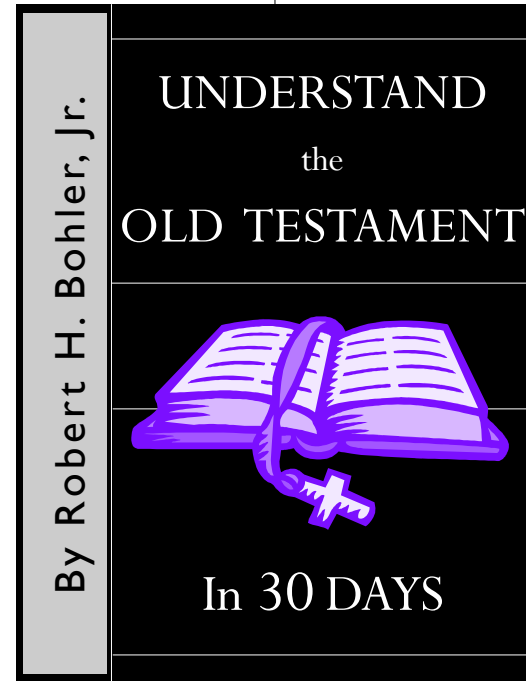




CENTRAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
380 ALPS ROAD • ATHENS, GA 30606
TEL 706-549-9284
EMAIL tziemer@bellsouth.net
www.athenscentralpres.org

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Summer
Devotional
Booklet
2007

To know the Bible is crucially important. Life is complicated. So is God. We are simply not smart enough to figure life and God out all on our own. The good news is that God does not intend us to. The Bible is given to us to provide us a frame of reference, a set of instructions, and an understanding of our Creator that will enable us to live a good life. Why not take advantage of what God has provided.

If this has been a start, do not let it be the end. Read through the Old Testament if you have never done so. If this has been a good review, remember to keep your knowledge of God's word fresh. Until life ends we will need it often.

May God bless you, his word enrich you, and his grace always guide you.

Bob

Bob Bohler

Day 31 and beyond

Commentary —

You have just surveyed the Old Testament. I hope you have enjoyed the experience. If you have never read the Old Testament, now you have a starting point. It is time to dig more deeply. It is time to read the entire Old Testament.

Remember that the revelation of God in the Bible is cumulative and progressive. Do not expect the first books of the Bible to have the same fully nuanced view of God that the final ones do. God's revelation starts us slow and gives us new information as we can receive it.

This does not mean, however, that the earlier revelations of God in the Old Testament are faulty. They are not. In fact, the entire Bible reveals God in his remarkable wisdom, power, grace, and compassion. The Old Testament reveals the same God throughout. He is a God of great power. But he is more than that. He is also a God of patience, mercy, and kindness.

Today we tend to view God in a one-sided way. We appreciate God's love and grace but do not care for his power and holiness. This is why understanding the Old Testament serves as a needed corrective. God is love and mercy. His holiness also sometimes results in correcting justice. Would we want a God that was different? Would we want a God we can manipulate? Would we want a God who is a push-over? The God seen in the Old Testament is certainly not that!

How does one read the Old Testament? One chapter at a time. One book at a time. Little by little. Let me suggest a plan. By reading one chapter a day, you can read through the Old Testament in two years. Reading two chapters a day will enable you to read through it in a year.

The Old Testament is a mystery to most people. It is full of mysterious names, strange customs, and difficult language. And it is just so *long*. While there are great stories in the Old Testament, there is also much that is difficult to wade through. And there is really no way to make these problems go away.

However it is possible to understand the story of the Old Testament without reading every word. There is a distinct story that runs through the Old Testament. This is because the story of the Bible happens in human history. The Bible is not a set of philosophical concepts. It is the record of a set of unique, unrepeatably events in human history. These events happened in real moments in real history to real people.

This is very important. It is one of the things that distinguishes the faith of the Bible from other religions. It means, for one thing, that God values history. God values the actions of people and nations. Our lives count in the grand scheme of God's work in the world. What we do in history matters because God chose to reveal himself in the world of human events.

One of the great questions about God is can we know God? The Bible has a clear answer to this question. It says that we can know God because God has revealed himself. It says that it would be absurd for God to create the world then remain silent. That would be like a parent who chose never to talk to their child. The Bible says that, not only is there a God, but he has chosen to speak. He has told us who he is, why he made us, and what he expects. There are no more important things we can know as his creatures.

The Bible contains the record of God's revealing himself to the world. He did it through one particular people, the Jews. Why did God do it this way? As the poet says, "How odd of God to choose the Jews." If we were God, we might have done differently. But no doubt God chose wisely. God revealed himself in detail to one nation among the many. And from that nation set the stage to reveal himself to the wider world.

What follows is a survey of the Old Testament. There is a commentary on a part of the Old Testament each day for 30 days. Then there are several chapters from that part of the Bible to read. Let me encourage you to take your time but be persistent. You do not have to complete this project in 30 calendar days. But keep at it. At the end of this time, you will have a basic understanding of the narrative, literature, and context of the Old Testament.

Most things are only difficult until we understand them. The same is true of the Old Testament. I pray that your understanding of the Old Testament will be enhanced and increased through this realistic and achievable exercise.

Best Wishes,
Bob Bohler

Day 1

Commentary –

The book of Genesis is a perfect beginning to the Bible. The word, “Genesis” means literally, “beginnings.” Genesis is the book about the beginnings of the world, civilization, and particularly the story of God’s salvation history. Genesis starts by simply saying, “In the beginning, God...” The book tells us that everything begins with God. At the very first there was God and all things come into existence because of God and through God.

Theologians have noted that Genesis 1 and 2 tell us how God created the world, “out of nothing.” Anything that humans create, they create from the materials already existing. But God is the one who is able to create out of nothing. And how does Genesis say God did that? God “spoke” the world into existence. God said, “Let there be light, and there was light.” Such is God’s power that his very word creates something out of nothing.

It has also been noted that Genesis 1 and 2 are not so much intended to tell us the “how’s and when’s” of creation. That is, Genesis does not give us a scientific analysis of the creation of the world. That would certainly take longer than 2 chapters. And they certainly would not have understood it when Genesis was first written. We probably would not understand it now. Instead, Genesis tells us “who” created the world. It tells us that the world did not appear by random chance. No, God is the author of all creation. God created the world and humans for his own purposes.

