

EXPLORING WORLD HISTORY
BIBLE
COMMENTARY

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Exploring World History

Bible Commentary

We encourage students to approach Scripture with a heart and mind open to God's Word. When there is a Bible reading assignment, we recommend that the student read the Biblical text first and then read the commentary. This commentary is intended to help students gain a greater understanding of the message of the passages. It is not our intention to push any kind of particular doctrine, but simply to present information that is true to the message of God's Word.

Unit 1

Lesson 1 - Commentary on John 1:1-18

The goal of these comments about the Bible reading assignments is to help you understand what you are reading and to put each section in the context of the overall story of the Bible. I hope that you will be encouraged to read the Bible more and to continue learning from it.

As you begin your study of world history, it is appropriate to read the opening of the Gospel of John, since it conveys the world-wide significance of Jesus. The Gospel of John is the only one of the four gospel accounts that begins by telling how Jesus existed with God from the beginning, how He was involved in the creation of the world, and how He then became flesh and lived with humans on earth. Jesus offers salvation to all who live in the world that God created.

"Word" (logos in Greek) was a term in Greek philosophical thought that meant wisdom, teaching, basic understanding, or the central concept of the universe. John uses this term to say that Jesus was God's central, essential thought or message. This Word was the agent of God's Creation. Jesus had life and light to give to the world He made, but those who lived in the world were in darkness and did not grasp what He had to offer. John the Baptist was a witness to the light, but Jesus was the light. The person who receives Jesus as this light and believes in His identity as revealed in the gospel is enabled to become a child of God.

The dramatic development in this profound passage is that God's central message became a human being. God's wisdom became a person, through whom we see God's glory, grace, and truth personified. John conveys the importance of Jesus by contrasting Him with Moses. Moses, important as he was, was only God's messenger. He gave Israel the Law that God gave to him. Jesus, however, actually was the Message Himself, whom God sent as the message of salvation for all mankind. Jesus brought grace and truth into existence. No one has ever seen God, but seeing Jesus (as we are about to do in the gospel account) is how we see who God really is. Jesus as God's Message made God known to the world.

This passage reminds us that our study of world history is primarily a spiritual quest, a story that above all else concerns the souls of mankind.

Lesson 2 - Commentary on John 3:1-21

This passage begins with a conversation between Jesus and a seeker, Nicodemus. Nicodemus knows that Jesus is from God, but his understanding ends there. Jesus then challenges Nicodemus by telling him that a person must be born again to see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus is dumbfounded: how can a person be born when he is old? Jesus explains by saying that a person must be born of water and the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God; in other words, it is a spiritual rebirth. Nicodemus is still not able to grasp what Jesus is saying. Jesus chides him for being a teacher of Israel who does not understand the things of God.

Students of the Bible have suggested many interpretations of the phrase “born of water and the Spirit.” Jesus apparently uses the phrase as a parallel or equivalent to “born again.” It seems plausible to see it as a reference to baptism, through which God’s Spirit regenerates a person. Acts 2:38 and Titus 3:5 are other passages that connect water and the Spirit. See also Romans 6:4.

Jesus then spends the rest of the passage telling about Himself and His mission. Jesus is opening the way to heaven. Just as Moses lifted up a serpent in the wilderness to save people who had been bitten by poisonous snakes (Numbers 21:6-9), so Jesus would be lifted up on a cross to save those who looked to Him. This is God’s plan, that whoever believes in Jesus should have eternal life. God did not send His Son on a mission to condemn the world; people in the world already stood condemned by their actions. The Light of God came into the darkness of the world, but for the most part people preferred the darkness. Those who are open to the Light, however, find new life in Christ.

God loves the world so much that He was not willing for the world to remain hopeless and in the dark. He sent Jesus to redeem the world from the darkness into which it had descended. As you study the story of world history and read about man’s accomplishments and failings, always remember that God loves people so much that through Christ He brought salvation.

Lesson 3 - Commentary on John 17 and John 19:17-20

These are two more passages that convey the international significance of Jesus. The first is the prayer of Jesus in the Garden before He was arrested. Jesus prays for Himself, then for His disciples, and finally for those who would believe in Him through the disciples’ preaching of the gospel. In other words, He is praying for us and for all the other believers in the world. Jesus knew God’s plan, that the men He trained would take the gospel to the world; and He prays for that plan. Jesus specifically prays that those who believe in Him will be one, as He and the Father are one. In this way the world will be encouraged to believe that God sent Jesus. When Christians are divided and do not get along, it hurts the spread of the gospel. People have enough conflict and division in their lives. They see plenty of it around them in the world in which they live. When Christians do not get along, unbelievers have little motivation to take the gospel seriously. However, when unbelievers can see Christians from various backgrounds and nationalities getting along because of their unity in Christ, it tells them that there is something exceptional about Jesus and that He offers a better way to live. Unity among believers can draw people to Jesus.

The second passage describes the crucifixion of Jesus. Pilate has a sign made to put on the cross that says, “Jesus the Nazarene, the king of the Jews.” Pilate intends this to be his last mocking insult of Jesus and the Jews. He was saying, “See what happened to your king?” It was also a warning: here is what happens when you don’t play by Rome’s rules. Pilate wants the insult and the warning to be proclaimed as widely as possible, so he has the message written in three languages: Hebrew (the language of the Jews), Latin (the language of the Romans), and

Greek (the language of international relations in that day). However, God uses Pilate's insult to proclaim the gospel. Jesus was indeed the king of the Jews, and as such He was the Savior of the world. The sign on the cross in three languages is a precursor of the gospel message being taken to every nation and language around the world. Pilate thought that he had defeated Christ and snuffed out the budding movement of His followers. Instead, the cross provided the way of salvation; and the message about it would go into all the world, even beyond the borders of the mighty Roman Empire.

Lesson 4 - Commentary on Genesis 1-4

The Bible begins with the majestic story of Creation, culminating in the creation of man. The second chapter of Genesis tells the story differently by focusing on the creation of man first and then describing his environment, culminating in the creation of woman and the establishment of the man-woman relationship of marriage. Chapter 3 relates how sin entered the world and the consequences of the sin of Adam and Eve. In Chapter 4 we rejoice with the birth of children to Adam and Eve, but then we witness the tragedy of hatred and killing. The story continues as people move away, establish cities, and begin to develop various aspects of human life.

Lesson 5 - Commentary on Genesis 5-7

This passage tells about the generations from Adam to Noah, God's grief at the sin of man, and the flood He sent to give the earth a new start. Chapter 5 provides one of many genealogies in the Bible. Israel placed great importance on family lines. Who your father and grandfather were played a big part in your identity in a community. This recognizes the importance of family in a person's life. The passage is also an example of obedience to the commandment to honor one's father and mother.

In one sense, each person has the obligation and the opportunity to live his or her own life as it should be lived. In another sense, however, everyone lives under the influence of his or her forebears. You have an obligation to maintain your family's reputation, or to rebuild it if previous generations have not lived well. You should want to live well to make a smoother path for those who come after you.

The flood that God sent upon all the earth shows His judgment on sin but also His mercy in preserving a few people as well as the animals in the ark.

Unit 2

Lesson 6 - Commentary on Genesis 8:1-11:10

This section completes the flood story. It gives God's promises about the earth and His covenant that is symbolized by the rainbow. The narrative of human history continues with the story of Noah's family, their sins, and Noah's blessings on Shem and Japheth and his curse on Canaan, the son of Ham. The latter is significant with regard to the Canaanite people, since their residence in the land of Canaan and their practice of idolatry will have a significant impact on the nation of Israel.

Lesson 7 - Commentary on Genesis 11:11-15:21

From the descendants of Shem, God calls Abram to go to a land where He will make Abram's descendants a great nation, the nation of Israel. God enables Abram to become wealthy there. We also learn of Abram's sojourn in Egypt and his war with the kings of nearby city-states during which he rescues his nephew Lot.

At the end of Chapter 14, we read of Abram's being blessed by Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God. Abram gives a tenth of his spoils to Melchizedek. This is all we learn about Melchizedek in the Bible, but he became the subject of much speculation in later Israelite thought. He came to be seen as a foreshadowing of the Messiah, since in the Bible he has no earthly parents and no birth or death. See the reference to him in Psalm 110, which was understood to be a psalm about the Messiah. Hebrews 6:19-7:28 connects Melchizedek with Christ. Jesus did not have typical earthly parentage, He has always been alive, and He lives forever. The writer of Hebrews is trying to convince Christians not to return to Judaism by showing that Christ is superior to Judaism. Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, which meant that Melchizedek was superior to Abraham. Jesus is of the order of Melchizedek, so Jesus is superior to Abraham and to the old covenant.

Lesson 8 - Commentary on Acts 17:24-28, Genesis 16-18

Since this lesson deals with some of the nations of the ancient world, we look at Bible passages that tell how God created nations.

Acts 17:24-28 is part of Paul's message at the Areopagus in Athens. Paul was seeking to teach the Athenians the identity and nature of the unknown God to whom the Greeks had built an altar. The Creator God, Paul says, does not live in man-made temples. God doesn't need man, since He gives life and breath to man. Paul then gives God's perspective on man and nations. God made from one man (Adam) every nation of the earth. He determines the times and places when and where the nations live. God's purpose is for the nations of the earth to seek Him and find Him. This should not be difficult since God is not far from us and since we have our existence in Him. Paul quotes from two Greek poets, Epimenides and Aratus, to bridge the gap between his message and his audience. Even your own poets, Paul was saying, know something about this one true God. We learn from Paul's sermon that the coming of man on earth and the development and movement of the nations are not accidents of evolution but the result of God's plan and action.

