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Reading the Bible Theologically

To read the Bible “theologically” means to read the Bible “with a focus on God”: his being, his character, his words and works, his purpose, presence, power, promises, and precepts. The Bible can be read from different standpoints and with different centers of interest, but this article seeks to explain how to read it theologically.

The Bible: The Church’s Instruction Book

All 66 books of the Bible constitute the book of the Christian church. And the church, both as a whole and in the life of its members, must always be seen to be the people of the book. This glorifies God, its primary author.

God has chosen to restore his sin-spoiled world through a long and varied historical process, central to which is the creating—by redemptive and sanctifying grace—of what is literally a new human race. This unfinished process has so far extended over four millennia. It began with Abraham; it centers on the first coming of the incarnate Lord, Jesus Christ; and it is not due for completion till he comes again. Viewed as a whole, from the vantage point of God’s people within it, the process always was and still is covenantal and educative. *Covenantal* indicates that God says to his gathered community, “I am your God; you shall be my people,” and with his call for loyalty he promises them greater future good than any they have yet known. *Educative* indicates that, within the covenant, God works to change each person’s flawed and degenerate nature into a new, holy selfhood that expresses in responsive terms God’s own moral likeness. The model is Jesus Christ, the only perfect being that the world has ever seen. For God’s people to sustain covenantal hopes and personal moral ideals as ages pass and cultures change and decay, they must have constant, accessible, and authoritative instruction from God. And that is what the Bible essentially is.

This is why, as well as equipping everywhere a class of teachers who will give their lives to inculcating Bible truth, the church now seeks to translate the Bible into each person’s primary language and to spread universal literacy, so that all may read and understand it.

The Bible Is Canonical

God’s plan is that through his teaching embodied in the Bible, plus knowledge and experience of how he rewards obedience and punishes disobedience in a disciplinary way, his people should learn love, worship, and service of God himself, and love, care, and service of others, as exemplified by Jesus Christ. To this end each generation needs a written “textbook” that sets forth for all time God’s unchanging standards of truth, right, love and goodness, wisdom and worship, doctrine and devotion. This resource will enable people to see what they should think and do, what ideals

they should form, what goals they should set, what limits they should observe, and what life strategies they should follow. These are the functions that are being claimed for the Bible when it is called “canonical.” A “canon” is a rule or a standard. The Bible is to be read as a God-given rule of belief and behavior—that is, of faith and life.

The Bible Is Inspired

Basic to the Bible’s canonical status is its “inspiration.” This word indicates a divinely effected uniqueness comparable to the uniqueness of the person of the incarnate Lord. As Jesus Christ was totally human and totally divine, so is the Bible. All Scripture is witness to God, given by divinely illuminated human writers, and all Scripture is God witnessing to himself in and through their words. The way into the mind of God is through the expressed mind of these human writers, so the reader of the Bible looks for that characteristic first. But the text must be read, or reread, as God’s own self-revelatory instruction, given in the form of this human testimony. In this way God tells the reader the truth about himself; his work past, present, and future; and his will for people’s lives.

The Bible Is Unified

Basic also to the Bible’s canonical status is the demonstrable unity of its contents. Scripture is no ragbag of religious bits and pieces, unrelated to each other; rather, it is a tapestry in which all the complexities of the weave display a single pattern of judgment and mercy, promise and fulfillment. The Bible consists of two separate collections: the OT, written over a period of about 1,000 years, and the NT, written within a generation several centuries after the OT was completed. Within such a composite array one would expect to find some crossed wires or incoherence, but none are found here. While there are parallel narratives, repetitions, and some borrowings from book to book, the Bible as a whole tells a single, straightforward story. God the Creator is at the center throughout; his people, his covenant, his kingdom, and its coming king are the themes unfolded by the historical narratives, while the realities of redemption from sin and of godly living (faith, repentance, obedience, prayer, adoration, hope, joy, and love) become steadily clearer. Jesus Christ, as fulfiller of OT prophecies, hopes, promises, and dreams, links the two Testaments together in an unbreakable bond. Aware that at the deepest level the whole Bible is the product of a single mind, the mind of God, believers reading it theologically always look for the inner links that bind the books together. And they are there to be found.

Theological Reading of the Bible: A Quest for God

Reading Scripture theologically starts from the truths reviewed above: (1) that the Bible is a God-given guide

to sinners for their salvation, and for the life of grateful godliness to which salvation calls them; (2) that the Bible is equally the church's handbook for worship and service; (3) that it is a divinely inspired unity of narrative and associated admonition, a kind of running commentary on the progress of God's kingdom plan up to the establishing of a world-embracing, witnessing, suffering church in the decades following Christ's ascension and the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit; and (4) that the incarnate Son of God himself, Jesus the Christ, crucified, risen, glorified, ministering, and coming again, is the Bible's central focus, while the activities of God's covenant people both before and after Christ's appearing make up its ongoing story. Theological reading follows these leads and is pursued theocentrically, looking and listening for God throughout, with the controlling purpose of discerning him with maximum clarity, through his own testimony to his will, works, and ways. Such reading is pursued prayerfully, according to Martin Luther's observation that the first thing one needs to become a theologian through Bible reading is prayer for the illumination and help of the Holy Spirit. And prayerful theological Bible reading will be pursued in light of three further guiding principles, as follows.

First, *revelation was progressive*. Its progress, in its written form, was not (as has sometimes been thought) from fuzzy and sometimes false (OT) to totally true and clear (NT), but from partial to full and complete. "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days [the concluding era of this world's life] he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1–2). In the Gospels, the Epistles, and the books of Acts and Revelation, readers are now faced with God's final word to the world before Christ comes again. Theological Bible reading maintains this perspective, traversing the OT by the light of the NT.

Second, *the Bible's God-language is analogical*. Today's fashion is to call it "metaphorical," which is not wrong, but "analogical" is the term that makes clearest the key point: the difference involved when everyday words—nouns, verbs, adjectives—are used of God. Language is God's gift for personal communication between humans and between God and humans. But when God speaks of himself—or when people speak to him or about him—the definitions, connotations, implications, valuations, and range of meaning in each case must be adjusted in light of the differences between him and his creation. God is infinite and flawless; people are both finite and flawed. So when everyday words are used of God, all thought of finiteness and imperfection must be removed, and the overall notion of unlimited, self-sustaining existence in perfect loving holiness must be added in. For instance, when God calls himself "Father," or his people in response call him their "Father," the thought will be of authoritative, protecting, guiding, and enriching love, free from any lack of wisdom that appears in earthly fathers. And when one speaks of God's "anger" or "wrath" in retribution for sin that he as the world's royal Judge displays, the thought will be as free from the fitful inconsistency, irrationality, bad temper, and loss of self-control that regularly mars human anger.

These mental adjustments underlie the biblical insistence that all God's doings, even those that involve human distress, are glorious and praiseworthy. This doxological, God-glorifying tone and thrust marks even books such as

Job and Lamentations, and the many complaint prayers in the Psalter. The Bible writers practice analogical adjustment so smoothly, unobtrusively, and unselfconsciously that it is easy to overlook what they are doing. But the theological reader of the Bible will not miss this point.

Third, *the one God of the Bible is Trinitarian and triune*. God is three persons in an eternal fellowship of love and cooperation within the one divine Being. Each person is involved in all that God does. God is a team no less than he is a complex entity. In the NT this concept is apparent, but in the OT, where the constant emphasis is on the truth that Yahweh is the one and only God, the truth of the Trinity hardly breaks the surface. God's triunity is, however, an eternal fact, though it has been clearly revealed only through Christ's coming. Theological Bible readers are right to read this fact back into the OT, following the example of NT writers in their citing of many OT passages.

Theological Reading of the Bible: The Quest for Godliness

Theology is for doxology, that is, glorifying God by praise and thanks, by obedient holiness, and by laboring to extend God's kingdom, church, and cultural influence. The goal of theological Bible reading is not just to know truth about God (though one's quest for godliness must start there) but to know God personally in a relationship that honors him—which means serving Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, the world's real though unrecognized Lord, who came to earth, died, rose, and ascended for his people, and has given them the Holy Spirit. To have him fill believers' horizons and rule their lives in his Father's name is the authentic form—the foundation, blueprint, scaffolding, and construction—of Christian godliness, to which theological Bible reading is a God-intended means. So, three questions must govern readers of the inspired Word:

First, in the passage being read, *what is shown about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?* What does it say about what the holy Three are doing, have done, and will do in God's world, in his church, and in lives committed to him? What does it reveal about God's attributes, that is, God's power and character, how he exists and how he behaves? One reason, no doubt, for God's panoramic, multigenred layout of the Bible—with history, homily, biography, liturgy, practical philosophy, laws, lists, genealogies, visions, and so on, all rubbing shoulders—is that this variety provides so many angles of illumination on these questions for theological Bible readers' instruction.

Second, in the passage being read, *what is shown about the bewildering, benighted world with all its beautiful and beneficial aspects alongside those that are corrupt and corrupting?* Discerning the world's good and evil for what they are, so as to embrace the world's good and evade its temptations, is integral to the godliness that theological Bible reading should promote.

Third, in the passage being read, *what is shown to guide one's living, this day and every day?* The theological logic of this question, through which the reader must work each time, is this: since God, by his own testimony, said *that* to those people in their situation, what does it follow that he says to readers today in their own situation? The Holy Spirit answers prayer by giving discernment to apply Scripture in this way. Those who seek will indeed find. ◀

Reading the Bible as Literature

Three primary modes of writing converge in the Bible: theological, historical, and literary. Overwhelmingly, theology and history are embodied in literary form.

A crucial principle of interpretation thus needs to be established at the outset: meaning is communicated *through form*, starting with the very words of a text but reaching beyond that to considerations of literary genre and style. We cannot properly speak about the theological or moral content of a story or poem (for example) without first interacting with the story or poem.

Literary form exists prior to content; no content exists apart from the form in which it is embodied. As a result, the first responsibility of a reader or interpreter is to understand the form of a discourse. It is a common misconception to think that the literary dimension of the Bible is *only* the form in which the message is presented. Actually, without some kind of literary form, the content would not even exist. The concept of literary form needs to be construed very broadly here. Anything having to do with *how* a biblical author has expressed his message constitutes literary form. We tend to think (erroneously) that authors tell us *about* characters, actions, and situations, whereas actually they speak *with* or *by means of* these things—*about* God, people, and the world.

The Bible as Literature

The idea of the Bible as literature began with the Bible itself. The writers refer to a whole range of literary genres in which they write: proverb, saying, chronicle, complaint (lament psalm), oracle, apocalypse, parable, song, epistle, and many others. Secondly, some of these forms correspond to the literary forms current in the authors' surrounding cultures. For example, the Ten Commandments are cast in the form of the suzerainty treaties that ancient Near Eastern kings imposed on their subjects, and the NT epistles show many affinities to the structure of Greek and Roman letters of the same era.

Mainly, though, we can look to the Bible itself to see the extent to which it is a literary book. Virtually every page of the Bible is replete with literary technique, and to possess the individual texts fully, we need to read the Bible as literature, just as we need to read it theologically and (in the narrative parts) historically.

Literary Genres

The most customary way to define literature is by the external genres (types or kinds of writing) in which its content is expressed. The two main genres in the Bible are narrative and poetry. Numerous categories cluster under each of these. Narrative subtypes, e.g., include hero story, gospel, epic, tragedy, comedy (a U-shaped plot with a happy ending), and parable. Specific poetic genres keep multiplying as well: lyric, lament psalm, praise psalm, love poem, nature poem, *epithalamion* (wedding poem), and many others.

But those are only the tip of the iceberg. In addition to narrative and poetry, we find prophecy, visionary writing, apocalypse, pastoral, encomium, oratory, drama (the book of Job), satire, and epistle. Then if we add more specific forms like travel story, dramatic monologue, doom song,

and Christ hymn, the number of literary genres in the Bible readily exceeds a hundred.

The importance of genre to biblical interpretation is that genres have their own methods of procedure and rules of interpretation. An awareness of genre should alert us to what we can expect to find in a text. Additionally, considerations of genre should govern the terms in which we interact with a text. With narrative, e.g., we are on the right track if we pay attention to plot, setting, and character. If the text before us is a satire, we need to think in terms of object of attack, the satiric vehicle in which the attack is couched, and satiric norm (stated or implied standard by which the criticism is being conducted).

In view of how many literary genres are present in the Bible, it is obvious that the overall literary form of the Bible is the anthology, as even the word Bible (Gk. *biblia*, "books") hints. As an anthology, the Bible possesses the same kinds of unity that other anthologies exhibit: multiple authorship (approximately three dozen authors), diverse genres, a rationale for collecting these particular materials (a unifying religious viewpoint and story of salvation history), comprehensiveness, and an identifiable strategy of organization (a combination of historical chronology and groupings by genre).

Literary Subject Matter

Literature is also identifiable by its subject matter. It is differentiated from expository (informational) writing by the way in which it presents concrete human experience instead of stating abstract propositions, logical arguments, or bare facts. We can profitably think of biblical writing as existing on a continuum, with abstract propositional discourse on one end and concrete presentation of human experience on the other. The more thoroughly a piece of writing falls on the experiential end of the spectrum, the more "literary" it is.

To illustrate, the command "you shall not murder" is an example of expository discourse. The story of Cain and Abel embodies the same truth in the form of characters in concrete settings performing physical and mental actions. Expository writing gives us the precept; literature gives us the example. "God's provision extends to all aspects of our lives" is a thematic summary of Psalm 23; rather than such abstraction, however, the psalm incarnates the truth about providence through the poetic image of a shepherd's daily routine with his sheep.

The subject of literature is human experience rendered as concretely as possible. The result is that it possesses a universal quality. Whereas history and the daily news tell us what *happened*, literature tells us what *happens*—what is true for all people in all places and times. A text can be both informational and literary, but its literary dimension resides in its embodiment of recognizable human experience.

The goal of literature is to prompt a reader vicariously to share or relive an experience. The truth that literature imparts is not simply ideas that are true but *truthfulness to human experience*. The implication for interpreting the Bible as literature is that readers and expositors need to actively recreate experiences in their imaginations, identify the recognizable human experiences in a text (thereby

building bridges to life in the modern world), and resist the impulse immediately to reduce every biblical passage to a set of theological ideas.

Archetypes and Motifs

An archetype is a plot motif (such as initiation or quest), character type (such as the villain or trickster), or image (such as light or water) that recurs throughout literature and life. The presence of archetypes signals a text's literary quality. When we read literature, we are continuously aware of such archetypes as the temptation motif, the dangerous valley, and the hero, whereas with other types of writing we are rarely aware of archetypes.

Archetypes are the building blocks of literature. The Bible is the most complete repository of archetypes in the Western world, something that makes the Bible universal, reaching down to bedrock human experience. Awareness of archetypes helps us see the unity of the Bible (since we keep relating one instance of an archetype to other instances), and also the connections between the Bible and other literature.

Stylistics and Rhetoric

Literature also uses distinctive resources of language that set it apart from ordinary expository discourse. The most obvious example is poetry. Poets speak a language all their own, consisting of images and figures of speech. Other important examples include: imagery, metaphor, simile, symbol, allusion, irony, wordplay, hyperbole, apostrophe (direct address to someone or something absent as though present), personification, paradox, and pun. The presence of these elements push a text into the category of literature.

The most concentrated repository of such language in the Bible is the books that are poetic in their basic format—the Prophetic Books, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes (a book of prose poems), Song of Solomon, and Revelation. But literary resources of language also appear on virtually every page of the Bible beyond the poetic books—most obviously in the discourses of Jesus and in the Epistles, but less pervasively in the narratives as well.

A related literary phenomenon is rhetoric—arrangement of content in patterns and use of conventional

literary techniques or formulas. Parallelism of sentence elements, e.g., is an instance of stylized rhetoric. Patterns of repetition—of words, phrases, or content units—are a distinguishing feature of the Bible. So is aphoristic conciseness that continuously raises the Bible to a literary realm of eloquence far above everyday discourse. A page from a NT epistle might include rhetorical questions, question-and-answer constructions, direct addresses to real or imaginary respondents, or repeated words or phrases.

Artistry

Literature is an art form in which beauty of expression, craftsmanship, and verbal virtuosity are valued as self-rewarding and as an enhancement of effective communication. The writer of Ecclesiastes states his philosophy of composition, portraying himself as a self-conscious stylist and wordsmith who arranged his material “with great care” and who “sought to find words of delight” (Eccles. 12:9–10). Surely other biblical writers did the same.

The standard elements of artistic form include unity, theme-and-variation, pattern, design, progression, contrast, balance, recurrence, coherence, and symmetry. Authors cultivate artistry because it is important to their effect and intention. The Bible is an aesthetic as well as utilitarian book, and we need to experience it as such.

Reading and Interpreting the Bible as Literature

Any piece of writing needs to be interpreted in terms of the kind of writing that it is. The Bible is a literary book in which theology and history are usually embodied in literary forms. Those forms include genres, the incarnation of human experience in concrete form, stylistic and rhetorical techniques, and artistry.

These literary features are not extraneous aspects of the text. Instead, they are the forms *through which* the content is mediated. If the writing of the Bible is the product of divine inspiration—if it represents what the Holy Spirit prompted the authors to write as they were “carried along” (2 Pet. 1:21)—then the literary forms of the Bible have also been inspired by God and need to be granted an importance congruent with that inspiration. ◀

Reading the Bible in Prayer and Communion with God

Communion with God is a staggering thought. God created billions of galaxies and calls every star by name (Isa. 40:26; 42:5). He never had a beginning and will never end (Ps. 90:2). His ways are inscrutable and his judgments unsearchable (Rom. 11:33). His thoughts are as different from ours as the heavens are high above the earth (Isa. 55:8). “The nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales” (Isa. 40:15).

If that were not enough to make communion with God unthinkable, consider that all of us are naturally rebellious against him. Therefore, his omnipotent wrath rests on us. We are by nature hostile to God and do not submit to his law (Rom. 8:7). Therefore, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against us (Rom. 1:18). We are “by nature children of wrath,” “sons of disobedience,” and “dead in . . . trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1–5). How then can there be any thought of communion with God?

For Our Joy

Before we see the Bible's answer, let's clarify what we mean by “communion.” Communion refers to God's communication and presentation of himself to us, together with our proper response to him with joy. We say “with joy” because it would not be communion if God revealed himself in total wrath and we were simply terrified. That would be *true* revelation and a *proper* response, but it would not be communion.

Communion assumes that God comes to us in love and that we respond joyfully to the beauty of his perfections and the offer of his fellowship. He may sometimes come with a rod of discipline. But even in our tears, we can rejoice in our Father's loving discipline (Heb. 12:6–11). Communion with God may lay us in ashes or make us leap. But it never destroys our joy. It *is* our joy (Ps. 43:4).

To God's Glory

Communion with God is the end for which we were created. The Bible says that we were created for the glory of God (Isa. 43:7). Yet glorifying God is not something we do *after* communing with him, but *by* communing with him. Many human deeds magnify the glory of God's goodness, but only if they flow from our contentment in communion with him. This is why we pray, "*Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love*" (Ps. 90:14). The joy of this communion in the love of God confirms God's worth and shows his glory.

Because of the Gospel

But how is this unthinkable privilege of communion with God possible for sinners like us? The answer of the Bible is that God himself took the initiative to be reconciled to his enemies. He sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die in our place and bear the curse that we deserved from God. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). So the wrath of God that we deserved fell on Christ (Isa. 53:4–6, 10).

Because God gave Christ as our substitute, we can be reconciled to God and enjoy peaceful communion with him. "While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:10). "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). This peace leads to the unparalleled joy of communion with God (Rom. 5:11).

The Gospel: The Bible's Central Message

Therefore, the first thing to say about the Bible in relation to communion with God is that the message of how to be reconciled to God for the glory of God is the central message of the Bible. There is no communion with God without salvation from *our* sin and *God's* wrath. The Bible is the only book with final authority that tells us what God did through Christ and how we must respond through faith to be saved and to enjoy communion with God (2 Tim. 3:15).

But the Bible is more. The Bible tells the story of creation, of the fall of humanity into sin, and of the history of God's chosen people Israel leading up to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus. Then it recounts the life of Christ and his teachings, his mighty works, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension. Finally, it tells the story of the early church after Jesus had returned to heaven, and how we are to live until Jesus comes again.

The Bible Reveals God

The God-inspired record of this history (the Bible) is the only infallible and authoritative book communicating and presenting God himself (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Pet. 1:21). To be sure, God is active everywhere in the world today, and we experience his precious power wherever we trust him and do his will. But we will go astray if we make this daily experience of God the basis of our communion with him. We know God for who he is, and meet him as he is, when we meet him through his Word—the Bible. We see this principle at work, for example, in 1 Samuel 3:21: "The LORD revealed *himself* to Samuel at Shiloh by the *word* of the LORD." The LORD *himself* is revealed by his *word*, that is, by what he says to us, whether audibly or in written form.

Therefore, when we seek to enjoy communion with the Lord—and not to be led astray by the ambiguities of religious experience—we read the Bible. From Genesis to

Revelation, God's words and God's deeds reveal God himself for our knowledge and our enjoyment. Of course, it is possible to read the Bible without enjoying communion with God. We must seek to understand the Bible's meaning, and we must pause to contemplate what we understand and, by the Spirit, to feel and express the appropriate response of the heart.

