

Bible Reading Guide

by Todd Bolen

One of my sons is going to try to read through the Bible this summer. I thought that it might help him if I made a “Bible reading guide” that would make sure he paid attention to important matters and grasped the main points. I’m writing this at a basic (6th-grade) level, but on the chance that it might be helpful to others, I’m posting it on the blog.

Before you read mine, you might think for a minute about Genesis and what you consider to be important. What would you tell a 6th grader or someone reading the Bible from cover to cover the first time?

Genesis

God makes a good world, including a good man and woman. They rebel against God and the rest of the Bible records God’s efforts to restore fellowship.

Pay careful attention to God’s promises to Abraham in chapters 12, 15, and 17. Much of the rest of the Bible assumes that you understand and appreciate these.

The patriarchs aren’t perfect, but God is always faithful to them. In some ways they are models for us today, but in many ways they aren’t.

Notice how God saves the Israelites by using Joseph in Egypt. If Joseph was not in Egypt, the Israelites may have died (from famine) or become Canaanites (by intermarriage).

Genesis explains how Israel came to Egypt, thus setting the stage for why the Israelites are slaves in the book of Exodus.

Exodus

Notice how everything changes from the beginning of the book to the end. At the beginning, the Israelites are **slaves**; at the end, they are **free people**. At the beginning they get **no rest** from their work; at the end they get a day of rest (**Shabbat**) every week. At the beginning they **do not know God**; at the end the **Lord lives in the middle** of their camp.

The ten plagues and the Red Sea are important because they show how God delivered his children. If Pharaoh had just let the Israelites go, they would not have needed God, and God would not have received glory. This way, God actually “saved” Israel from Egypt.

Pay close attention to **chapter 19** where God and the Israelites make a covenant. This means that they each agree to do certain things. God promises to protect and provide for his people. The Israelites agree to obey his commands.

Chapters 20-24 form the essence of **the covenant**. They begin, appropriately, with the ten commandments.

Chapter 25-40 is about building the **tabernacle**. In 25-31, God gives instructions. In 35-40, the Israelites follow the instructions (which is why it sounds repetitive). In the middle (32-34), Israel makes a **big mistake**, but don't miss some of the most important verses in the Bible when **God reveals himself** to Moses (34:6-7).

Leviticus

The book's name means "for the Levites," but most of the book is actually for the Israelites.

The heart of the book is this: now that God is living in the center of camp in the tabernacle, how should the Israelites live? The short answer is: be holy, as I am holy. How do you do that? That's what this book is about. This includes how one can come close to God (sacrifices) as well as what one should eat, wear, and celebrate.

Numbers

This book gets its name because of the counting at the beginning and near the end. The Israelites are numbered in a census in chapter 1 and then (after 40 years in the wilderness) again in chapter 26.

The first ten chapters describe how the Israelites get ready to leave Mount Sinai.

Chapters 11-14 describe why the Israelites are going to live and die in the wilderness for 40 years.

Lots of people sin in chapters 14-21, including Moses! By chapter 20, the 40 years in the wilderness are almost over.

The story with Balaam and his donkey is funny, but what is most important are his prophecies in chapter 24 about a king. This is one of the first prophecies about the Messiah!

Deuteronomy

This book might be called the "heart" of the Old Testament, because it teaches so much of what God cares for. Some of the laws may seem boring, but many of them sound very much like the principles in the New Testament.

Chapters 1-4 is a review of the good things God did in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.

Chapter 5 will sound familiar because it repeats the Ten Commandments.

Three of my favorite chapters in the Old Testament are Deuteronomy 6, 8, and 10.

I thought about writing my dissertation related to chapter 12. You might not understand why, but it is very important that God only allows people to sacrifice to him at one place.

God gives rules for some jobs that are going to be important later in the Bible, especially rules for kings (ch. 17) and prophets (ch. 18).

Chapter 28 explains a lot of what happens in the books of Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, and 1-2 Chronicles. If only the Israelites had obeyed what God said here!

Chapters 29-30 predict that Israel will sin and because of that they will go into exile. But God will bring them back from exile. This is an amazing prediction long before it ever happened. God knows the future! More than that, he has planned it all out.

Joshua

The main point of this book is to show how Israel finally took possession of the Promised Land. They had been waiting ever since God promised it to Abraham. Then they were stuck in Egypt. Then they were traveling in the wilderness. Finally, they arrive!

Notice in the battles that the Israelites hardly do any fighting at all. God fights for them!

Chapters 13-21 may seem boring to you, but they were very important to the people who were being given a special piece of land by God. Imagine as you read that you're at the reading of a will and you're eagerly waiting to hear what you will inherit.

Chapter 24 is important to understand before you start Judges. Joshua warns the people that if they don't obey God, they're going to get in trouble.

Judges

The main point of this book is that the **Israelites keep sinning**. God keeps saving, but then they sin again. There are no real heroes in this book; everyone is pretty wretched, though some are worse than others.

Pay attention to **chapter 1** because this explains one of the reasons the Israelites kept sinning: they didn't get rid of the Canaanites and so they were always a temptation to them.

Note that **chapter 2** describes the cycle of the book: the people sin, God makes them suffer by sending an oppressor, the people cry out for help, God saves them. This cycle repeats itself throughout the book.

The main point in the story of **Gideon** is that the Israelites could not brag that they won (note 7:2).

Samson was a very naughty boy. But God still accomplished what he wanted through him.

At the end of the book there is a refrain repeated several times that "In those days **Israel had no king**; everyone did as he saw fit." One of the purposes of the book is to express the need for a godly king who will lead the people to do what is pleasing to God. Will Saul or David solve the people's problem? We'll find out in 1-2 Samuel.

Ruth

This short story shows how **Ruth** was selfless and worshipped the true God even though she was from Moab.