Genesis 16-18 tells how two great nations came from Abraham. Abram listens to Sarai in her faithlessness and fathers a child by Sarai's handmaiden, Hagar. God does not forget or ignore Hagar and her child. He tells Hagar that her son will be the father of many descendants. Ishmael was indeed the father of the Arab nations. Thirteen years later, God again speaks to Abram. The Lord repeats His covenant promise to Abram and gives Abram the act of circumcision as the sign of that covenant. God also promises that Sarah will have a son. At this promise Abraham laughs.

Then three visitors come to Abraham, apparently the Lord and two angels. The Lord again announces that Sarah will have a son, and at this prediction Sarah laughs. God's actions are sometimes hard to believe, but He keeps His word.

God not only builds nations; He tears down the work of man when it becomes odious in His sight. He reveals to Abraham His plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham tries to bargain with God to keep the cities from being destroyed.

Lesson 9 - Commentary on 2 Peter 3:1-9 and Genesis 19-21

The significance of 2 Peter 3:1-9 for this lesson is that it is a reference to Creation in the New Testament. Peter says that some people doubt that God will do anything because they only see things continuing just as they always have. They fail to see, Peter notes, that God created the world “out of water and by water” (perhaps a reference to “the deep” in Genesis 1:2) and that God destroyed the world with water in the flood. God has promised that He will not destroy the earth by water again. Now the world is being preserved for destruction by fire. The apparent delay in God’s judgment (misunderstood by some as nothing happening) is actually a demonstration of God’s patience. He does not want any to perish, but He wants all to come to repentance.

Genesis 19 describes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. A poignant scene is described in Genesis 19:27-29 when Abraham looks out the next morning to see the destroyed cities, just as God had told him would happen. God showed mercy to Abraham by sending his nephew Lot out of Sodom. Sadly, Lot lets himself be manipulated by his daughters into lying with both of them. The children born from these unions found the Moabite and the Ammonite nations. The name of Amman, the capital city of the modern-day country of Jordan, is derived from the Ammonites.

Abraham misleads Abimelech about Sarah in the same way he misled Pharaoh years before. When Isaac is born, Sarah has Hagar and Ishmael sent away; but God preserves them and promises that Ishmael will be the father of a great nation.

Finally, Abraham and Abimelech enter into a covenant of peace with each other. Abimelech ruled to the south of Canaan, in the region of the northern Negev Desert, the area that is still called by that name today. Since Abimelech is mentioned again with reference to Isaac, many believe that the name could have been a title for the king in that area. This would be a usage similar to the way the Bible uses the term Pharaoh.

Lesson 10 - Commentary on Romans 1:16-31, Genesis 22-24

The Romans passage is an important New Testament teaching about Creation. Paul says that the gospel was revealed to men because God’s wrath had been revealed against men. His wrath had been revealed because men suppress the truth about God in unrighteousness. Verse 20 says that God’s invisible qualities, His eternal power and divine nature, are clearly seen in the created world, so men are without excuse when they reject Him. Because people rejected God, God gave mankind over to lives of sin. Paul then lists various degrading sins that characterize human life.

The Genesis passage describes the great test of faith that Abraham faced when God told him to sacrifice Isaac. Afterward, God renews His promise to multiply Abraham’s descendants. Chapter 18 describes the death of Sarah and Abraham’s negotiation for a burial place for her.

Abraham wants Isaac to find a wife among their own people. The Lord leads Abraham’s servant to Rebekah. Rebekah’s father Bethuel and brother Laban agree for her to go with Abraham’s servant but only after a delay. Rebekah, however, says that she is ready to go. As Isaac receives her, Genesis 24:67 gives a beautiful description of the next generation of Abraham’s family entering into marriage.

Unit 3

Lesson 11 - Commentary on Genesis 25-27

Abraham remarries and has other children, but these are not the son of God's promise as Isaac was. Abraham lives to be 175 years old. Genesis then gives the genealogy of Ishmael. Even though Ishmael's descendants are not the line of the child of promise, these people are important.

While Rebekah is carrying twins, the Lord tells her that the older will serve the younger. Later events show how this took place. The younger son, Jacob, came into the world as a supplanter and never forsook that role. The parents in the family had favorites: Isaac's favorite son was Esau, and Rebekah's favorite was Jacob. Playing favorites in a family always causes problems. In a moment of Esau's weakness, Jacob uses stew to obtain his older brother's birthright. When Isaac is in Gerar, he uses the same deception about Rebekah that Abraham had used about Sarah. The apple does not fall far from the tree. Still, God renews His promise to Jacob to create a great nation through his descendants. Esau grieves his parents by marrying Hittite women.

Chapter 27 describes how Jacob deceives his father to obtain Isaac's blessing. The blessing was given by a father to bestow the family birthright. The recipient of the blessing received a double portion of the father's inheritance. Esau had already sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew. Now Isaac offers to grant Esau the blessing anyway. With Rebekah's help, Jacob tricks Isaac and receives the blessing. As a result, the enmity between the brothers grows. Rebekah urges Jacob to go stay with her brother Laban, ostensibly until Esau cools off but also so that Jacob might find a wife there. To say that theirs was a complicated family situation is an understatement.

Lesson 12 - Commentary on Genesis 28-30

Continuing the family pattern, Isaac tells Jacob to get a wife from the household of his uncle Laban. On his way, Jacob has a dream of a ladder or stairway to heaven with the Lord standing above it. God promises to give to Jacob and his descendants the land and a multitude of descendants. Jacob understands the place to be "the house of God" and "the gate of heaven." The ladder symbolizes Jacob's connection with God. Jacob raises a stone marker at the place to commemorate the event.

Jacob desires to marry Rachel, and Laban agrees for him to work seven years to be able to do so. But then Uncle Laban proves to be a trickster himself, as he gives Jacob his older daughter Leah instead. Jacob serves another seven years to win Rachel. As things develop, Jacob has children by Rachel, Leah, and their maids. As you read the narrative, remember that the events described took place over many years: seven years for Leah, seven years for Rachel, and then however long it took for Jacob to father all of his children and to breed his livestock.

Jacob wants to return to Canaan, and he makes a deal with Laban about how to divide the flocks that Jacob had tended. Apparently Jacob increased his flocks by prenatal conditioning; the text does not indicate that the breeding involved miraculous intervention although that might have been a factor also. God prospers Jacob in preparation for his return to Canaan.

Lesson 13 - Commentary on Genesis 31-33

Jacob makes plans to leave Laban. Rachel steals Laban's household gods and hides them in her camel's saddle (probably a basket-type device). If having household gods sounds pagan, that's because it was. Owning such teraphim was a common practice in that day and time, apparently

even among people who believed in YHWH. They might have been seen as something like good-luck charms. Another suggested explanation is that the possessor of a man's household images would be considered that man's heir. This might explain why Rachel took them. If this is the case, then Rachel turns out to be a trickster also. We also see a recurring theme of how God used dreams to convey His revelation to people in that day. Dreams will be important in the story of Joseph a few years later.

Jacob and Laban come to a parting agreement, and they erect stones as a witness of their final discussion. Jacob hears that Esau is coming to meet him with a great show of force. This worries Jacob, who arranges his family and goods to provide the greatest safety for them. That night, Jacob wrestles with God, who had assumed the form of a man. Because of that incident, God changes Jacob's name to Israel, which means "striven with God." As a result of the incident, Jacob walked with a limp and Israelites did not eat meat from the socket of the thigh. People who want to walk closely with God will find that walk to have struggles and not just continual ease, but the struggles are worth it to get to where God wants to take you.

The meeting with Esau takes place without the conflict that Jacob feared. Esau is not still angry with his brother. Esau recognizes that God had provided him with great wealth. The brothers part in peace.

Lesson 14 - Commentary on Genesis 34-36

Chapter 34 describes the incident of Dinah being taken advantage of by Shechem, a Canaanite lord or prince. Dinah's brothers, the sons of Israel, are furious at the shameful treatment of their sister and plot revenge. Hamor, the father of Shechem, wants his family and Jacob's family to intermarry. This sounds like an offer of reconciliation, but it would likely have resulted in the sons of Jacob going astray into idolatry. The sons of Israel insist that Shechem's men be circumcised; but while they are healing from the procedure the sons of Israel attack and kill them. Jacob fears that he and his household will be destroyed by other Canaanites, but this does not happen. In fact, the next chapter says that the people of the land were in great terror of the sons of Jacob.

Chapter 35 tells of God's call to Jacob. Jacob rids his household of foreign gods, God appears to Jacob and confirms Jacob's name being changed to Israel, and Israel honors God there. A pattern in the Old Testament is that the names that people were given had great significance. Jacob has one more son, Benjamin, but Rachel dies during the childbirth. Then Isaac dies at the age of 180.

Chapter 36 provides the genealogy of Esau. As with Ishmael's descendants earlier, these people have significance in the story that God is writing.

Lesson 15 - Commentary on Genesis 37-39

Chapter 37 begins the story of Joseph. Chapter 39 continues the story of Joseph.