God communicates with us in many ways through the Bible and seeks the response of our communion with him. If God indicts us (2 Cor. 7:8–10), we respond to him with sorrow and repentance. If he commends us (Ps. 18:19–20), we respond to him with humble gratitude and joy. If he commands us to do something (Matt. 28:19–20), we look to him for strength and resolve to obey with his help. If he makes a promise (Heb. 13:5–6), we marvel at his grace and trust him to do what he says. If he warns us of some danger (Luke 21:34), we take him seriously and watch with a thankful sense of his presence and protection. If he describes something about himself (Isa. 46:9–11), his Son (Mark 1:11), or his Holy Spirit (John 16:13–14), we affirm it and admire it and pray for clearer eyes to see and enjoy his greatness and beauty.

Fellowship with the Triune God

In all these communications, it is God himself that we most want to see. Communion with God is not merely *learning about* God but enjoying *fellowship with* God in the truth he reveals about himself. The apostle John, who enjoyed unusually close communion with Jesus while he was on the earth, said that he wrote his letters so that we might enjoy this fellowship: "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). In other words, the Bible records the words and deeds of God so that by means of these we have fellowship—that is, communion—with God.

This fellowship is with each person in the Trinity: with the Father (1 John 1:3), with the Son (1 Cor. 1:9), and with the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14). This is possible because each person of the Godhead communicates with us in a way that corresponds to his unique role in creation, providence, and salvation. As the great Puritan John Owen wrote in his classic *Communion with God*, the Father communicates himself to us by the way of "original authority," the Son from a "purchased treasury," and the Spirit by an "immediate efficacy." Each person, as Owen says, communicates with us "distinctly" in the sense that we may discern from which person particular realizations of the grace of God come to us. But "distinctly" does not mean "separately": particular fellowship with each person of the Trinity is always one facet of ongoing communion with all three.

Humble, Bold Prayer

Finally, from this Father-initiated, Son-purchased, Spirit-effected communion with God, we *pray* with humble boldness (Heb. 4:16). That is, we speak to God the Father, on the basis of Christ's work, by the help of the Spirit. This speaking is called *prayer*. It includes our confessions of sin (1 John 1:9), our praises of God's perfections (Ps. 96:4), our thanks for God's gifts (Ps. 118:21), and our requests that he would help us (Ps. 38:22) and others (Rom. 15:30–31)—all to the glory of God (Ps. 50:15), for the hallowing of his name, which must ever be our goal.

Prayer is the verbal aspect of our response to God in

communion with him. The Bible does speak of “groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26), but ordinarily prayer is the response of our heart to God in words. It may be in private (Matt. 6:6) or in public (1 Cor. 14:16). It may last all night (Luke 6:12) or be summed up in a moment’s cry (Matt. 14:30). It may be desperate (Jonah 2:2) or joyful (Ps. 119:162). It may be full of faith (Mark 11:24) or wavering with uncertainty (Mark 9:24).

But it is not optional. It is commanded—which is good news, because it means that God loves being the giver of omnipotent help (Ps. 50:15). The Bible reminds us that ordinary people can accomplish great things by prayer (James 5:17–18). It tells us about great answers to prayer (Isa. 37:21, 36). It gives us great examples of how to pray (Matt. 6:9–13; Eph. 3:14–19). And it offers amazing encouragements to pray (Matt. 7:7–11).

God Gets the Glory; We Get the Joy

The Bible shows that prayer is near the heart of why God created the world. When we pray for God to do what

only he can do, he alone gets the glory while we get the joy. We see this when Jesus says, “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, *that the Father may be glorified in the Son*” (John 14:13), and then later says, “Ask, and you will receive, *that your joy may be full*” (John 16:24). In prayer, God gets the *glory* and we get the *joy*. God is the overflowing fountain; we are satisfied with the living water. He is infinitely rich; we are the happy heirs.

Central to all our praying, as we have seen, must be our longing that God’s name be hallowed in the world—known and honored and loved (Matt. 6:9). To that end, we pray (1) for his church to be “filled with the fruit of righteousness . . . to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1:11); (2) that the gospel would spread and awaken faith in Jesus among all the nations (2 Thess. 3:1); and (3) that many who do not believe would be saved (Rom. 10:1). In this way, the aim of God’s Word and the aim of prayer become the same: the glory of God and the salvation of the nations through Jesus Christ. ◀

Reading the Bible for Personal Application

It is a marvel how personally the Bible applies. The words pointedly address the concerns of long-ago people in faraway places, facing specific problems, many of which no longer exist. They had no difficulty seeing the application. Much of what they read was personal application to actual situations they were facing. But nothing in the Bible was written directly to you or specifically about what you face. We are reading someone else’s mail. Yet the Bible repeatedly affirms that these words are also written for us: “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction” (Rom. 15:4; cf. Deut. 29:29; 1 Cor. 10:11; 2 Tim. 3:15–17). Application today discovers ways in which the Spirit reapplies Scripture in a timely fashion.

Furthermore, the Bible is primarily about God, not you. The essential subject matter is the triune Redeemer Lord, culminating in Jesus Christ. When Jesus “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45), he showed how everything written—creation, promises, commands, history, sacrificial system, psalms, proverbs—reveals him. We are reading someone else’s biography. Yet that very story demonstrates how he includes us within his story. Jesus is the Word of God applied, all-wisdom embodied. As his disciples, we learn to similarly apply the Bible, growing up into his image. Application today experiences how the Spirit “rescripts” our lives by teaching us who God is and what he is doing.

“Personal application” proves wise when you reckon with these marvels. The Bible was written to others—but speaks to you. The Bible is about God—but draws you in. Your challenge is always to *reapply* Scripture afresh, because God’s purpose is always to *rescript* your life. How can you expand your wisdom in personal application? The following four ways are suggested.

1. Consolidate What You Have Already Learned

Assuming that you have listened well to some parts of the Bible, consider these personal questions. What chunk of Scripture has made the most difference in your life? What verse or passage have you turned to most frequently? What

makes these exact words frequently and immediately relevant? Your answer will likely embody four foundational truths about how to read the Bible for wise application.

First, this passage becomes your own because you listen. You remember what God says. He is saying this to you. You need these words. This promise, revelation, or command *must* be true. You *must* act on this call to faith and love. When you forget, you drift, stray, and flounder. When you remember and put it to work, bright truth rearranges your life. The foundation of application is always attentive listening to what God says.

Second, the passage and your life become fused. It is not simply a passage in the Bible. A specific word from God connects to some pointed struggle inside you and around you. These inner and outer troubles express your experience of the dual evil that plagues every human heart: sin and confusion from within; trouble and beguilement from without (1 Kings 8:37–39; Eccles. 9:3). But something God says invades your darkness with his light. He meets your actual need with his actual mercies. Your life and God’s words meet. Application depends on honesty about where you need help. Your kind of trouble is everywhere in the Bible.

Third, your appropriation of this passage reveals how God himself does the applying. He meets you before you meet him. The passage arrested you. God arranged your struggle with sin and suffering so that you would need this exact help. Without God’s initiative (“I will write it on their hearts,” Jer. 31:33) you would never make the connection. The Spirit chose to rewrite your inner script, pouring God’s love into your heart, inviting you to live in a new reality. He awakens your sense of need, gives you ears to hear, and freely gives necessary wisdom. Application is a gift, because wisdom is a gift.

Fourth, the application of beloved passages is usually quite straightforward. God states something in general terms. You insert your relevant particulars. For example:

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Ps. 23:4). What troubles are you facing? Who is with you?

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6). What is your particular way of straying? How does the Lamb of God connect with your situation?

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6). With what are you obsessed? What promises anchor your plea for help (Phil. 4:5, 7–9)?

Such words speak to common human experiences. A passage becomes personal when your details participate in what is said. The gap across centuries and between cultures seems almost to disappear. Your God is a very present help in trouble—this trouble. Application occurs in specifics.

2. Look for the Directly Applicable Passages

How do you widen your scope of application? Keep your eye out for *straightforward passages*. Typically they generalize or summarize in some manner, inviting personal appropriation. Consider the core promises of God, the joys and sorrows of many psalms, the moral divide in many proverbs, the call of many commands, the summary comment that interprets a story. As examples of the first, Exodus 34:6–7; Numbers 6:24–26; and Deuteronomy 31:6 state foundational promises that are repeatedly and variously applied throughout the rest of Scripture. Pay attention to how subsequent scriptures specifically reapply these statements, and to how the entire Bible illustrates them. Make such promises part of your repertoire of well-pondered truth. They are important for a reason. Get a feel for how these words come to a point in Jesus Christ and can rescript every life, including yours.

Consider how *generalization* occurs. In narratives, details make the story come to life. But psalms and proverbs adopt the opposite strategy. They intentionally flatten out specific references, so anyone can identify. David was troubled when he wrote Psalm 25—his emotions are clearly felt. But he left his own story at the door: "For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great. . . . Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins" (Ps. 25:11, 18). He gives no details. We are given a template flexible enough to embrace any one of us. As you reapply *your* sins and sufferings make Psalm 25 come to life as it leads you to mercy.

In matters of obedience, the Bible often proclaims a general truth without mentioning any of the multitude of possible applications. When Jesus says, "You cannot serve God and money" (Luke 16:13), he leaves you to puzzle out the forms of money-worship particular to your personality and your culture. In such cases, the Bible speaks in large categories, addressing many different experiences, circumstances, and actions. Sorting out what it specifically means is far from being mechanical and automatic, but the application process follows a rather direct line.

If you have a favorite Bible passage, it is likely one of these parts of Scripture whose application is relatively direct. But our experience of immediate relevance can

skew our expectations for how the rest of God's revelation applies to our lives.

3. Recognize the Sorts of Passages where Personal Application Is Less Direct

Here is the core dilemma. Most of the Bible does *not* speak directly and personally to you. How do you "apply" the stories in Genesis? What about genealogies and census data? Leviticus? The life stories of Esther, Job, Samson, or Paul? The distribution of land and villages in Joshua? The history of Israel's decline detailed through 1 and 2 Kings? The prophetic woes scorching Moab, Philistia, Egypt, and Babylon, fulfilled so long ago? The ruminations of Ecclesiastes? The Gospel stories showing Jesus in action? The New Testament's frequent preoccupation with Jew-Gentile relations? The apocalyptic images in the Revelation?

The Bible's stories, histories, and prophecies—even many of the commands, teachings, promises, and prayers—take thoughtful work in order to reapply with current relevance. If you receive them directly—as if they speak directly to you, about you, with your issues in view—you will misunderstand and misapply Scripture. For example, the angel's command to Joseph, "take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt" (Matt. 2:13), is not a command to anyone today to buy a ticket to Egypt! Those who attempt to take the entire Bible as if it directly applies today end up distorting the Bible. It becomes an omni-relevant magic book teeming with private messages and meanings. God does not intend that his words function that way.

These passages *do* apply. But most of the Bible applies differently from the passages tilted toward immediate relevance. What you read applies by extension and analogy, not directly. Less sizzle, but quietly significant. In one sense, such passages apply exactly because they are *not* about you. Understood rightly, such passages give a changed perspective. They locate you on a bigger stage. They teach you to notice God and other people in their own right. They call you to understand yourself within a story—many stories—bigger than your personal history and immediate concerns. They locate you within a community far wider than your immediate network of relationships. And they remind you that you are always in God's presence, under his eye, and part of his program.

4. Tackle the Application of Less-direct Passages

Application is a lifelong process, seeking to expand and deepen wisdom. At the simplest level, simply read through the Bible in its larger chunks. The cumulative acquisition of wisdom is hard to quantify. A sense of what truth means and how truth works is overheard as well as heard. But also wrestle to work out the implications of specific passages.

Consider two examples. The first presents an extreme challenge to personal application: a genealogy or census. These are directly *irrelevant* to your life. Your name is not on the list. The reasons for the list disappeared long ago. You gain nothing by knowing that "Koz fathered Anub, Zobebah, and the clans of Aharhel" (1 Chron. 4:8). But when you learn to listen rightly, such lists intend many good things—and each list has a somewhat different purpose. Among the things taught are these:

- The Lord writes down names in his book of life.
- Families and communities matter to him.

- God is faithful to his promises through long history.
- He enlists his people as troops in the redemptive reconquest of a world gone bad.+
- All the promises of God find their “Yes” in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:20).

You “apply” a list of ancient names and numbers by extension, not directly. Your love for God grows surer and more intelligent when you ponder the *kind* of thing this is, rather than getting lost in the blizzard of names or numbers.

The second example presents a mid-level challenge. Psalms are often among the most directly relevant parts of Scripture. But what do you do when Psalm 21:1 says, “O LORD, in your strength the king rejoices”? The psalm is not talking about you, and it is not you talking—not directly. A train of connected truths apply this psalm to you, leading you out of yourself.

First, David lived and wrote these words, but Jesus Christ most fully lived—is now living, and will finally fulfill—this entire psalm. He is the greatest human king singing this song of deliverance; and he is also the divine Lord whose power delivers. We know from the perspective of NT fulfillment that this psalm is overtly by and about Jesus, not about any particular individual.

Second, you participate in the triumph of your King. You are caught up in all that the psalm describes, because you are in this Christ. So pay attention to *his* experience, because he includes you.

Third, your participation arises not as a solo individual but in company with countless brothers and sisters. You most directly apply this psalm by joining with fellow believers in a chorus of heartfelt gladness: “O LORD, *we* will sing and praise your power” (Ps. 21:13). The king’s opening joy in God’s power has become his people’s closing joy.

Finally, figuratively, you are also kingly in Christ. In this sense, Jesus’ experience of deliverance (the entire psalm) does apply to your life. Having walked through the psalm as an expression of the exultant triumph of Christ Jesus himself, you may now make it your experience too. You could even adapt Psalm 21 into the first person, inserting “I/me/my” in place of “the king” and “he/him/his.” It would be blasphemous to do that at first. It is fully proper and your exceeding joy to do this in the end. This is a song in which all heaven will join. As you grasp that your brothers and sisters share this same goal, you will love them and serve their joy more consistently.

God reveals himself and his purposes throughout Scripture. Wise application always starts there.

Conclusion

You started by identifying one passage that speaks persistently, directly, and relevantly into your life. You have seen how both the direct and the indirect passages intend to change you. Learning to wisely apply the harder, less relevant passages has a surprising benefit. Your whole Bible “applies personally.” This Lord is your God; this history is your history; these people are your people; this Savior has brought you in to participate in who he is and what he does. Venture out into the remotest regions of Scripture, seeking to know and love your God better.

Hopefully, you better understand why your most reliable passage so changed your life. Ponder those familiar words once more. You will notice that they also lift you out of self-preoccupation, out of the double evil of sin and misery. God brought his gracious care to you through that passage, and rearranged your life. You love him who first loved you, so you love his other children. And that is how the whole Bible, and each of its parts, applies personally. ◀

Reading the Bible for Preaching and Public Worship

The Bible, as holy Scripture, is the only certain source of God’s words in the entire world. Paul’s statement that “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16; see note) means that all the words of the Bible are God’s words to us. Therefore if we want to hear our Creator and Lord speaking to us, we must continually give attention to the authoritative words of the Bible. This means that the Bible must be the only true foundation and constant guide for all that we do in the life of the church, and the Bible must be central to all that happens in preaching and public worship.

Moses and Jesus confirm how God’s people are to regard his holy Word. On the very day that Moses completed the writing of the Book of the Law, he directed that it be placed beside the ark (Deut. 31:26), sang his final song (the great Song of Moses; Deut. 31:30–32:43), and then declared that “it is no empty word for you, but your very life” (Deut. 32:47). Moses’ declaration set the standard for the primacy and sufficiency of God’s Word (cf. Psalms 19; 119). A millennium and a half later Jesus, the second Moses, after defeating Satan with three deft quotations from Deuteronomy, declared, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). The Scriptures were life to Moses and food to Jesus; as such they together establish the ideal for God’s people and directly

inform the Bible’s use in preaching and public worship. Jesus’ dependence on the sufficiency and potency of God’s Word raised the standard high for all apostolic and post-apostolic preaching and worship.

The Bible’s Use in Preaching

When the apostle Paul instructs his younger colleague Timothy in the conduct of public worship, he places the Bible at its very center: “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching, . . . Practice these things, immerse yourself in them” (1 Tim. 4:13, 15). Paul’s direction was: read the Word; preach the Word! (Cf. 2 Tim. 4:2.) The early church sought to follow Paul’s exhortation. Justin Martyr, writing c. A.D. 150–155, describes a typical Lord’s Day: “On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has finished, the president speaks, instructing and exhorting the people to imitate these good things” (*First Apology* 1.67). In other words, the practice of these earliest churches was that the Scripture was to be read, and then preaching was to be based on that reading of the Word.

From the text. Paul directs Timothy, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). “Rightly handling” is a compound word in Greek, in which the first part comes from the Greek word *orthos*—“straight.” The exact charge to Timothy is to impart the word of truth *without deviation and without dilution*—to get it straight and give it straight! The preacher must preach the text, not the idea that brought him to the text. He must stand behind the Bible, not in front of it. He must preach what the passage says, not what he wants it to say.

Good preaching requires prayerfully interpreting the text in its context. This involves using the established rules of interpretation; understanding the text’s application both in its historical setting and in the whole of Scripture; discerning how it is a revelation of Jesus Christ and making the appropriate biblical connections; taking the trip from Jerusalem to one’s own town and coming to see its present relevance; articulating the theme of the text; using stories and illustrations which truly illuminate the text; and employing language that actually communicates in today’s culture.

From the heart. However, the proper use of the Bible in preaching requires more than good hermeneutics and homiletics; it also requires a heart that has been softened and prepared and sanctified by the Word that is to be preached. The Puritan William Ames (1576–1633) expressed it well:

Next to the evidence of truth, and the will of God drawn out of the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation. To this purpose it is very profitable, if besides the daily practice of piety we use serious meditation and fervent prayer to work those things upon our own hearts, which we would persuade others of.

Every appropriation of the truth preached will strengthen the preacher for preaching. Every act of repentance occasioned in his soul by the Word he now preaches will give conviction to his voice.

Jonathan Edwards’s *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections* (1746) has provided the best explanation of what must take place within the preacher. By “affections” Edwards meant one’s *heart*, one’s *inclinations*, and one’s *will*. As Edwards said, “true religion *consists in a great measure* in vigorous and lively actings and the inclination and will of the soul, or the fervent exercises of the heart.” Edwards demonstrates from a cascade of Scriptures that real Christianity so impacts the affections that it shapes one’s fears, hopes, loves, hatreds, desires, joys, sorrows, gratitudes, compassions, and zeals.

This is what should routinely happen to the preacher: the message should work its way through his whole intellectual and moral being as he prepares for and practices the proclamation of God’s Word. When the message has affected him deeply, then he is ready to preach. Sermon preparation is twenty hours of prayer. It is humble, holy, critical thinking. It is repeatedly asking the Holy Spirit for insight. It is the word penetrating into the depths of the preacher’s own soul. It is ongoing repentance. It is utter dependence. It is a singing heart.

The Bible’s Use in Public Worship

God’s Word deserves great reverence from his people. Isaiah writes, “But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:2). Therefore when Scripture is read aloud in a worship service, the reader and the congregation should take care to convey the reverent attention that Scripture deserves.

From its earliest days the church gave primacy to the reading of Holy Scripture, as seen in the apostle Paul’s aforementioned charge to Timothy to devote himself to “the public reading of Scripture,” as well as Justin Martyr’s account of the apostolic church’s practice of reading “the memoirs of the apostles and writings of the prophets . . . as long as time permits.” The regular custom soon was to have two extended public readings, one from the OT and one from the NT.

Reading of Scripture. Every Bible-believing church must give preeminence to Scripture in its public services of worship. This means that the Scripture to be expounded should be read aloud, and should be set forth in its full context. After all, the reading of God’s Word is the one place where we can be sure that we are hearing God. Responsive readings can be beneficial because they involve the congregation in voicing the sacred text.

There is substantial wisdom in keeping to the apostolic church’s custom of reading passages from the OT and NT in pairs, as it were, because this practice weekly reaffirms the continuity of the two Testaments, encourages biblical theology, and counters the tendencies of many today to pit the two Testaments against each other. It also substantially contributes to the service as a service of the Word in its unity and fullness.

Congregational response to the reading with a hearty “Amen!” or the time-honored “Thanks be to God” can further elevate the corporate assent to the centrality and authority of God’s Word. Jerome said of the congregational “Amen” in his day that at times it “seemed like a crack of thunder.” How glorious and how good for the soul!

Of course, such attention to God’s Word can also prove ineffective if the reading itself is left to a last-minute assignment, such that the reader fails to prepare mentally and spiritually for what he or she is required to do. All of us have heard the Scripture abused by a reader who hasn’t the faintest idea of the meaning of what he is reading, or by reading too fast, or mispronouncing common words, or by losing his place. This is not to suggest that the Scripture is to be read as dramatically as possible or performed as a reader’s theater. But how God-honoring it is to read God’s Word well, with a prayerful spirit. Pastors and readers can serve their congregations well by prayerfully reading the text a dozen times with pencil in hand *before* reading it to God’s people.