Boaz is a hero of the story because he marries Ruth even though it may have cost him.

The last verses of the book have a special ending: the baby that God gives to Ruth and Boaz becomes the grandfather of **David**. In other words, without Ruth and Boaz, there would be no David!

1 Samuel

The book starts off with stories about Samuel. This is important because it proves that **Samuel is speaking for God** (he is a prophet). Therefore, when he anoints Saul king, we know that is what God wants. When he rejects Saul and anoints David instead, we know that that is what God wants.

This book has a lot of interesting stories, but the main point is that Saul is not a good king and God **has chosen David instead**. Saul sins and so God rejects him. David proves that he will be a good king by doing things like killing Goliath, not killing Saul, and saving the Israelites in Keilah.

Jonathan is a hero of the story because he serves David (and helps him to survive) even though he knew that David was going to be the next king instead of him.

2 Samuel

The most important part of this book is chapter 7 because here **God promises David** that his descendants (son, grandson, etc.) will always be the king. This is important because this did not happen with Saul; God rejected him and Jonathan never became king. It is even more important because of the promise that one of David's sons would rule *forever*. This is talking about the **Messiah**.

The first half of the book is mostly positive stories about David. After his sin with Bathsheba (ch. 11), the rest of the book is mostly the **negative results in his life**. There are several lessons in this. One is that even though God forgives the repentant sinner, there may be lifelong (and devastating) consequences. Another is that even though David sinned, God did not take his promises away. The book ends with a story that prepares you for 1 Kings: the choosing of the place where the temple would be. Thus in 1-2 Samuel, **God chooses** an everlasting dynasty (David), his everlasting capital (Jerusalem), and the place of his own house (the temple).

1 Kings

This book tells about what happened after David died. It's mostly a sad story, because most of the kings disobey God. When the kings disobey, most of the people disobey. That means that God is going to punish them.

Pay attention to chapter 11, because this explains that because Solomon was wicked, the Lord divided his kingdom into two parts. The rest of this book and 2 Kings bounce back and forth between the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern kingdom (Judah).

A couple of kings of Israel are especially wicked and God takes extra steps to stop them from their idolatry. The first is Jeroboam; his sin is described in chapter 12 and God's "extra steps" are in chapters 13-14. The second is Ahab. Because he leads the nation to worship Baal, God sends Elijah to bring a drought on the land and then later to have a big contest with the prophets of Baal. Of course, God wins.

The rest of the book is mostly about how Ahab was such a wicked king.

2 Kings

On the one hand, this book tells many stories about disobedient kings. On the other hand, think about how patient God is that he didn't kill them earlier and cause Israel and Judah to be destroyed.

Notice how the northern kingdom is destroyed in chapter 17. The ten tribes are carried into exile and they never come back. This chapter explains why and it is one of the most important chapters in the book.

The two best kings are Hezekiah (chs. 18-20) and Josiah (chs. 22-23). The two most wicked kings are Ahaz (the father of Hezekiah) and Manasseh (the son of Hezekiah).

The end of the book is very important. God destroys Jerusalem and the people are sent into exile. This is just what God had predicted in Deuteronomy 29! It was also predicted by many prophets, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, but you haven't made it to them yet. Just remember that the Old Testament does not go in chronological order, and when you read the prophets, you have to put them back into place in the history that you are reading now. Most of them fit somewhere in the story in 2 Kings.

1 Chronicles

This book takes you all the way back to the beginning, all the way to Adam! The first nine chapters are rather boring genealogies, but they were important if you needed to know who your family was! Why would this matter? Well, you couldn't serve in the temple as a priest if you weren't a Levite. How did you know if you were a Levite? You checked these lists.

The rest of the book is about David, but the focus is different than 1-2 Samuel. In Chronicles, most of the attention is on how David got things ready for the temple, including moving the ark to Jerusalem (chs. 13, 15), identified the location of the temple (ch. 21), and appointed lots of people to serve in the temple (chs. 23-26).

It's also interesting what 1 Chronicles skips: nearly the entire reign of Saul and most of the sins of David.

2 Chronicles

2 Chronicles is a lot like 1-2 Kings, but there is one very big difference: the writer ignores all of the northern kings. They don't matter because they were carried off into exile and they didn't come back. The ones who matter are those in Judah who were taken to exile in Babylon but they returned. So the story is mostly about them.

Notice how often in this book a king does something good and God blesses him. Or a king does something bad, and God punishes him. Again and again!

Some kings start off good, but then they turn against God, like Asa and Joash.

2 Chronicles (ch. 33) tells us something very different about Manasseh that we didn't learn in 2 Kings. See what this is!

Ezra

Ezra continues the history of 2 Chronicles, as you can see from the fact that the beginning of the book is the same as the end of 2 Chronicles. Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book, and they tell the story of what happened to the exiles when they came back to the land of Israel after 70 years or more living in exile in Babylon.

It is important to note that there are **three separate returns** from Babylon to Israel. The first is described in Ezra 1-6 and it is led by Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest. The second takes place about 60 years later and is led by Ezra himself (chapters 7-10).

Notice the **problems** that the returning Jews face. First, they have **external opposition** from those who live around them and don't want them to build Jerusalem or the temple (especially chapter 4). Second, they have internal difficulties because some of the men are **marrying foreign wives**. This is the same sin that Solomon was guilty of that caused him to commit idolatry. Ezra tears his clothes because he fears that this intermarriage can eventually cause the Israelites to become like "Canaanites." This would be a great irony, for though the people were preserved from assimilation outside of Israel, they may become assimilated inside the land of Israel. If they are assimilated, that means there is no more Israel, no more people of God, and no fulfillment to God's promises, including a Messiah who will save the people from their sins.