Chapter 38 provides the narrative of a shameful event involving Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar. Judah marries a Canaanite woman. Their firstborn son is evil, and their second son is rebellious; the Lord takes the lives of both of them. Judah then fails to carry out his responsibility to make sure that his third son fathers a child by Tamar to preserve the oldest son's name. Judah's wife then dies. Tamar realizes that Judah has failed in his responsibility to her, so she does what she believes she has to do to have a child. Apparently Tamar disguises herself as a pagan temple prostitute and makes herself available to Judah, who gives in to the temptation and has relations with her. When Judah finds out that Tamar is pregnant, he hypocritically demands that Tamar

be put to death. Tamar proves that Judah is the father, and Judah admits that Tamar has been more righteous than he had been. As unrighteous as Tamar had been, she was more righteous than Judah. The union between them results in twins.

Judah's giving in to sexual temptation stands in stark contrast to Joseph's resisting the attempted seduction by Potiphar's wife in the next chapter. The patriarchs were not perfect, and the Bible does not hide that fact. Judah is the ancestor of the royal line of Israel, which is the earthly family line of Christ.

Unit 4

Lesson 16 - Commentary on Genesis 40-42

This passage continues the story of Joseph. Pharaoh puts his cupbearer and baker in prison, where they each have a dream and meet Joseph. Joseph says, "Do not interpretations belong to God?" giving honor to God for what he is able to do. Joseph interprets the dreams, which are favorable for the cupbearer and unfavorable for the baker. However, the cupbearer forgets about Joseph for two years, until Pharaoh has a dream. Pharaoh recognizes that Joseph has "a divine spirit" (41:38). The Lord raises Joseph to the pinnacle of power in Egypt by making him second in command to Pharaoh. Joseph marries and has two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

Meanwhile Joseph's brothers, who thought that they had exercised great power over Joseph, stand around helplessly looking at each other because of the famine (Genesis 42:1). Israel sends his sons except Benjamin to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph recognizes them, but they don't recognize him. Joseph was seventeen when they sold him into slavery. Now he is thirty, and his appearance as a result of Egyptian grooming is probably much different from how they would have remembered him, if they had expected to see him at all. Joseph holds Simeon hostage while the rest return to Canaan and bring Joseph's younger brother Benjamin with them on their next trip. Joseph hides their money in their grain sacks. The brothers do not enjoy being treated without consideration, the way they once treated Joseph.

Lesson 17 - Commentary on Genesis 43-46

Chapter 43—Joseph toys with his brothers, but he intends to bless them. The brothers learn what it feels like to be powerless, as Joseph once had been at their hands. The steward recognizes the hand of God being involved in their finding their money. Joseph is overcome at seeing Benjamin. At the meal, Joseph arranges the brothers by age, which astonishes them.

Chapter 44—Joseph again plays with his brothers. He has his cup of divination planted in Benjamin's sack. Judah pleads for Benjamin on behalf of their father.

Chapter 45—Joseph finally reveals himself and credits God for all that has happened. Joseph wants to see all of his family in Egypt, where he can provide for them. Joseph sends his brothers back to get their father and the rest of their family with the warning, "Do not quarrel on the journey" (45:24). Joseph knows his brothers well.

Chapter 46—The text lists the family members who come. The reunion of Joseph with his father is deeply moving.

Lesson 18 - Commentary on Genesis 47-50

Chapter 47—Joseph introduces his family to Pharaoh and provides for them in the land of Goshen. However, the famine continues and the Egyptians become increasingly desperate.

Chapter 48—At Israel’s final meeting with Joseph and his sons, Israel pulls one final surprise when he unexpectedly gives the right hand of blessing to Joseph’s younger son. Israel had received Isaac’s blessing when the latter’s eyesight was dim; now Israel’s eyesight had dimmed and he blesses Ephraim instead of Manasseh.

Chapter 49—Through Israel the Lord gives His prophecies of what would come about with his descendants. The chapter presents several difficulties for interpreters, but the reader can get the general idea about each tribe.

Chapter 50—Following the death of Israel, Joseph’s brothers appeal to him for mercy by saying that Israel had wanted Joseph to forgive his brothers. This might or might not be true, but Joseph is not bitter about how his brothers had treated him or about the difficulties he had faced. “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive,” he tells them (50:20). Joseph showed great faith in God through all of his trials. Genesis ends with the death of Joseph at the age of 110.

Lesson 19 - Commentary on Job 1-3

Today and tomorrow we take a brief look at Job as a piece of inspired literature. The book of Job addresses the issue of suffering, particularly when bad things happen to a good person.

Job is a good man. He is described as being richly blessed, wealthy, and spiritually sensitive. We then read a conversation between God and Satan. Satan challenges this view and claims that Job is faithful because he is blessed. If he were to suffer, Satan believes, Job would turn away from God and come to Satan’s side. The Lord agrees for Job to be tested with suffering.

Job loses everything, including his possessions and even his children. In response, Job worships and praises God. Job accepts the fact that the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Even though Satan was wrong about Job, Satan challenges God again by saying that Job would deny God if he suffered physically. After Job begins to suffer physically, even his wife questions his faithfulness. Again Job shows his faithfulness by saying, “Shall we accept good from God and not adversity?” (2:10). It is important to remember that Job does not know about the conversations between God and Satan.

Job’s three friends come and sit with him for a week without saying anything. This is the most eloquent thing they do in the whole book. When a friend is suffering, sometimes the best thing another person can do is not to have something profound to say but simply to be there to show support.

In Chapter 3 Job curses the day he was born. Job is struggling with what has happened to him, as just about anyone would. Beginning in Chapter 4, Job’s three friends open their mouths, and that is when the difficulty starts. The friends say, in several different ways and with many confident words, that Job’s problems are the result of Job’s sins. If he would quit being so prideful and stubborn and if he would confess and repent, God would bless him. Job refuses to agree with this. Job wants to argue his case before God. He believes that he can rightly accuse God of treating him unfairly. Later in the book, a younger man, Elihu, offers his perspective and tells all four of the others that they are wrong.

Someday, if you have not done so already, you will want to read Chapters 4-37 to consider their arguments and responses. These interchanges between Job and the others are the way people talk about suffering and other great theological questions: they go round and round, saying the same things in different ways, differing on relatively minor points, and always sounding confident about their assertions. To God we must sound like children chattering about things we don’t understand. We will continue the story of Job tomorrow.

Lesson 20 - Commentary on Job 38-42

At this point in the story, God comes onto the scene. By asking a series of questions about Creation, God challenges the five people who have been debating sin and suffering by saying, in effect, "You don't know what you are talking about." And they don't. Neither do we, even when we write books and have lengthy discussions and use big words. Our understanding of the universe and especially about such questions as suffering is mere child's play compared to what God understands. We don't understand the role that suffering plays as a part of our existence and as part of God's plan. God doesn't explain it in this book. He simply says we have to trust the God who is.

Job is appropriately humbled. He confesses his faith in and dependence on God. God accepts this and encourages Job to intercede for his friends. God then blesses Job even more abundantly. Job is not prideful when the story begins, but then he reacts in his suffering and questions God. The end of the story is not an explanation of suffering, but a lesson on trusting God even when times are hard.

Unit 5

Lesson 21 - Commentary on Exodus 1-5

This passage gives several examples of how people chose to obey or disobey God and how God accomplished His purposes through and sometimes in spite of men's actions.

Exodus begins by telling how God preserved the life of Moses. God brought the family of Israel to Egypt in order to spare them in a time of famine. They prospered so much, however, that a later Pharaoh sees them as a threat and enslaves them. The people who preserve the male Israelite children in spite of Pharaoh's death edict are not soldiers, but midwives who fear God. A woman of the tribe of Levi gives birth to a son and puts him in a basket on the Nile. She shows great faith in hiding her child and in trusting that God will preserve his life. God uses the daughter of Pharaoh to sustain the child until he grows up. She names him Moses, which is a play on the Hebrew word for "draw out," commemorating what she did for the baby.

Moses identifies with the Hebrews when he strikes down an Egyptian who is beating a fellow Hebrew. Moses then learns that his act has become known, so he flees the country and settles in Midian. He marries a daughter of the priest of Midian, and they have two sons. Moses spends about forty years learning the wilderness as he shepherds the flocks of his father-in-law. God speaks to Moses from a burning bush on Horeb (another name for Sinai) and identifies Himself as YHWH ("I Am"), the God of the Hebrews. God calls Moses to return to the land where he left as a wanted man and lead the Israelites out of bondage to the mountain where they were. Moses gives several excuses why he shouldn't go, but God has an answer for each excuse. God also gives Moses miraculous powers to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go.

Moses makes his request, but Pharaoh refuses and instead makes the Israelites' work even more difficult. The Israelites complain to Moses, and Moses then complains to God. Chapter 6 tells us God's answer in the form of promises that He will accomplish His purpose for Israel through Moses.

Exodus 4:24-26 tells an unusual story. Apparently Moses had failed to circumcise his son. When God starts to take Moses' life in response, Moses' wife circumcises the boy, throws the foreskin at Moses' feet, and says, "You have become a bridegroom of blood." This might have one of two meanings. Zipporah might have been saying that his failure to obey God's law about

circumcision resulted in her having to shed her son's blood in circumcision in order to save his life. Another view is that Zipporah was about to lose her husband, but her obedience to God gave Moses back to her; so now Moses is her bridegroom again, except this time through blood.