The height of creation is human beings. What makes humans different is that they are created in the image and likeness of God. Something of God’s very nature resides in us. This makes us “like God” in the sense that we are able to commune with God in a way no other creature can. In the beginning God created all things good. God also placed humans in a paradise of perfect relationship with him. But our life in paradise was not to last, as we will discover in tomorrow’s reading.

Read – Genesis, chapters 1, 2

Day 30

Commentary –

The book of Malachi is a fitting ending to the Old Testament. It begins with words of challenge and ends with words of promise. It is also full of memorable phrases.

There are many things the people are still doing wrong. They have returned from exile and settled back in the land of Israel. They have declared their intention to serve God fully. But it has turned out harder in practice than in theory. The old ways do not die easily.

For example, when they bring their offerings to the temple, they do not bring the best of the flock. They secretly bring animals with some defect. They offer to God what they would be embarrassed to offer someone else. The priests have become hard hearted. They go through the motions in their work. They are not teaching the people righteous living nor modeling it themselves. The work of the temple is suffering because the people are holding back their offerings. God has noticed that they are keeping for themselves what rightly belongs to him.

But Malachi ends with a great promise. It is the promise of the coming of Elijah. Elijah was considered among the very greatest of the Old Testament prophets. Elijah will again come in preparation for the day of the Lord. Malachi characterizes the day as “great and terrible.” What Elijah will do is turn the hearts of the parents to the children and the children to the parents. Otherwise, God says that he will strike the earth with a curse. It is a call for love, righteousness, and peace to come back into the family. For God is displeased with anything other than that.

This promise sets the stage for the beginning of the New Testament. The Old Testament ends with a sense of anticipation. The Day of the Lord is coming. God will make a new covenant with his people. They will recognize the day when they see “Elijah” appear. No wonder when John the Baptist began his ministry, dressed in animal skins and looking like the prophets of old, there was tremendous anticipation.

Read – Malachi 3, 4

Day 29

Commentary –

The people of Judah never lost hope in captivity. They dreamed of the day when they might be able to come home and rebuild the nation and city of Jerusalem. That day finally arrived after an exile of about 70 years. The Persian ruler Cyrus allowed a group of people to return and begin their life again in the land. It was a hard and difficult life. What had once been a great and glorious nation was now only a pile of rubble. Discouragement ran rampant. But God kept encouraging the people to be diligent about the work.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah chronicle the process of rebuilding the temple and the walls of the city. The task was Herculean for the people who returned. What Solomon and the former kings had done with large workforces, the people now had to do slowly and laboriously. In addition, they could not match the opulence of what had been before. The rebuilt temple was a mere shadow of Solomon's magnificent structure. But God kept issuing words of confidence through the prophets. If they remained faithful, he would bless their labors.

There was a great deal of soul searching during this time. It was a time to take stock of their failures as a nation. Ezra and Nehemiah were leaders in this call to personal and national reformation. On one occasion, the people gather to hear the book of the law read. They read the entire Law of Moses. The priests explained it to the people as they read. And the people wept when they heard the law. It had been so long since it had been spoken. They recognized their failure to live up to the covenant and wept for what had been lost. It was a time of national confession and renewal.

These books are the reminder that we can always rebuild our lives. Things may not be like they were, but God will never leave us. There is always grace for those who depend on God.

Read – Ezra 6, Nehemiah 8

Day 2

Commentary –

Where did the serpent come from? When did serpents start talking (or when did they quit talking)? Why is temptation allowed in paradise? Did God not know Adam and Eve would succumb to the serpent's wiles? Why does Adam and Eve's sin affect everyone else and not just themselves? Those are only some of the questions we find ourselves asking when we get to Genesis, chapter 3. While Genesis 3 does not answer all those questions, it does answer, "Why is the world full of so much evil and suffering?" The answer is that humans live in a broken relationship with the God who created them and thus with the world around them.

Genesis 3 is crucial to the story the Bible is going to tell in the rest of its pages. It is crucial because it sets up the problem that both God and humans find themselves in. The human problem is being separated from God. God's problem is how to redeem his lost and wayward creatures. The rest of the Bible tells the story of how God sets about to seek and save his lost children and how his children respond to God's call.

Genesis 3 introduces what is sometimes called, "original sin." As Genesis 3 tells the story, because Adam and Eve sinned, sin is passed on to every human from the moment they are born. Paradise has been lost. We have disobeyed God. Now we must live with those consequences. Theologians sometimes remark that while sin is not "necessary" (that is, no one is ever forced to sin), it is "inevitable" (that is, everyone does sin). Genesis 3 gives us, in story form, a symbol of the history of human sinfulness. Our human nature is to want to be our own God, do our own will, and be our own masters. To understand sin is important, because it allows us to recognize our need of redemption. Sin breaks our relationship with God and discolors everything we do. Who will deliver us from our bondage to sin?

Read – Genesis 3

Day 3

Commentary –

God's grace is seen throughout the book of Genesis. After the Fall in Genesis 3, God does not completely destroy Adam and Eve (though their perfect spiritual connection with God dies), but only sends them out of Paradise. The story of Noah and the Flood is another story of God's grace in the midst of judgment. It says that in the time of Noah, "every inclination of people's hearts was only evil continually." Genesis 6 talks about God in terms that we can understand, when it says that God was "grieved to his heart" and "sorry that he had made human-kind."

But Noah finds grace in God's sight. Noah is a picture of righteousness, though we will discover later that Noah, like all of us, is not perfect. The New Testament is going to call Noah a "preacher of righteousness." He is also a picture of faith, for he is willing to build a giant ark (450 feet long) on dry land. The project would take many years and would certainly make one the object of ridicule among one's neighbors. Yet Noah obeyed God.

What is the importance of the story of the flood? It is a story about a new beginning coming out of a disaster. It is about new starts. It is about the tendency of human society to lose its moral compass. It is about God's grace being greater than any human problem. The symbol of God's grace is the rainbow. God gives Noah the sign of the rainbow as a promise that he will never again destroy the earth through a flood. God makes a covenant with Noah and all his descendants. This is just one of many covenants we find God making in the scriptures, culminating in the wonderful new covenant with us in Jesus Christ.

Read – Genesis 6-8

Day 28

Commentary –

The Minor Prophets are so called because of their length. The longest of them is only 14 chapters long. The shortest is 1 chapter. There are twelve Minor Prophets. Their ministries take place in the times of the kings of Israel and Judah. The final three come from the time of the return from exile.