Nehemiah

The third return from exile occurs thirteen years after Ezra the priest comes back. While Ezra was mostly concerned with the purity of the community, Nehemiah is focused on **rebuilding the walls** of Jerusalem. The walls matter not only because they protect the city, but they also define it and allow God's people to separate from the Gentile peoples who worship idols.

Pay attention to the **big celebration** in chapter 8. This is really the high point of the book of Ezra-Nehemiah. Notice how the center of activity is the Law of Moses. The people realize that if they are going to succeed as a people, they have to understand what God requires of them.

Unfortunately, the book ends on a **sad note** (ch. 13), as it shows that the people are still failing to obey. This sets the stage for all the years that follow (which are not recorded in the Bible), in which the Jews struggle to keep God's law. By the time that Jesus comes, most people are not obedient, as is clear from the call of John the Baptist that they need to repent.

Esther

One of the unique things about this book is that it takes place entirely outside of Israel. An even stranger thing is that it **never mentions** the name of God! This is not an accident, and it helps us to understand what the author wanted to communicate. In short, the story of Esther teaches that God takes care of his people even when he doesn't do obvious "miracles," and even if his people are not faithful to him. The book of Esther is really the story of the Jewish people for the last 2,500 years: even though they have not been obedient to his word, **God still protects them** and he will certainly fulfill all of the promises that he has made to them.

What are those promises? These are the ones he made to Abraham in Genesis 12, 15, 17 and to David in 2 Samuel 7. And they are the ones that were given through the prophets in the books you will be reading soon. **God has promised** to save his people, bring them back to live in the land of Israel, and to bless them beyond their wildest dreams. God has still not fulfilled those promises, but it is getting close to the time when he will. I wonder how many times God has protected the Jewish people like the way he did in this book.

Job

Job is a tough book. The beginning (chapters 1-2) and the end (chapter 42) are easy to understand, but it's everything in the middle that can be difficult to follow. On top of that, at the end of the book, God condemns Job's three friends for their advice. Even Job repents.

So how can you read this book? I would suggest three things. First, all of the conversation should be increasing your anticipation for what God is going to say (chapters 38-41). Second, because we have the beginning and the end of the story, we know that the main thing Job's friends are saying is wrong. It is not true that suffering is always caused by sin. Third, recognize that though Job's friends think they know what is going on, they do not. The reason for this is that they weren't in heaven when God and Satan had their conversation. Thus man's knowledge is dependent upon God revealing it. Without revelation (Scripture), man cannot understand God, the world, or life. Two key chapters that help to explain this are 26 and 28.

Psalms

The book of Psalms is different than most of the other books of the Bible because there is **not an apparent “story”** from beginning to the end. When you get older, I’ll let you read a paper I wrote a few months ago that explains what I think is the basic “structure” of the five books, but for now, you can profitably read each psalm on its own.

It helps to know that there are **different groups of psalms**. Nearly all (if not all) of Book 1 (1-41) was written by David. Another group is the Psalms of Ascent (120-134). The first two psalms are probably an introduction to the whole book, and the last five psalms (146-150) are probably the grand conclusion (with an emphasis on praising God).

There are other groups of psalms that aren’t necessarily in order. One type of psalm is called a **lament psalm**, and these express feelings of great distress, yet they always (except for 88) end with a declaration of confidence in God. Another type is **praise psalms**, and these focus on how great God is. Some psalms are more about thanking God, and these are sometimes called **“thanksgiving” psalms**. There are three psalms that exalt **God’s word** (1, 19, 119), and a cluster of psalms that declare that **God is king** over the whole earth (93, 95-99).

An important group of psalms anticipate the Messiah. These are sometimes difficult to discern at first, but one clue is that they describe the person or king in terms that are not true of David or any of his descendants (except Jesus). These psalms were considered very important by Jesus and the apostles, and you will see them quoted many times in the New Testament. These include psalms 2, 16, 22, 45, 72, 89, 110, and 132.

A very important thing to pay attention to in this book is what the psalms teach us about God. They are very rich in theology, and we may know more about the character of God from this book than from any other in the Old Testament.

Proverbs

This book is another one that does not seem to have “an order.” There are **two parts** to the book, and it is good to pay attention to this. The first part, chapters 1-9, is really an introduction to the whole book, and it explains the **value of wisdom**. One of the ways it does this is to contrast it with other things that are not valuable and can actually destroy you (like a bad girl). I think this part of the book is very important and you should read it more slowly.

The second half of the book (10-31) is much **more difficult to read**. It’s easier if you go slowly and take a chapter a day or less. Some of them require thinking (meditation) for a while. As you read it through this time quickly, notice the main categories that are addressed. There are wise ways to talk, and there are foolish ways. There are wise ways to work, and there are foolish ways. Some proverbs talk about being a child and others about being a parent. Some talk about how important it is to have a good wife, and others explain that money is not as good as the world thinks it is. Perhaps when you’re reading it

through this time, you can keep in mind that you need to come back and re-read this book and study it more in the future.

Ecclesiastes

This can be a tough book to navigate, particularly because it seems to say so many things that contradict the rest of the Bible. The best way to understand it as the **honest reflections of a great king who learned that all that the world values ultimately isn't worth anything**. What does matter? Throughout the book you see glimpses of the truth: fear God, trust God, enjoy your life, and know that God will judge you for what you do. Pay attention to the conclusion of the book, as this gives the "answer" to the long search.

Song of Songs

This book reads like a series of love poems between a man and a woman. For that reason, some people have said that it doesn't belong in the Bible. But often what others say is not that it doesn't belong, but rather that it has a "deeper meaning." I disagree. I think that the purpose of the book is **to celebrate the beauty of love** between one man and one woman committed to each other for life in marriage. God gave sex as a wedding present to his children, and this book expresses delight in that.