Pharaoh chose to enslave the Israelites. Moses tried to resist God's call, and he failed to keep the law of circumcision. Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go. Moses and the Israelites chose to show a lack of faith in God. However, the Israelite midwives and Moses' mother chose to trust God. God's plan does not happen without surprises, setbacks, and detours because of faithlessness on the part of men. That is how He leads us, and the result of God's work is good.

Lesson 22 - Commentary on Exodus 13-15

As God is preparing to send the final plague on Egypt and bring the people of Israel to Himself in the wilderness, He pauses to institute the Passover meal. The Lord gives detailed instructions and explains the significance of the meal. Passover is a time for every generation of Israelites to remember and to feel that they were personally involved in the Exodus (see 13:8). It is a time to communicate to the next generation how the Lord showed them grace, brought them to Himself, and made them His people (see 13:14). The day of Passover is followed by a week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread. The entire eight days came to be known as Passover. Another detail that Moses takes care of is carrying the bones of Joseph with the Israelites so that they could be buried in Canaan (13:19). The Israelites are guilty of selective, fearful memory when the Egyptian army was bearing down on them (14:11-12).

Throughout the narrative that tells of the plagues and the Exodus, sometimes the Lord is said to harden Pharaoh's heart (for example, Exodus 4:21, 9:12, and 10:1), and sometimes Pharaoh is said to harden his heart (see 8:15, 8:32, and 9:34). So did God harden Pharaoh's heart, or did Pharaoh harden his own heart? Think about the effect of the sun on butter and on clay. The same sun that melts butter hardens clay; the difference is in the composition of the object on which the sun shines. The kindness and patience of God leads some to repentance (see Romans 2:4) but some to ignoring and rejecting God. The difference is within the heart of each person. Pharaoh had every opportunity to humble himself before God, and he came close on a few occasions. However, his basic direction was against God; and the plagues only served to harden Pharaoh in his rebellion against God.

In Chapter 15 we read the song that expresses Israel's joy at God's destruction of the army of Pharaoh at the Red Sea. They give all glory and praise to God for what He had done. Then immediately we read about Israel's grumbling when conditions aren't exactly as they would like. How quickly we can go from rejoicing in God's love to complaining about our lot! Have you ever left an uplifting church service and complained about the traffic, or the food at lunch, or something another family member was doing that irritated you? In Chapter 16 the Israelites complain about a lack of bread, and the Lord gives them manna. Learn from the story of the Israelites in the wilderness. Try to complain less and give thanks more.

Lesson 23 - Commentary on Deuteronomy 1-6

Moses wrote the first five books of the Old Testament. These books are often called the Pentateuch, from the Greek for five books. Jews usually call this section of Scripture the Torah, which means law in Hebrew. Genesis tells of origins, Exodus focuses on that event, Leviticus gives a great deal of the Law (though some is given in Exodus and Numbers), and Numbers relates much of the history of Israel's time in the wilderness. Deuteronomy is primarily a series of sermons that Moses gives to the younger generation of Israelites before his death and before

they enter into Canaan, which God had promised to give them (often called the Promised Land). The word Deuteronomy is also from the Greek and means second law.

The sermons in Deuteronomy have three recurring themes, each of which you can find in the section of the book that you read today: (1) a review of the history of Israel's experiences in the wilderness after the Exodus; (2) a repeating of some parts of the Law, including the Ten Commandments; and (3) Moses' exhortations to be faithful to God and his warnings of what will happen if the Israelites are not faithful. Deuteronomy also contains some historical narratives, including the death of Moses.

Lesson 25 - Commentary on Leviticus 19, Deuteronomy 32

Leviticus 19 shows how in the Law God was concerned with the hearts of the Israelites and not just with their outward actions. The chapter is a call to holiness: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (verse 1). To be holy does not mean to do religious acts or to go around with a long, other-worldly face. To be holy means to be distinct, set apart for a reason, dedicated to God in one's life. The motivation to be distinct and set apart is that God is holy. Since the holy God is set apart from the world, He wants His people to be holy as He is.

God tells the Israelites what they needed to do in order to be holy. The first commandment in the chapter is to honor one's parents, which even comes before keeping the Sabbath. There are some commandments related to avoiding idolatry and making sacrifices, but primarily the chapter teaches the Israelites what kind of people they need to be. Holiness involves being generous (leaving gleanings for the poor), being kind (not cursing the deaf or tripping the blind), and loving toward those around you. Verse 18 is the source for what Jesus said is the second greatest commandment, to love one's neighbor as oneself. The Israelites were not to compromise with pagan religions; that would be a violation of holiness. The reason given repeatedly for how the Israelites are to think and act is simply, "I am the Lord." That is reason enough.

Deuteronomy 32 is primarily the Song of Moses, which Moses gives at the close of his ministry to Israel. The theme of the song is the faithfulness of God and the unfaithfulness of Israel. This theme summarizes the last forty years of Moses' life. As Moses says afterward, this is "not an idle word," not just a nice song (verse 47). It is a reminder to Israel of how God has acted toward them and how they have acted toward God. If their hearts are right they will learn from their past and overcome it to serve the Lord faithfully. The unfolding story of the Old Testament will reveal whether they did or not.

Unit 6

Lesson 26 - Commentary on 1 Samuel 12-13, 2 Kings 17

The Old Testament provides a generally chronological narrative from Genesis through Esther. First and Second Chronicles repeat some of the stories about Israel but emphasizes the southern kingdom of Judah. The books of Job through Ecclesiastes are wisdom or poetical books. Then come the major prophets (Isaiah through Daniel) followed by the twelve minor prophets. These latter books are minor only in the sense that they are shorter, not because their message is less important. The books of the prophets come from various periods in Israel's history.

1 Samuel 12 gives Samuel's farewell address to Israel. In it he recalls their history. He says that the Lord will not abandon them, and he assures them that he will continue to pray for them. Chapter 13 describes Saul's disobedience to God. Israel is at war with the Philistines. Samuel is

supposed to come and make sacrifices, but Saul gets impatient and takes matters into his own hands. When Samuel arrives and questions Saul about it, Saul makes excuses about what he has done. Samuel tells Saul that God has rejected him and his house from leading Israel. Instead, God has found “a man after His own heart” (13:9) to lead Israel, referring to David.

2 Kings 17 tells how the Northern Kingdom of Israel was captured by the pagan Assyrians. It also tells why Israel fell: because they had been disobedient to the Lord. The area of Samaria was later repopulated with Assyrians, who intermarried with the Israelites who remained in the land. The resulting population were the forebears of the Samaritans that we read about in the New Testament. The ethnic and religious development of those first-century Samaritans is unclear, but apparently they built a temple on Mount Gerizim. In Jesus’ day the Samaritans worshiped God but only accepted the Pentateuch as Scripture. Their mixed ethnic and religious background is why the Jews of the New Testament had no dealings with the Samaritans of their day.

Lesson 27 - Commentary on 2 Samuel 8-9, 1 Kings 17-19

Since this lesson discusses some of the Gentile nations around Israel, we consider 2 Samuel 8, which tells of David’s battles with neighboring nations during his reign. He led the armies of Israel against the Philistines, the Moabites, the Arameans, the Ammonites, the Amalekites, and the Edomites. The point of the passage is that David was successful in all his wars. David could be exacting against his enemies, as he was against the Moabites.

Second Samuel 9 describes an incident that shows David’s heart and character. David wonders if any descendants of his friend Jonathan are still living, so that David might show kindness to them. He locates one of Saul’s servants, who tells him that Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth is still alive but that he is lame in both feet. David brings Mephibosheth to his home, restores the wealth of Saul’s family to him, and from then on has Mephibosheth dine at the king’s table like one of his family. David could have seen Mephibosheth as a potential rival and tried to eliminate him. Mephibosheth could not fight for David in battle or contribute anything to David’s power. He was simply the son of David’s friend Jonathan, and David wanted to show him kindness. This is what being a man after God’s own heart looks like.

The reading from 1 Kings introduces us to the prophet Elijah. For most of the prophets whose books we have in the Old Testament, we know some of the things they said but little of what they did. For Elijah and Elisha, we know more about what they did than what they said. Chapter 17 describes some of the miracles that Elijah performed. Chapter 18 includes the famous showdown between Elijah, the lone prophet of God, and 450 prophets of Ba’al, which demonstrated who has the real power. Elijah makes the contest as favorable to his opponents as he can. The victory that God produces is overwhelming. But then in Chapter 19, Elijah learns that Ahab is after him; and Elijah fears for his life. God assures him that there are still many who have not given themselves over to the worship of Ba’al. Later God leads Elijah to Elisha, and Elijah places his mantle on Elisha. This means that Elisha would carry on the prophetic work of Elijah. It also means that respect for God and faith in Him will continue in Israel after the passing of Elijah, who had once feared that he was the only one faithful.

Lesson 28 - Commentary on 2 Samuel 22-24, Various Psalms

2 Samuel 22 is David’s psalm of deliverance. It is almost identical to Psalm 18. Surely David’s heart overflowed with praise to God for all He had done for him. David’s last song is given in

the first part of Chapter 23, which again reveals David's love for God and his thankfulness for God's mercies.