It is easy to overlook these twelve books but they contain some wonderful words and stories. For example Jonah is one of these prophets. He does not want to proclaim God's word to the wicked city of Nineveh, capital of Assyria. In the end he is displeased because God has mercy on the city. Hosea talks about the people's unfaithfulness to the covenant they made with God. Joel tells of a coming day when God will pour out his Spirit on all people. Amos proclaims judgment on Israel and its wicked neighbors. Obadiah tells the neighboring nation of Edom that they will be punished for rejoicing in Israel's downfall. Micah contains the prophecy of where the Messiah will be born, in Bethlehem of Judah. Nahum tells the people that Assyria will also experience God's judgment. Habakkuk complains that God is using a nation more wicked than Israel, the Assyrians to punish them. Zephaniah proclaims a coming terrible day of the Lord. Haggai and Zechariah encourage the people to the rebuilding of God's temple after the return from captivity. And Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament.

Each of these books deals with some aspect of life and faith. In general the prophets call us to obedience to the commands of God, respect for one another, and faithfulness to our covenant with God. They remind us that idolatry takes many forms and is always an affront to God. They encourage us to faith and perseverance in the tasks God has set before us. They tell us that God judges nations for their wickedness but repentance is always acceptable to God. They invite us to look forward to what God will do in the future because God has not finished all his work yet.

Read – Micah 5, Joel 2

Day 27

Commentary –

There are many great stories in the Old Testament. None are more beloved than the stories of Daniel, the prophet. He is among the bright young men that Nebuchadnezzar takes captive from Jerusalem. He will serve the Babylonian king for many years as an advisor. He will live and serve into the reign of the Persians and live to a ripe old age.

The book of Daniel begins with Daniel and his three friends refusing to defile themselves with the king's rations. God gives Daniel favor with the palace administrator who agrees to test Daniel and his friends. The end of the story is the Daniel and his friends prove healthier and smarter than any of the other students. During his ministry as a prophet, Daniel interprets dreams and strange handwriting on the wall. He is saved from the lion's den by the angel of God. His three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego escape death in the fiery furnace. And king Nebuchadnezzar comes to acknowledge that there is no one like the Lord, the God of Daniel and his friends.

Daniel is also a man of prayer. He feels the despair and failures of his people. On several occasions he decides to commit himself to times of intense prayer for God's people. God answers him with visions and promises about the hope and future of the nation of Israel. These visions are full of symbols and have been subject to a variety to different interpretations. They are "apocalyptic" literature about the future of God's reign on the earth. While it is not readily evident what they mean, they tell one message clearly. God is in control of world events. God will bring all things to conclusion, at the right time, through his grace and power. Daniel also gives clear indication of a resurrection when he says, "those who are asleep shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt." His words are a foreshadowing of the explicit promises of eternal life given in the New Testament. "Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars of the sky forever and ever."

Read – Daniel 1, 3, 12

Day 4

Commentary –

The first 11 chapters of Genesis is often considered to be "pre-history", that murky, mysterious time before civilization and recorded history really began. But chapter 12 marks a change. It marks the beginning of what we have come to call "salvation history." Salvation history is the record of how God redeemed fallen humanity in the course of human events. Unlike some other religious perspectives, Christianity is a historical religion. The Bible affirms that God has revealed himself not simply in ideas but in human history, through concrete acts, revealing himself and seeking his lost children.

Chapter 12 is the story of the call of God to Abraham. God's call is found in verses 1-3. It contains some truly remarkable promises. Abraham will be given a land in which to live. He will become a great nation. God will bless him and make his name great so that he will be a blessing. God will bless those who bless him and curse those who curse him. And in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

Abraham is going to prove to be a man of faith. He is not perfect as the account in the end of chapter 12 illustrates. But he believes that God's promise is faithful, though he will wait long for its fulfillment. The next chapters in Genesis are the story of Abraham's life, his journey to the Promised Land, his struggles, mistakes, greatness, friendship with God, and finally the testing of his faith. The most remarkable part of the promise to Abraham is that all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him. It is a promise ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ.

Read – Genesis 12

Day 5

Commentary –

The account in Genesis 24 of Abraham's finding a wife for his son Isaac is a wonderful story of God's providence. Abraham had to wait many years until he had an heir. In fact Abraham's wife Sarah was well beyond the age where she could be expected to conceive. So impossible did the idea seem that when Sarah heard God reaffirm the promise of a son, she laughed in her heart. God heard her and said, "Why did you laugh? Is anything too hard for the Lord?" She denied it and said, "I did not laugh." But God replied, "Yes, you did laugh." When a son was born to Sarah about a year later, they called him Isaac, which means "laughter." God had finally turned the sorrow of Sarah's barrenness into the laughter of great joy.

But when it came time to find Isaac a wife, Abraham chose not to let Isaac marry from the pagan nations around him. Abraham was seeking here to keep Isaac from the worship of the gods of the native people. So he sent his most trusted servant back to his kinfolk to find a wife for Isaac. The account of the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah is a delightful story of God's providential care. It also introduces us to Rebekah's brother, Laban. We are going to hear more about Laban. He is going to become the father-in-law to Isaac's son Jacob and be a difficult person to deal with.

Not every circumstance in life works out like the account of Abraham sending his servant to find a wife for Isaac. Sometimes our prayers do not get answered so quickly or easily. Sometimes we search long and hard for an answer that never seems to materialize. And many stories in the Bible are going to talk about how we deal with life's disappointments. But this story reminds us of God's care. If we will trust God, God will show us grace and give us help, though it may not always come in the form we expect.

Read – Genesis 24

Day 26

Commentary –

Jeremiah is generally seen as a prophet of gloom. His prophetic ministry continues right through the destruction of Jerusalem. He sees the good, the bad, and the ugly. It is no wonder that he felt often discouraged. In spite of God's words to the kings and people, they did not change their ways. They did everything to make the punishment of God on the nation inevitable. The kings and people made horrible choices that sealed their fate before God.

The book of Jeremiah chronicles the prophet's sufferings and discouragements. On one occasion, for example, God commands Jeremiah to write the words of God on a scroll. The scroll is read to the people of God in the temple. But the king takes the scroll and burns it. Jeremiah has to write another scroll. On another occasion Jeremiah prophesied about the destruction of the city. The officials of the city imprisoned Jeremiah in an old well. The water of the well had almost dried up. Instead Jeremiah sank down into the mud. Not a pleasant experience. We hear some of Jeremiah's "lamentations" in the Old Testament book by the same name.