A service of the Word. The Bible’s use in preaching and public worship should be in such a way as to result in a Christ-exalting service of the Word. This requires work by the preacher and the leaders of the congregation, so that God’s Word is read to his glory, the sermon is derived from the faithful exposition of the text reading, and the reading and preaching of the biblical passage is set in the context of songs and hymns and programs that are redolent with the substance of God’s holy Word. ◀

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INTRODUCTION TO

THE PSALMS



Title

The book of Psalms, or Psalter, has supplied to believers some of their best-loved Bible passages. It is a collection of 150 poems that express a wide variety of emotions, including: love and adoration toward God, sorrow over sin, dependence on God in desperate circumstances, the battle of fear and trust, walking with God even when the way seems dark, thankfulness for God's care, devotion to the word of God, and confidence in the eventual triumph of God's purposes for the world.

The English title comes from the Greek word *psalmos*, which translates Hebrew *mizmor*, “song,” found in many of the Psalm titles and simply translated as “psalm” (e.g., Psalm 3). This Greek name for the book was established by the time of the NT (Luke 20:42; Acts 1:20). The Hebrew name for the book is *Tehillim*, “Praises,” pointing to the characteristic use of these songs as praises offered to God in public worship.

Theme

The Hebrew label for the psalms, “Praises,” may have originally reflected the idea, readily found today, that adoration and thanks to God are the primary acts of worship; but it would be better to learn from the title of the entire Psalter that the whole range of the psalms—from adoration and thanks to the needy cry for help (even the desolate moan of Psalm 88)—praises God when offered to him in the gathered worship of his people.

Authorship, Occasion, and Date

Many of the psalms have titles (e.g., see Psalms 3 and 4). These titles can include liturgical directions, historical notes, and—possibly—the identity of the author. The Hebrew word translated “of” (as in “of David”) can mean, according to its context, “belonging to,” “authored by,” or “about” (see note on Psalm 72); the same word can also be translated “to” (as in “to the choirmaster”). In the expression “a Psalm of David” (Psalm 3), the most natural sense is that it is “of” David because David wrote it; this is reflected in NT citations (e.g., Mark 12:36; Acts 2:25; Rom. 4:6; 11:9). Based on this, the simple “of David” (e.g., Psalm 11) is most readily taken in the same way.

Interpreting the titles this way yields David as the most common author of the Psalms: he appears in 73 titles, and the NT adds two more (Acts 4:25 for Psalm 2; and Heb. 4:7 for Psalm 95). Other authors include the Sons of Korah (11 psalms), Asaph (12 psalms), Solomon (possibly two psalms), and Moses (one). Other psalms do not identify the author at all.

Davidic authorship corresponds well with biblical testimony. David was “skillful in playing the lyre” (1 Sam. 16:16–23) and an accomplished songwriter (2 Sam. 1:17–27; 22:1–23:7); his reputation as “the sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Sam. 23:1) is highly credible, as is the way 1 Chronicles presents him as taking an active role in developing Israel's worship (e.g., 1 Chron. 16:4–7, 37–42; 23:2–6; 25:1–7). The Sons of Korah served in the sanctuary (1 Chron. 9:19), and some of them along with Asaph were “in charge of the service of song in the house of the LORD” (1 Chron. 6:31). (It is also conceivable that these last two names represent the headwaters of choirs or guilds that bear their names.) Solomon is known for his achievements in “wisdom,” but he also wrote “songs” (1 Kings 4:32), which could include two psalms (Psalm 127, and possibly Psalm 72). Moses provided songs for the whole assembled people (Ex. 15:1–18; Deut. 31:30–32:44; cf. 33:1–29).

By the end of the nineteenth century, many scholars had concluded that the titles in Psalms had little or no validity; some of their strongest arguments involved the presence of words and phrases in the psalms that look more at home in later Hebrew or even Aramaic than in standard biblical Hebrew; this would imply that the psalms as they exist today come from the first few centuries B.C. But the discovery of more ancient Near Eastern writings since that time has made it possible to give a fuller history of the Hebrew language and a fuller appreciation of ancient literary conventions, and it is now harder to sustain these arguments for late dating. Many scholars will now allow that quite a few of the psalms come from before the Babylonian exile. Coupled with the apparent antiquity of the authorship inscriptions, this provides a good reason for taking these inscriptions at face value. The NT authors accept David as author of the psalms attributed to him (e.g., Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16; 2:25; Rom. 4:6; 11:9), and sometimes the characters in a story make David's authorship a key part of their case (e.g., Luke 20:42; Acts 2:29, 34; 13:36–39). (For the question of what use to make of the authorship, esp. of David, see *The Psalms as Scripture*.)

Fourteen of the Davidic psalms add further information in their titles, connecting the psalm to a specific incident in David's life (see chart below). It is often said that they are later additions to the psalms, since they narrate events in the third person (while the psalm is in the first person). Some wonder as well whether such polished productions (e.g., Psalm 34) could have arisen from the circumstances described in the title. In reply, there is no reason why an author cannot narrate about himself in the third person (e.g., Isa. 20:2; Jer. 20:1–2; 21:1–3; 26:1–24; Hos. 1:2–6; etc.); further, the titles do not imply that David composed the psalm at the time of the event, only that the event led to the psalm. The fact that two of the titles cannot be correlated with anything in 1–2 Samuel argues against the idea that a later editor added these titles after carefully examining biblical texts. Finally, this historical information often lends help to both interpreting the psalm and discerning how it should be applied. Therefore the notes that follow employ this information.

A few of the psalms seem originally to have been written for a particular occasion, and the individual expositions will discuss that possibility (e.g., Psalms 24; 68; 118). Perhaps they came to be used in specific festivals in order to commemorate the original events. Some scholars have suggested that the liturgical calendar found in Leviticus is a late invention, and that the early period of Israel (when some of the psalms were first written) had annual festivals analogous to those found in other cultures; hence they tried to associate particular psalms with places in these hypothetical festivals. The evidence for such a construction is poor, and many today try to connect various psalms with the biblical festivals. One difficulty with this is that there is so little information in the OT itself about how many aspects of the worship were conducted. In addition to the festivals, Leviticus 23:3 sets the weekly Sabbath as a day of "holy convocation." It is unclear what kind of meeting is expected in the villages week by week, but it seems to be some kind of worship. Therefore, while it seems true that some psalms are intended for particular festivals or celebrations (e.g., Psalm 65 as a harvest thanksgiving), it also is clear that many psalms are suitable year round, and could be used as needed; indeed, Psalm 92 is a thanksgiving for the weekly Sabbath worship.

Psalm	Incident	References
3	David flees from and battles Absalom	2 Samuel 15–17
7	The words of Cush, a Benjaminite (persecution by Saul?)	unknown
18	David delivered from enemies and from Saul	2 Samuel 22
30	Dedication of the temple	Nothing in David's life; cf. 1 Kings 8:63
34	David delivered from danger by feigning madness in the presence of King Achish of Gath	1 Sam. 21:12–22:1
51	Nathan confronts David about his adultery with Bathsheba	2 Samuel 11–12
52	Doeg the Edomite tells Saul that David went to the house of Ahimelech	1 Sam. 22:9–19
54	The Ziphites tell Saul that David is hiding among them	1 Sam. 23:19
56	The Philistines seize David in Gath	1 Sam. 21:10–11
57	David flees from Saul into a cave	1 Sam. 22:1 or 24:3
59	Saul sends men to watch David's house in order to kill him	1 Sam. 19:11
60	David's victory over Transjordan	2 Sam. 8:1–14
63	David in the desert of Judah	2 Samuel 15–17?; 1 Sam. 23:14–15?
142	David flees from Saul into a cave	Same as Psalm 57

The individual psalms come from diverse periods of Israel's history: from the time of Moses (15th or 13th century B.C.), to that of David and Solomon (10th century), down to exilic and postexilic times (e.g., Psalm 137). A number of factors clearly indicate that the book of Psalms in its present form is the product of a process of collecting (and possibly of editing) from a variety of sources; such factors include:

- The division into five books and the affinity groupings, e.g., Psalms 1–2; 113–118 (the Egyptian Hallel; see notes on Psalms 113–118); Psalms 120–134 (the Songs of Ascents); and the final Hallelujah of Psalms 146–150 (see discussion of Structure);
- the existence of the almost identical Psalms 14 and 53;
- the notice in 72:20 about the end of David's prayers (while there are still plenty of Davidic psalms to follow).

There is no way to tell what kind of editing the collectors might have done as they incorporated a composition into the developing Psalter; recognized scribal practices include minor things like updating spelling and grammar, and clarifying place names. If the regard for an author's inspiration was as high as it should have been (1 Chron. 25:1–5 describes some of the psalmists as “prophesying” and as “seers,” which means they convey God's own words), then it is unlikely that the editors went much beyond the recognized scribal practices. It is likely that many of the psalms began as intensely personal poems, which were then adapted for congregational use (e.g., see note on Psalm 51), possibly even by the original author. It is also likely that some psalms were composed by stitching together preexisting material (e.g., Psalm 108); but, for the faithful, it is the final form that is canonical, and that is the focus of these notes.

It appears that at every stage of this editorial process, the Psalter served as the songbook of the worshipping people of God.

Key Themes

The Psalter is fundamentally the hymnbook of the *people of God* at worship. The Psalms take the basic themes of OT theology and turn them into song. Thus, themes common throughout the OT (see pp. ****–****) reappear in the Psalms and include the following:

1. *Monothelism*. The one true God, maker of heaven and earth and ruler of all things, will vindicate his own goodness and justice, in his own time. Every human being must know and love this God, whose spotless moral purity, magnificent power and wisdom, steadfast faithfulness, and unceasing love are breathtakingly beautiful.

2. *Creation and fall*. Though God made man with dignity and purpose, all people since the fall are beset with sins and weaknesses that only God's grace can heal.

3. *Election and covenant*. The one true God chose a people for himself and bound himself to them by his covenant. This covenant expressed God's intention to save the people, and through them to bring light to the rest of the world.

4. *Covenant membership*. In his covenant, God offers his grace to his people: the forgiveness of their sins, the shaping of their lives in this world to reflect his own glory, and a part to play in bringing light to the Gentiles. Each member of God's people is responsible to lay hold of this grace from the heart: to believe the promises, to grow in obeying the commands, and to keep on doing so all their lives long. Those who lay hold in this way are the faithful, as distinct from the unfaithful among God's people; they enjoy the full benefits of God's love, and they find boundless delight in knowing God. Each of the faithful is a member of a people, a corporate entity; the members have a mutual participation in the life of the whole people. Therefore the spiritual and moral well-being of the whole affects the well-being of each of the members, and each member contributes to the others by his own spiritual and moral life. Thus each one shares the joys and sorrows of the others, and of the whole. The faithful will suffer in this life, often at the hands of the unfaithful, and sometimes from those outside God's people. The right response to this suffering is not personal revenge but believing prayer, confident that God will make all things right in his own time.

5. *Eschatology*. The story of God's people is headed toward a glorious future, in which all kinds of people will come to know the Lord and join his people. It is part of the dignity of God's people that, in God's mysterious wisdom, their personal faithfulness contributes to the story getting to its goal. The Messiah, the ultimate heir of David, will lead his people in the great task of bringing light to the Gentiles.

History of Salvation Summary

Throughout history God has been fashioning a people for himself who will love and obey him, and who will express and nourish their corporate life in gathered worship. The Psalms served as a vehicle for the prayers and praises of God's people in Israel, and Christians today, who have been grafted into the olive tree of God's ancient people (Rom. 11:17, 24), can join their voices together with these ancient people in their worship. There are indeed adjustments to be made, now that Jesus has died and risen (see The Psalms as Scripture), and yet Gentile believers in Jesus may rejoice with the people of God of all ages. (For an explanation of the "History of Salvation," see the Overview of the Bible, pp. ****-****. See also History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ, pp. ****-****.)

Musical Terms

There are several Hebrew words and phrases in the Psalms, such as "Selah" (e.g., 3:2), "The Sheminith" (Psalm 6 title), "Shiggaion" (Psalm 7 title), whose exact meaning is uncertain—which is why the translators have simply transliterated them, as any attempt to translate would be misleading. The ESV footnotes indicate that these are probably terms for musical or liturgical direction. (Cf. how Psalms 4 and 5 refer to musical instruments in their titles.) In some cases these may be things like names of tunes or chant styles (see note on "Do not destroy" in Psalm 57 title).

Curses in the Psalms

Many psalms call on God for help as the faithful are threatened with harm from enemies (often called "the wicked"—frequently the unfaithful who persecute the godly, and sometimes Gentile oppressors). In a number of places, the requested help is that God would punish these enemies. Christians, with the teaching and example of Jesus (in passages like Matt. 5:38–48; Luke 23:34; 1 Pet. 2:19–23; cf. Acts 7:6), may wonder what to make of such curses: How can it possibly be right for God's people to pray in this way? Many have supposed that this is an area in which the ethics of the NT improve upon and supersede the OT. Others suggest that these only apply to the church's warfare with its ultimate enemy, Satan, and his demons. Neither of these is fully satisfying, both because the NT authors portray themselves as heirs of OT ethics (cf. Matt. 22:34–40) and because the NT has some curses of its own (e.g., 1 Cor. 16:22; Gal. 1:8–9; Rev. 6:9–10), even finding instruction in some of the Psalms' curses (e.g., Acts 1:20 and Rom. 11:9–10, using Psalms 69 and 109). Each of the psalm passages must be taken on its own, and the notes address these questions (e.g., see notes on 5:10; 35:4–8; 58:6–9; 59:11–17; 69:22–28; 109:6–20; and the note on Psalm 137, which contains the most striking curse of all). At the same time, some general principles will help in understanding these passages.

First, one must be clear that the people being cursed are not enemies over trivial matters; they are people who hate the faithful precisely for their faith; they mock God and use ruthless and deceitful means to suppress the godly (cf. 5:4–6, 9–10; 10:15; 42:3; 94:2–7).

Second, it is worth remembering that these curses are in poetic form, and can employ extravagant and vigorous expressions. (The exact fulfillment is left to God.)

Third, these curses are expressions of moral indignation, not of personal vengeance. For someone who knows God, it is unbearably wrong that those who persecute the faithful and turn people away from God should get away with it, and even seem to prosper. Zion is the city of God, the focus of his affection (cf. Psalms 48; 122), and it is unthinkable that God himself could tolerate cruel men taking delight in destroying it. Thus these psalms are prayers for God to vindicate himself, displaying his righteousness for all the world to see (cf. 10:17–18). Further, these are prayers that God will do what he said he will do: 35:5 looks back to 1:4, and even 137:9 has Isaiah 13:16 as its backdrop. Most of these prayers assume that the persecutors will not repent; however, in one place (Ps. 83:17), the prayer actually looks to the punishment as leading to their conversion.

Fourth, the OT ethical system forbids personal revenge (e.g., Lev. 19:17–18; Prov. 24:17; 25:21–22), a prohibition that the NT inherits (cf. Rom. 12:19–21).

Thus, when the NT writers employ these curses or formulate their own (as above), they are following the OT guidelines. Any prayer for the Lord to hasten his coming must mean disaster for the impenitent (2 Thess. 1:5–10). Yet Christians must keep as their deepest desire, even for those who mean harm to the church, that others would come to trust in Christ and love his people (cf. Luke 23:34; Rom. 9:1–3; 10:1; 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). Hence, when they pray for God to protect his people against their persecutors, they should be explicit about asking God to lead such people to repentance. With these things in mind, then, it is still possible that the faithful today might sing or read aloud even these sections of the Psalms.

The Psalms as Scripture

The OT certainly presents the Psalms as part of God's inspired Word: 1 Chronicles 25:1–6 says that a number of sanctuary personnel “prophesied,” and that one was a “seer” (a synonym for “prophet”). Some of these men appear as authors of canonical psalms. It is important to clarify just how the psalms are to function for the people of God.

Their primary function has already been mentioned: the Psalter is the songbook of the people of God in their gathered worship. These songs cover a wide range of experiences and emotions, and give God's people the words to express these emotions and to bring these experiences before God. At the same time, the psalms do not simply *express* emotions: when sung in faith, they actually *shape* the emotions of the godly. The emotions are therefore not a problem to be solved but are part of the raw material of now-fallen humanity that can be shaped to good and noble ends. The psalms, as songs, act deeply on the emotions, for the good of his people. It is not “natural” to trust God in hardship, and yet the Psalms provide a way of doing just that, and enable the singers to trust better as a result of singing them. A person staring at the night sky might not know quite what to do with the mixed fear and wonder he finds in himself, and singing Psalm 8 will enrich his ability to respond.

The Psalms also provide guidance in the approach to worship: at times they offer content that is difficult to digest, calling on God's people to use their minds as well as their hearts and voices. They show profound respect for God as well as uninhibited delight in him. They enable the whole congregation to take upon themselves, to own, the troubles and victories of the individual members, so that everyone can “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15). They enable God's people more fully to enjoy being under his care, and to want more keenly to be pure and holy, seeing purity and holiness as part of God's fatherly gift rather than as a burden.

David is the author of about half the Psalms. His role as king over Israel was more than that of a ruler, and more than that of an inspired author. The king was to represent and even embody the people, and the well-being of the whole people was tied to the faithfulness of the king (see notes on the royal psalms, e.g., Psalms 2; 89; 132). As a representative, the king was to aim to be the ideal Israelite. David, then, writes as a representative, and the readers must discern whether the emphasis of the psalm is more on his role as *ruler*—which he does not share with “ordinary” Israelites—or more on his role as *ideal Israelite*, in which he is an example for all. Most of the historical occasions in the psalm titles allow the reader to appreciate the way in which exemplary faith meets concrete situations, and then to apply that faith to features of his or her own situation that are analogous to those in the psalm.

These notes reflect the conviction that Christians are the heirs of the ancient people of God. Much has changed: the final heir of David has arrived and taken his throne (Rom. 1:4), and the people of God are no longer defined as a particular nation. The sacrifice of Jesus has radically altered the way that Christians look at the Levitical system. And yet Paul can include Gentile Christians as heirs of Abraham (Rom. 4:11–12), and ask Gentile Christians to think of the OT people as their “fathers” (1 Cor. 10:1). Therefore a large portion of these functions of the Psalms already mentioned still apply to Christians. The notes include suggestions as to how Christians might employ the psalms, making the necessary changes for application to their own lives.

Christians have generally used the Psalms in their worship (cf. Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), even though they have not agreed on whether they may use *only* canonical psalms. That topic goes far beyond this discussion; it will be enough to say that all Christians would profit from a more deliberate effort to use the Psalms in their worship.

Literary Features

As already mentioned, the book of Psalms is an anthology of individual poems. It is important to remember that these are poems to be sung, and thus are to be read differently than, say, a doctrinal or ethical treatise. Because the content of these songs is expressed in a poetic idiom, readers need to be ready to interpret such staples of poetry as image, metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, and apostrophe (see chart, p. ****). All of these factors contribute to the rhetoric of a psalm, the way it enables the singers to own the psalm's view of the world, and how it shapes their emotional structure so that they can “lean into” the world in a godly manner.

Guiding principles for reading the psalms include the following: The individual psalms should first be read as self-contained compositions. Sometimes it is helpful to see them as part of an ongoing sequence (e.g., Psalms 111–112). Further, within a particular psalm, the author does not always spell out his flow of

Term	Explanation	Example
Image	A word or phrase that names a concrete action or thing; by extension, a character, setting, or event in a story is an image—a concrete embodiment of human experience or an idea.	See examples in notes.
Metaphor	An implied comparison that does not use the formula <i>like</i> or <i>as</i> : “The Lord is my shepherd” (Ps. 23:1).	“The Lord is my shepherd” (Ps. 23:1).
Simile	A figure of speech in which a writer compares two things using the formula <i>like</i> or <i>as</i> .	“He is like a tree planted by streams of water” (Ps. 1:3).
Personification	A figure of speech in which human attributes are given to something nonhuman, such as animals, objects, or abstract qualities.	Light and truth are personified as guides in Psalm 43:3.
Hyperbole	A figure of speech in which a writer consciously exaggerates for the sake of effect; usually that effect is emotional, and thus, loosely put, hyperbole usually expresses emotional truth rather than literal truth.	“My tears have been my food day and night” (Ps. 42:3).
Apostrophe	A figure of speech in which the writer addresses someone absent as though present and capable of responding. By slight extension, an apostrophe might be an address to something nonhuman as though it were human and capable of responding, even if the speaker is in the presence of the object.	The poet in Psalm 148:3 might well be looking up at the sun, moon, or stars as he commands them to praise God.

thought; one must use a disciplined imagination to follow the connections. Finally, readers must begin with the premise that poets present their material in images rather than abstractions, and that they prefer the figurative or nonliteral to the literal.

All of the Psalms are written in the verse form of parallelism, on which see Introduction to Poetic and Wisdom Literature, pp. ****-****.