The rest of Chapter 23 details the exploits of David's mighty men. These were key warriors. They are described in 1 Chronicles 11:10 as being instrumental in helping David come to power. They numbered thirty (some were replaced at various times), and the three were David's inner circle and most trusted men. The account in 23:13-17 of the three getting water from Bethlehem in response to David's longing, followed by David's refusing to drink it because of the risk they took, tells of the three's great commitment to David and David's tender heart of appreciation for what they had done.

Chapter 24 describes David's prideful numbering of Israel and the consequences of that action. David's strength did not come from his numbers but from the Lord. Joab tries to tell David this, but David is momentarily blinded by his position. The Lord punishes Israel because of David's foolish pride, but the Lord grants mercy at the threshing floor of Araunah (apparently a Hittite name, which is rendered Ornan in 2 Chronicles 3:1). In response to God's mercy, David wants to buy the threshing floor to build an altar there to the Lord. Araunah offers to give it to David, but David, in another demonstration of his heart for God, insists on paying for it and for the sacrifice. David says, "I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God which cost me nothing" (verse 24). Second Chronicles 3:1 tells us that this is the location where Solomon later built the temple. It is appropriate that the temple was built on a place where God showed mercy to His people.

The other Bible readings for today are several psalms. These are examples of the different kinds of psalms that are discussed on page 142 of the text. The first three are psalms of lament and petition. Psalm 44 is a psalm of innocence. The psalmist recalls God's mighty acts in former times, then he describes the difficulty in which Israel finds itself, difficulty that he believes Israel does not deserve. "All this has come upon us, but we have not forgotten You, and we have not dealt falsely with Your covenant" (verse 17). He calls upon God to arise and be their help. Psalm 51 is David's well-known psalm of penitence after Nathan the prophet convicted him of his sin with Bathsheba. Psalm 23 is a psalm of confidence that God is his shepherd and will take care of him.

Psalm 8 is one of the many psalms of praise. In it David expresses wonder and awe at how God has created the heavens, the earth, and man. Psalm 136 is a psalm of thanksgiving. It might well have been shared in by the congregation of Israel with the high priest saying the first line of each verse and the people saying the second line, "For His lovingkindness is everlasting," in response. The Hebrew word translated "lovingkindness" in the New American Standard Bible is *chesedh*, which is roughly the Hebrew equivalent to grace in the New Testament.

Psalm 19 is a teaching or didactic psalm. It points out what the heavens declare about God and then reminds the reader what the Law communicates about God. Finally, the psalmist looks at himself and prays that his own communication about God, his words and meditations, will be acceptable to God. Psalm 110 is about the king, and it came to be understood as a prophecy of the Messiah, the great King of Israel. Psalm 119 is the ultimate acrostic. The first eight lines all begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the second eight lines begin with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and so forth through the entire alphabet. Significantly, the psalm is a celebration of God's Law. The message of the psalm is that the Law is God's A to Z, as we would say in English. It is His powerful and valuable Word that teaches, encourages, and convicts.

Lesson 29 - Commentary on Proverbs 1-3, Ecclesiastes 1-3

The readings today are from the section of the Old Testament known as wisdom literature. This was a kind of literature known in the ancient world, in which the writer reflects on life and the world and shares his insights about what it all means. The books from which you are reading are distinctive wisdom literature in that they are inspired by God.

Most of Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings about how to live well. The first nine chapters are an admonition to the author's son to pay attention to the words that his father is sharing. The wisdom that the father teaches will help his son live a good life. The young man needs to respect the teaching of his father and mother. This is an important reminder because the typical mindset of a youth is to reject the teaching of his parents and to think that he has a better way. (You would never think that, would you? And certainly none of your friends think that way either, do they?) Chapter 2 tells the young man that wisdom is valuable because it will keep him from being seduced by the adulteress. Giving in to sexual temptation will damage a man's life more than any other mistake he might make. The young man should be prepared with all the wisdom he can, and he should flee from this temptation every time it presents itself. The momentary pleasure is never worth it. Chapter 3 is a rich collection of wisdom. It has much good advice to live by.

Ecclesiastes has a different tone. As the Preacher considers life, it appears that all is emptiness. We never get anywhere; life is the same thing over and over. He seeks to acquire wisdom, hoping that it will provide the answer; but his conclusion is, "What's the point?" Having greater wisdom only leads to greater grief, and more knowledge results in more pain. So he tries pleasure, but all the pleasures that the world has to offer also seem pointless to him. It is pointless to seek to be above others because all come to the same end. Why be wise, he wonders; the wise man meets the same end as the fool. Why work hard to acquire? You leave behind you everything you work for. Chapter 3 tells us that there is a time for everything in life. The vital insight that the Preacher gives repeatedly is to enjoy where you are and what you do. Striving to surpass others is pointless. Enjoy now; enjoy what you have instead of trying to have more. Live joyfully with the understanding you have instead of constantly being dissatisfied and wanting to understand more. With this kind of striving you will always be seeking an unattainable goal and you will fail to enjoy the life that God is giving you right here and right now. As the Preacher says at the end of the book, fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. A simple life that is lived to enjoy one's situation and to serve God is the rich, full, and successful life.

Lesson 30 - Commentary on 2 Kings 14-16

After Israel divides into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah, the books of 1 and 2 Kings tell the stories of the kings of the two realms by going back and forth between them. The narrative about one kingdom is related until it passes the time when a new king begins to rule in the other kingdom, then the narrative shifts over to the other kingdom until it passes the time when a new king begins to reign in the first kingdom. It can be confusing, but you can get the general idea of what was happening in Israel and Judah during this period.

In the section you read today, you can see several patterns. Some of the kings of Judah do some things right, even though they do not remove the high places where pagan worship continues. All of the kings of Israel practice idolatry. Ahaz even stoops to sacrificing his son to a pagan god (16:1-4). Some kings of Israel are assassinated, and new dynasties begin. The passage talks about occasional interaction with foreign kings. It is during the reign of the second Jeroboam that Amos began his prophetic ministry (see 14:23-29), about 750 BC.

Unit 7

Lesson 31 - Commentary on Daniel 1-3

Daniel's work as a prophet of God took place in the 500s BC in Babylon, during the Jews' exile there. In this devastating time, God worked through Daniel and his three friends to remind the Jews that (1) the way of faith is victorious even in difficult situations and (2) God is sovereign over the events of history. In the earliest known manuscripts of the book, the first part and the last part are written in Hebrew; but the section from Daniel 2:4b through 7:28 is written in Aramaic. Aramaic was a more commonly known and used language in that period. The stories in the book flow into each other.

In Chapter 1 we meet the young Jewish men who are chosen to serve in Nebuchadnezzar's court. We know Daniel by his Jewish name, but we know his three friends better by the Chaldean names they are given. These young men refuse to eat the food ration that was provided by the king. The exact reason is not stated; perhaps the king's food was unclean according to the Law, or perhaps it was too closely associated with paganism and the men did not want to be dependent on the Babylonians. God enables them to be healthier even though they consume only vegetables and water. These Jews were wiser than all of the king's magicians and conjurers.

The king has dreams, but his advisers cannot tell him either the dreams or their interpretation. Because of their failure, the king orders that all of the wise men in the realm be executed. God reveals the dream to Daniel and gives him the interpretation also, so the executions do not take place. The statue that the king saw in his dream represents four successive kingdoms in history: the Babylonian or Chaldean kingdom, then the Medo-Persian Empire, then Greece, and finally Rome. During the time of the Roman Empire, God would create an eternal kingdom. Rome would be crushed but God's kingdom would endure forever. Daniel and his three friends are promoted to high offices in the kingdom.

Chapter 3 provides an account of the faithfulness of the other three. The king sets up an idol and demands that everyone worship it. Shadrach, Mesach, and Abed-nego refuse. The king orders them to be thrown into the furnace. They say that they believe God will rescue them, but they also say that even if He does not they will still not worship the image. God does indeed spare them. When the king looks into the furnace, he sees a fourth person, one "like a son of the gods," (3:25) walking with them. This might have been an angel or Christ Himself. The king orders that no one should speak ill of the God of the Jews.

Lesson 32 - Commentary on Daniel 4-6

The next section is told in first person. Nebuchadnezzar has another dream. This time he tells the dream, but his wise men cannot interpret it. Daniel is able to do so, and he foretells the king's humbling. The proud king is indeed humbled and driven into the wild for seven "times" (perhaps years) until he recognizes and confesses God as supreme. The king is restored to his previous life. This story shows how Nebuchadnezzar was humbled after arrogantly setting up the image for all to worship.

Chapter 5 tells of the arrogance of Belshazzar, who was the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar (the reference to Belshazzar's father should be understood to mean his ancestor). During a banquet in which Belshazzar and others use the vessels taken from the temple in Jerusalem, fingers appear that write words on the wall. Daniel interprets the vision for the king. The king's days have been numbered (the repetition of the word indicates the certainty of the judgment). He has been weighed and found wanting, and his kingdom will be divided and given to the

Medes and Persians. That night Belshazzar is slain and Darius the Mede becomes ruler. The incident is the origin of the phrase “seeing the handwriting on the wall,” which means realizing that certain doom is coming.