There is one particularly important promise in the book of Jeremiah. It has to do with a new covenant God promised to make with the people. Jeremiah says that it will be a different covenant. It will not be like the old one. The law will not be written on tablets of stone but on people's hearts. Everyone will know the Lord and the peoples' sins will be forgiven. The new covenant was still many centuries away when Jeremiah saw its coming. His words gave a sense of anticipation to the people that God was planning something fresh and wonderful.

Read – Jeremiah 31, 38

Day 25

Commentary –

There are three prophets in the Old Testament called Major Prophets. This designation has not so much to do with their importance as the length of their books. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are called the Major Prophets. Each of their books is over forty chapters. Isaiah, the longest, runs for sixty-six chapters. Isaiah wrote primarily to the southern kingdom of Judah. He had watched the destruction of the northern kingdom. His call was to warn the southern kingdom that they too needed to turn back to God.

Isaiah has been a favorite book of people down through the centuries. It is because the language of Isaiah is full of rich metaphors and wonderful promises. But Isaiah is not just a prophet of encouragement. His words are full of incrimination. The people had fallen away from God. There was still time to turn back, before it was too late.

Chapter 1 begins the denouncement by calling Judah a “sinful nation, laden with iniquity.” In chapter 5, the people are compared to an unproductive vineyard. Both kings and priests and people are called to account for their failures to respond to God’s great mercy. God warns the nation that they, like their northern neighbor Israel, are going to be called to task for their doings.

There are some wonderful sections in the prophet Isaiah. Chapter 6 contains a detailed account of his call to be a prophet. Chapters 9 and 11 contain words about the coming Messiah. The prophecy about the suffering of the Messiah is found in chapters 52 and 53. Chapters 60 through 66 are promises about Israel’s future hope and salvation. Isaiah is the most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament. It is one of the most quoted books in the Bible.

Read – Isaiah, 6, 53, 55

Day 6

Commentary –

Isaac and Rebekah would eventually have two twin sons (not identical), Esau, the oldest, and Jacob the youngest. They are as different as night and day. Esau is a rough outdoorsman. Jacob is a quieter, more reflective youth. Isaac will find his heart drawn to Esau. Rebekah to Jacob. All these family dynamics come together to make for great rivalry between these two brothers. In addition, before they are even born, God will give his blessing to Jacob over Esau. The tension between Esau and Jacob rises further when Jacob steals Esau’s blessing from Isaac. Because of Esau’s hatred of Jacob, Jacob flees to the land and home of his uncle Laban.

The story of Jacob’s time in Laban’s house is a story of trickery by a master schemer. What Jacob has done to Esau, Laban does multiple times to Jacob. But God had promised Jacob that he would be with him and make him the inheritor of the promises to Abraham and Isaac. By the time Jacob escaped from Laban and returned to his father Isaac and his brother Esau, he had eleven sons with one more to be born in the land of Canaan. Jacob’s twelve sons will become the heads of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel.

Jacob wrestles with the angel of the Lord on the way back to Canaan. The angel gives him a new name, Israel, which means, “prince.” While Jacob is a man who has learned a great deal about faith, his parenting skills leave much to be desired. He perpetuates the sins of his parents by showing favoritism to one of his children, Joseph. It creates such envy among the children that they sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt. But God is at work. God will use this terrible act to bring about his plan. Joseph will become a part of his family’s salvation in a time of great famine. And by God’s grace, Joseph is able to forgive his brothers what they did and see that God used their evil for good. The events of the story of Joseph and the famine lead the Israelites down into Egypt where they would stay for 400 years.

Read – Genesis 37, 50

Day 7

Commentary –

Life eventually became difficult for the descendants of Jacob (Israel) in the land of Egypt. A new pharaoh would come to power who did not know Joseph. He would put the now very numerous Israelites to work as slaves. Their bondage would be cruel. Eventually they would cry out to God in distress.

Into the picture is born a young boy who is named Moses. If you have seen the movie, *The Ten Commandments*, with Charlton Heston, you understand some of the dynamics that surround the life of the young man Moses. He is raised with all the privileges of the Egyptian court, educated in the finest arts. He becomes, apparently, a young man of skill and action. But he is also a Hebrew and not an Egyptian. At some point his loyalties become divided and he sides with the Hebrews by killing an Egyptian for abusing a Hebrew. When he is forced to flee the wrath of pharaoh, he ends up in the desert as a shepherd.

The appearance of God to Moses in the burning bush is the beginning of a very dramatic episode in the story of God's salvation history. The exodus from Egypt through the hand of Moses is going to be a defining moment in Israel's history. They are going to become, not just a family, but a nation. They are going to be delivered by the miraculous power of God who will show his power greater than all the gods of the Egyptians. And when they gather around Mt. Sinai to receive the 10 Commandments, God will make a covenant with them to become their God and they his people.

The 10 plagues with which God strikes the Egyptians end with one final terrible plague, the death of all firstborns. The terribleness of such a loss foreshadows the greatness of God's love for us in one day giving his only Son for our redemption.

Read – Exodus 2, 3

Day 24

Commentary –

The books of the Old Testament can be divided into various categories. Some books are narrative in nature. That is, they tell a story. The first seventeen books of the Old Testament, Genesis through Esther fall into this category. Within these books the first five, Genesis through Deuteronomy are also often called the Law, because they contain the laws given to Israel through Moses. There are the prophetic writings. These include Isaiah through Malachi. Then there are the books of poetry. These five books are Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. They are not poetry in our modern sense. They do not rhyme at the end of each phrase. But they are Hebrew poetry. They have rhythm and meter and repetition, all hallmarks of Hebrew poetry of their era.

Three books are traditionally attributed to Solomon, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Each book is unique and each has its own interpretive difficulties. Ecclesiastes, for example, is cynical and depressing. It gives a rather gloomy view of life and its possibilities. The tone of the book has often been attributed to Solomon's disenchantment with life, even his life of luxury and indulgence. Yet as difficult as the book's tone is, it leaves us with a very clear lesson. Life is not about having the most material possessions or experiencing the most pleasures. In the end even those things do not satisfy. Rather to serve God is the only possible remedy for an otherwise futile life.