Scholars have tended to identify psalms according to their types (praise, lament, etc.). Unfortunately, scholars vary in their list of types, and it is easy to multiply categories to account for the particularities of each psalm—and soon one can end up with 150 categories! Nevertheless, used reasonably, this approach can shed light on the different purposes of the various psalms. The basic categories include:

- *Laments*, whose primary function is to lay a troubled situation before the Lord, asking him for help. There are community laments, dealing with trouble faced by the people of God as a whole (e.g., Psalm 12), and individual laments, where the troubles face a particular member of the people (e.g., Psalm 13). This category is the largest by far, including as much as a third of the whole Psalter.
- *Hymns of praise*, whose primary goal is to call and enable God’s people to admire God’s great attributes and deeds. These can focus, e.g., on a particular set of attributes (e.g., on God’s benevolence in Psalm 145), on God’s universal kingship over his creation (e.g., Psalm 93), or on God’s works of creation (e.g., Psalm 8).
- *Hymns of thanksgiving*, which thank God for his answer to a petition; sometimes the petition can be identified as one of the lament psalms. Like laments, there are community (e.g., Psalm 9) and individual (e.g., Psalm 30) thanksgiving psalms.
- *Hymns celebrating God’s law*, which speak of the wonders of the Torah (the Law of Moses), and help worshipers to aspire to obey it more fully (e.g., Psalm 119).
- *Wisdom psalms*, which take themes from the Wisdom Books (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon) and make them the topic of song (e.g., Psalms 1; 37).
- *Songs of confidence*, which enable worshipers to deepen their trust in God through all manner of difficult circumstances (e.g., Psalm 23).
- *Royal psalms*, which are concerned with the Davidic monarchy as the vehicle of blessing for the people of God. Some of these are prayers (e.g., Psalm 20), some are thanksgivings (e.g., Psalm 21). All relate to the Messiah, the ultimate heir of David, either by setting a pattern (Psalms 20–21) or by portraying the king’s reign in such a way that only the Messiah can completely fulfill it (e.g., Psalms 2; 72), or by focusing primarily on the future aspect (e.g., Psalm 110).
- *Historical psalms*, which take a lesson from the history of God’s dealings with his people; these are generally corporate in their focus (e.g., Psalm 78).
- *Prophetic hymns*, which echo themes found in the prophets, especially calling the people to covenant faithfulness (e.g., Psalm 81).

There are other elements in the psalms, such as penitence (see Psalms 6; 25; 32; 38; 51; 130; 143), claims of innocence (e.g., Psalm 26), yearning for God (e.g., Psalm 27), curses or imprecations (see Curses in the Psalms).

There are psalms that seem to have been written for specific liturgical occasions (e.g., Psalm 24, and possibly Psalms 68 and 118). There are groups of psalms, such as the Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113–118) and Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120–134); see notes on the individual psalms. Further, a psalm may fit mostly in one category, but that does not mean that elements of another category cannot also appear (cf. the note on Psalm 34, a thanksgiving psalm with a wisdom section; and note on Psalm 56, which combines lament and thanksgiving).

Structure

The most basic structure of the Psalter is the easiest to see: it is a collection of 150 separate songs. It is possible that Psalms 42–43 are really two parts of one combined song, and Psalms 9–10 are companions (though not part of the same psalm; see note on Psalm 9).

The standard Hebrew text divides the Psalms into five “books,” perhaps in imitation of the five books of the Pentateuch. The psalm that ends each book finishes with a doxology (see note on Ps. 41:13), and Psalm 150 as a whole is the conclusion both of Book 5 and of the entire Psalter.

Book 1	Psalms 1–41	Psalms 1–2 have no titles that attribute authorship (but see Acts 4:25 for Psalm 2); they provide an introduction to the Psalms as a whole. The remainder of Book 1 is made up almost entirely of psalms of David: only Psalms 10 (but see note on Psalm 9) and 33 lack a Davidic superscription. Prayers issuing from a situation of distress dominate, punctuated by statements of confidence in the God who alone can save (e.g., 9; 11; 16; 18), striking the note that concludes the book (40–41). Reflections on ethics and worship with integrity are found in Psalms 1; 14–15; 19; 24; and 26.
Book 2	Psalms 42–72	From the Davidic voice of Book 1, Book 2 introduces the first Korah collection (42–49, although 43 lacks a superscription), with a single Asaph psalm at Psalm 50. A further Davidic collection is found in Psalms 51–65 and 68–69, including the bulk of the “historical” superscriptions (51–52; 54; 56–57; 59–60; 63). Once again, lament and distress dominate the content of these prayers, which now also include a communal voice (e.g., Psalm 44; cf. Psalms 67; 68). The lone psalm attributed to Solomon concludes Book 2 with the Psalms’ pinnacle of royal theology (72; cf. 45).
Book 3	Psalms 73–89	The tone darkens further in Book 3. The opening Psalm 73 starkly questions the justice of God before seeing light in God’s presence; that light has almost escaped the psalmist in Psalm 88, the bleakest of all psalms. Book 2 ended with the high point of royal aspirations; Book 3 concludes in Psalm 89 with these expectations badly threatened. Sharp rays of hope occasionally pierce the darkness (e.g., Psalms 75; 85; 87). The brief third book contains most of the psalms of Asaph (Psalms 73–83), as well as another set of Korah psalms (Psalms 84–85; 87–88).
Book 4	Psalms 90–106	Psalm 90 opens the fourth book of the psalms. It may be seen as the first response to the problems raised by the third book (Psalms 72–89). Psalm 90, attributed to Moses, reminds the worshiper that God was active on Israel’s behalf long before David. This theme is taken up in Psalms 103–106, which summarize God’s dealings with his people before any kings reigned. In between there is a group of psalms (93–100) characterized by the refrain “The Lord reigns.” This truth refutes the doubts of Psalm 89.
Book 5	Psalms 107–150	The structure of Book 5 reflects the closing petition of Book 4 in 106:47. It declares that God does answer prayer (Psalm 107) and concludes with five Hallelujah psalms (146–150). In between there are several psalms affirming the validity of the promises to David (Psalms 110; 132; 144), two collections of Davidic psalms (108–110; 138–45), the longest psalm, celebrating the value of the law (Psalm 119), and 15 psalms of ascent for use by pilgrims to Jerusalem (Psalms 120–34).

There are other evidences of editorial arrangement: e.g., Psalms 1–2 form the doorway into the whole Psalter; Psalms 111–112 illuminate each other; and some “affinity groupings” of psalms celebrating God’s universal kingship (Psalms 93; 95–99), historical psalms (e.g., Psalms 104–107; see note on Psalm 107), the Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113–118), the Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120–134), and the final Hallelujah Psalms (Psalms 146–150). There appear to be other factors that have led to psalms being grouped together, as the notes observe.

However, the question of whether there is an overarching scheme that governs all 150 psalms remains a recurring topic in scholarly discussion. It is entirely possible that those who compiled the Psalter arranged the individual psalms to address the concerns of their age. The difficulty is that many structural schemes have been proposed but none has won universal agreement, nor does any of them seem fully persuasive (therefore no overall outline of the book has been included here). But the absence of an overall structural scheme is no surprise when dealing with a songbook, which is what the Psalter is.

THE PSALMS

BOOK ONE

The Way of the Righteous and the Wicked

- 1 Blessed is the man¹
 who^a walks not in^b the counsel of the wicked,
 nor stands in^c the way of sinners,
 nor^d sits in^e the seat of^f scoffers;
 2 but his^g delight is in the law² of the LORD,
 and on his^h law he meditates day and night.
 3 He is likeⁱ a tree
 planted by^j streams of water
 that yields its fruit in its season,
 and its^k leaf does not wither.
 In all that he does, he prospers.
 4 The wicked are not so,
 but are like^m chaff that the wind drives away.
 5 Therefore the wickedⁿ will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in^o the congregation of the righteous;

Psalm 1

1^aProv. 4:14, 15 ^bJob 21:16
^cProv. 1:10 ^dPs. 26:4; Jer.
 15:17 ^e[Ps. 107:32] ^fProv.
 1:22; 3:34; 19:29; 21:24;
 29:8; [Isa. 28:14]
 2^gPs. 112:1; 119:35, 47, 92
^hPs. 119:1; 97; Josh. 1:8
 3ⁱJer. 17:8; Ezek. 19:10;
 [Num. 24:6; Job 29:19]
^jPs. 46:4 ^kEzek. 47:12;
 [Isa. 34:4] ^lGen. 39:3, 23;
 [Ps. 128:2; Isa. 3:10]
 4^mSee Job 21:18
 5ⁿPs. 5:5; 76:7; Nah. 1:6;
 Luke 21:36; Eph. 6:13
^oEzek. 13:9]

¹ The singular Hebrew word for *man* (*ish*) is used here to portray a representative example of a godly person; see preface ² Or *instruction*

Psalm 1. The first psalm serves as the gateway into the entire book of Psalms, stressing that those who would worship God genuinely must embrace his Law (or Torah), i.e., his covenant instruction. This psalm takes topics found in wisdom literature such as Proverbs and makes them the subject of song; the purpose is that those who sing the psalm will own its values—namely, they will want more and more to be people who love the Torah, who believe it, who see themselves as the heirs and stewards of its story of redemption and hope, and who seek to carry out its moral requirements. They can delight in the idea of being among the “righteous,” feeling that nothing can compare with such blessedness. By its sustained contrast, the psalm reminds readers that in the end there are really only two ways to live.

1:1–2 Contrasting Sources of Values. The truly happy person guides his life by God’s instruction, rather than by the advice of those who reject that instruction.

1:1 Blessed. The truly happy person is happy because God showers him with favor. Jesus uses the Greek equivalent in Matt. 5:3–11; cf. also James 1:12. The Latin translation, *beatus*, is the source of the word *beatitude*. **the man.** A specific, godly individual (Hb. *ha’ish*, “the man”) is held up as an example for others to imitate. Such teaching by use of a concrete example is common in OT wisdom literature. **wicked . . . sinners . . . scoffers.** These are people, even within Israel, who refuse to live by the covenant; the godly person refuses to follow the moral orientation of such people’s lifestyle. Some have seen an increasing level of sinfulness in the terms “wicked-sinners-scoffers,” together with an increasing loyalty in the metaphors “walk-stand-sit”; however, it is likely that the terms “wicked” and “sinner” here are equivalent, while a “scoffer” is certainly more committed to evil (see note on Prov. 19:25–20:1).

1:2 the law of the LORD. As the ESV footnote indicates, this could be taken

as God’s *instruction* (Hb. *torah*, which often designates the Law of Moses), particularly as he speaks in his covenant. For this reason no one should ever think that such a person receives his blessedness by deserving it, since the covenant is founded on God’s grace. **Meditates** describes an active pondering, perhaps even muttering to oneself in pursuit of insight. Some suppose **day and night** speaks of the work of professional scholars who spend all their time pondering the words of the law, but in view of the similar instruction in Josh. 1:8, readers should see this as setting the ideal of facing every situation, be it ever so mundane, with a view to pleasing the Lord by knowing and following his word.

1:3–4 Contrasting Fruitfulness. Here are two similes, based on agriculture in ancient Palestine, describing the effects of the two kinds of people.

1:3 The first image is that of a **tree** in a dry climate, which nevertheless thrives because of its constant supply of **water**. A tree bears fruit, not for itself, but for others; thus, when the faithful **prosper**, it is not for himself, nor is the prospering even necessarily material, but he succeeds in bringing benefit to others. See Jer. 17:8 for the same image.

1:4 wicked. See v. 1. **chaff.** This is the husks and straw removed by threshing, and it is lighter than the edible kernels; when a farmer tosses threshed wheat into the air, **the wind drives away** the chaff. Those who reject God’s covenant are like chaff in that they bring no benefit to anyone (cf. 35:5).

1:5–6 Contrasting Outcomes of Their Lives. These two verses lead readers to reflect on where these two kinds of life are headed, showing that God will make the contrast last forever.

1:5 Therefore indicates that these verses are the conclusion of the psalm. **judgment.** This could be any particular judgment that falls on the **wicked** in this life, but it is more likely the final judgment, which allows some to enter the **congregation of the righteous**, while excluding others (Eccles. 12:14).

⁶Ps. 31:7; 37:18; 144:3;
Nah. 1:7; [John 10:14;
2 Tim. 2:19] ⁹Ps. 37:5

Psalm 2

¹Cited Acts 4:25, 26 ¹[Ps. 46:6]

²Ps. 18:50; 20:6; 45:7;
89:20

³Jer. 5:5

⁴Ps. 11:4; 29:10; [Isa. 40:22] ¹⁰Ps. 37:13; 59:8;
Job 22:19; Prov. 1:26

⁵Rev. 6:16, 17

⁶Prov. 8:23 ²2 Sam. 5:7;
Ps. 110:2 ⁹Ps. 3:4; 15:1;
43:3; 99:9

⁷Rom. 1:4; Cited Acts
13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5

⁸[Ps. 72:8; 89:27; Dan.
7:14]

⁹Ps. 89:23; Job 34:24

¹⁰Rev. 2:27; 12:5; 19:15
¹Isa. 30:14; Jer. 19:11

2

6 for the LORD ^Pknows ^Qthe way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

The Reign of the LORD's Anointed

- 1 'Why do ^Sthe nations rage¹
and the peoples plot in vain?
- 2 The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against his ^IAnointed, saying,
- 3 "Let us ^Uburst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us."
- 4 He who ^Vsits in the heavens ^Wlaughs;
the Lord holds them in derision.
- 5 Then he will speak to them in his ^Xwrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
- 6 "As for me, I have ^Yset my King
on ^ZZion, my ^aholy hill."
- 7 I will tell of the decree:
The LORD said to me, ^b"You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.
- 8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and ^cthe ends of the earth your possession.
- 9 You shall ^dbreak² them with ^ea rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like ^fa potter's vessel."
- 10 Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.

¹ Or nations noisily assemble ² Revocalization yields (compare Septuagint) You shall rule

1:6 Knows must be something stronger than simply "knows about," since God knows about the wicked and their deepest secrets (cf. 94:8–11). Some have argued that the word means "cares for," but it is better to take this as "knows with affection and approval, i.e., prefers" (cf. Gen. 18:19; Amos 3:2). **will perish.** That is, end in destruction.

Psalm 2. When the people of God sing Psalm 2, they remind themselves of how God made David and his descendants to be kings in order to enable them to fulfill the very purpose for which Abraham was called (to bring blessing to all nations, Gen. 12:1–3). Thus it can be called a *royal psalm*. The pious Israelite realizes that his hope of blessing is now irrevocably tied to the house of David (cf. 2 Sam. 7:12–16), and so he prays that God will keep the king pure. At a time when the Gentile kingdoms that are part of the Davidic empire seek to throw off Israelite rule, this psalm recalls the promises made to the Davidic king at his coronation and notes that the Gentiles will find lasting joy only as subjects of this king. With its prospect of a worldwide rule for the house of David, the psalm also looks to the future, when the Davidic Messiah will indeed accomplish this; in fact, the scope of such an accomplishment calls for a ruler who is more than a mere man.

2:1–3 The Gentile Kings in Revolt. In vv. 1–2 several kings of Gentile peoples who are vassals of the Davidic king propose a revolt to throw off Israelite rule; in v. 3 they speak their goal.

2:2 Anointed. Samuel anointed both Saul (1 Sam. 10:1) and David (1 Sam. 16:13), setting them apart as king, whose task was to rule Israel and to embody covenant faithfulness. The word *Messiah* comes from transliterating the Hebrew word for "Anointed," and the word *Christ* comes from translating "Anointed" into Greek. For the Gentiles to rebel against the heir of David is to rebel against the Lord who installed him; it is also to cut themselves off from their only hope of knowing the one true God. In Acts 4:25–26, the early Christians saw the persecution they faced as the same kind of foolish rebellion.

2:4–6 Heaven's Perspective on the Revolt. Since the Lord is not dismayed,

neither do his people need to be. In fact, God laughs at the rebels and declares his firm purpose to establish the throne of David as he has promised.

2:7–9 The Davidic King Speaks. The king recalls what God had said at his coronation. Lying behind this is the promise that the line of David will be sure forever before the Lord (2 Sam. 7:16) and that the obedience of the peoples will come to the ruler from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10), together with the very purpose for choosing Abraham and his offspring.

2:7 decree. That is, the divine oracle spoken when the king took his throne. **The LORD said.** Although many suppose that this psalm is for the crowning of a king, the past tense indicates that the king recalls the oracle at a later time of trouble. **You are my Son.** In 2 Sam. 7:14, God says that he will take the heir of David as a "son." The people as a whole are called the "son of God" (see Ex. 4:22–23; Ps. 80:15; Hos. 11:1), and the king is called the "son of God" because he represents and embodies the people (see also Ps. 89:27). Hebrews 1:5 brings Ps. 2:7 together with 2 Sam. 7:14: this shows that the argument of that book assumes that Jesus is the messianic heir of David (the Son of God), into whom God has also folded the priestly office. In Acts 13:33 (a speech of Paul) and Rom. 1:4, Paul portrays the resurrection of Jesus as his coronation, his entry into his Davidic rule.

2:8 nations. That is, the Gentiles, including those in revolt (v. 1). The primary messianic picture of the OT is of the heir of David who will lead his people in bringing the light to the nations, by making them his subjects; this is how the nations of the earth will find blessing for themselves in him (see Gen. 22:18; see also Ps. 72:8–11, 17); thus Paul looks forward to the obedience of faith among all the nations (Rom. 1:5).

2:9 break (Hb. *tero'em*). As the esv footnote says, the Septuagint (used in Rev. 2:27; 12:5; 19:15) renders this as "rule"; this comes from using the same Hebrew consonants with different vowels (*tir'em*).

2:10–12 Advice to the Gentile Kings. The kings must understand that the ruler whom they reject is not just another human ruler but is God's own appointed king for the sake of the whole world. Therefore they serve their best interest by submitting to David's heir.

2:10 kings . . . rulers of the earth. See v. 2.

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INTRODUCTION TO

ISAIAH



Author and Title

The opening words of the book explain that this is “the vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz” (1:1). Unlike Jeremiah, who discloses aspects of his inner personal life (e.g., Jer. 20:7–12), Isaiah says little about himself. Isaiah 6 records his call to prophesy, openly revealing his innermost thoughts on that occasion. Chapters 7–8, 20, and 37–39 offer glimpses into his public ministry. The parallel accounts in 2 Kings 19–20 add a little. The NT bears witness to his prophetic foresight (John 12:37–41) and boldness (Rom. 10:20). Beyond this, the Bible’s sole interest is in Isaiah’s message, which is summed up in the meaning of his name: “Yahweh is salvation.”

Isaiah’s father was Amoz (1:1), but the Bible says nothing more of him. Jewish tradition claims that Amoz was a brother of Amaziah, king of Judah, putting Isaiah into the royal family. It is clear that Isaiah was a married man and a father (7:3; 8:3, 18). He appears to have been a resident of Jerusalem (7:3). Hebrews 11:37 (“they were sawn in two”; see note there) may allude to the tradition of Isaiah’s death under persecution by Manasseh, king of Judah (687–642 B.C.; cf. *Lives of the Prophets* 1.1; *Martyrdom of Isaiah* 5.1–14).

Isaiah’s record of the reign of King Uzziah (2 Chron. 26:22) is not to be identified with the biblical book of Isaiah.

The title presents the book as “the *vision* of Isaiah the son of Amoz” (1:1). Israel’s prophets were indeed seers (2 Kings 6:15–17; 17:13; Isa. 29:10; 30:10). Isaiah himself “saw the Lord” (6:1), but his visionary insights were made shareable by being put into a written message: “The *word* that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw” (2:1). Isaiah’s book is a vision in that it reveals, through symbols and reasoned thought, a God-centered way of seeing and living. It offers everyone the true alternative to the false appearances of this world.

Date

Isaiah prophesied “in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (1:1). His call to ministry came “in the year that King Uzziah died” (6:1), around 740 B.C., and he lived long enough to record the death of Sennacherib (37:38), datable to 681. A few of the oracles can be dated, as the notes below will show: e.g., chapter 7 comes from about 735 B.C.; chapters 36–38 come from the time of the Assyrian invasion, 701. Most of the material, however, can be dated only in very general terms because the book offers no such information.

Some scholars theorize that more than one author was responsible for this book. These scholars spread the authorship of the book through multiple hands writing over the course of around 200 years. This theory proposes that, though chapters 1–39 are largely the work of Isaiah, chapters 40–66 are the work of an anonymous prophet living during the Babylonian exile, over a century after Isaiah. Many propose further that chapters 56–66 were composed by yet another, still later, anonymous prophet. This would yield First Isaiah (chs. 1–39), from the late eighth century B.C.; Second Isaiah (chs. 40–55), from the middle of the sixth century; and Third Isaiah (chs. 56–66), from sometime in the fifth century. There are three primary reasons offered for not attributing chapters 40–66 to Isaiah the son of Amoz: (1) Chapters 40–66 assume the exilic period as their background. (2) Chapters 40–66 have differences in style from chapters 1–39. (3) The detailed predictions in the latter section of the book would have been meaningful to the exilic and postexilic community of Judah, but (according to this view) would not have been relevant to the people of Isaiah’s own time.

These reasons for dividing the book suffer from severe shortcomings, and it is better to take the heading (1:1) as indicating that the entire book comes from Isaiah, the son of Amoz.