In the time of Darius, Daniel is appointed one of three commissioners. The other two become jealous of Daniel and plot to get rid of him. They convince Darius to issue a decree forbidding a petition to any god or to anyone other than to him. In a demonstration of Daniel’s faith, when Daniel hears about the decree, he goes to his house and prays! The king regrets the situation, but a law of the Medes and Persians could not be changed. This refusal to amend laws was bad policy because it assumed that the rulers were always correct, which they were not. Darius regretfully orders Daniel to be put in the lion’s den, but God protects him through the night. The next day Darius has the accusers and their families cast into the den. Darius for all practical purposes changes the law by ordering that all in his realm fear the God of Daniel. Daniel continues to have success into the reign of Cyrus.

Lesson 33 - Commentary on Daniel 7-9

The second half of Daniel records the prophet’s visions and gives interpretations of them. For this the narrative goes back to the reign of Belshazzar. This section is largely in the form of apocalyptic writing. Apocalypsis is a style that was sometimes used in the centuries before Christ and in the early Christian period by both inspired and non-inspired writers. It utilized beasts, numbers and other symbols to convey a message to an inner group that knew the symbols. The word apocalypsis means a revealing or revelation. You will find many similarities between Daniel and portions of Ezekiel in the Old Testament and the book of Revelation in the New Testament. The meaning of the imagery was probably clearer to people of Daniel’s day than it is to us today. Bible students have offered many different interpretations of these passages. It is inappropriate to be dogmatic about the correctness of an interpretation if the explanation is not clearly given in Scripture.

The vision of the four beasts in Chapter 7 appears to be similar to the vision of the statue in Chapter 2. The four beasts represent the kingdoms of the Babylonians, the Medes and the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. The fourth beast is more complicated, and the ten horns might represent subordinate rulers whom Rome would allow to reign. It is during the discussion of this beast that Daniel describes the Ancient of Days (God) and the one like a Son of Man who is given an everlasting kingdom. This is the origin of the use of the phrase “Son of Man” with reference to Jesus. The phrase “son of--” in Aramaic means one of that description. A son of cruelty, for instance, is someone who is cruel. A son of man is a man. The specific Son of Man described here, however, is an identity that is given special significance. Jesus used this phrase to describe Himself. In the simplest sense, Jesus was saying that He was a man. However, in the deeper sense, He was also saying that He fulfilled the role described in Daniel of a divine figure receiving an everlasting kingdom from God.

Chapter 8 records the vision of the ram and the male goat, which we are told represent Medo-Persia and Greece, respectively. The large horn on the goat is Alexander the Great, and the four horns are the four Hellenistic leaders that divided up Alexander’s domain after his death (see pages 222-223 in the text). A later ruler in one of these kingdoms, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, enraged the Jews of Palestine. These Jews began the Maccabean Revolt almost two centuries before Christ. Antiochus is apparently described in 8:23-25.

Chapter 9 gives us Daniel’s prayer of confession for his people. The Lord gives Daniel an answer through Gabriel. Verses 26 and 27 say that the Messiah will be cut off and the city will

be destroyed, apparently a reference to Jesus' crucifixion and the destruction of Jerusalem. The temple will be destroyed and sacrifices will end.

Lesson 34 - Commentary on Daniel 10-12

Daniel Chapter 10 apparently records a vision of Christ in heaven. It is similar to the vision John has of Christ in Revelation Chapter 1. Daniel receives comfort and is told that he is being given a message regarding the future of his people.

Chapter 11 appears to describe conflicts between two successors of Alexander, the king of the South (the Ptolemaic Empire in Egypt) and the king of the North (the Seleucid Empire). Antiochus IV Epiphanes of the Seleucid dynasty is introduced in verse 21, and his siege and destruction of Jerusalem are described.

Chapter 12 gives a brief vision of the last day and the final judgment as well as encouragement to remain faithful until the end. The meaning of the periods of days and their relation to Antiochus and the end of time are much debated.

The overall message of the book of Daniel is that God is in control and He is working a plan. Sometimes we get a window on what he is doing, but sometimes it is not so clear to us. His people are called to trust Him regardless of what is happening or will happen.

Unit 8

Lesson 36 - Commentary on Isaiah 40, 42

The book of Isaiah is a powerful and eloquent collection of prophetic messages given by Isaiah the prophet in the latter half of the 700s BC. The book touches on a wide range of topics, including the nature of God, the sins of Israel, the promise of God's blessing, God's judgment on Gentile nations, and the work of the coming Messiah.

Isaiah 40 is a message of comfort to the Jews. It promises that the people will be restored to their land after the time of captivity in Babylon. God will lead them home upon their release by the Persian leader Cyrus. God's word on this is sure, and God is mighty and is able to do this. He is far above the powerless idols crafted by men. Nothing and no one compares to God. Israel is wrong to complain that God has forgotten them. God watches over all Creation and He does not miss a thing. God empowers those who wait on Him to be able to continue their walk of faith.

Isaiah contains four passages that have come to be called Servant Songs: 42:1-4, 49:1-7, 50:4-9, and 52:13-53:12. These passages had an immediate application in describing the nation of Israel, but their greater meaning is as descriptions of God's ultimate Servant, the Messiah or Christ. They describe the kind of person that He would be and the redemptive work He would do. Jesus fulfilled these prophecies in His ministry.

Isaiah 42:1-4 describes God's Servant as gentle, faithful to His calling, and One who will establish justice. The rest of the chapter details God's working with Israel, including their resistance to His guidance and resulting punishment. Israel did not fulfill God's will for them as His servant nation, but the coming Messiah would fulfill that role as God's faithful Servant.

Lesson 37 - Commentary on Isaiah 43-44

God gives a message of restoration and renewal to Israel, which is an assurance that Israel greatly needed in a time of trial. God chose Israel to be His witness to the nations (43:10, see also 44:8). Israel has failed the Lord, but God in His grace promises to wipe out their transgressions.

God's assurance continues into the first part of Chapter 44. The Lord then communicates the folly of idolatry. A man will cut down a tree, use part of it for a fire to keep warm or bake bread, make another part of it into boards to build a house, and then from the rest of it fashion an idol and fall down before it and say, "Deliver me, for you are my god" (44:15-17).

God will restore Israel by bringing their captor Babylon to naught (43:14). He will do this by raising up Cyrus, king of Persia, whom God calls his shepherd, to defeat Babylon and allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem.

Lesson 38 - Commentary on Isaiah 52:13-53:12

This is a beautiful and powerful description of God's Suffering Servant. Jews say that the passage refers to Israel. Israel has suffered often in history, although many times it has been as a result of their own sins. The most complete fulfillment of the passage took place with Jesus Christ. This passage and Psalm 22 are the most extensive Old Testament prophecies of the Christ.

The passage begins with a promise of victory for God's Servant, although that victory will come at a terrible price. He will suffer greatly, but in doing so He will sprinkle the nations with cleansing. Kings will be amazed because they will come to see power and majesty in Him that no one had told them about, power and majesty that comes from self-sacrifice and bearing the sins of others.

The message about this Servant is almost unbelievable. There was nothing stately or majestic about His appearance. He was despised, forsaken, a man of sorrows, and one who knew grief. But in this He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was pierced for our transgressions as a substitute, and by His being wounded we are healed. All of us have sinned, but God caused all our iniquity to fall on Him. Yet He did not complain, argue, or fight back. He went like a sheep to the slaughter. His grave was assigned with wicked men (Jesus was crucified between two thieves), but He was with a rich man in his death (Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea).

He did nothing wrong, but the Lord saw fit to crush Him. Jesus was willing to give Himself as an offering for the guilt of others, so God will allow Him to see His seed (those who believe in Him). He will see victory (in the resurrection and ascension). God's servant will justify many by bearing their iniquities. He will enjoy an abundance of blessings because He gave Himself to death and was considered a transgressor. What He was doing was bearing the sins of others and interceding to God on behalf of the real transgressors, namely us.

Lesson 39 - Commentary on Isaiah 55

God is amazing. He is bountiful and merciful, even to those who had rejected Him. The invitation of this chapter is directed first toward the exiles in Babylon, but it can be applied to all sinners as an invitation to come to the blessings of Christ.

God offers what people need: to the thirsty, He offers water; to those without money, He offers food; to the lost, He offers forgiveness. God offers for people to buy what He has without money. From the perspective of logic this is a contradiction in terms, but it is simply a way to say that His blessings are obtainable only by His grace. We who have nothing can receive a bounty from Him.

Since God has given us this offer, there is no need to seek what does not satisfy, which includes everything the world offers. God offers an everlasting covenant. When other nations see the grace of God in the lives of believers, they will come to Him also. God wanted Israel to

be a light to the nations. He now wants the lives of Christians to attract unbelievers to Christ (see Titus 2:10, for instance).

God promises compassion and pardon for those who seek Him. Typical human interaction often involves resentment and revenge when one has been mistreated, but God's ways are higher than man's ways. Just as precipitation brings forth vegetation, God's message of pardon and salvation will bear fruit.

The exiles will go forth from Babylon to Jerusalem with joy, just as the lost will go forth from condemnation to salvation. Isaiah describes the entire Creation as breaking forth with joy. As the exiles make their way home, the Lord will clear their path of everything harmful and give to them what is good. This victorious homecoming will be a memorial for all time to the mercy of the Lord.