I think that the poems in the book **tell a story**. At the beginning, the lovers are praising each other (ch. 1) and longing for each other (ch. 2). Then the woman is searching for her lover before she sees him coming up for the wedding (ch. 3). After the honeymoon (ch. 4), the couple has a little problem which sends the woman out searching for her husband (ch. 5). She finds him and then he describes her a couple of times (chs. 6-7). The book ends with an expression of commitment to each other.

One key phrase in the book that is repeated is "do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires." That's a warning that the kind of love described in this book is designed by God **only for married people**.

Isaiah

Isaiah is not only a long book, it's a difficult book. But, as you know, it's also one of my favorite books. How do you make sense of it? As you're reading, see if you can figure out which of these main themes Isaiah is discussing:

1. **Judgment and exile** – the people are guilty for their sin and thus they are going to be punished by being removed from the land of Israel. This is more frequent in chapters 1-12.
2. **Hope and the Messiah** – God isn't just going to take his people out of the land, he is also going to bring them back. He is also going to give them a new king, and unlike the rest of Israel's kings, this one will be righteous and kind. This king is described briefly in various places and especially in chapters 7-11. Beginning in chapter 42, this same figure is called the "servant" (though not all references to a "servant" are to this same person).

3. **The nations** – while this may seem boring, this is a very important part of the book. God uses other nations to punish Israel, but he is always in control of all the nations (chs. 13-23). Israel is often tempted to trust the nations *instead of* God, and he hates that (chs. 28-35).

4. **God** – this book gives some of the best descriptions of who God is. Chapter 40, which I taught in Sunday School yesterday [at the time of writing], is an extraordinary section on the character and abilities of God.

5. **The Servant** – I mentioned him above under “Messiah,” but I must come back and encourage you to pay special attention to 52:13-53:12. This is the fourth song about the servant (also in chs. 42, 49, 50), and this climax tells how the servant would die for the sins of his people. This is one of the best passages about Jesus, and it’s not even in the New Testament!

6. **Faith** – the primary question that runs throughout the book is this: will you trust God?

Jeremiah

Jeremiah is sometimes called the “weeping prophet” because of his statement that his eyes were a fountain of tears (9:1). That is somewhat of an appropriate title because nearly all of Jeremiah’s message is negative. He spoke just before the Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians (in 586) and the people were carried off into exile. Jeremiah’s main message was: you are wicked and you deserve God’s judgment. To us today, it gets a bit weary reading lots of negative things over and over again. But repetition was important because the consequences of disobeying were (and still are) severe.

Your head should pop up when you get to chapter 30. The next four chapters (30-33) really stand apart in the book because they are long messages of hope. And it’s not flimsy hope either. These are some of the richest passages of hope, particularly when you realize that Jeremiah was giving them to a people about to be carried away to Babylon. But God made some promises to his people and he intends to keep them. One of the most remarkable ones is that he will make a New Covenant with his people. This New Covenant will be different from the Old Covenant because it will cause the person’s heart to be changed so that he fully obeys God’s word. This means that the people will never be carried into exile again because they won’t disobey.

Lamentations

Tradition says that Jeremiah wrote this book after he saw the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. It is a series of five lament poems, each of the first four written as an acrostic (each letter beginning with the next letter in the alphabet). Most of this book is a sad memory of what happened, but pay attention to the few verses that give hope for the future. Notice what the basis of this hope is—the very character of God himself.

Ezekiel

Most of the prophets that you're now diving into have two basic messages: judgment and hope. The people deserve **judgment** because of their sin, but they have **hope** because God has made promises to Israel and God always keeps his promises. Ezekiel is like the other prophets this way, but his book is pretty neatly divided into a judgment half (chs. 1-24) and a hope half (chs. 33-48). In the middle there are **oracles against the nations** (chs. 25-32). Those oracles against the nations are good for Israel, because when God punishes Israel's enemies, then Israel can prosper.

Some of the stories in the first half of the book are entertaining (and a few are gross), but I really like the second half of the book where Ezekiel describes for a long time **just how great** things will be one day. Ezekiel tells us more about this than Jeremiah does, because Ezekiel wrote this part **after Jerusalem was destroyed**. Thus he didn't have to worry about confusing his readers and making them think things were going to be good when they really weren't. But now that Jerusalem has fallen (ch. 33), Ezekiel can describe at length how God is going to **put all of the pieces back together**. That includes not only changing the hearts of the people, but it means that God will defend the nation against the enemies (chs. 38-39) and build them a new temple where he will come and live (chs. 40-45). Things will be so different in that day that even the Dead Sea will be fresh water and have fish in it!

Daniel

A lot of Daniel will be familiar, and thus easy, for you. But parts of it are tough. Let me try to help you make sense of everything. Those stories that you already know in chapters 1-6 are more than just entertainment for kids. They make a **very important point**: God will protect his people even when they are in exile. This is even more important when you understand the rest of the book.

The rest of the book (chs. 2 and 7-12) says this: you (Israel) are going to be in exile for a long time. It doesn't tell us exactly how long, but it says that there are going to be **four kingdoms** (four parts of the statue in ch. 2 and four beasts in ch. 7). Only when the fourth kingdom arrives does God's kingdom come and smash the kingdoms of earth.

The most important chapter of the book is **chapter 7**, because this is the "big picture" that makes sense of the rest of the prophecies. The two animals in chapter 8 are kingdoms #2 and #3 from chapter 7. The war described in chapter 11 is during the time of kingdom #3 and then at the end (v. 36) it jumps to #4 (and the key for this is given in chapter 7). A lot of this is too much to take in when you're reading quickly through the Bible, but one day you'll want to come back and try to "crack the case." It's a lot of fun; perhaps you remember a few weeks ago when I seemed **really happy**. That was the week I was studying Daniel.