1. There is unified testimony from the ancient world for single authorship. (1) The NT refers to passages throughout the book as the work of Isaiah (see Matt. 3:3; 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:17–21; 13:14–15; 15:7–9; Mark 7:6–7; Luke 3:4–6; 4:17–19; John 1:23; 12:37–41; Acts 8:27–35; 28:25–27; Rom. 9:27–29; 10:16, 20–21; 15:12). The NT acknowledges no other author or authors. The testimony of Jesus in John 12:41 is especially instructive: “Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.” “These things,” which is plural, refers to the two previous quotations in John 12:38 (using Isa. 53:1, from the so-called “Second Isaiah”) and John 12:40 (using Isa. 6:10, from so-called “First Isaiah”), but Jesus refers to the one person, Isaiah, who both “saw his glory” and “spoke of him.” (2) The intertestamental book of *Sirach* (48:24–25) and the first-century Jewish historian Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 11.5–6) attest Isaiah’s authorship of the whole book. (3) A Hebrew manuscript of Isaiah in the Dead Sea Scrolls bears witness to the seamless unity of the book as the work of Isaiah. (4) It is hard to imagine how prophets could have issued such oracles as those of Isaiah 40–66, which were of such importance in the history of Judah, and yet fade into obscurity. (5) Later OT authors seem to cite prophecies from chapters 40–66, which they could not have done if the book were broken up as described (e.g., see note on 60:7, used in Ezra 7:27).

2. There are many distinctive features of Isaiah’s style that run through all three parts. For example, Isaiah’s characteristic title for the Lord is “the Holy One of Israel,” which appears 25 times in the whole book (12 times in Isaiah 1–39; 11 times in chs. 40–55; and twice in chs. 56–66). It appears only six times outside of Isaiah: twice in Jeremiah, three times in the Psalms, and in 2 Kings 19:22 (cf. Isa. 37:33). The phrase “high and lifted up” is a feature of Isaiah, appearing in 2:12–14; 6:1; 52:13; 57:15 (i.e., in each of the three sections; see note on 6:1). The notes will show other aspects of coherent thought and expression in Isaiah. Any differences of style can be explained by the different topics of the chapters and by different stages in Isaiah’s life (e.g., Isaiah may have written chapters 40–66 after the Assyrian invasion of 701 B.C.).

3. The predictive material in chapters 40–66 is highly relevant both to the exilic audience and to Isaiah’s own day. Certainly it demonstrates the Lord’s rule over history; these chapters appeal to it for that purpose (e.g., 41:21–29), and Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 11.5–7) records a story of the impression the specific prediction of Cyrus (Isa. 44:28) made on the Persian monarch when he learned of it (a prediction made about 150 years in advance). The biblical worldview, which begins with the majestic Creator, can readily accept this. Further, chapters 40–66 often mention pagan religion, but specifically Babylonian material is rare (46:1); most address Canaanite idolatry, which Judah mixed in with their worship of Yahweh (e.g., 57:5; 66:3, 17; cf. 40:19; 41:7, 29; 42:17; 45:16–20; 46:6; 48:5; and the extended satire on idolatry, 44:9–20)—and this was no longer a problem in Judah after the fall of Jerusalem.

However, the primary significance of this predictive material resides in a wider context. The whole book portrays God’s plan for Judah as a story that is headed somewhere, namely, toward the coming of the final heir of David who will bring light to the Gentiles. Israel was created for this very purpose, and it will require that God’s people be purified of those members whose lives destroy that mission (see note on 1:24–28). This prospect of a glorious future enlists all believing readers to dedicate themselves to living faithfully and to embrace the dignity of playing a part in its development (cf. 2:5).

At the heart of Isaiah’s message is God’s purpose of grace for sinners. If that ultimate miracle is accepted—and one cannot be a Christian without accepting it—then a lesser miracle is no barrier. Indeed, the prophet making predictions of future events is not a problem; it is, as Isaiah intended it to be, encouraging evidence of God’s sovereign salvation intercepting a sinful world.

Theme

The central theme of the book is God himself, who does all things for his own sake (48:11). Isaiah defines everything else by its relation to God, whether it is rightly adjusted to him as the gloriously central figure in all of reality (45:22–25). God is the Holy One of Israel (1:4), the One who is high and lifted up but who also dwells down among the “contrite and lowly” (57:15), the Sovereign over the whole world (13:1–27:13) whose wrath is fierce (9:12, 17, 21; 10:4) but whose cleansing touch atones for sin (6:7), whose salvation flows in endless supply (12:3), whose gospel is “good news of happiness” (52:7), who is moving history toward the blessing of his people (43:3–7) and the exclusive worship due him (2:2–4). He is the only Savior (43:10–13), and the whole world will know it (49:26). To rest in the promises of this God is his people’s only strength (30:15); to delight themselves in his word is their refreshing feast (55:1–2); to serve his cause is their worthy devotion (ch. 62); but to rebel against him is endless death (66:24).

A microcosm of the book’s message appears in 1:2–2:5. The Lord announces his basic charge against the

people: they have received so much privilege from God and ought to be grateful children, but “they have despised the Holy One of Israel” (1:2–4). He describes the purpose of the various judgments they face, namely, to bring them to repentance, or at least to preserve a remnant who *will* repent (1:5–9). Judah is very diligent to observe the divinely appointed sacrifices, but the people’s hearts are far from God, as their unwillingness to protect their own weakest members exhibits (1:10–20). The Lord called his people to be the embodiment of faithfulness in this world, and yet they are now filled with rampant unfaithfulness at every level (personal, religious, and social); but God intends to purge Zion of its sinful members and set her up as a beacon of light for the whole world. In view of this glorious future, Isaiah’s contemporaries should commit themselves afresh to walking “in the light of the LORD” (1:21–2:5).

Purpose, Occasion, and Background

Isaiah announces God’s surprising plan of grace and glory for his rebellious people and, indeed, for the world. God had promised Abraham that through his descendants the world would be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3). God had promised David that his throne would lead the world into salvation (2 Sam. 7:12–16; Ps. 89:19–37). But by Isaiah’s time, the descendants of Abraham and many members of the dynasty of David no longer trusted the promises of God, aligning themselves instead with the promises—and the fears—of this false world. Judah’s unbelief in God during the pivotal events of Isaiah’s lifetime redirected their future away from blessing and toward judgment. At this historic turning point, Judah moved from independence under God’s power to subservience under pagan powers.

What, then, of God’s ancient promises? Is the gracious purpose of God defeated by Judah’s sin? Isaiah answers that question. After the prefatory chapters 1–5, his answer unfolds in chapters 6–27, and the rest of the book develops the serious but hopeful message of these chapters. Isaiah’s answer is that, although God must purify his people through judgment, he has an overruling purpose of grace, beginning with Isaiah himself (ch. 6), spreading to Judah (7:1–9:7) and Israel (9:8–11:16), and resulting in endless joy (12:1–6). Even the nations of the world are taken into account (13:1–27:13). The purpose of Isaiah, then, is to declare the good news that God will glorify himself through the renewed and increased glory of his people, which will attract the nations. The book of Isaiah is a vision of hope for sinners through the coming Messiah, promising for the “ransomed” people of God a new world where sin and sorrow will be forever forgotten (35:10; 51:11).

Isaiah’s book envisions three historical settings (see chart): (1) chapters 1–39 are set against the background of Isaiah’s own times in the late eighth century B.C.; (2) chapters 40–55 assume the Jewish exiles in Babylon in the sixth century as their audience; and (3) chapters 56–66 take the returned exiles and subsequent generations of God’s people as their backdrop. It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that the chapters have relevance only to their assumed audiences: the long-range prophecies of chapters 40–66, as already indicated, challenge all the people of Judah in Isaiah’s time to accept their role in a story that is headed to a glorious future and to live faithfully in that light (cf. 2:5, on the heels of 2:1–4). Further, the entire book, as canonical Scripture, addresses all the people of God until Christ returns.

First, in his own times, Isaiah prophesied “in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (1:1). Called by God “in the year that King Uzziah died” (6:1), his long ministry began in 740 B.C. The external threat of Isaiah’s day was the militant Assyrian Empire rising to power in the east. The question forced upon Judah by this threat was one of trust: in what will God’s people trust for salvation—in human strategies of self-rescue, or in prophetic promises of divine grace?

This question of what and whom to trust intensified on two occasions. The first occurred c. 735 B.C., during the reign of King Ahaz. Under pressure from Assyria, the northern kingdom of Israel formed a pact of

Simplified Overview of Isaiah

	Isaiah 1–39	Isaiah 40–55	Isaiah 56–66
Date and Setting	The eighth century B.C. (700s); the Assyrian threat	Prophecies about the sixth century B.C. (500s); the Babylonian exile	Prophecies about all times and occasions until the end
Audience	God’s rebellious people craving worldly security	God’s defeated people under worldly domination	All who hold fast to God’s covenant
Actions	God purifies a remnant of his apostate people through judgment	God consoles his discouraged people in exile	God prepares all of his true people for his promised salvation
Message	“In returning and rest you shall be saved; . . . But you were unwilling” (30:15)	“the glory of the LORD shall be revealed” (40:5)	“Keep justice, and do righteousness” (56:1)



The Near East at the Time of Isaiah
c. 740 B.C.

The prophecies of Isaiah are set against the backdrop of a rising Assyrian Empire. This resurgent ancient nation posed a great threat to Israel and Judah, and it would eventually engulf nearly the entire Near East from Ur to Ararat to Egypt.

mutual defense with Syria, and together these two kingdoms aimed to force Judah into alignment with them (ch. 7). But God could be trusted to stand by his commitment to defend the Davidic throne. Accordingly, Isaiah assured Ahaz of God's saving purpose. But Ahaz refused God, preferring the power of Assyria, and negotiated for pagan protection (2 Kings 16:5–9). Thus Ahaz surrendered the sovereignty of the Davidic throne to a nation hostile to the kingdom of God, and achieved nothing in return. The coalition arrayed against Judah failed—Syria fell in 732 B.C. and Israel in 722, as God had said they would (Isa. 7:16; 8:4).

The second crisis occurred in 701 B.C., during the reign of Hezekiah. This time Assyria was the threat. As before, the temptation was to negotiate an alliance of defense with human powers, in this case with Egypt (30:1–7; 31:1–3; 36:6). Judah chose the false refuge of human promises rather than to rest on the Lord's "sure foundation" (28:14–22). Assyria then set out to punish Judah for its pact with Egypt. Hezekiah tried to buy peace from the Assyrians (2 Kings 18:13–16), but they turned on him (Isa. 33:1). Under extreme pressure, Hezekiah finally put his trust in the Lord and found him to be powerfully faithful (chs. 36–37).

The eventual downfall of Judah was foreseen in Hezekiah's unguarded openness to Babylonian influence (ch. 39). Isaiah discerned in Hezekiah's enthusiasm for Babylon a future of captivity there for God's people.

Second, Isaiah was enabled by God to address the Jewish captives far away in Babylon in the sixth century B.C. He announces a promise that God is coming with a world-changing display of his glory (40:5). To prepare for his coming, the exiles must return to the Promised Land (48:20). They must not be demoralized by the impressive but empty culture of idolatry in which they live (41:21–24), nor should they resent God's use of a pagan conqueror, Cyrus the Great, as their liberator from Babylon (44:24–28). They must look by faith for a greater liberator still to come, the messianic "servant of the Lord" (see note on 42:1–9). He will bring justice to the nations (42:1–4) and save his people from their ultimate captivity, the guilt of sin (52:13–53:12). Since the faith of God's people had already proven weak, God pledges that he alone will accomplish this, for his own glory (48:9–11).

Third, Isaiah addressed the returned exiles and subsequent generations of God's people with messages of challenge and hope, to keep their faith and obedience steady until God fulfills all his promises. Isaiah makes clear the spiritual and universal nature of God's true people (56:3–8; 66:18–23). He sees the final triumph of One who is "mighty to save" (63:1). His prophetic eye looks beyond the fraudulence of this world, all the way forward to the eternal finality of God's renewed people in a renewed cosmos (65:17; 66:22). "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (Heb. 12:28).

Key Themes

With God himself as the center of Isaiah's vision, multiple supportive themes are entailed:

1. God is offended by religious ritual, however impressive, if it conceals an empty heart and a careless life (1:10–17; 58:1–12; 66:1–4).
2. God's true people will become a multinational community of worship and peace forever (2:2–4; 19:19–25;

25:6–9; 56:3–8; 66:18–23), and the predominant culture of a new world (14:1–2; 41:8–16; 43:3–7; 45:14–17; 49:19–26; 60:1–22).

3. God opposes all manifestations of human pride (2:10–17; 10:33–34; 13:11; 16:6; 23:9; 28:1–4).

4. The foolish idols that man creates are destined for destruction (2:20–21; 19:1; 31:6–7; 44:9–20; 46:1–7).

5. Though God's judgment will reduce his people to a remnant, his final purpose is the joyful triumph of his grace (1:9; 6:1–12:6; 35:1–10; 40:1–2; 49:13–16; 51:3; 54:7–8; 55:12–13).

6. God is able to judge people by rendering them deaf and blind to his saving word (6:9–10; 28:11–13; 29:9–14; 42:18–25).

7. The only hope of the world is bound up in one man—the promised Davidic king (4:2; 7:14; 9:2–7; 11:1–10), the servant of the Lord (42:1–9; 49:1–13; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12), the anointed preacher of the gospel (61:1–3), and the lone victor over all evil (63:1–6).

8. God is actively using creation and history, and even the wrongs of man, for his own glory (10:5–19; 13:1–27:13; 36:1–39:8; 40:12–26; 44:24–45:13).

9. With a great and holy God ruling all things, man's duty is a repentant trust in him alone (7:9; 10:20; 12:2; 26:3–4; 28:12, 16; 30:15–18; 31:1; 32:17–18; 36:1–37:38; 40:31; 42:17; 50:10; 55:1–7; 57:13, 15; 66:2).

10. God's people, feeling abandoned by God (40:27; 49:14; 51:12–13), foolishly put their trust in worldly powers (7:1–8:22; 28:14–22; 30:1–17; 31:1–3; 39:1–8).

11. God will uphold his own cause with a world-transforming display of his glory (4:2–6; 11:10; 35:1–2; 40:3–5; 52:10; 59:19; 60:1–3; 66:18).

12. God uses predictive prophecy to prove that his hand is guiding human history (41:1–4, 21–29; 44:6–8; 44:24–45:13; 46:8–11; 48:3–11).

13. God's past faithfulness and the certainty of his final victory motivate his people toward prayer and practical obedience now (56:1–2; 62:1–64:12).

14. The wrath of God is to be feared above all else (5:25; 9:12, 17, 19, 21; 10:4–6; 13:9, 13; 30:27; 34:2; 59:18; 63:1–6; 66:15–16, 24).

History of Salvation Summary

Isaiah shares with the rest of the OT a high view of the mission of Israel. God called Abraham and his family to be the vehicle by which he would bring to the whole world the blessing of knowing the true God (Gen. 12:1–3). The great tragedy of Israel was their repeated faithlessness, which hid the light from the Gentiles. God will not be thwarted, however, and in order to bless the Gentiles he will purify his people (Isa. 1:24–28) and from them raise up the heir of David.

Though Isaiah denounces hypocrisy, greed, and idolatry as offenses against God, he also foresees the Savior of offenders, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is God-with-us (7:14), the child destined to rule forever (9:6–7), the hope of the Davidic throne (11:1), the glory of the Lord (40:5), the suffering servant of the Lord (42:1–9; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12), the anointed preacher of the gospel (61:1–3), the bloodied victor over all evil (63:1–6), and more. Isaiah is mentioned by name in the NT over 20 times and is quoted there extensively, for the message he preached is the very gospel of Jesus and the apostles.

Isaiah's message makes an impact on every reader in one of two ways. Either this book will harden the reader's pride against God (6:9–10; 28:13; 29:11–12) or it will become to the contrite reader a feast of refreshment in God (55:1–3; 57:15; 66:2). Through Isaiah's vision the eyes of faith see their iniquity laid on Another (53:6), they see a new Jerusalem of eternal gladness (65:17–18), they see all humanity giving God the worship that is his due forever (66:22–23), and that prophetic vision keeps their hope alive. As with the rest of the OT, these things were written "that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). (For an explanation of the "History of Salvation," see the Overview of the Bible, pp. 23–26. See also History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ, pp. 2635–2662.)

Literary Features

The overall genre of the book is prophecy. Although biblical prophets primarily *tell forth* God's message in their contemporary situation, and less frequently *foretell* the future, the last third of Isaiah is an exception in being mainly predictive of the future. It is important to clarify two literary features of the foretelling: first, having been received in visions, it has many figurative elements; and second, its purpose is not simply

to tell the future but to express the author's sense of Israel's place in God's overarching redemptive plan for the world.

A book this large, and lacking a narrative line, must be viewed as an anthology or collection of individual compositions. It is often futile to look for a smooth flow from one unit to the next. The book swings back and forth between oracles of judgment and oracles of salvation. The general movement of the book is from an emphasis on evil and judgment to rapturous visions of a coming redemption, a movement from bad news to good news. But this is only a general pattern that should not lead readers to distort the smaller swings, between evil/judgment and redemption/restoration, which persist to the very last verses of the book.

The opening movement of the book is more of a warning against sin than a blueprint for the future. As Isaiah looks at his world, he *depicts* its evil, *denounces* that evil, and *predicts God's imminent judgment* against that evil. All three of these ingredients are typically couched in the form of the oracle of judgment, a divine indictment of present evil. Additionally, biblical prophets intermingle and end their books with visions of God's restored favor to his people; these visions are expressed in the form of the oracle of redemption (also called the oracle of salvation) and oracle of blessing.

The oracles of judgment need to be approached as examples of satire: they have an object of attack, a vehicle in which the attack is embodied, a stated or implied norm by which the criticism is conducted, and a prevailing tone of either ridicule or disgust. Because much of the book of Isaiah envisions things that either have not yet happened or do not literally happen (given the symbolic form in which they are portrayed), the genre of visionary writing is continuously operative in the book of Isaiah (the author *envisions* something that does not literally exist and/or that has not yet happened). A preponderance of the book is cast into the form of poetry, with the result that readers need to apply all that they know about staples of poetry, such as imagery, metaphor, simile, apostrophe, and hyperbole.

Many of the visions of redemption in the last third of Isaiah are lyric in form and effect. Apocalyptic writing appears prominently in chapters 24–27. Because the agents who interact with God are often nations rather than individuals, and because the forces of nature are also sometimes actors, the label “cosmic drama” is a helpful concept. Finally, in this book that encompasses such a diversity of material, there is even a full-fledged hero story involving King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah (chs. 36–39).

Outline

- I. Introduction: “Ah, Sinful Nation!” (1:1–5:30)
 - A. Judah's sins confronted (1:1–31)
 - B. Judah's hope, guilt, hope (2:1–4:6)
 1. Hope (2:1–5)
 2. Guilt (2:6–4:1)
 3. Hope (4:2–6)
 - C. Judah's sins condemned (5:1–30)
- II. God Redefines the Future of His People: “Your Guilt Is Taken Away” (6:1–12:6)
 - A. Grace—through judgment—for Isaiah (6:1–13)
 - B. Grace—through judgment—for Judah (7:1–9:7)
 - C. Grace—through judgment—for Israel (9:8–11:16)
 - D. The enjoyment of God's grace (12:1–6)
- III. God's Judgment and Grace for the World: “We Have a Strong City” (13:1–27:13)
 - A. First series of oracles: the here and now (13:1–20:6)
 1. Babylon (13:1–14:27)
 2. Philistia (14:28–32)
 3. Moab (15:1–16:14)
 4. The Syria-Israel alliance (17:1–18:7)
 5. Egypt (19:1–20:6)
 - B. Second series of oracles: the deeper truth (21:1–23:18)
 1. Babylon (21:1–10)
 2. Edom (21:11–12)
 3. Arabia (21:13–17)

4. Jerusalem (22:1–25)
5. Tyre (23:1–18)
- C. Third series of oracles: the final end (24:1–27:13)
 1. The wasted city (24:1–20)
 2. The Lord will punish (24:21–23)
 3. He will swallow up death forever (25:1–12)
 4. He will ordain peace (26:1–21)
 5. The whole world will be fruitful (27:1–13)
- IV. God's Sovereign Word Spoken into the World: "Ah!" (28:1–35:10)
 - A. Six laments, with assurances (28:1–33:24)
 1. The proud crown of Ephraim (28:1–29)
 2. The city where David encamped (29:1–14)
 3. Those who turn things upside down (29:15–24)
 4. Stubborn children with their own plans (30:1–33)
 5. Those who go down to Egypt for help (31:1–32:20)
 6. The destroyer who has not been destroyed (33:1–24)
 - B. Two final outcomes: judgment or salvation (34:1–35:10)
- V. Historical Transition: "In Whom Do You Now Trust?" (36:1–39:8)
 - A. Practical trust in God vindicated (36:1–37:38)
 - B. Human inconstancy sent into exile (38:1–39:8)
- VI. Comfort for God's Exiles: "The Glory of the Lord Shall Be Revealed" (40:1–55:13)
 - A. The God of glory: his coming, exclusivity, power (40:1–31)
 - B. The one true God moving history for his people (41:1–20)
 - C. False hopes, the Lord's servant, a new song (41:21–42:17)
 - D. God reclaims his people for his glory (42:18–43:21)
 - E. God revives his people for his glory (43:22–44:23)
 - F. God predicts his use of Cyrus (44:24–45:25)
 - G. The gods and pride of Babylon doomed (46:1–47:15)
 - H. God will free his people from Babylon for his own sake (48:1–22)
 - I. The Lord's servant displayed, his people assured (49:1–50:3)
 - J. The Lord's servant taught, his people attentive (50:4–51:8)
 - K. Encouragements to a responsive faith (51:9–52:12)
 - L. The Lord's servant: the exalted sin-bearer (52:13–53:12)
 - M. Compassion for God's people, offered to all (54:1–55:13)
- VII. How to Prepare for the Coming Glory: "Hold Fast My Covenant" (56:1–66:24)
 - A. The true people of God redefined (56:1–8)
 - B. The false people of God exposed (56:9–57:13)
 - C. The true people of God invited (57:14–21)
 - D. The path to blessing: ritual vs. responsibility (58:1–59:13)
 - E. Present failure, eternal covenant, future glory (59:14–60:22)
 - F. The anointed Preacher renewing the world (61:1–62:12)
 - G. The coming Victor; his past faithfulness (63:1–14)
 - H. Praying for the power of God (63:15–64:12)
 - I. The eagerness of God for his people's eternal joy (65:1–25)
 - J. True worship now and forever (66:1–24)

ISAIAH

1 The ^avision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem
^bin the days of ^cUzziah, ^dJotham, ^eAhaz, and ^fHezekiah, kings of Judah.