The Song of Songs is perhaps the most difficult book in the Old Testament to interpret. On the surface it would seem to be a love poem, at times a somewhat suggestive one, written by Solomon to one of his wives. Yet such a poem would hardly merit inclusion in the canon of sacred scripture. The poem found inclusion in the Bible primarily because it was seen as an allegory of the heart's quest for God, and God's desire for his people. Which is it, a spiritual allegory or a love poem? Christians still debate the matter. Either way it has something to teach us, about either marital love and/or spiritual passion.

Read – Ecclesiastes 1, 12, Song of Songs 1

Day 23

Commentary –

The book of Psalms has been called, “The prayer book of the Bible.” It is a book filled, primarily with prayers. They give voice to many experiences of faith. There are psalms that recognize loss and suffering. Others are full of joy and exultation. Others teach. Others were designed to be sung at ceremonial occasions, like the coronation of the king. They are personal and show a wide variety of faith experiences.

The psalms were originally sung in public worship in the life of the people of Israel. We can still see evidences of this in our Bible. Often a psalm will begin with some type of musical designation. Psalm 53, for example, begins, “To the leader: according to the Mahalath. A Maskil of David.” We assume that these instructions have to do with how to sing the psalm and/or what instruments to use. Regrettably, the meaning of all these terms has now been lost. Another indication of their musical origin is the use of the unknown word, “Selah”, which seems to separate verses or indicate a chorus.

One of the things the psalms teach us is that we can bring any matter to God. The psalms do not hesitate to express anger (with God), frustration, discouragement, and depression. They remind us that these are not feelings to be held inside. They can be brought to God, who hears, understands, and responds with help. In this sense the psalms give us language for prayer. When discouraged we can pray, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” When frustrated we can pray, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” When in need we can pray, “Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.”

Some psalms teach, like Psalms 1 and 119. Others help us in times of difficulty, like Psalms 13 and 17. There are psalms for times of joy, like Psalms 148 and 150. Psalm 51 helps us give voice to our need for forgiveness. Psalm 23 reminds us of the nearness of God’s care. If you open your Bible to about the center, you will find the book of Psalms. They have had a central place in the life of people of faith down through the centuries.

Read – Psalms 1, 19, 100

Day 8

Commentary –

The exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt is not merely for the purpose of delivering them from their bondage and giving them the Promised Land. From God’s point of view, there is a much more significant reason. God is going to make this extended family (now very large) into a nation and a people. Up to this point they have been held together by their lineage from Jacob and the promises given to their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Now they are going to discover that God has a plan for them. God is going to make them his special people. Of all the nations on the earth, God is going to reveal himself to them. God will be their God and they will be God’s people.

This happens when they arrive at Mt. Sinai. Gathered around the mountain, God gives to them the 10 Commandments. Moses goes up to the top of the mountain and receives the instructions for building the tabernacle and the laws of God. God says that he has chosen the Israelites, not because they were numerous. In fact God has chosen them because they were not powerful or mighty so that he might show his wisdom and power through them. The command of God to the people is to obey his laws. In return God will bless them and prosper them in all they do.

The Israelites are not going to find it easy to follow God’s laws. In fact their story is the account of repeated failure and disobedience. They are tempted by other gods, by injustice, and by the lifestyles of the nations around them. The degree of their waywardness is illustrated by their building a golden calf to worship while Moses talked with God on the mountain. But after every failure, God is merciful and does not completely forsake them, though they are punished for their sins.

The nation of Israel is the forerunner of the Christian Church. As they were the people of God in those days, so the church is now the people of God in our time. God is interested not only in individuals but calls people together for his purposes.

Read – Exodus 19-20, 32

How do we know what is right and what is wrong? The answer of the Bible is that God teaches us what is good and true and discourages us from falsehood, evil and error. This is the purpose of the laws of the Old Testament, to teach the people the difference in right and wrong, as God, who created the world, sees it. Much of the books of Exodus and Leviticus are concerned with the giving of the law to Israel. While these books may at times seem tedious, they are filled with judgments about good and evil. These judgments serve as the basis for Western Civilization. There is no code of law more important than those foundational laws given to Israel in the Old Testament.

The call of God to the Israelites is to be holy as God is holy. This does not mean they are going to be perfect. It rather means that they are set apart as God's people and for God's service. From God's point of view it is not as a burden that God gives Israel his laws. No, it is a great privilege, for no other nation will have laws as just, fair, and wise as these.

The call of God to the Israelites also gets to the heart of what is a troubling question. "Why does God destroy the nations in the Promised Land to give it to the Israelites?" The answer is that God destroys the nations because of their wickedness. They had corrupted their ways and continued to commit evil in the sight of the Lord. Therefore God was going to work against them and drive them out of the land. God makes clear that he is not giving the Promised Land to the Israelites because of their worthiness, but rather because of his anger against the wickedness of the nations in the land.

The Israelites would come to see the laws of God as a great burden. But God never intended it to be so. The law was a great gift by which the people could order their lives to follow after what was best and avoid evil. The law also contained severe warnings however for the Israelites should they turn their minds to wickedness. If they should live wickedly like the nations before them, the land will "vomit them out" also.

Read – Leviticus 19-20

The book of Job comes from ancient times. Scholars believe it is a very early story recorded for us in the Bible. It comes from a time in which people were not quite sure who God was and how God worked in the world. But the prevailing view was that God rewarded people for their deeds in direct correlation to what they did. When bad things happened to you, it was because you had displeased God in some way. Job tells us that this is not the case.

The book begins with this wonderful description of a heavenly counsel meeting. God seems to be having a committee meeting. It just so happened that Satan was there. We do not know whether Satan was invited or just showed up. The curious part is that God is the one who first brings up Job's name. He seems to invite Satan to test Job's faith and character. Satan jumps at the opportunity and takes away Job's possessions, family, and health. In the end Job is left to wonder what he has done to deserve such treatment.

The heart of the book is Job's conversations with his friends. Each tries to convince Job that he has sinned in some way. Their solution to his trouble is simple. If he will just repent, God will stop being angry and restore Job's good fortune. Job does not think it is that simple. Job also does not think he has anything to repent of. Job never loses his faith. In the end, however, he becomes bitter and confused. He just cannot understand why all this has taken place.

The resolution of the book comes in the appearance of God, in a whirlwind, to Job and his friends. Job has been questioning God so God now questions Job. Job, of course, has no answers to God's questions. In the end he repents of his doubt that God was working some good purpose in his life. God restores Job's fortunes and family. Job asks God to forgive his friends for speaking without knowledge.