Lesson 40 - Commentary on Nahum

Jonah preached in the city of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian Empire, about 790-760 BC. The book of Jonah reports that the entire city repented even with his minimal preaching. Unfortunately, their repentance did not stick. In the book that bears his name, the prophet Nahum predicts the downfall of the city, probably just before the downfall occurred in 612 BC at the hands of the Babylonians. Nahum preached about the same time as the early years of Jeremiah. Nineveh was located in what is now northern Iraq.

"The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble," assures Nahum (1:7); but His judgment against sin is also sure and will be complete. Chapter 1 describes the coming of the Lord in judgment against Nineveh, while the last two chapters describe in vivid terms the downfall of the city. This is the just judgment of God against evil, and Nahum rejoices at the display of God's justice. The Assyrians were known for their cruel treatment of their enemies, so their downfall was good news for Judah and a reason for rejoicing by all who were victims of their harshness. We can get a sense of the rejoicing that Nahum felt at the fall of Nineveh when we compare it to the reaction people had to the fall of Adolph Hitler or Saddam Hussein or the death of Osama bin Laden.

No one gets by with anything before the Lord. The Assyrians should have shown mercy to others since they had once received mercy, but they did not do so. You have dished it out, the Lord is saying, and now you must take it. So it will be with all who do not show mercy to others.

Unit 9

Lesson 41 - Commentary on 1 Corinthians 1-4

As you read 1 Corinthians and the first chapters of 2 Corinthians, you get insights into the Greek mindset; but you should also keep in mind that the time period of the letters is much later than the Golden Days of Greece (fifth century BC) and the reign of Alexander the Great (fourth century BC). Paul wrote his letters during the time of Roman ascendancy in the Mediterranean world, after Greek power and influence had declined. Also keep in mind that Paul was writing to Christians in Corinth, not Athens. Not all Greeks thought alike. There were some similarities throughout Greek culture, but Corinth was a seaport city, not an intellectual center. Whatever corruption and immorality existed in Greek culture as a whole might have been present to a greater degree in Corinth.

Paul wrote to the fellowship in Corinth that had serious divisions, failings in their lifestyle, and troubling questions on their minds. The root problem seems to have been their pridefulness and lack of concern for one another. Paul needed to address several issues, but he first had to get the Corinthian Christians to be unified beneath the cross of Christ. In this way their thinking could be changed so that they could see the ungodliness of their previous ways and the importance of letting Christ be Lord of all of their lives.

These struggling Christians needed to be reminded that God had given them a new identity of holiness in Christ. Not even their failings would keep Paul from loving them. He says that they had been enriched in all speech and knowledge in Christ (1:5), which means that they did not need to look anywhere besides Christ for wisdom. The theme verse for the letter can be identified as 1:10, where Paul calls upon them to be of the same mind to end the divisions that had arisen. Various subgroups within the fellowship claimed loyalty to specific teachers, while some arrogantly claimed to be above all that by being loyal to Christ. Paul says that this is not what Jesus was about.

They would not live effectively as the people of God by following the typical way of worldly thinking. Instead, the message they needed to hear and follow was the self-sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, which was foolishness in the world's eyes but wisdom in God's eyes. Following Jesus is not about boasting. Our only boast is Christ and what He has done for us.

Paul points to himself as an example of being a servant. Notice how many times Paul uses the word servant in these first chapters. The Christians in Corinth needed to see themselves as servants of Christ, not as people trying to out-argue each other or trying to see how much knowledge they could acquire. They thought that they were being wise and mature, but in fact they were acting like immature babies. The fellowship is the temple of God, in which the Spirit dwells (3:16-17). Pridefulness and divisiveness destroy God's temple, and this is a serious sin.

In 4:6, Paul says that what he had been saying about himself and Apollos really applied to them, so that they would learn not to be arrogant toward each other. He expresses mock amazement at their supposedly all-sufficient prudence, strength, and honor, compared to his foolishness and weakness. They assume that these worldly characteristics are true about themselves, but what they needed to be was humble, loving, and willing for the world to reject them as it rejected Christ. Paul had sent Timothy to teach them in person, and he planned to come soon himself. The Corinthian Christians did a lot of talking, but Paul was interested in actions.

Lesson 42 - Commentary on 1 Corinthians 5-8

The fellowship at Corinth had tolerated terrible immorality, a kind that not even pagans accepted. The best understanding of it is that a man had taken up an immoral relationship with his stepmother after his father had died. Perhaps in their desire to be "open-minded" and "non-judgmental," they had accepted the relationship in the fellowship. Paul says that they need to remove such a one from their midst by withdrawing their fellowship from him. In this way Paul hopes that the man will see the seriousness of his sin, repent of it, and end the relationship. The Christians in Corinth were not to accept a so-called brother who was immoral or defiantly practicing other sins.

Another failing in the fellowship is the practice of Christians taking their disputes with each other to the secular courts instead of resolving their conflicts among themselves. They shouldn't submit themselves to the judgments of the unrighteous. They were once among the unrighteous

themselves, but they had been washed and sanctified in the name of Christ and were now different.

“All things are lawful for me” (6:12) might be Paul quoting their arrogant claim and replying with his corrective, “not all things are profitable.” “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food” (6:13) might be their justification for immoral behavior. They might have made the application, “The body is made for sex, so why not engage in it at any time?” Instead, Paul reminds them that their bodies are members of Christ and that each Christian is a temple in which the Holy Spirit dwells. Since they had been bought with such a great price by the death of Jesus, they needed to glorify God in their bodies. In Chapter 7, Paul begins addressing questions that they had asked of him in a letter (Paul mentions in 5:9-11 a letter he had previously sent).

Chapter 8 introduces a long section that deals with the need for Christians to give up their “rights” out of sensitivity toward other Christians. The specific issue addressed is whether a Christian should eat meat taken from animals that had been sacrificed to idols. The common practice was for meat from pagan sacrifices to be sold in the marketplace. Another common practice was for special dinners (such as a wedding reception) to be held in pagan temples, with meat that had been sacrificed to idols on the menu. Was a Christian free to eat such meat, or would doing so make him a participant in pagan sacrifices? Would eating such meat wound the conscience of one who had scruples against eating such meat?

Paul apparently quotes the Corinthians again in 8:1 when he says, “We all have knowledge.” Having knowledge can make one arrogant; by contrast, showing love toward one another builds up the fellowship. If I arrogantly do whatever I want to do, through my “knowledge” I might hurt the faith of one without my level of understanding. That would not be a loving thing to do.

Lesson 43 - Commentary on 1 Corinthians 9-12

In Chapter 9, Paul uses himself as an example of one who has the freedom to do certain things but refrains from exercising those “rights.” As an apostle, Paul has the “right” to be supported by the church for his work and to take along a believing wife. But he does not use those rights because he does not want to be a stumbling block to the church. Instead, he sacrifices himself all that he can for the sake of the gospel. His point is that Christians need to give up their rights for the good of others in the fellowship. Paul uses Israel in the wilderness as an example of those who were in a fellowship, who thought they stood firm, but who sinned and fell. He then applies the lesson to Christians: they partake of the table of the Lord, so it is inappropriate for them to partake of the table of demons. They should avoid meat sacrificed to idols. They have the “right” to do so--it is lawful--but it is not profitable and does not build up the body of Christ. So Christians can eat anything sold in the meat market, but if anyone makes it a matter of conscience he should not eat. Give glory to God in everything you do, he says, and give no offense in what you do.

Chapter 11 provides instructions about head coverings while praying or prophesying. The teaching includes instructions for men and for women in the matter. He then addresses the assemblies of the Corinth fellowship. There are divisions even when they assemble because they do not show consideration for each other. As a result, they have a meal together, but it is not the Lord’s Supper that they eat. Paul reminds them that the Lord instituted the meal as a time to remember Him as a fellowship. Selfishness is inappropriate on such an occasion.

Chapter 12 addresses the practice of spiritual gifts. There are many manifestations of the gifts, but the same Spirit guides them all. The purpose of the many and varied gifts is to build up the body. Every member has a function to fulfill, and the body is stronger because not all members have the same function. Each has something to contribute.

Lesson 44 - Commentary on 1 Corinthians 13-16

Paul says in Chapter 13 that all spiritual gifts must be exercised in love. The Corinthians were competing and comparing with regard to their spiritual gifts, which was the wrong attitude. Without love, the gifts accomplish nothing.

Chapter 14 emphasizes the need for the spiritual gifts to be exercised in an orderly manner so that others might be edified. Paul also gives additional instructions about the assembly of the saints. Chapter 15 emphasizes the centrality of the resurrection to the gospel message. Some of those who heard Paul in the Areopagus in Athens were skeptical about the idea of resurrection. This is understandable, but it must not be explained away. It is essential to the forgiveness of sins and the hope that Christians have. Paul proves the reality and nature of the resurrection by various logical arguments. The final chapter discusses Paul's collection for the saints in Jerusalem, his companions in ministry, and his final admonitions.

Lesson 45 - Commentary on 2 Corinthians 1-5

Paul wrote the second letter to the Corinthians a few months after the first. He wrote the first one while he was in the province of Asia in what is now Turkey, probably in Ephesus. He wrote this letter while he was in Macedonia (northern Greece) as he traveled toward Corinth. Some things were better in the fellowship in Corinth by then--apparently the man living in sin had repented and changed his ways (2 Corinthians 2:5-9)--but some in the fellowship had raised serious questions about the legitimacy of Paul's apostleship. This letter is Paul's answer. His defense is that he makes no defense of himself. Throughout the letter, he says, "It's not me, it's God." The theme verse is 1:12, where he says that he has conducted himself not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God toward everyone but especially toward them.