Hosea

I know you're going to be flying through these small books now, so I'll keep my comments briefer. The key to understanding Hosea is to recognize that the story of Hosea and his unfaithful wife Gomer is a picture of God and his unfaithful wife Israel. God always did good for his people, but again and again

they turned away. If a lot of this book seems difficult and hard to understand, don't be discouraged; it's a tough one.

Joel

Joel describes a recent locust plague that devastated the land (ch. 1). This made the people sad. But Joel said: watch out, the "day of the Lord" is going to be like a locust plague, but worse. What happens on the "day of the Lord"? First, God defeats and judges all of his enemies. Since you don't want to face God's wrath, now is the time to repent. Second, God will deliver his people and establish his kingdom for them.

Amos

Amos was mostly upset with how people in the northern kingdom were treating each other. The rich were nasty to the poor, and Amos said that they would suffer for it. Some of them thought that they could offer sacrifices (their equivalent of our "going to church") and be ok with God. Amos told them they were wrong. Still, even with all of Amos's warnings about judgments, he ends his book with a very amazing promise of God's blessing for the future.

Obadiah

Why does Edom get a whole book devoted to its sin and destruction? First, because of all nations, they should have treated Israel better because they are "brother" countries (Jacob/Israel and Esau were brothers). Second, because in Scripture, Edom often stands for any nation that would hurt Israel (and thus stand against God's purposes).

Jonah

You already know this story. Keep in mind the difference between how compassionate God is for people (even cruel people from Nineveh) and how uncompassionate Jonah is. It's really a sad story in that regard. I think many Christians are like Jonah.

Micah

Micah is a normal prophet in that he gave good news and he gave bad news. The good news is in chapters 4, 5, and 7, and I like those parts best. You'll recognize 5:2 because it is the prophecy of Jesus' birth. I think it is important to observe that this prophecy is in the context of a Messiah who comes to rule the earth. Some people think that Jesus wasn't the Messiah because he didn't do this. Other people think that Jesus never planned to do this, but he only set up a "spiritual kingdom" inside people's hearts. I am convinced that he will rule the earth in the future. All of these prophecies weren't fulfilled when Jesus came because he had to die and the nation of Israel was not ready to be restored. God decided that one thing he would do is to create a new group of people (the "church") who would make Israel jealous so that they would want to come back to God. One day that will happen and then Jesus

will be King Jesus ruling in Jerusalem. A lot of the prophets (and the gospels, and the other books in the New Testament) say this, but for some reason I wrote it here about Micah!

Nahum

God sent Nahum to predict doom for the Assyrians. Doom for the Assyrians is good news for all those who have been oppressed by them. Thus this is bad news for all nations who would oppose God, and good news for those who trust and submit to him.

Habakkuk

This prophet had two questions. First, he asked God how he could allow the evil people in Judah to get away with their crimes. God answered that he would punish them by bringing Babylon to conquer them. That raised a second and even more difficult question in Habakkuk's mind: how could God use an even more wicked people to judge Judah? God doesn't give a direct answer to this question. The bottom line though is that we must trust God because even when we don't understand, we know he always does the things that are best for him and for us.

Zephaniah

This book is one of the least known in the whole Bible, I think. Most people can't remember anything about him. I think, however, that if I was teaching a class on the prophets, I might start with Zephaniah. The reason is that he's a very normal prophet but he is short. So by studying this book, you learn a lot about the main emphases of a prophet. One special emphasis of Zephaniah is on the Day of the Lord—the time in the future when God will judge his enemies and save his chosen ones.

Haggai

All of the prophets you've been reading so far were written before Israel and Judah were carried into captivity or while they were still in exile. But the last three prophets were all written after the people came back to the land from Babylon. The historical context of each of these books is thus important. Haggai is short and has a simple message: **get to work building the temple!** You may remember that he and Zechariah were both mentioned in Ezra 5 and 6. Both of these prophets were trying to get the people to finish building the second temple. The main way that Haggai motivates them is by promising them, in chapter 2, that one day the temple, and the people, and the ruler are going to be so much better.

Zechariah

As I said, Zechariah also is telling the people to finish the temple. But he does this mainly by relating visions that he has seen and oracles that God has given him. Frankly, this book is hard to understand. **It may be the most difficult book in the whole Bible.** With only a few words, I don't think I can be all that helpful to you. But I'll try to summarize it this way: in chapters 1-6, the messages are all positive for

Judah—God is going to do good things for his people, including rebuilding the temple, cleansing them of their sin, and sending the Messiah. In chapters 7-8, he tells the people to be obedient so they will be blessed. The last six chapters are tough, but **keep your eyes open for verses that talk about the Messiah**. Many of these were already fulfilled in the New Testament and are quoted there, so you may recognize them. Finally, read chapter 14 slowly. This is such a very, very good chapter that talks about the future kingdom that God is going to establish. Hopefully Jesus will come soon and do all these things!

Malachi

Malachi tells us that the people who came back from exile and were living in and near Jerusalem quickly fell into some bad sins, including marrying foreign women (like in the book of Ezra), giving God crummy sacrifices, and cheating him by not paying the tithes. God is coming, he says, so watch out. If you're a cheater, you'll be consumed by the fire of his judgment. But if you trust him and live in obedience, he will reward you.

Pay special attention to two verses. 3:1 predicts the coming of a messenger before God. This turns out to be John the Baptist who came before Jesus. Then notice the phrase in 4:2 about the "sun of righteousness" who has "healing in his wings." The Bible has already described Jesus as a great light (Num 24; Isa 9), and the chief characteristic of the future David king is righteousness. Thus this is talking about Jesus, and of course when he came he healed many people. But the best is yet to come!

Congratulations on finishing the Old Testament! You have done a fantastic job and I am very proud of you!