People have noticed that God restores everything double to Job, except his children. God gives him again the same number, seven sons and three daughters. But why not double? One answer may be that his original children were not lost to him forever. When he arrived at heaven, he would find them again. Then he would be restored double of everything, including his children.

Read – Job 1, 2, 42

Day 21

Commentary –

Though the southern kingdom of Judah had a number of good kings, the sins of the nation finally caught up with them. Their commitment to God was sporadic. They found it hard to worship God exclusively. The idols of the pagan nations held too much allure to discard them completely. Though God sent prophet after prophet to turn them back from their sins, they grew farther from God. God finally brought a punishment so devastating that it would lead to a true repentance. It would take the destruction of the city, the destroying of the temple, and the peoples' captivity in Babylonia to accomplish what God desired.

One can understand how many people believed that God would never let Jerusalem be destroyed. After all, it contained the magnificent temple. It was the center of true worship in a pagan world. God had promised King David that his throne would endure forever. For all these reasons, the people had a false sense of security. Even though the prophets cried out against their unjust practices, the people saw little incentive to change. The prophets reminded the people that the temple would not save them if they continued to disobey God's laws. Finally, in 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylonia came to Jerusalem. He besieged it, conquered it, plundered it, and burned the sacred temple. He carried the people captive to Babylonia.

There are actually three dates that are important in the final days of the southern kingdom. In 605 B.C. a number of the elite members of Jerusalem society are taken captive. It was probably in this captivity that Daniel and his companions were taken to Babylonia. In 597 B.C. King Jehoiachin and members of the royal family were taken into captivity. Finally the city is burned in 586 B.C. The land is left desolate. Only the poorest of the poor are left in the land. It would be many years before God's people would return to rebuild their land and lives. They would learn a hard lesson. They would learn that God was true to his words, both the commandments and the warnings. They would have a long time to think about their sin and the wages of despair it had paid them.

Read – II Kings 25

Day 10

Commentary –

When the twelve spies went in to scout out the Promised Land, they were impressed with its bounty. They were also awed by their inhabitants. The cities had great walls and the people were large and imposing. When the spies returned to report, only two, Caleb and Joshua gave an encouraging report. The other ten discouraged the people and the people grew afraid. Therefore God sent them back into the wilderness to wander for forty years until all the adults of that generation died out. Except for Caleb and Joshua. They lived to enter the Promised Land.

Joshua had been Moses' assistant. When Moses went up on Mt. Sinai to receive the law from God, Joshua went with him. The Bible even reports a time when Moses returned to the people after being in the presence of God. But the young man Joshua remained behind, apparently lost in the wonder of God's presence. God was using this apprenticeship to train Joshua for his time of leadership.

After the death of Moses and all that generation, God told Joshua to prepare the people to enter the land. This generation of people was eager to trust God to help them enter their new home. God encourages Joshua to be strong and courageous for the tasks set before him.

Under Joshua's leadership the Israelites conquered the nations of the land of Palestine, beginning with the city of Jericho. It is a process that would take a number of years, up to the end of Joshua's life. When the land had finally been conquered, the land was divided into twelve large parcels, one for each of the tribes of Israel. The people settled in the land having seen God's great power at work. Before Joshua sent the people to their allotted regions, he said, "Choose you this day whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." And the people replied, "We will serve the Lord." It is a promise they would keep - for a while.

Read – Joshua 1, 6

Day 11

Commentary –

One of the problems societies face is that the experiences of generations are different. The generation that knew Joshua, continued to serve God in the promised land. The next generation, however, had not seen the miracles of the Exodus. Nor had they fought to conquer the land. And their parents did not effectively pass on the fear of the Lord to them. The people became enamored with the gods of the nations around them. They forgot the Lord and began to worship idols. The book of Judges tells how the anger of the Lord rose up against them.

Interestingly the people had not conquered the entire land under Joshua. God said that he would let them conquer the land a little at a time, at a pace they could handle. This meant that on the outskirts of the land there were hostile nations still existing. When the people turned away from God, he allowed these nations to raid the Israelites and make their lives miserable.

There is a period of about four-hundred years when there is no central government in Israel. People were a law unto themselves. The Bible says that people did what was good in their own eyes. Often what they did displeased the Lord.

But when the Philistines would overrun the land, the people would cry out to God. God would then raise up a “judge” to deliver them. These judges were not as we think of judges. They were more like generals who rallied the people to fight behind them. Only after the land had a degree of peace, would the judges serve as moral arbiters for the people.

But the judges also have their problems. Some like Samson and Gideon, have tragic flaws. But their stories are engaging and they are each, in their own way, people of faith. God raised them up and worked through them at important moments to bring peace and deliverance to his struggling people.

Read – Judges 2, 16

Day 20

Commentary –

While the northern kingdom of Israel had terrible leadership, the southern kingdom of Judah fared better. It also had some bad kings. But it had a number of good kings as well. The names of Asa, Joash, Josiah, and Hezekiah are among the kings who did what was right in the sight of the Lord. They tore down the places of pagan worship. They judged the people rightly. They led the people back to the worship of the one true God.

We might think how foolish the kings were who did not follow God. But life’s pressures were no less on them than they are on us today. They must have felt tremendous pressures to continue pagan practices. There must have been large numbers of people engaged in them and many economic aspects to pagan worship. The kings advisors, on occasion, must have recommended keeping the pagan practices as a way to support a struggling economy. It must have taken great courage and faith for the good kings to stand up against prevailing trends and discontinue pagan practices.

One of the places where the faith of the kings and people was tested concerned national security. Israel was situated in the land that separated Egypt and Assyrian (and later Babylonia). These two great powers often vied for dominance over the other. The land that stood between them was Israel. For this reason, Israel was constantly facing threats to its existence. The kings had to decide what to do. Should they fight or seek favorable terms of surrender? Would God help them or was the nation on its own? Could God help them against overwhelming odds or had God forsaken them because of their sins?

King Hezekiah is one example of a king who trusted in God’s care. His army was outnumbered. His defenses were not sufficient. His people were at risk. But he understood that God was able to play a part in the outcome. Hezekiah’s prayers are examples of how God hears authentic petitions of people in need. They remind us to likewise bring our needs to God and not depend only on our own strength.

Read – II Kings 18,19

Day 19

Commentary –

The southern kingdom of Judah would have some good kings and some bad kings. The northern kingdom of Israel, however, would not have a single good king who kept the Lord's commandments. Each one did evil in God's sight, often worse than the king before them. Though God sent the prophets to warn them, the people did not listen. Their kings led them astray and they followed willingly along. Finally God had had enough.