He does not need to commend himself because the church in Corinth is his letter of recommendation. His adequacy for carrying out his ministry comes from God and not from himself. He is a servant; he is an earthen jar, so that the focus will be on the precious gospel that he carries. The love of Christ leaves him no choice but to be an ambassador for Christ. Through the letter Paul tries to extinguish the lingering pride among the Corinthians and help them understand that they needed to die to themselves in order to be servants of Christ. Paul refers to himself a great deal, but near the end he says that he has not been defending himself but trying to build them up (12:19).

Unit 10

Lesson 46 - Commentary on Romans 1-3

Paul wrote this letter to Christians living in the capital of the Roman Empire. People in Rome came from many ethnic backgrounds. A central theme in the letter is the need for Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians to accept one another. This was a major issue in the early church. Paul addresses it in Ephesians as well. Jews and Gentiles had not cared much for each other for generations. Now people from these two conflicting backgrounds had become Christians. It was easy for them to fall back into old habits and let their prejudices outweigh their new oneness in Christ.

Paul approaches the question by first humbling the heritage of each group. Chapter 1 says that the world is in sin and under God's wrath; so much for a reason for Gentiles to think they were better. Chapter 2 says that the Jews are in sin and under God's wrath; so much for a reason

for Jewish pride. Chapter 3 summarizes the teaching thus far and says that God's one answer for both groups is Jesus Christ. Righteousness comes by faith for all who believe, regardless of their background, because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. God will justify the circumcised and the uncircumcised on the basis of faith.

Lesson 47 - Commentary on Romans 4-6

Chapter 4 says that Abraham is an example to both Jews and Gentiles of what it means to be justified by faith. God credited Abraham's faith as righteousness before he was circumcised, and then God gave Abraham the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness of faith. Thus Abraham is the spiritual father of the circumcised and the uncircumcised, that is, of the Jews and the Gentiles. Being made right with God by faith is available equally to all, Jew and Gentile.

The grace of God that comes by being justified by faith in Jesus Christ makes right what Adam's sin made wrong. This reconciliation with God does not give believers permission to do whatever they want and think that they will be forgiven for it. Instead, being baptized into Christ's death and being raised in the likeness of His resurrection means that a person is dead to sin and is raised to walk in newness of life. Instead of being a slave to sin, he is now a slave to righteousness.

Lesson 48 - Commentary on Romans 7-8

Paul gives another illustration of the believer's new life with God in Chapter 7. The believer has died to his old mate, the Law, and is now joined to his new mate, Christ. But this new life involves a struggle. The old ways tug at us. We want to do what is right, but we wind up doing what is wrong. For the person who wants to do right, this results in a miserable existence: he concurs with God in his inner person, but he winds up serving sin with his body. Who can set such a person free from this death in life? The answer is Jesus Christ.

There is no condemnation in Christ. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ sets one free from the law of sin and death. The mind set on the Spirit is life and peace. The Spirit gives the Christian a new life. Even as we suffer with Christ in this life, we look forward to being glorified with Him. We look forward to the redemption that Christ will bring about at His coming. Through Him we are more than conquerors over every difficulty and fear. Nothing is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ.

Lesson 49 - Commentary on Romans 9-12

Since these great blessings and assurances are available to all Christians regardless of their background, what was the point of God's choosing Israel? Is there anything special about the Jews? Paul says that God had a purpose for choosing Israel, and it is not for us to question His purpose and plan. Not all who are of ethnic Israel are part of spiritual Israel because salvation is by faith, and not all who are Jews ethnically believe in Christ.

God is a God of mercy. He showed mercy to Israel, and He shows mercy to all who come to Christ. Israel did not pursue righteousness by faith. They tried to pursue God by the way of law, and as a result they stumbled over Christ. They did not get the idea of salvation by faith. Israel heard the gospel, but for the most part they rejected Christ. But God has not rejected His people. There is still a remnant of believers from Israel. Because the Jews rejected Christ, Paul and others took the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul says that the response of Gentiles to the gospel will stir

up Jews to reconsider the message and respond favorably. As a result, all who are willing to respond to Jesus in faith will be saved. What a brilliant plan God has!

Therefore, in view of God's mercies, we should give ourselves as living sacrifices, transformed by the renewing of our minds. This means not thinking too highly of ourselves, but simply being God's servants, using the talents that he gives us. We need to be devoted to one another in love, getting along with all people as much as we possibly can.

Lesson 50 - Commentary on Romans 13-16

We need to be subject to the governing authorities because government is God's agent for keeping order. In summary, we should love our neighbor as ourselves.

In Chapters 14-15, Paul deals specifically with issues within the fellowship that had caused the unrest between Christians from a Jewish background and Christians from a Gentile background. They need to accept one another, even when they have different scruples about what is essential in the Christian life. For instance, one Christian believes that he can eat anything, while another Christian believes that he must refrain from eating meat because it might come from a sacrifice made to a pagan god. Each one is to hold his opinion without being judgmental toward the other. In a different example, one person observes certain days as special to the Lord (probably a reference to Jewish holidays), while another person believes that all days are alike before the Lord. Each believer is to respect his own conscience as well as the faith of others. Other Christians do not answer to you; they answer to God, and He will enable them to stand. Don't major in the minors; remember the central matters of the kingdom and focus on them. All Christians should glorify God with one voice because Christ is a servant of both the Jews and the Gentiles (15:5-9).

At the close of the letter, Paul informs the Christians in Rome of his plans and sends greetings to individual believers there. Paul knew an amazing number of disciples in Rome even though he had never been there, probably because people he had known elsewhere were now in Rome.

Units 11-12

The Bible commentary for Units 11 and 12 is at the end of each lesson.

Unit 13

Lesson 61 - Deuteronomy 4:2, Revelation 22:18-19

The Bible readings for the first four lessons in this unit are in preparation for the lesson on the inspiration and authority of the Bible. In Deuteronomy, Moses warns the Israelites not to add to or take from the word that God is giving them through Moses. The temptation we face is to try to pick and choose the things we like and find comfortable in God's word and thus conform the Word of God to our wishes and desires. Instead, we need to conform our hearing and our hearts to His message for us.

The passage in Revelation is similar, although there John adds by inspiration the curses that will result if one adds to or takes from the words of that book. The one who copies the book or reads it aloud to others must not do any editing of God's message in it. These warnings apply primarily to the books in which they are found, but the principle applies to all of Scripture.

Lesson 62 - Commentary on 2 Kings 22:1-23:3

This passage describes a time of revival and renewal in Judah. The young king Josiah orders that the temple be restored after a time when the Jews allowed it to deteriorate. During the remodeling, the book of the Law is discovered. As the book is read to Josiah, he is convicted of Israel's failure to obey the Lord. A prophetess reveals that the evil Judah had suffered had taken place because they had not heeded God's Word but instead had worshiped idols. She blesses Josiah because of his humility and tender heart. All the people are summoned to the temple, the book is read to them, and the king makes a covenant to follow the words of the book, a covenant to which the people agree.

This time of renewal occurs because the king is convicted when he hears the words of God. The discovery of the book helps to explain how things had gotten so bad in Judah: they had laid aside the word of God and had begun to practice the ways of the pagans around them. The Scriptures had become so unimportant to the leaders that they had not insured that Judah was following God's commandments.

Lesson 63 - Commentary on John 10:35-36 and 14:10, and Matthew 26:51-56

Today's passages are the words of Jesus and indicate the high view that He held of Scripture. In John 10, Jesus quotes a line from Psalm 82:6 and says that Scripture cannot be broken. The psalm is a denunciation of unjust judges in Israel. Those judges are in the role of gods to those who appear before them. Jesus' point is that, if Scripture can call Israelites gods, surely the one whom God sent into the world is not blaspheming when he says, "I am the Son of God."

In John 14, Jesus says that He does not decide what words to use. God gives Him the words that He says. The words of Jesus--and by extension the words that the Bible uses--come from God.

The passage from Matthew is from the scene of Jesus' arrest in the Garden. He says that what is happening fulfills the Scriptures. Jesus saw His entire life as the fulfillment of Scripture, as carrying out what the authoritative Word of God predicted. Jesus recognized and accepted the authority of Scripture.

Lesson 64 - Commentary on 1 Corinthians 2:12-13, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Peter 1:16-21

In 1 Corinthians, Paul is explaining that what he says and writes is from God. He has received God's Spirit that he might know God's message. He communicates that message in words taught to him by the Spirit, "combining spiritual with spiritual" (verse 13). The point is that his message and the words that communicate the message are from God, not from men.

In 2 Timothy, Paul is encouraging Timothy to remain faithful to what he has learned from the Scriptures since childhood. The Scriptures provide the wisdom that leads to salvation by faith in Christ. All Scripture, Paul says, is God-breathed and is useful for giving the man of God what he needs to be adequate and equipped.

Peter admonishes his readers to pay attention to the word of God. No prophecy of Scripture, Peter says, is a matter of personal interpretation. Instead, a prophet is impelled to speak by the Holy Spirit. In other words, what you read in Scripture is not man's ideas but the word of God.