The Wickedness of Judah

- 2** ^gHear, O heavens, and give ear, O ^hearth;
for the LORD has spoken:
“Children ⁱ have I reared and brought up,
but they have rebelled against me.
- 3** The ox ^j knows its owner,
and the donkey its master’s crib,
but Israel does ^j not know,
my people do not understand.”
- 4** Ah, sinful nation,
a people laden with iniquity,
^k offspring of evildoers,
children who deal corruptly!
They have forsaken the LORD,
they have ^l despised ^m the Holy One of Israel,
they are utterly ⁿ estranged.
- 5** Why will you still be ^o struck down?
Why will you ^p continue to rebel?
The whole head is sick,
and the whole heart faint.

Chapter 1

^{1a}ch. 6:1 ^bHos. 1:1; Mic. 1:1 ^c[2 Kgs. 15:1, 7]; See 2 Chr. 26 ^dSee 2 Kgs. 15:32–38; 2 Chr. 27 ^ech. 7:1, 3, 10, 12; 14:28; See 2 Kgs. 16; 2 Chr. 28 ^fSee ch. 37:2–39:8; 2 Kgs. 18–20; 2 Chr. 29–32 ^gDeut. 32:1; [Deut. 4:26] ^hMic. 1:2; 6:2 ⁱ[Deut. 32:6, 10, 15] ^j[Jer. 8:7] ^k[Matt. 3:7] ^lch. 5:24 ^mSee ch. 31:1 ⁿEzek. 14:5 ^oJer. 5:3; [ch. 9:13] ^pch. 31:6

¹ Or Sons; also verse 4

1:1–5:30 Introduction: “Ah, Sinful Nation!” The prophet rebukes the people of God in order for them to place themselves under the judgment of God’s word. Isaiah includes promises of miraculous grace beyond the remedial judgments. On 1:2–2:5 as a microcosm of the book’s message, see Introduction: Theme.

1:1–31 Judah’s Sins Confronted. Isaiah explains why God’s people Judah are in crisis. They do not comprehend that they have forsaken God, hollowed out their worship, and corrupted their society.

1:1 The superscription for the entire book. **vision.** A message from God

Kings of Judah in the Time of Isaiah

Isaiah prophesied “in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (1:1).

Kings of Judah	Years of Reign
Uzziah (Azariah)	767–740 B.C.
Jotham	750–735
Ahaz	735–715
Hezekiah	715–686

(1 Sam. 3:1; Ezek. 7:26), given in symbolic form. **Isaiah the son of Amoz.** See Introduction: Author and Title. **Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.** See Introduction: Date, and chart to the left.

1:2–9 Isaiah indicts Judah’s mindless revolt against God.

1:2 heavens . . . earth. Isaiah calls on the entire cosmos as a faithful witness to God’s word (Deut. 30:19; 31:28; Ps. 50:4). **Children . . . they.** These emphatic words accent the contrast between God’s grace and his people’s ingratitude. Thus Isaiah summarizes Israel’s history up to his time. Israel as a whole is God’s “son” (Ex. 4:22–23), and individual Israelites are also “sons” (see ESV footnote; Deut. 14:1); this privilege should have led to gratitude, but it did not. **rebelled.** See Isa. 66:24.

1:4 Ah is a cry of pain and indignation. **sinful.** Isaiah’s complex vocabulary uses a number of evocative Hebrew words for sin (translated here as **iniquity** and **corruptly**) that reveal to the people their true character. **the Holy One of Israel.** As described above (see Introduction: Date), this is Isaiah’s characteristic title for God, occurring 25 times in the book (and rarely anywhere else in the OT); it reflects a central theme in Isaiah’s thought. Perhaps it originated in the seraphic cry, “Holy, holy, holy” (6:3). When Isaiah saw God high and lifted up in infinite holiness, it defined his knowledge of God as the Holy One who is righteous (5:16), incomparable (40:25), redemptive (47:4), and lofty (57:15), and who has given himself to Israel. To despise the Holy One is to scorn, in practical ways, all that God is. **they are utterly estranged.** Their backwardness is beyond self-remedy.

6^qPs. 38:3 ^r[Jer. 8:22]
 7^sch. 5:5; 6:11, 12; Deut.
 28:51, 52
 8^tch. 10:32; 37:22; Zech.
 2:10; 9:9 ^uJob 27:18
 9^vLam. 3:22 ^wch. 10:21,
 22; Cited Rom. 9:29 ^xch.
 13:19; Gen. 19:24, 25
 10^yEzek. 16:46, 48, 49, 55;
 [ch. 3:9; Rev. 11:8]
^z[Deut. 32:32]
 11^aProv. 15:8; Jer. 6:20;
 Mal. 1:10; [ch. 66:3]; See
 1 Sam. 15:22
 12^bEx. 23:17; 34:23
 13^cNum. 28:11; 1 Chr.
 23:31 ^dEx. 12:16; Lev.
 23:36 ^e[Jer. 7:9, 10] ^fSee
 Joel 2:15-17
 14^g[See ver. 13 above]
 15^h1 Kgs. 8:22

- 6 ^qFrom the sole of the foot even to the head,
 there is no soundness in it,
 but bruises and sores
 and raw wounds;
 they are ^rnot pressed out or bound up
 or softened with oil.
- 7 ^sYour country lies desolate;
 your cities are burned with fire;
 in your very presence
 foreigners devour your land;
 it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.
- 8 And ^tthe daughter of Zion is left
 like a ^ubooth in a vineyard,
 like a lodge in a cucumber field,
 like a besieged city.
- 9 ^vIf the LORD of hosts
 had not left us ^wa few survivors,
 we should have been like ^xSodom,
 and become like ^yGomorrah.
- 10 Hear the word of the LORD,
 you rulers of ^zSodom!
 Give ear to the teaching^t of our God,
 you people of ^zGomorrah!
- 11 ^a“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
 says the LORD;
 I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
 and the fat of well-fed beasts;
 I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
 or of lambs, or of goats.
- 12 “When you come to ^bappear before me,
 who has required of you
 this trampling of my courts?
 13 Bring no more vain offerings;
 incense is an abomination to me.
^cNew moon and Sabbath and the ^dcalling of convocations—
 I cannot endure ^einiquity and ^fsolemn assembly.
- 14 Your ^cnew moons and your appointed feasts
 my soul hates;
 they have become a burden to me;
 I am weary of bearing them.
- 15 When you ^gspread out your hands,
 I will hide my eyes from you;

¹ Or law

1:5 Why? Not even painful experience makes an impact. Their minds are closed.

1:7–8 This imagery merged into reality in the foreign invasions during Isaiah's lifetime. **the daughter of Zion.** The city of Jerusalem (37:22).

1:9 Only the power of **the LORD of hosts** has preserved God's people (1 Kings 19:18). See Rom. 9:29, where Paul quotes this verse to teach God's gracious purpose to preserve a remnant that is truly his people. There is nothing within their own nature to keep God's people from the worst of paganism and its appropriate judgment (see Gen. 13:13; 18:16–19:28; 2 Pet. 2:6; Jude 7; Rev. 11:8).

1:10–20 These verses highlight the hypocrisy of the people's worship. Isaiah, like other prophets who comment on sacrificial practices, recog-

nizes that God appointed the system of worship and authorized the central sanctuary. But these ordinances were always intended to foster true piety among God's people, which would move them to humble purity of heart and energetic promotion of others' well-being. Isaiah denounces the way his contemporaries have divorced the ordinances from their proper purpose. It seems that they treated their worship as a way of manipulating God; they also mixed in elements from Canaanite religions (v. 29). See note on Amos 4:4–5.

1:10–17 God rejects his people's worship, however lavish, because they use it as a pious evasion of the self-denying demands of helping the weak (cf. James 1:27). Even lifting their hands in prayer avails nothing, for **your hands are full of blood** (Isa. 1:15; see 59:3).

- ^heven though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
ⁱyour hands are full of blood.
- 16 ^jWash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
^kcease to do evil,
17 learn to do good;
^lseek justice,
correct oppression;
^mbring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow's cause.
- 18 "Come now, ⁿlet us reason ¹ together, says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as ^owhite as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.
- 19 ^pIf you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;
20 but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be eaten by the sword;
^qfor the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

The Unfaithful City

- 21 How the faithful city
^rhas become a whore,²
^sshe who was full of justice!
Righteousness lodged in her,
but now murderers.
- 22 ^tYour silver has become dross,
your best wine mixed with water.
- 23 Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.
Everyone ^uloves a bribe
and runs after gifts.
^vThey do not bring justice to the fatherless,
and the widow's cause does not come to them.
- 24 Therefore the ^wLord declares,
the LORD of hosts,
the ^xMighty One of Israel:
"Ah, I will get relief from my enemies
^yand avenge myself on my foes.

¹ Or dispute ² Or become unchaste

15^hProv. 1:28; Mic. 3:4
ⁱch. 59:3
16^j[Jer. 2:22] ^k[1 Pet. 3:11]
17^jJer. 22:3 ^m[ver. 23; James 1:27]
18ⁿMic. 6:2; [ch. 43:26]
^oPs. 51:7; [Rev. 7:14]
19^pDeut. 30:15, 16
20^qver. 2; ch. 24:3; 40:5; 58:14; Mic. 4:4; [Num. 23:19]
21^rJer. 2:20; [Ex. 34:15]
^s[Jer. 31:23]
22^t[Jer. 6:30; Ezek. 22:18]
23^uMic. 7:3; [Ex. 23:8]
^vJer. 5:28; Zech. 7:10; [ver. 17]
24^wch. 3:1; 10:33 ^xPs. 132:2 ^y[Deut. 32:41]

1:17 seek justice, correct oppression. Doing **good** in God's sight includes seeking the just functioning of society (note, by contrast, v. 23).

1:18–20 let us reason together. Rather than continue in their incomprehension, the people are urged to consider thoughtfully their actual position before God. **though your sins are like scarlet . . . red like crimson.** Their hands, red with blood (v. 15), can be cleansed (Ps. 51:7). But they must make a deliberate choice (Isa. 1:19–20).

1:21–26 Isaiah chronicles their social abuses.

1:21 a whore. Their covenant with God was comparable to a marriage (54:5). To depart from faithfulness to him is a more shocking sin than the people realize.

1:24–28 the Lord . . . the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel. In contrast to the worthless leaders of v. 23, Israel's God is a formidable Judge. Startlingly, he calls his own people his **enemies**! But the judgment

here is not the end of the story; its purpose is to **smelt away** the **dross**, i.e., to remove the unbelieving members of the people (called **rebels and sinners, those who forsake the LORD**). **Afterward**, what remains will be a chastened people of God, **those . . . who repent** (i.e., who embrace their covenant privileges from the heart). **redeemed**. This word (Hb. *padah*) and its synonym (*ga'al*; see note on 41:14) generally convey the idea of rescue and protection, either for the whole people (1:27; 35:10; cf. 50:2; 51:11), or for a particular person (cf. 29:22). In some places either word carries the idea of exchanging a substitute or ransom (e.g., Ex. 13:13), but that is not relevant here. The prophet looks forward to a cleansed people after the historical judgment of the exile, restored to its mission (Isa. 2:1–5).

1:29 the oaks . . . the gardens. Suggesting pagan, and probably Canaanite, rites of worship (57:5; 65:3; 66:17) mixed into the life of God's own people.

1:31 Self-salvation, though it seems to make the people strong for a time,

25²Ps. 81:14; Amos 1:8; [ch. 5:25] ^a[Ezek. 22:20; Mal. 3:3]
 26^bJer. 33:7, 11 ^c[Zech. 8:3]
 27^dJer. 22:3, 4
 28^eJob 31:3; Ps. 1:6
 29^fHos. 4:19 ^gch. 57:5; Hos. 4:13 ^hch. 65:3; 66:17
 30ⁱ[Jer. 17:8]
 31^jJudg. 16:9 ^kch. 66:24
Chapter 2
 2^lFor ver. 2-4, see Mic. 4:1-3 ^mch. 14:13; 25:6
ⁿ[ch. 56:7]
 3^oSee Zech. 8:20-23

- 25 ^zI will turn my hand against you
and will smelt away your ^adross as with lye
and remove all your alloy.
- 26 And I will restore your judges ^bas at the first,
and your counselors as at the beginning.
Afterward ^cyou shall be called the city of righteousness,
the faithful city.”
- 27 ^dZion shall be redeemed by justice,
and those in her who repent, by righteousness.
- 28 ^eBut rebels and sinners shall be broken together,
and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed.
- 29 ^fFor they¹ shall be ashamed of ^gthe oaks
that you desired;
and you shall blush for ^hthe gardens
that you have chosen.
- 30 For you shall be ⁱlike an oak
whose leaf withers,
and like a garden without water.
- 31 And the strong shall become ^jtinder,
and his work a spark,
and both of them shall burn together,
with ^knone to quench them.

The Mountain of the LORD

2 The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

- 2 ^lIt shall come to pass in the latter days
that ^mthe mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and ⁿall the nations shall flow to it,
- 3 and ^omany peoples shall come, and say:
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”

¹ Some Hebrew manuscripts you

carries with it its own self-destruction. Apart from repentance (v. 27), the people and their syncretistic oaks and gardens (v. 29) will burn, **with none to quench them**.

2:1–4:6 *Judah's Hope, Guilt, Hope.* Within the reassuring context of glorious divine promises (2:2–4; 4:2–6), the prophet identifies the sinful human obstacles standing in the way of the promised hope (2:6–4:1).

2:1–5 *Hope.* Isaiah reveals the triumph of God's purpose for his people, when the nations will hurry to learn his ways as the only way. The fulfillment of this prophecy is foreseeable in the progress of Christian missions (see Luke 24:46–48).

2:1 This superscription marks the beginning of a new section. After the introductory, confrontational ch. 1, this section begins and ends with hope (2:2–4; 4:2–6), also taking into account the sinful human obstacles standing in the way of that hope (2:6–4:1). This vision expands the hope of 1:25–28.

2:2–4 Nearly the same wording appears in Mic. 4:1–3. It is possible that one borrowed from the other, or both used a common source; in any event the two were contemporaries and shared the same expectation for God's purpose.

2:2 The **latter days** is an expression for the future beyond the horizon (e.g., Num. 24:14; Deut. 4:30; Dan. 2:28), which sometimes refers specifically to the time of the Messiah (Hos. 3:5). It is not immediately clear here whether Isaiah is

so specific, but the way Isa. 11:4 echoes 2:4 shows that the oracle speaks of the messianic era. NT authors use the various Greek translations of the expression (generally rendered “in the last days”) in the belief that, since Jesus inaugurated his messianic kingship by his resurrection, the latter days have arrived in a decisive way, while at the same time the last days await their complete realization and final fulfillment at the end of the age (Acts 2:17; 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; James 5:3; 2 Pet. 3:3; and probably 1 Pet. 1:20; 1 John 2:18). Isaiah's future orientation in this section is also marked by his sevenfold use of “in that day” (Isa. 2:11, 17, 20; 3:7, 18; 4:1, 2) and “the LORD of hosts has a day” (2:12), including both the near and distant future. To the prophetic eye, the crises of the present are to be measured by the ultimate crisis of judgment and salvation toward which God is moving history (see Joel 2:28–3:21; Zeph. 1:7–2:3). **the mountain of the house of the LORD.** The Temple Mount in Jerusalem, though unimpressive from the lofty gaze of human religion, was God's choice (Ps. 68:15–16) and the true hope of the world (Ps. 48:1–2). **the highest of the mountains.** The gods of antiquity supposedly lived on mountains. The exaltation of the Lord's temple as the peak of world religion will be attractive to the nations. “Highest” here probably means “most exalted in honor,” not actually physically highest. **all the nations shall flow to it.** By a miraculous magnetism, a river of humanity will flow uphill to worship the one true God (see John 12:32).

2:3 out of Zion. Out of Zion alone; the Gentiles will abandon all other religions for the true God.

- For ^pout of Zion shall go the law,¹
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
- 4 He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;
^qand they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
^rnation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore.
- 5 O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in ^sthe light of the LORD.

The Day of the LORD

- 6 For you have rejected your people,
the house of Jacob,
because they are full of things ^tfrom the east
and ^uof fortune-tellers ^vlike the Philistines,
and they ^wstrike hands with the children of foreigners.
- 7 Their land is ^xfilled with silver and gold,
and there is no end to their treasures;
their land is ^yfilled with horses,
and there is no end to their chariots.
- 8 Their land is ^zfilled with idols;
they bow down to ^athe work of their hands,
to what their own fingers have made.
- 9 So man ^bis humbled,
and each one ^bis brought low—
do not forgive them!
- 10 ^cEnter into the rock
and hide in the dust
^dfrom before the terror of the LORD,
and from the splendor of his majesty.
- 11 ^eThe haughty looks of man shall be brought low,
and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled,
and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.

¹Or *teaching*

^{3p}[Luke 24:47; John 4:22]
^{4q}[Joel 3:10] ^{ch} 9:7; Ps.
72:3, 7; Hos. 2:18; Zech.
9:10
⁵^{ch} 60:1, 2; [Eph. 5:8]
⁶[2 Kgs. 16:10, 11] ⁴Mic.
5:12 ²2 Kgs. 1:2
^u[2 Kgs. 16:7, 8]
⁷^{ch} 39:2; [ch. 22:8, 11;
Deut. 17:17] ²ch. 30:16;
[Deut. 17:16; Mic. 5:10]
⁸^{ver} 18, 20; ch. 10:10,
11; Jer. 2:28 ^aSee ch.
44:9-17
⁹^{ch} 5:15
¹⁰^{ver} 19, 21; [Rev. 6:15,
16] ^cCited 2 Thess. 1:9
¹¹^{ver} 17; Ps. 18:27;
[Mic. 2:3; 2 Cor. 10:5]

2:4 nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. Tiny Judah has been threatened by war for most of its existence. Now Isaiah predicts that, far from bringing oppression, the triumph of biblical faith will bring a peace the world has never known, when all nations **shall beat their swords into plowshares**. The description of the Messiah's reign in 11:1-10 echoes many of these themes; and 11:4 takes up the words **judge** and **decide disputes**, attributing the activity to the Messiah, in order to show that God will exercise this rule through his Messiah. Some Christian interpreters take this to describe the effect on the nations as their citizens and leaders submit to the rule of Christ; others understand this to point forward to an earthly reign of Christ in the millennium (see note on Rev. 20:1-6); still others see it as a prediction of Christ's reign in the new heavens and new earth. In any case, people of all ages have taken these words to express their longings for freedom from war, when the nations seek to follow the "ways" of "the God of Jacob" (Isa. 2:3) and when no mere human authority but the Lord Jesus himself shall judge **between the nations**.

2:5 Isaiah calls the people of God to live now in the **light** of the promised future. His exhortation applies the nations' future rallying cry in v. 3 to the people of God in the present. Judah is part of God's unfolding story, starting with Abraham's call, and the individuals within Judah must embrace their role in that story by faithfully keeping the covenant.

2:6-4:1 Guilt. In tragic contrast with the glory of the latter days (2:1-5;

4:2-6), God rejects Judah in Isaiah's time for their greed, idolatries, pride, and oppression (see Matt. 5:13).

2:6-22 Isaiah surveys the immensity of the present barriers to that happy future, but he is impressed by the Lord alone (vv. 10-11, 17, 19, 21).

2:6-8 For. The urgency of v. 5 is explained. **full . . . filled . . . no end.** Rather than the world coming to Zion to learn God's ways (vv. 2-4), the people of God in Isaiah's day are influenced by the ways of the world—to the point of saturation.

2:9 do not forgive them! Isaiah has given up on his generation. The mystery of forgiveness—for sin cannot be ignored—is revealed in ch. 53.

2:10, 19, 21 from before the terror of the LORD, and from the splendor of his majesty. Sennacherib, king of Assyria, boasted in terms of "the terror-inspiring splendor of my lordship" in his writings. Isaiah counters all human bravado with the prophetic vision of God as the only one who is truly terrifying: **when he rises to terrify the earth** (vv. 19, 21). The Lord is the Creator of all mankind, and therefore has an interest in all mankind (not just Israel).

2:11 the LORD alone will be exalted. Isaiah sees "the haughty looks/haughtiness of man" as central to what is wrong with the world and the exclusive exaltation of the Lord as the only remedy (cf. v. 17).