Matthew

There are four books about Jesus, but they are not unnecessary. Each one presents not only different events in Jesus' life, but also a different picture of who Jesus is (and they are all true). Matthew shows how Jesus was the **long awaited king of Israel**. He was the descendant of David (ch. 1), who was born of a virgin (just like Isaiah predicted), who was heralded by the forerunner (predicted in Malachi and Isaiah), who resisted all sin, who came from Galilee (just like Isaiah said), and who said that the kingdom was coming.

Now **this kingdom coming part** can be tricky. Some people read backwards and say that because Jesus went up into heaven (at the end of the book), that Jesus only came to bring a kingdom in which Jesus "rules" in the hearts of people. That is utter nonsense. Jesus does rule in the hearts of his believers, but that has nothing to do with the kingdom that he said was coming. So the big question is: if Jesus said the kingdom was near, and he was talking about the glorious kingdom of righteousness and prosperity that all of the OT prophets predicted, **what happened?** Hold that thought.

In chapters 5-7, Jesus not only proved that he was the Messiah by virtue of his amazing and authoritative words, but he also made another point very clear: you don't just get into the kingdom by walking in the door. In fact, the requirements are (very) high. The Sermon on the Mount is about what God requires of those who will be in his kingdom.

In chapters 8-9, Jesus proves that he is the Messiah by doing all the works (miracles) that the Messiah was predicted to do. So by the time you get to chapter 12, everyone should be pretty well convinced that **Jesus really is the Messiah**. And if he is the Messiah, you had better listen to him and do what he says. But that's not what happens. The Pharisees, leaders of the people, say that, yes, Jesus can do amazing things, but he really comes from Satan. This is mind-blowing, and when Jesus hears it, he knows that the nation will not accept him as their king (Messiah). They don't want a righteous king; they want someone who will give them freedom to sin even more (that is, if they are free from the Romans, they can sin without restraint).

At this point, Jesus starts explaining to his disciples that **the kingdom is not going to come right away**. This is what the parables of chapter 13 are about. This is because many people don't accept him (parable of the sower). What that means is that there's going to be a period of time during which good people and bad people live together (this is *not* the kingdom), at the end of which, the judgment happens and the kingdom comes. Does that mean that the disciples should give up? No way—the kingdom is worth selling everything you have. Those who don't treasure the kingdom will be thrown into hell. The last parable (13:52) makes a crucial point: you have to understand Jesus' new teachings about the kingdom *together with* the old teachings (in the Old Testament). Unfortunately, many Christians today don't do this: they say that Jesus just scrapped everything about the kingdom from the OT and decided to have a spiritual kingdom instead.

Now this is long, I know. Maybe you can keep it and it will be helpful as you study the book in the future. But a few more quick things. Since Jesus knows that he is going to be rejected, he prepares the disciples for his crucifixion (chs. 16-20). Then he comes into Jerusalem and **he acts like he is the king!** There are no secrets at all this time—he wants everyone to know! He really makes the Jewish leaders mad, and this pushes them to do exactly what Jesus wanted—to crucify him on Passover. Throughout the story of the crucifixion, Matthew makes it clear that **Jesus is in control**—he knows when he is going to die and how he is going to die. He is the Suffering Servant who lays down his life for his sheep, just like Isaiah had predicted. And just like Jesus predicted, he rose from the grave after three days. Jesus' power is evident everywhere. He really is the king! Right now, he wants all of his disciples to go throughout the whole world and **tell the good news about him** so that they can be in his kingdom when he comes back. I wonder how God will use you to do this throughout your life.

Mark

What makes Mark's gospel different? First, it is shorter than the other Gospels. That means he doesn't include things like Jesus' birth and childhood. Second, Mark is action-packed, moving from one event to the next. Third, Mark doesn't have most of the long speeches of Jesus that Matthew records (like the Sermon on the Mount). Fourth, Mark spends six chapters (out of sixteen total) on the last week of

Jesus' life. He obviously thought it was very important. Finally, Mark seems to reflect the perspective of the apostle Peter. Mark may have written the book based on sermons he heard Peter preach and conversations that they had about Jesus. The main message of the book is: who is Jesus? Mark gives the answer in the first verse, but then for the rest of the book you get to watch as everyone else figures it out (or not).

Luke

While Luke tells the same basic story of the life of Jesus that Matthew and Mark do, he has some particular emphases. One is that Luke was a doctor, so he sometimes gives more details about medical issues and he doesn't say bad things about doctors like the other writers do. Another is that he is writing a two-part work and so some of the things he mentions are related to the "rest of the story" in Acts. A third emphasis of Luke is on people who were not as highly valued in the ancient world, including Samaritans, poor people, and women. He tells us more about the women in Jesus' life than the other Gospels do. He also emphasizes that how one uses money is an indicator of one's spiritual state. Luke also prepares the reader for how God is going to do a great work among the Gentiles in the Book of Acts.

John

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are similar in many ways, but the Gospel of John is quite different. It is the same Jesus, of course, but John knows those stories are well known to the churches and his readers, and so he chooses other stories. His main point: Jesus is God. In the first part of the book, John writes of many signs that Jesus did that pointed to his identity as the Son of God. Notice too that Jesus keeps saying, "My time has not yet come." But watch for when he says, "My time has come." Another unique thing of this book is the "Upper Room Discourse," where Jesus tells his disciples many important things the night before he died.

[The following was not in my original guide to my son, but is included here as a supplement to the rather thin entry above. It is taken from my recent "argument" of the book.]

The Gospel of John consists of two primary parts. The first half describes the signs that Jesus did which pointed to his true identity. Along the way, Jesus explained the meaning of these signs and revealed how he was the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures and festivals. The book turns with his decisive rejection by the Jewish leadership following the seventh sign.