In the year 722 B.C., God sent the Assyrians to overrun the northern kingdom. They conquered the country and took the surviving people captive. They scattered the people throughout their kingdom. They then brought in a new group of people to inhabit the land of Israel. This was part of the Assyrian military strategy to keep nations from rebelling against them. They removed the entire population and brought in people loyal to the Assyrian nation.

The new inhabitants of Israel had little interest in the God of Israel. However they discovered that terrible things were happening to them in the land. It soon became clear that God was against them because of the idols they worshipped. So the Assyrian king sent a priest of Israel to instruct them on how to properly worship the Lord. So they began to worship God, for their own safety. But they did not give up the customs they had grown up with. They continued to sacrifice to idols and practice pagan religion.

They would eventually intermarry with the Jews of the southern kingdom and become racially mixed with them. In the following centuries, the people of the northern kingdoms, whose capital was Samaria, would also be of mixed mind. They would call themselves Israelites when it was to their political advantage. They would, in turn, distance themselves from Israel when it was expedient to do so.

No wonder then that the Jews in the New Testament times looked down on the Samaritans. They were not racially pure Israelites. Nor were their religious practices consistent. But Jesus would invite them too, like the entire world, to find their way back to God through him.

Read – II Kings 17

Day 12

Commentary –

The prophet Samuel is a transitional figure. He is the last of the judges and the first of the prophets. The prophets of Israel are a unique historical phenomenon. They come on the scene for about 700 years then for the most part disappear. They are unique in that they hear the word of God directly. God speaks to them and they are able to say with authority, "Thus says the Lord." The first great prophet is Samuel.

The account of Samuel's birth is one of the most poignant in the Bible. His mother Hannah is barren and constantly badgered by her husband's other wife. She vows to the Lord that if she bears a son, she will give him to the Lord for service all his days. She does indeed bear a son and fulfills her vow. Samuel is raised by Eli the priest in the place where the Ark is residing. When Samuel is a young man God calls Samuel to be a prophet and bring his words to Israel.

Samuel comes to the nation of Israel in a time of great chaos. There is disarray in the cultural fabric. The worship of the people is disorganized. Samuel is a source of great encouragement to the people. But Samuel's presence is not enough. The people are tired of their societal anarchy. They come to Samuel and ask him to anoint a king for them. Samuel is not pleased. He sees this request as another example of their refusing to trust in God alone. But God instructs Samuel to do as they request, anoint as king a person God will show him. But Samuel also warns the people that having a king will often create more difficulties for them than it will solve.

Much of Samuel's ministry will be spent dealing with Israel's first king Saul. Saul is a tragic figure who has great promise, but whose heart is like that of his people, only partly committed to God.

Read— I Samuel 1, 3, 5

Day 13

Commentary –

The first king of Israel was Saul. Saul was an imposing figure of a man, standing head and shoulders above everyone else. He had all the makings of a great leader. His only problem was his heart. He could never find it in his heart to serve God fully. He was distracted by his own needs, by the pressures around him, and ultimately the paranoia a position of power creates. In the end, because of his disobedience, God rejected Saul as king.

While Samuel was mourning for Saul and his failures, God said to him, “Why do you continue to mourn? Get up! I have found me a man after my own heart who will do all my will.” God sent Samuel to the family of Jesse to anoint one of his sons as the next king. The story of David’s anointing is a moving story. Jesse’s sons parade before the prophet Samuel. They are tall, handsome, and stately. But as each one passes by, God says to Samuel, “Not this one.” Samuel says to Jesse, “Do you have any other sons?” Jesse replies that there is one more out keeping the sheep, “But he is only a young man.” Samuel instructs him to be sent for. When David arrives, God says to Samuel, “This is the one. Anoint him.” From that moment the Spirit of God comes on David and he is empowered both for acts of courage and with a heart for God.

The most famous story about David is his slaying of Goliath. David is willing to face the giant, knowing God is with him, and trusting God to see him through. The results are a significant victory for the Israelites and a memorable story about the power of God. David’s life will be one lived in God’s power and grace. David will serve God with all his heart. One evidence is the psalms David will write. David was a poet at heart. He was also a prophet able to hear God’s voice in a special way. The psalms were used in the worship of the people at the temple. David revived people’s faith in God and renewed the nation to follow their God.

David is not perfect. He will have several notable failures. He will commit adultery with Bathsheba. He will order a census of the people and provoke God’s anger. And his parenting skills are notably lacking. But in the end, he will never turn away from God. God will promise that one of David’s sons will sit on the throne of Israel forever. That promise will finally be fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ, from the line of David, to be the Savior of Israel and the entire world.

Read— I Samuel 16, 17

Day 18

Commentary –

Some of the Old Testament prophets are known to us primarily through their writings. This is true of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Minor Prophets. Some prophets seem to have left few or no written works. Yet they are known to us by their actions. Such is the case with Elijah and Elisha his successor.

When Elijah ascends to heaven, Elisha asks for a double portion of Elijah’s spirit. Elijah acknowledges that Elisha has asked for a “hard thing”, that is, a difficult prayer to answer. Yet Elisha receives what he asks for and will exhibit great prophetic powers. Elisha’s recorded miracles are exactly twice the number performed by his mentor Elijah. His mighty works help the people in their need and give them evidence that God has not forsaken his people.

There is one miracle of Elisha, however, that is disturbing. On one occasion, a group of small boys made fun of Elisha’s bald head. He turned and cursed them. Immediately two bears came out of the woods and attacked the boys, mauling forty-two of them. We wonder that Elisha, being as close to God as he was, might not have been a little more forgiving of the boys’ impudence.

This story served to remind people in Old Testament times that the prophets were not to be trifled with. They were men of God and not to be taken lightly. Their words had power. One should measure one’s words when one was near a prophet of God.

It is no wonder then that two of Jesus’ disciples, James and John, the Sons of Thunder should want to do likewise. They wanted to call fire down from heaven to destroy those who rejected Christ’s words. But Jesus rebuked them. He said, “You do not understand who you now represent.” Jesus did not come to destroy, but to save through the power of sacrificing love.

Read – II Kings 2, 4

Day 17

Commentary –

The phenomenon of the prophets is uniquely Hebrew. Nothing else in world history is quite like them. They are a group of people who stand against the culture in which they are living. They call it to task for its failures and inadequacies. At the heart of their message is the call to return to the living God.

