniel's visions are puzzling, and even Daniel admitted he didn't understand everything. Keep asking. Keep reading. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Daniel is right, every empire will fall, and only one kingdom will last forever. It's worth knowing who its King is.

He changes the times and the seasons. He removes kings and sets up kings. He gives wisdom to the wise, and knowledge to those who have understanding.

Daniel 2:21 (WEB)