The second half is thus concerned with the crucifixion, including Jesus' preparation of the disciples, his true testimony before the officials, the completion of his mission in his death, and his resurrection appearances to his disciples. The book begins with a prologue that prepares the reader for the unfolding of Jesus' ministry and it concludes with an epilogue which points to the future ministry of two of his disciples.

John is doing more than just recording a life of Jesus; he is reflecting on the identity and character of his Savior in order to present him as one fully worthy of complete faith. He

understands the stakes of the decision that his readers must make is nothing short of life and death.

Acts

Following the Gospels, this book answers the question, “What’s next?” Since Jesus has ascended into heaven, the apostles are to go from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. That’s what happens in this book. In chapters 1-7, they are in Jerusalem. Persecution pushes them out to Judea and Samaria (ch. 8-10). Finally, in chapter 13, the gospel starts to go to all the nations through the ministry of Paul.

One way to divide the book is to recognize that the first half (chs. 1-12) is mostly focused around the ministry of Peter. The second half (chs. 13-28) is centered around Paul. Paul takes three missionary journeys. Most of what he says and does is not recorded. Entire years are skipped over in a verse. But the main point that Luke makes is that nothing can stop the gospel from spreading to the ends of the earth. Not even a shipwreck!

Pay attention to the pattern of Paul’s ministry. He goes first to Jews (in the synagogue), and then when they reject him, he goes to the Gentiles. Note the consistent rejection of the Jews. Note also that Paul never gives up on them, and he always goes to them first wherever he is.

Romans

This book, probably better than any other, gives the essence of the gospel. Man is sinful, but God saves on the basis of grace. Man can never do enough, but God has provided all that is needed for the one who believes. Some might think that because the Jews aren’t believing that they have been rejected from God’s plan, but Paul explains why this is not so (chs. 9-11). As in most of his books, he concludes with practical advice on how to live. One interesting thing about Romans is that Paul had never been to the city when he wrote this letter. Yet note how many people he knows (ch. 16).

If you prefer a more detailed version, here is the summary of the book from my argument:

The letter to the Romans is a bold and clear statement of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The beginning of the letter is primarily concerned with truths of salvation and the conclusion of the letter focuses on the practices that should be manifest in the lives of believers as a result of these truths. As Paul states in the introduction, the gospel is indeed the power of God for salvation, and he develops how this is so first by declaring man’s universal need for salvation by virtue of being under the power and condemnation of sin. Deliverance is offered to all but only on the basis of faith in Christ’s substitutionary atonement. This principle of salvation by faith is not new but has been God’s means of working since the time of Abraham. The result of being justified by God is peace with God, a reality possible by virtue of union with Christ and his distribution of life to all who are in him. Those united to Christ are free from the condemnation of sin and the power of the law so that they can live victoriously by the Spirit. Paul emphasizes the assurance that believers can have based upon God’s past work and his future promises. These are not negated by Israel’s rejection of Christ, but rather are explained as typical of God’s

sovereign purposes and the nation's unwillingness to submit to the righteousness of another. God's promises will indeed be fulfilled in the nation of Israel following the ingathering of the Gentiles when all Israel is redeemed and forgiven. Given the abundance of God's mercy poured out, believers must live in righteousness and love both towards one another as well as to outsiders. Jews and Gentiles in the church must not reject those whom Christ has accepted but love one another without passing judgment or causing believers to sin. Paul anticipates his arrival in Rome following his visit to Jerusalem and he looks forward to his fellowship with those who have now heard the gospel he preaches.

1 Corinthians

Paul started churches in many of the cities that he visited. But many of these churches had problems when he left. The church in Corinth was one of the worst. They were bitterly divided and they boasted in their sin. They took the Lord's supper in a dishonorable way and they didn't use the spiritual gifts correctly. Some of them were even denying that bodily resurrection was possible! Thus Paul had to write a long letter to try to straighten them out. This is good for us, because this book gives us a lot of answers that we wouldn't otherwise have.

2 Corinthians

Paul's first letter apparently didn't work so well, so he had to write a second one. One of the big problems now is that some of the people in the church in Corinth think Paul is not an apostle or not a good apostle. So he has to spend a lot of time defending himself and what God has called him to. There's a lot of scorn and sarcasm in the second half of the book.

Galatians

This book isn't that long, but it is potentially difficult to understand unless you go slow because there is so much packed in here. The reason why Paul writes is that some outsiders have come to the churches in Galatia and told them that in order to be good Christians they have to also be good Jews. That means they have to keep the Law, including being circumcised, eating kosher food, and keeping the Sabbath. This is nonsense, Paul says! It's not just dumb, it's dangerous! Salvation comes free by believing in what Jesus did for us. By trying to do other things (like circumcision), you are saying that what Jesus did was not enough and you have to make up for it. This makes Paul very, very mad. He tells his readers that if they follow the Law, they will not be following Jesus and they will go to hell.

Ephesians

This book is mostly about how God is working through the church. Jesus is the head of the church, and the unique thing about the church is that it is not only a group of Jews, but it is Jews and Gentiles together (not Gentiles who became Jews by converting). In the first three chapters, Paul mostly explains what the church is and the great privileges that believers have. In the second three chapters, Paul tells the believers how they should live. Thus there is a lot of good, practical wisdom here.

Philippians

You'll probably find this book easier to understand than some of the others. Paul is real down to earth with a congregation that has been some of his best friends throughout much of his ministry. Even though Paul writes this from prison (as he did Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon), he is particularly joyful because he knows that God is in charge. One special thing to pay attention to is the song (hymn) about Jesus in 2:5-11; this tells us some very important things about him.

Colossians

Like Galatians, this letter was written because of some false teaching. But the teaching here was different. People are telling them to keep some rules, but it's not pure Judaism but a mixture of other religions. One of the things they are attacking is the nature of Jesus, and so Paul hits that hard (ch. 1). He also tells them how they must live, and you'll notice here a lot of similarity with Ephesians. Many years ago I memorized this book with one of the guys we'll see on our trip – Mr. Lander near Cleveland, Ohio. Pastor Jeff is memorizing this book right now—in Greek.