One of the great Hebrew prophets is Elijah. He stands out because of his great deeds and because of the opponents he faces. The word of God comes to Elijah in the days of Ahab the king of Israel (the northern kingdom). Ahab is a terrible king. It says of Ahab that, “he did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all (the kings) who were before him.” Things grow worse when Ahab marries a foreign wife named Jezebel. She persuades Ahab to worship the god Baal and the people of Israel follow along. Ahab leads the people astray and continues to provoke God’s anger.

Elijah pronounces God’s judgment on Ahab by predicting the coming of a drought. The drought effects the land profoundly and there is great suffering. Finally there is a great showdown between Ahab and the “prophets” of Baal. God’s power validates Elijah and the prophets of Baal are destroyed. It is a great victory for the honor of God and Elijah.

But Elijah’s euphoria is short-lived. Jezebel the queen is furious. She promises to pursue Elijah’s life until he is dead. So Elijah flees to the mountains, discouraged by the people’s continued disobedience. But God takes care of Elijah. He meets Elijah on the mountain and speaks to him in a still small voice.

Elijah is the prototypical prophet in many ways. He is courageous and brave. He is not afraid of what others think. He stands up for God in the face of great opposition. He also seems a little rough around the edges. We are going to hear Elijah’s name again in the Bible, because the prophets will later speak of someone with Elijah’s spirit coming later. That person will be John the Baptist, who will have the rough-hewn look of Elijah and his undaunted spirit.

Read – I Kings 18, 19

Day 14

Commentary –

One evidence of David’s heart for God was his desire to build God a permanent sanctuary. At this point the people worshiped God in the tabernacle built by Moses at Mt. Sinai. It was a portable house of worship that could be moved from place to place. But once the people became settled in the land of Israel, a permanent sanctuary was needed. After David had built himself a palace, it dawned on him that it was inappropriate that God’s house should be a tent while he lived in a great palace.

The desire of David’s heart pleased the Lord. But God would not let David build the house, because he had been a man of war and shed much blood. Instead God promised that David’s son would build the house. The temple that Solomon built would become the great symbol of Israel’s faith in God. David would make great preparations before his death, gathering wood and precious metals for the work. Solomon would build the temple with only the finest materials and the best craftsmanship. It would be a marvel to behold. The temple would give the people a central place to worship God and to gather for the sacred festivals.

At later points in Israel’s history, the people would rely on the temple too much. In Jeremiah’s time, for example, they would not be able to believe that God might come in judgment on their sins and destroy the city. They believed God would not allow his own temple to be destroyed. So they continued to sin. The Babylonians would eventually come and destroy the temple. It would be rebuilt under the direction of Ezra and others, but not equal the glory of the first temple in craftsmanship and grandeur. King Herod (37 B.C. – 4 A.D.) would enlarge and rebuild the temple back to a work a great splendor. It would again be destroyed by the Roman general Titus in 70 A.D.

The most important promise to David comes in this section when God promises David that his house and kingdom will endure forever before God. This is a promise that comes to fruition in the coming of Christ, to reign as our Lord and Savior forever.

Read — II Samuel 7

Day 15

Commentary –

The Bible is full of evidences of God's forgiveness. The son that is born from David's adulterous affair with Bathsheba dies. David repents of his sin and God forgives him. One evidence of that forgiveness is that David and Bathsheba have another child, a son. It is this child, Solomon, whom God chooses to succeed David as king.

Solomon becomes king when he is still a young man. The task of ruling such a great people must have seemed overwhelming. One night the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream. The Lord asked Solomon to ask what he wished. Solomon might have asked for many things. He asked for, "an understanding mind to govern the people." God was pleased that Solomon did not ask selfishly. God promised to give him a "wise and discerning mind." In fact God said that there would be no one so wise, either before or after him. God also promised Solomon what he did not ask for, riches and honor beyond comparison.

The first half of the book of First Kings is the story of the life of Solomon. His life indeed lived up to all God's promises about him. His wisdom became legendary. He completes the work of building the temple. His wealth is like no one in that region had ever seen. He rules the nation with justice and dignity.

One evidence of the wisdom of Solomon is the book of Proverbs. There are thirty-one chapters in the book of Proverbs. Most of these proverbs are attributed to Solomon. The book begins as a set of instructions from a father to a son. They are instructions to help a young person avoid the ways of evil and walk the paths of righteousness.

Many of the proverbs are short pithy statements about the two different ways of living, the way of wisdom and the way of foolishness. The book of proverbs does not divide into neat sections. It is assorted proverbs about practical living. But book of proverbs contains great wisdom about how to live. It is wisdom that cannot be mastered in a few days. It is the wisdom of a lifetime designed to help with the living of a full and meaningful life.

Read – I Kings 3, Proverbs 1

Day 16

Commentary –

Solomon should have followed his own advice. He started his life of faith well. He loved the Lord and walked in his ways. But something happened along the way. Toward the end of Solomon's life, his heart became divided. He began to worship others gods. And the Lord became displeased with Solomon's life.

We do not know exactly what happened to Solomon. It seems to have been a slow distancing of himself from God. It began by his disobedience in small things. For example, the scriptures had warned that kings were not to "multiply wives" to themselves or marry outside the nation of Israel. Solomon did both to excess. He had 700 wives, many through alliances with surrounding kingdoms. In the end, when Solomon was old, his foreign wives persuaded him to worship the gods of their upbringing. They drew Solomon's heart away from God to worship idols.

God had sworn to be with Solomon if he would walk in God's commands. When Solomon forsook God, however, God's anger burned against him. He promised to tear the kingdom from Solomon's family line after his death. This happened to Solomon's son Rehoboam. The nation split from him. The ten tribes who lived in the north of Israel split off to form their own nation. The name of this nation became Israel. Only the tribe of Judah and part of the tribe of Benjamin reminded loyal to Solomon's son Rehoboam. They formed the southern kingdom and took the name Judah. This would begin a period of animosity between the two kingdoms. At some times they would work together against a common enemy. At other times they would be at war with one another. There would grow up an intense rivalry between the two nations.

The southern kingdom of Judah had one thing in its favor. It still held the city of Jerusalem. It still had the great temple. When the people came to the annual festivals, they came back to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was also strategically located and heavily fortified. It would enable the southern kingdom to survive longer in what would become an increasingly hostile region.

Read – I Kings 11, 12