12^f[Job 40:11, 12; Mal. 4:1]

13^gch. 14:8; See Judg. 9:15

^hEzek. 27:6; Zech. 11:2

14ⁱ[ch. 30:25]

16^jch. 60:9; 1 Kgs. 10:22

17^kPs. 18:27; [Mic. 2:3;

2 Cor. 10:5]

18^lver. 8

19^mver. 10; Hos. 10:8;

Luke 23:30; Rev. 6:16

ⁿ[Ps. 76:8, 9; Hab. 3:6]

20^och. 30:22; 31:7 ^pLev.

11:19; Deut. 14:18

21^q[See ver. 19 above]

^r[See ver. 19 above]

22^sPs. 146:3 ^tJob 27:3;

[James 4:14]

Chapter 3

1^uch. 1:24 ^vLev. 26:26;

Ezek. 4:16

2^w2 Kgs. 24:14; Ezek.

17:13, 14

- 12 ^fFor the LORD of hosts has a day
against all that is proud and lofty,
against all that is lifted up—and it shall be brought low;
- 13 against all the ^gcedars of Lebanon,
lofty and lifted up;
and against all the ^hoaks of Bashan;
- 14 against all ⁱthe lofty mountains,
and against all the uplifted hills;
- 15 against every high tower,
and against every fortified wall;
- 16 against all ^jthe ships of Tarshish,
and against all the beautiful craft.
- 17 ^kAnd the haughtiness of man shall be humbled,
and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low,
and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.
- 18 ^lAnd the idols shall utterly pass away.
- 19 ^mAnd people shall enter the caves of the rocks
and the holes of the ground,¹
from before the terror of the LORD,
and from the splendor of his majesty,
ⁿwhen he rises to terrify the earth.
- 20 In that day ^omankind will cast away
their idols of silver and their idols of gold,
which they made for themselves to worship,
to the moles and to the ^pbats,
- 21 ^mto enter the caverns of the rocks
and the clefts of the cliffs,
from before the terror of the LORD,
and from the splendor of his majesty,
ⁿwhen he rises to terrify the earth.
- 22 ^qStop regarding man
^rin whose nostrils is breath,
for of what account is he?

Judgment on Judah and Jerusalem

3

- 1 For behold, the ^sLord GOD of hosts
is taking away from Jerusalem and from Judah
support and supply,²
all ^tsupport of bread,
and all support of water;
- 2 ^uthe mighty man and the soldier,
the judge and the prophet,
the diviner and the elder,

¹ Hebrew dust ² Hebrew staff

2:12–16 against all . . . against every. Ten times Isaiah asserts God's settled opposition to all human pride.

2:17 the LORD alone will be exalted. See note on v. 11.

2:20–21 their idols of silver and their idols of gold . . . to the moles and to the bats (i.e., into the ruins and caves in which they live). The precious but fraudulent ideals of the present world will be seen for the contemptible things they are and acted upon accordingly. True conversion does not quibble over the loss (cf. Phil. 3:8).

2:22 Stop regarding man. Matching the exhortation in v. 5, Isaiah urges a realistic assessment of the weakness of human power and pride.

3:1–4:6 The false and sinful glories of men and women, which are—and

deserve to be—vulnerable, are replaced by the glory of the Lord, “a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain” (4:6; cf. Ex. 13:21).

3:1–15 Bracketed by “the Lord GOD of hosts” (vv. 1, 15), this section announces God's intention to deprive Jerusalem and Judah of human leadership in their time of crisis.

3:1 For. The prophet explains why man is not to be regarded (2:22). **taking away.** See “take away” in 3:18. God takes away whatever keeps his people from him, but only in order that they might enjoy his glory (4:2–6). The words **support** and **supply** sound alike in Hebrew, and the combination suggests severe deprivation, i.e., **all support of bread, and all support of water.**

3:2–5 God judges his people by removing the leaders who were considered indispensable and replacing them with irresponsible **boys** and **infants**.

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INTRODUCTION TO

EZEKIEL



Author and Title

Ezekiel is both the name of the sixth-century B.C. prophet and the title of the book that records his preaching. Ezekiel's name (Hb. *Yekhezqel*) means "God strengthens" or "May God strengthen," appropriate for a prophet called to proclaim a message of uncompromising judgment and later a message of a restoration for God's sake, not Israel's. Ezekiel lived out his prophetic career among the community of exiled Judeans in Babylon. He belonged to the priestly class and was married (see 24:15–24), but it is doubtful that he had any children.

If Ezekiel was thirty years old at the time of the inaugural vision (see note at 1:1), an intriguing connection can be made with the final vision of the book, which is dated to the twenty-fifth year of the exile (40:1), when Ezekiel would have been fifty. As Numbers 4 makes clear, the ages of thirty and fifty mark the span of the active service of the priests. As a member of the exilic community, Ezekiel would not have been able to participate in the ritual life of the Jerusalem temple, nor would he have undergone initiation into priestly service while living outside the land. But perhaps the timing of these visions coincided with what would have been Ezekiel's "working life" as a priest had he lived in Jerusalem prior to the exile.

The relationship between the Hebrew prophets and the books that bear their names is complex. For both Isaiah (see Isa. 8:16) and Jeremiah (e.g., Jeremiah 36) there is evidence of individuals or groups who preserved the prophet's words. Such is not the case with Ezekiel. No such disciples are named, and Ezekiel's autobiographical style suggests his close involvement with recording the written traditions that bear his name. At the same time, the very preservation of his scroll implies the existence of a support group, which may also have provided some editorial input.

Date

Ezekiel's oracles are more frequently dated than those of other OT prophets. The first date of the book takes the reader to the summer of 593 B.C., five years after the first group of exiles was deported to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. The latest-dated oracle comes 22 years after that summer, in April of 571 B.C. The book is arranged chronologically in three parts: chapters 1–24 and 33–48 form one sequence, while the foreign-nation oracles of chapters 25–32 have their own order (see Outline). Caution must be exercised in attempting to align Ezekiel's dates with those of the modern calendar, but the rough equivalents are as shown in the chart, *Dates in Ezekiel*.

Theme and Purpose

Ezekiel spoke to a community forced from its home, a people who had broken faith with their God. As the spokesman for the God of Israel, Ezekiel spoke oracles that vindicate the reputation of this holy God. This radically God-centered point of view finds its sharpest expression in 36:22–23 ("It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name. . . . And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name. . . . And the nations will know that I am the LORD"). Thus the primary purpose of Ezekiel's message was to restore God's glory before the people who had spurned it in view of the watching nations. But Israel's own welfare was bound up with its God. So the prophet pleads: "Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live" (18:31–32).

Dates in Ezekiel

Reference	Year / month / day following exile of Jehoiachin	Modern equivalent*/year B.C.	Situation
1:2	5th year / 4th month / 5th day	July 593***	inaugural vision
8:1	6th year / 6th month / 5th day	September 592	first temple vision
20:1	7th year / 5th month / 10th day	August 591	elders come to inquire
24:1	9th year / 10th month / 10th day**	January 588 or 587	siege of Jerusalem begins
26:1	11th year / month (?) / 1st day	c. 587–586	oracle against Tyre, before Babylon besieged it
29:1	10th year / 10th month / 12th day	January 587	oracle against Egypt
29:17	27th year / 1st month / 1st day	April 571****	Egypt assigned to Babylon; after end of Babylon's siege of Tyre
30:20	11th year / 1st month / 7th day	April 587	oracle against Egypt
31:1	11th year / 3rd month / 1st day	June 587	oracle against Egypt
32:1	12th year / 12th month / 1st day	March 585	oracle against Egypt
32:17	12th year / 12th month / 15th day	April 585	oracle against Egypt
33:21	12th year / 10th month / 5th day	January 585	fugitive arrives in Babylon
40:1	25th year / 1st month (?) / 10th day (?)	April 573	second temple vision

*For simplicity, here and in the notes that follow, only the second month of the modern equivalent is given (cf. *Months in the Hebrew Calendar*, p. 34)

Unique dating formula in Hebrew; see notes *earliest recorded oracle ****latest recorded oracle

Ezekiel's message was unrelenting. Of all the books in the OT, only Psalms, Jeremiah, and Genesis are longer. Ezekiel's uncompromising message is matched by language that often seems hard and sometimes offensive. If there is no softening his language, at least it appears that the grandeur of Ezekiel's vision of God rendered much of the earthly reality he observed as sordid, and worse. The appropriate response, in Ezekiel's terms, is not simply revulsion but repentance and a longing for the restoration of God's glory.

Occasion and Background

Ezekiel prophesied during a time of great confusion. In 597 B.C. the Babylonians had exiled Judah's king Jehoiachin—only 18 years old, and on the throne for only three months—along with several thousand of its leading citizens (2 Kings 24:10–16). Ezekiel was among their number; he was probably about 25 years old. The political situation was complex: a Judean king was among the exiles (Jehoiachin), but the Babylonians had appointed a puppet king to the throne in Jerusalem (Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah).

The pattern in the history of the exiled northern kingdom of Israel, and now again for the southern kingdom of Judah, was that prophets emerged in times of crisis to bring God's message to his people. The time of Judah's exile was therefore a period of intense prophetic activity. Jeremiah was an older contemporary of Ezekiel (and, like Ezekiel, from a priestly family). Ezekiel clearly knows Jeremiah's message and develops some of the older prophet's themes. However, it is not known whether they ever met, and it seems Jeremiah was not aware of Ezekiel, whose ministry did not begin until after Ezekiel had been in exile for five years.

Although Ezekiel's fellow exiles formed his main audience, it seems likely that his oracles would have been communicated to their compatriots back in Judah. Ezekiel probably lived out his days in exile. His second temple vision—in which a new constitution for renewed, ideal Israel was spelled out—came well into the long exile Jeremiah predicted (Jer. 25:8–14). If Ezekiel was 30 years old when his ministry began, this vision came when he was about 50.

Key Themes

1. As a priest, Ezekiel was deeply concerned with *the holiness of God*, and consequently with *the sin of his people*, that is, with any behavior that offended the holy God. These twin themes can hardly be separated, as attention to matters of purity can be found on nearly every page. Ezekiel's perception of the depth of Israel's sin shows graphically in his version of Israel's history (ch. 20). Even the oracles of restored Israel in chapters 40–48 include provision for dealing with the people's sin so they can survive in the presence of a holy God. This concern also accounts for the many echoes in Ezekiel's oracles of the priestly material in the

Pentateuch, particularly in the legislation of Leviticus and Numbers, as well as the resonances of Ezekiel's new temple (Ezekiel 40–42) with the Exodus tabernacle.

2. Israel was of course subject to its national God. However, Ezekiel's God is no tribal deity but rather is *supreme over all nations*. Therefore Nebuchadnezzar, king of mighty Babylon, was simply a tool in God's hand to accomplish God's purpose (e.g., 21:19–23; 30:25). God's absolute supremacy finds its most pronounced expression in the battle against Gog, the final enemy (chs. 38–39), where God alone crushes Gog's vast hostile forces.

3. The vigilance for holy living that the holy God demands places a claim both on *individuals* and on *the whole community*. Some see a significant milestone in biblical thought in Ezekiel's preaching on individual responsibility in chapter 18 (cf. Jer. 31:29–30). While this chapter certainly focuses on the individual in the modern sense, Ezekiel's clear expression of the requirements binding on communities should not thereby be ignored.

4. The very structure of the book declares *judgment* on those clinging to (false) hope, but true *hope* for those who accept judgment (37:11). Ezekiel's restoration message was heard both before and after the destruction of Jerusalem, but radically God-centered judgment is partnered with a hope (“salvation”) that wholly depends on God's gifts of a new heart and spirit (36:22–32).

5. The *condemnation of Israel's “princes”* (e.g., ch. 19; Ezekiel is reluctant to use the title “king”) finds its hopeful counterpart in the *promise of a future “prince”* who would rule with justice (34:23–24) and stand at the point of connection between God and people (46:1–18).

Style

Prophetic books often make use of formulaic statements, but such formulas have a frequency and consistency in Ezekiel not matched in other prophetic writings. Once recognized, these formulas can greatly help interpretation because they formally mark the introduction and conclusion of oracles. Introductory formulas include “the word of the LORD came to me” (50 times), or, at significant junctures, “the hand of the LORD” being upon Ezekiel (1:3; 3:14, 22; 8:1; 33:22; 37:1; 40:1). Conclusions are often marked with variations of the “recognition formula,” e.g., “they shall know that I am the LORD” (more than 50 times), and the formula itself is an indication of the book's central purpose. Internally, oracles are frequently structured by the terms “because . . . therefore,” identifying the motivation and the message of the oracle.

Some of the unusual aspects of Ezekiel's prophecies are inevitably some of the better known. This is true of his frequent recourse to street theater, and symbolic actions of a quite odd and striking kind (e.g., 4:1–5:17; 12:3–6; 24:16–18; 37:16–17). He also makes plentiful use of extended allegories (e.g., chs. 15–17; 19; 21; 23; etc.). Especially in the foreign-nation oracles, laments become vehicles for his message (e.g., 27:2; 28:11–12; 32:2).

Influence

This book stands at a turning point in the history of biblical prophecy. In part this has to do with Ezekiel's standing on the cusp between the predominant preexilic message, which called for repentance by threatening judgment, and postexilic prophecy, which regularly called for repentance by promising restoration. It has also to do with forms of prophetic experience. While the origins of apocalyptic literature are still debated, Ezekiel's visions must play a role in contributing to its development. In particular, the scenario in which a vision of heavenly realities is given in the company of a celestial guide-interpreter—so familiar from Zechariah and Daniel, as well as the NT book of Revelation—finds its headwaters in Ezekiel's prophecy.

Ezekiel inherited some of his themes from earlier prophets, but his handling of them contributes to their later shape in the NT. This seems particularly true of the imagery of the “good shepherd” (34:11–24) and “living water” (47:1–14; cf. Rev. 22:1–2). The book of Revelation draws inspiration from some of Ezekiel's most negative images—e.g., the “whoring” of Ezekiel 16 and 23, the enemy Gog of Magog (on the use of this in Rev. 20:8, see note on Ezek. 38:2)—but Ezekiel's vision of a new city also resonates there (Rev. 3:12; 21:1–22:5). There are few clear hints of resurrection in the OT, but one of them is found in the interpretation of Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (see Ezek. 37:12–13 and note). Whatever it might have meant to Ezekiel's audience, it makes an important contribution to the development of biblical thought.

History of Salvation Summary

Like other prophets called to explain the Babylonian exile, Ezekiel stressed that it was due to the people's faithlessness toward God, and therefore to their failure to live as God's renewed humanity. He also stressed



The Near East at the Time of Ezekiel

c. 593 B.C.

Ezekiel recorded his visions and prophecies while living in the vicinity of Babylon, where he had been exiled years earlier. By Ezekiel's time, the Babylonian Empire had engulfed virtually all of the area along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea and would eventually subdue even the land of Egypt, where many other Judeans had fled.

that even this disaster was not the end of Israel's story. God would restore them morally and spiritually, and eventually use Israel to bring light to the Gentiles. Ezekiel adds a nuance to this prophetic refrain: Israel's calling was to show forth the holiness of God's name, but they had "profaned" that name (treated it as unholy); in restoring them, God would act to vindicate the holiness of his name before all nations, enabling them to know him. (For an explanation of the "History of Salvation," see the Overview of the Bible, pp. 23–26. See also *History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ*, pp. 2635–2662.)

Literary Features

The book of Ezekiel is one of the most complex books in the Bible because so many different genres converge in it. It is important to grasp right at the start that this book is an anthology of separate pieces of writing. There is no single overarching story line; the unity is that of a carefully arranged collection (see Outline). The general arrangement of the material is one that several other OT prophetic books also follow—a general movement from (1) oracles of judgment against the prophet's own nation of Judah (usually called Israel in the text), to (2) oracles of judgment against the surrounding pagan nations, to (3) oracles of future, eschatological blessing on those who believe in God.

Several observations are in order. First, much of the book consists of visionary writing, which transports readers to a world of the imagination where the rules of reality are obviously suspended in favor of highly unusual visions. To understand and relish the book of Ezekiel, readers often need to abandon expectations of realism. Second, Ezekiel employs a technique known as symbolic reality, which occurs when a writer consistently transports the reader to a world of visionary experience where the most important ingredients are symbols—symbols like a vine, a boiling pot, or a valley full of dry bones. Third, prophecy is itself a genre, made up of oracles (pronouncements from God through the agency of a prophet) that fall into two main categories—oracles of judgment and oracles of blessing. Oracles of judgment are ordinarily examples of satire, and in the prophetic satire of Ezekiel there are three motifs: (1) *description* of evil, (2) *denunciation* of this evil, and (3) *warnings and predictions* that God will judge the evil. Prophecy often merges with apocalyptic writing about epic, end-time struggles. These sections often portray events at the end of history. Finally, readers should not overlook the obvious—the prophet Ezekiel expresses himself in the form of poetry.

In addition to abandoning expectations of consistent realism, readers should give themselves to the sheer strangeness of what is presented. Ezekiel talks about real, historical events, but much of the time he does not portray these events in literal terms. Instead he prefers extravagant visions as his mode. Additionally, readers need to be ready for a kaleidoscope of details, always shifting and never in focus for very long. The best approach to the oracles of judgment is to analyze them according to the usual literary rules regarding satire.

Outline

Ezekiel is the most overtly and deliberately structured of the Major Prophets. The book as a whole is organized around the fulcrum of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., with chapters 1–25 preceding its fall, and chapters 33–48 following. The foreign-nation oracles of chapters 26–32 also have a chronological ordering, as well as geographical and thematic organization (see notes for details). The book's major visions play a structuring role too. The inaugural vision of chapters 1–3 finds an explicit cross-reference in the middle of the first temple vision of chapters 8–11 (see 10:20–22). The “dry bones” vision of 37:1–14 is shorter than the others but plays a pivotal role in the movement toward restoration, seen in the culminating vision of chapters 40–48, which in turn makes a pronounced cross-reference back to the inaugural vision as well as the previous temple vision (43:1–5). These observations alone powerfully imply that in Ezekiel's book, both content and form contribute to the message.