1 Thessalonians

This is one of the earliest letters that Paul wrote. He didn't have much time to spend with these new believers before he was run out of town by persecutors (Acts 17). So he writes this letter to answer some questions that have come up. One of the main concerns is about whether Jesus is coming back or not. Paul explains this in chapters 4-5. This is one of the only places where it clearly explains what the "rapture" is.

2 Thessalonians

Shortly after the first letter, Paul writes them a second, shorter letter. Apparently the church is really being persecuted, just like Paul was when he was with them (ch. 1). Someone also is spreading a nasty rumor that Jesus had already come back and they missed it. So Paul explains how they can know this is absolutely false (ch. 2). As he usually does, he gives them some general encouragement to do things that please the Lord.

1 Timothy

Paul had a disciple that he sent to Ephesus to be the pastor of the church there. But Timothy was young and needed some advice. This letter is so helpful to us today because we learn a lot of things about how a church should run. For instance, we learn about what is good worship and what is bad, what are good leaders and who should not be allowed to lead, how to treat widows, and the danger of money.

2 Timothy

This is almost certainly Paul's last letter. He probably wrote it very shortly (a few days, a few weeks?) before he was executed by the Roman government. He wrote this letter from prison to encourage Timothy to be strong and persevere even though Paul would not be with him to help him. When I was younger, this was one of my favorite books. (It could still be, but I just have not spent much time reading or studying it lately.)

Titus

Paul had another young disciple that he left on the island of Crete in order to provide leadership to the churches. You'll notice that he gives him some of the same advice that he gives to Timothy. My favorite passage in this book is 3:3-8.

Philemon

The letters of Paul keep getting shorter, and in fact, that is probably why they were arranged in the order they are – from longest to shortest. Philemon is a friend of Paul's, and Paul writes him because he found one of Philemon's slaves, a man named Onesimus. The point of the letter is for Paul to convince Philemon to accept Onesimus back without punishing him, and even more, to treat him as a brother and not as a slave.

Hebrews

This is probably the toughest book in the New Testament to understand. The main problem is that some people that the author is writing to are tempted to stop being Christians and go back to being Jews. So the author (we don't know his name, but some people including myself think that it may be Paul) explains why Jesus is better and everything they're thinking of going back to is worse. Jesus is better than the angels, he is better than Moses, he is better than all of the temple ceremonies and sacrifices. Interwoven in this explanation are repeated warnings in which the author tells his hearers that if they leave Jesus and the church, they are leaving eternal life and they will not be saved. The warnings are very severe, because the danger is so great.

James

This is one of the most practical books. It was written by Jesus' brother and it sounds a lot like Jesus does, such as in his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). There are many things that you can apply to your own life in this book. I memorized this book with the first friend that we're going to see on our trip (Mr. Parker). It is a good book to memorize.

1 Peter

One of the main ideas in this book is that being a Christian means that you suffer a lot. The question is “how should one suffer?” The answer is: suffer like Jesus did. He is a good example to follow in everything.

2 Peter

All of these books have good nuggets that I don't have time to draw your attention to, but an important one here is at the end of chapter 1, where Peter tells us that Scripture comes from God. That's why the Bible is God's Word and not just another book. This book focuses mostly on false teachers and the coming judgment. One of the most deadly things for a church is false teachers, because they take the people away from what God says (in his Word). But judgment is coming and so it is important to stay faithful to God and live a holy life.

1 John

Most people in our world today see things in shades of gray. Some things are mostly right or kinda right or not really very wrong. The book of 1 John sees things in black and white. There is truth and there is error. There is salvation and there is damnation. There is light and there is darkness. This letter helps the readers to distinguish between what is good and what is evil.

2 John

This short letter was written to a woman to warn her against false teachers. One of the things that she should do when a false teacher comes is refuse to give him a room to sleep in. In those days when there weren't hotels, the false teacher would have to travel on to another city and probably he wouldn't come back.

3 John

This letter is something of the flip side of 2 John. Here he says that they should show hospitality to those who are doing God's work. He includes some other helpful advice also.

Jude

This letter is a lot like the second chapter of 2 Peter. It also is warning the people against false teachers. This was a very severe danger because the apostles (who were eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry) were dying. False teachers were coming in and leading the people astray. Were all of these warnings (as also in Galatians, Colossians, 1 John and elsewhere) necessary? Why say the same things so many times? The answer is that the church really needed it. The proof of that is in the history of the church. Only a few decades later, some segments of the church starting believing strange things not in the Bible. The

history of the early church is largely a sad story of fighting heretics. This was Satan's strategy for defeating God, since he failed to prevent Jesus from rising from the dead.

Revelation

A lot of people thought that Jesus was going to come back very soon after he went to heaven. They didn't have any idea that he would wait 100 (or 2000!) years. Remember, Jesus told them to be ready at any time. But with the apostles dying, the writing of the New Testament was coming to a close. Thus the Lord gave John a vision which would help to strengthen the church in the days of persecution ahead. The main point is that in the end, Jesus wins! But this book shows us just how God is in control of all of the details. He knows exactly how he is going to judge the earth. Most of the events in the book (chs. 6-19) take place during a seven-year period known as the tribulation. At the end of this, Jesus comes back down to earth (ch. 19) and establishes his kingdom for a thousand years (ch. 20). When this is over, a new heaven and a new earth is made, where the Father and Jesus live forever with their people (chs. 21-22). Though this book has some "blood and guts," it is a very encouraging story that should give us all hope. No matter how bad things get, God has it all under control. We can pray just like John does at the end, "Come, Lord Jesus"!

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