- I. Inaugural Vision (1:1–3:27)
 - A. Setting (1:1–3)
 - B. Inaugural vision (1:4–3:15)
 - 1. The throne of the Lord approaches (1:4–28)
 - 2. The prophet commissioned (2:1–3:11)
 - 3. The throne of the Lord withdraws (3:12–13)
 - 4. The vision concludes (3:14–15)
 - C. The watchman (3:16–21) [cf. 33:1–9]
 - D. Inaugural vision reprise (3:22–27)
- II. Judgment on Jerusalem and Judah (4:1–24:27)
 - A. God against Jerusalem (4:1–5:17)
 - 1. God against Jerusalem enacted (4:1–5:4)
 - 2. God against Jerusalem explained (5:5–17)
 - B. Oracles against the “land” (6:1–7:27)
 - 1. Against the mountains of Israel (6:1–14)
 - 2. Against the land of Israel (7:1–27)
 - C. Ezekiel's temple vision (8:1–11:25)
 - 1. Transportation and abominations (8:1–18)
 - 2. Slaughter in Jerusalem (9:1–11)
 - 3. The fire and the glory (10:1–22)
 - 4. Punishment for civic authorities (11:1–13)
 - 5. Promise of a new heart, spirit (11:14–21)
 - 6. The glory of the Lord departs (11:22–25)
 - D. Anticipating exile (12:1–28)
 - 1. Exile predicted (12:1–20)
 - 2. Exile confirmed (12:21–28)
 - E. False prophecy, true prophecy (13:1–14:11)
 - 1. False prophets (13:1–23)
 - 2. False inquirers (14:1–11)
 - F. The consequences of infidelity (14:12–15:8)
 - 1. Noah, Daniel, Job (14:12–23)
 - 2. The useless vine (15:1–8)
 - G. The faithless bride (16:1–63)
 - 1. Jerusalem, the foundling bride (16:1–43)
 - 2. Jerusalem and her sisters (16:44–58)
 - 3. The everlasting covenant (16:59–63)
 - H. The parable of the eagles and the vine (17:1–24)
 - 1. The parable narrated (17:1–10)
 - 2. The parable explained (17:11–18)
 - 3. The parable interpreted (17:19–21)
 - 4. A new parable (17:22–24)
 - I. Moral responsibility (18:1–32)

1. The one who sins dies (18:1–4)
2. Three case studies (18:5–18)
3. Two objections (18:19–29)
4. Conclusion: repent! (18:30–32)
- J. Lament for the princes of Israel (19:1–14)
 1. A lioness and her cubs (19:1–9)
 2. A vine and its stem(s) (19:10–14)
- K. Learning from history (20:1–44)
 1. Looking to the past (20:1–31)
 2. Unthinkable idolatry (20:32)
 3. Looking to the future (20:33–44)
- L. Fire and sword (20:45–21:32)
 1. The parable of the fire (20:45–49)
 2. The drawn sword (21:1–7)
 3. The sharpened sword (21:8–17)
 4. The sword of Nebuchadnezzar (21:18–29)
 5. The sword sheathed and judged (21:30–32)
- M. A city defiled (22:1–31)
 1. The bloody city (22:1–16)
 2. The city of dross (22:17–22)
 3. Systemic failure (22:23–31)
- N. Two sisters (23:1–49)
 1. The sisters and politics (23:1–35)
 2. The sisters and religion (23:36–49)
- O. Two losses (24:1–27)
 1. Jerusalem, the bloody pot (24:1–14)
 2. No mourning for Ezekiel's wife (24:15–24)
 3. Fugitive news (24:25–27)
- III. Oracles against Foreign Nations (25:1–32:32)
 - A. Against Judah's neighbors (25:1–17)
 1. Against Ammon (25:1–7)
 2. Against Moab (25:8–11)
 3. Against Edom (25:12–14)
 4. Against Philistia (25:15–17)
 - B. Oracles against Tyre (26:1–28:19)
 1. Against Tyre (26:1–21)
 2. A lament against Tyre (27:1–36)
 3. Against Tyre's king (28:1–19)
 - C. Oracle against Sidon (28:20–23)
 - D. Israel gathered in security (28:24–26)
 - E. Oracles against Egypt (29:1–32:32)
 1. Against Pharaoh (29:1–16)
 2. Nebuchadnezzar and Egypt (29:17–21)
 3. Lament for Egypt (30:1–19)
 4. The kings of Egypt and Babylon (30:20–26)
 5. The fall of Pharaoh (31:1–18)
 6. Lament over Pharaoh (32:1–16)
 7. Egypt's descent to the pit (32:17–32)
- IV. After the Fall of Jerusalem (33:1–39:29)
 - A. Reminders (33:1–20)
 1. The watchman (reprise) (33:1–9) [cf. 3:16–21]
 2. Moral responsibility (reprise) (33:10–20) [cf. 18:21–29]

- B. The fall of Jerusalem (33:21–22)
 - C. Culpability (33:23–33)
 - 1. A word for the homelander (33:23–29)
 - 2. A word for the exiles (33:30–33)
 - D. Shepherds and sheep (34:1–31)
 - 1. Wicked shepherds and the good shepherd (34:1–16)
 - 2. The flock: problems and prospects (34:17–31)
 - E. The mountains of Edom and Israel (35:1–36:15)
 - 1. Against Mount Seir (35:1–15)
 - 2. The mountains of Israel restored (36:1–15)
 - F. Restoration for the sake of God's name (36:16–38)
 - 1. State of impurity (36:16–21)
 - 2. Divine intervention: a new spirit (36:22–32)
 - 3. Land renewed (36:33–36)
 - 4. Populace increased (36:37–38)
 - G. The vision of dry bones (37:1–14)
 - H. The houses of Israel and Judah (37:15–28)
 - I. Gog of Magog (38:1–39:29)
- V. Vision of Restoration (40:1–48:35)
- A. Vision of the new temple (40:1–42:20)
 - 1. The vision begins (40:1–4)
 - 2. The outer court and its gates (40:5–27)
 - 3. The inner court, gates, and chambers (40:28–49)
 - 4. The temple interior (41:1–26)
 - 5. Chambers of the outer court (42:1–14)
 - 6. Exterior measurements (42:15–20)
 - B. The return of God's glory (43:1–5)
 - C. Regulations for renewed Israel (43:6–46:18)
 - 1. New people for new temple (43:6–12)
 - 2. The altar regulations (43:13–27)
 - 3. The prince's gate (44:1–3)
 - 4. Temple access and rules for priests (44:4–31)
 - 5. The temple districts (45:1–8)
 - 6. Legal measurements (45:9–12)
 - 7. Offerings and gatherings (45:13–46:15)
 - 8. Rules for inheritance of the prince (46:16–18)
 - D. The river flowing from the temple (46:19–47:12)
 - 1. The temple kitchens (46:19–24)
 - 2. The temple's river (47:1–12)
 - E. Dividing the land: allotment and access (47:13–48:35)
 - 1. The outer boundaries (47:13–23)
 - 2. Territories of the northern tribes (48:1–7)
 - 3. The central territories (48:8–22)
 - 4. Territories of the southern tribes (48:23–29)
 - 5. Access to the city (48:30–35)

EZEKIEL

Ezekiel in Babylon

1^aIn the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by ^bthe Chebar canal, ^cthe heavens were opened, and I saw ^dvisions of God.¹
²On the fifth day of the month (it was ^ethe fifth year of ^fthe exile of King Jehoiachin), ³the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel ^gthe priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by ^bthe Chebar canal, and ^hthe hand of the LORD was upon him there.

The Glory of the LORD

⁴As I looked, behold, ⁱa stormy wind came ^jout of the north, and a great cloud, with ^kbrightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, ^las it were gleaming metal.² ⁵And from the midst of it came the likeness of ^mfour living creatures. ⁿAnd this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, ⁶^obut each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. ⁷Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot. And they sparkled ^plike burnished bronze. ⁸Under their wings ^qon their four sides ^rthey had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: ⁹their wings touched one another. ^sEach one of them went straight forward, ^twithout turning as they went. ¹⁰As for the likeness of their faces, ^ueach had a human

¹ Or from God ² Or amber; also verse 27

¹⁰ ch. 10:14, 21

Chapter 1

^{1a} [ver. 3; Num. 4:3]

^b ch. 3:15, 23; 10:15, 20, 22; 43:3 ^c [Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:21; John 1:51; Acts 7:56; 10:11; Rev. 19:11] ^d ch. 8:3; 40:2; [ch. 11:24; Num. 12:6]

² [ch. 8:1]; See ch. 20:1

² Kgs. 24:12, 15; [ch. 17:12; 19:8; 33:21; 40:1]

^{3a} [ver. 1] ^b [See ver. 1 above] ^c ch. 3:22; 8:1; 33:22; 37:1; 40:1; [1 Kgs. 18:46; 2 Kgs. 3:15]

⁴ Jer. 23:19; 25:32; 30:23; [ch. 3:12] ⁵ See Jer. 1:14 ⁶ ver. 27 ⁷ ver. 27; ch. 8:2

⁵ See Rev. 4:6-8 ⁶ ch. 10:14, 21

⁶ ch. 10:21

⁷ ch. 40:3; Rev. 1:15; 2:18

⁸ ver. 17; ch. 10:11 ⁹ ch. 10:8, 21

⁹ ch. 10:22 ^q [See ver. 8 above]

1:1-3:27 Inaugural Vision. The opening sequence of Ezekiel is the most elaborate and complex of the prophetic call narratives in the OT, and also one of the most carefully structured. In a vision, Ezekiel witnesses the awesome approach of the glory of God (1:1-28). Ezekiel receives his prophetic commission through swallowing the scroll God offers (2:1-3:11), thus both fortifying him and training him in obedience. After the glory of God withdraws (3:12-15), Ezekiel's role is further refined by his appointment as a "watchman" (3:16-21). The sequence concludes with a further encounter with God's glory (3:22-27).

1:1-3 Setting. Unusually, Ezekiel opens with an autobiographical note (v. 1) and some accompanying explanation (vv. 2-3). These verses have echoes in 3:14-15; together they frame the book's opening vision.

1:1 What the **thirtieth year** signifies is obscure, as it does not follow the usual pattern for dates in Ezekiel. It may refer to the prophet's age. Reference to the **Chebar canal** locates the prophet near ancient Nippur (or, in modern terms, halfway between Baghdad and Basra) and thus not in the city of Babylon itself. **Visions of God** links this vision with 8:3 and 40:2; the other great vision in the book (37:1-14) does not use this language.

1:2 Probably the "thirtieth year" of v. 1 should be linked with the **fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin** (i.e., 593 B.C.). Jehoiachin's exile is the regular chronological marker for dates given throughout the book. Jehoiachin was only 18 at the time of exile in 597 B.C., and had then been king for only three months (see 2 Kings 24:8).

1:4-3:15 Inaugural Vision. The vision forms a unified whole, in spite of its being comprised of distinct episodes. It is symmetrically structured, having onion-like layers: the "frame" (1:1-3 and 3:14-15) is wrapped around the approach and departure of the cherub-throne (1:4-28 and 3:12-13), with the prophet's audience before the Lord contained in 2:1-3:11. That central section has its own internal "nesting."

1:4-28 The Throne of the Lord Approaches. The richness of detail in Ezekiel's

account of this vision is both inspiring and perplexing. It recalls the traditions of the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:10-22), especially within the context of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8:6-8), and stands at the head of the later mystical *merkavah* (Hb. for "chariot") tradition within Judaism.

1:4 A stormy wind (Hb. *ruakh se'arah*) heralds the approach of the Lord, as in Job 38:1; 40:6. Likewise, the **north** is associated with the divine abode (see Ps. 48:2), and in Jeremiah it indicates the source of divine judgment (Jer. 1:13-15). The phrase **as it were** translates the Hebrew preposition *ke-*, "like," which is used 18 times in this description; half of those are in Ezek. 1:24-28. Clearly Ezekiel is groping for language to describe the vision.

1:5-14 The piling up of detail contrasts with the bland label of **living creatures**, only later identified as "cherubim" in 10:20. The first impression (1:6-9) is followed by closer detail (vv. 10-13). (A beautiful carved ivory that may depict one of these composite creatures has been found, dating to the 9th century B.C. It probably comes from the site of Arslan Tash in northern Syria. The figure combines all four features described in ch. 1: a human figure, wings of an eagle, forelegs of a lion, and hind legs of an ox.)

1:5 The many uses of the term **likeness** (Hb. *demut*, 10 times in ch. 1) emphasize the impressionistic nature of the vision's description.

1:9 The notice that **their wings touched** is reminiscent of the description of the cherubim in the Most Holy Place in Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6:27). The four-sided form of the creatures ensures that they can always do the impossible: go **straight forward**, in any direction, but **without turning** (cf. "went straight forward" [Ezek. 1:12] with "darted to and fro" [v. 14]).

1:10 The creatures had a predominantly human shape, but each had four different **faces**. This assemblage is unique, although complex combinations of supernatural beings are known throughout the ancient Near East. Many suggestions have been made to explain their symbolism. Certainly each creature is majestic in its realm, whether among the wild (**lion**; Prov. 30:30) and domestic (**ox**; Prov. 14:4) animals, or in the air (**eagle**; Prov. 23:5; cf. Obad. 4), with each of them noticed subsequently to the **human face** (cf. Gen.

11¹⁴ver. 23; [Isa. 6:2]
 12²[See ver. 9 above] ^cch.
 10:17
 13⁴[Ps. 104:4] ^a[Ps.
 97:3, 4]
 14¹[Zech. 4:10] ²[Matt.
 24:27; Luke 17:24]
 15²ch. 10:9; [Dan. 7:9]
 16¹[See ver. 15 above]
^b[Dan. 10:6] ^cch. 10:10
 17²ch. 10:11 ^aver. 8 ^fver. 9
 18⁶ch. 10:12; [Rev. 4:8]
 19⁷ch. 10:16 [ch. 10:19;
 11:22]
 20¹ch. 10:17
 21¹[See ver. 19 above]
^f[See ver. 19 above] ^f[See
 ver. 20 above]
 22⁴[ver. 25, 26; ch. 10:1]
^f[Rev. 4:6]
 23¹ver. 7 ^aver. 11
 24²ch. 43:2; [Rev. 1:15]
^aPs. 29:3, 4; 68:33 ^aSee
 Gen. 17:1 [Dan. 10:6;
 [Rev. 19:6]
 25¹[ver. 22]
 26⁶ch. 10:1; [1 Kgs. 22:19]
^aEx. 24:10 ^bDan. 8:15;
 [Rev. 1:13]
 27¹ch. 8:2; [ver. 4] ^aSee
 ver. 4 ^aver. 4
 28²Gen. 9:13; [Rev. 4:3;
 10:1]

face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle. ¹¹Such were their faces. And their wings were spread out above. Each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while ¹²two covered their bodies. ¹²^aAnd each went straight forward. ¹³Wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went. ¹³^aAs for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was ¹⁴like burning coals of fire, ¹⁴like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures. ¹⁵And the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. ¹⁴And the living creatures ¹⁵darted to and fro, ¹⁵like the appearance of a flash of lightning.

¹⁵^aNow as I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them. ¹⁶^aAs for the appearance of the wheels and their construction: their appearance was like ¹⁶the gleaming of beryl. ¹⁷And the four had the same likeness, their appearance and construction being as it were a wheel within a wheel. ¹⁷^dWhen they went, they went ¹⁸in any of their four directions² ¹⁸without turning as they went. ¹⁸And their rims were tall and awesome, ¹⁸and the rims of all four were full of eyes all around. ¹⁹^hAnd when the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them; ¹⁹and when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose. ²⁰Wherever the spirit wanted to go, they went, and the wheels rose along with them, ²⁰for the spirit of the living creatures³ was in the wheels. ²¹^hWhen those went, these went; and when those stood, these stood; ²¹and when those rose from the earth, the wheels rose along with them, ²¹for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

²²Over the heads of the living creatures there was ²²the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring ²³crystal, spread out above their heads. ²³And under the expanse their wings were ²⁴stretched out straight, one toward another. ²⁴And each creature had two wings covering its body. ²⁴And when they went, I heard the sound of their wings ²⁵like the sound of many waters, like ²⁵the sound of the ²⁵Almighty, a sound of tumult ²⁵like the sound of an army. When they stood still, they let down their wings. ²⁵And there came a voice from above ²⁶the expanse over their heads. When they stood still, they let down their wings.

²⁶And above the expanse over their heads there was ²⁶the likeness of a throne, ²⁶in appearance ²⁶like sapphire; ²⁶and seated above the likeness of a throne was ²⁷a likeness with a human appearance. ²⁷And ²⁷upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were ²⁸gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and ²⁸there was brightness around him. ²⁸Like the appearance of ²⁸the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around.

¹Hebrew of their faces ²Hebrew on their four sides ³Or the spirit of life; also verse 21 ⁴Or lapis lazuli ⁵Or it

1:26). This imagery is later echoed in the four (separate) creatures before the throne in Rev. 4:7.

1:11 The **two wings** of these creatures (also in v. 23) are similar to the three pairs of wings of the seraphim in Isaiah's throne vision (Isa. 6:2).

1:12 straight forward . . . without turning. See note on v. 9. Should this **spirit** (Hb. *ruakh*) be identified with that of v. 20? It is certainly different from the *ruakh* (Hb. for "wind") of v. 4. Given the closer identification of the spirit in v. 20, it seems likely that here the reference is to a "spirit" beyond the living creatures—in other words, the creatures' movements are responsive to the divine spirit (for "Spirit," see note on 3:12).

1:14 darted to and fro. See note on v. 9.

1:15–21 The complex structure of their **wheels** is difficult to envisage, though something gyroscopic seems to be suggested.

1:16 Beryl (Hb. *tarshish*) is a crystalline mineral found in different colors. Here, it is likely to be the pale green to gold variety. The Septuagint does not use a consistent Greek equivalent.

1:18 The wheels' **eyes** should be understood metaphorically and as related to the "gleaming" beryl of v. 16 (perhaps protruding gemstones).

1:22–28 The climax of the vision: a form can be discerned **above** the wheels,

above the creatures, above the expanse, on a throne. Wrapped in light, **the glory of the LORD** cannot be captured in human language.

1:22–23 Expanse appears four times in the immediate context (vv. 22–23, 25–26) and forms a strong link to Gen. 1:6–8, 14–20, where it is used nine times (out of a total of 17 times in the whole OT). There the expanse forms the dome of the sky; here it is borne on the wings of the creatures and forms a boundary *beyond* which comes the culmination of the vision.

1:24 For the first time in the vision, sound dominates sight, even though the preceding description includes a violent thunderstorm (v. 4). The sound of **many waters** will again accompany the approaching glory of God in 43:2.

1:25 While the sound of a **voice** is registered, report of speech is deferred until v. 28b.

1:28 The bow . . . on the day of rain could signal the covenant rainbow of Gen. 9:13–16. Given the ominous message that follows, the more likely symbolic reference is to the bow that is the Lord's weapon from the storm, which shoots arrows of lightning (see Ps. 7:12–13; Hab. 3:9). The **glory of the LORD** is his manifested presence with his people, visible in the wilderness (Ex. 16:7) and then accessible through the sanctuary (Ex. 40:34–35); in Ezekiel the term appears in Ezek. 1:28; 3:12, 23; 8:4; 9:3; 10:4, 18–19; 11:22–23; 43:2–5; 44:4. This glory will leave the temple (chs. 9–11) and then will return to the restored temple (43:2–5). See note on Isa. 6:3. **I fell on my face.**

Such was the appearance of the likeness of ^athe glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, ^bI fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

Ezekiel's Call

2 And he said to me, ^c“Son of man, ^dstand on your feet, and I will speak with you.” ²And as he spoke to me, ^ethe Spirit entered into me and ^fset me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. ³And he said to me, “Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to ^gnations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. ^hThey and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. ⁴The descendants also are ⁱimpudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’ ⁵And ^jwhether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are ^ka rebellious house) ^lthey will know that a prophet has been among them. ⁶And you, son of man, ^mbe not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words, ⁿthough briars and thorns are with you and you sit on ^oscorpions. ² Be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. ⁷And you shall speak my words to them, ^jwhether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house.

⁸“But you, son of man, hear what I say to you. ^oBe not rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and ^peat what I give you.” ⁹And when I looked, behold, ^qa hand was stretched out to me, and behold, ^ra scroll of a book was in it. ¹⁰And he spread it before me. And it had writing ^son the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe.

3 And he said to me, ^c“Son of man, eat whatever you find here. ^tEat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.” ²So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. ³And he said to me, “Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it.” ^uThen I ate it, and it was in my mouth ^vas sweet as honey.

⁴And he said to me, ^w“Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with my words to them. ⁵For you are not sent to a people of foreign speech and a hard language, but to the house of Israel—⁶not to many peoples of foreign speech and a hard language, whose words you cannot understand. ^xSurely, if I sent you to such, they would listen to you. ⁷But the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me: because all the house of Israel ^yhave a hard forehead and a stubborn heart. ^{8a}Behold, I have made your face as hard as their faces, and your forehead as hard as their foreheads.

¹ Or Son of Adam; so throughout Ezekiel ² Or on scorpion plants

²⁸ch. 3:23; 8:4; 9:3; 10:4, 18, 19; 11:22, 23; 43:4, 5; 44:4; [Ex. 24:16] ²ch. 3:23; 43:3; 44:4; [Gen. 17:3, 17; Josh. 5:14; Dan. 8:17; Acts 9:4; Rev. 1:17]

Chapter 2

¹ch. 3:1, 3, 4, 17, 25; 4:1, 16; 5:1 ²Dan. 10:11 ²ch. 3:24 ch. 3:24; Dan. 8:18

³[ver. 5, 6, 8; ch. 3:26; 24:3; 44:6] ⁴ch. 20:16, 18, 21

⁴[ch. 3:7]

⁵ch. 3:11; [ch. 3:27; 17:12] ⁶[See ver. 3 above] ⁷ch. 33:33

⁸ch. 3:9; Jer. 1:8 ⁹[ch. 28:24; 2 Sam. 23:6; Mic. 7:4] ¹⁰[Deut. 8:15]

¹¹[See ver. 5 above]

¹²[Isa. 50:5] ¹³Rev. 10:9; [ch. 3:1, 3]

¹⁴ch. 8:3; Dan. 10:10; Rev. 10:2 ¹⁵Jer. 36:2 ¹⁶Rev. 5:1

Chapter 3

¹[See ch. 2:1 above]

²[ch. 2:8]

³Jer. 15:16; Rev. 10:9,

¹⁰[Ps. 19:10; 119:103]

⁴See ch. 2:1

⁶[Matt. 11:21, 23]

⁷[John 15:20] ⁸[ch. 2:4]

⁸See Jer. 1:18

In the NT, John's vision of the risen Christ (Rev. 1:9–20, esp. v. 17) stirred a similar response.

2:1–3:11 *The Prophet Commissioned.* The vision of glory culminates in a call that is both sweet and severe. Two speeches bracket a test of obedience.

2:1 Ezekiel is never addressed by name, but 93 times as **son of man** (Hb. *ben-'adam*), out of a total of 99 times for the phrase in the OT; Daniel is the only other person so addressed in the OT (Dan. 8:17). The Hebrew idiom “son of x” indicates membership in a class. “Son of man” identifies Ezekiel as a creature before the supreme creator. This highlights the humanity and thus the proper humility and dignity of the servant before Israel's almighty, transcendent God.

2:2–4 The characterization of the people of Israel as **rebels** sounds a distinctive note throughout the commissioning vision. This deep-seated trait (**and their fathers**; cf. v. 4) will be emphasized again in Ezekiel's retrospective of Israel's history in ch. 20. Ezekiel is sent to speak on God's behalf (**you shall say to them**), but no content is given—yet.

2:5–7 The label **rebellious house**, used almost like a refrain in these verses, is unique to Ezekiel (see also 3:9, 26–27; 12:2–3, 9, 25; 24:3). This label joins 2:2–4 in pointing to a deeply ingrained bent to rebellion, while treating the Judean nation as a whole. On the parallel of vv. 6b–7 to 3:9b–11, see note on 3:9b–11.

2:8–3:3 The demand to **eat** the scroll immediately tests Ezekiel's obedience, a matter of contrast with the rebelliousness of his compatriots. The progression from command to compliance moves through three moments of speech and response (2:8–10; 3:1–2; 3:3).

2:8–10 The request to **open your mouth and eat** comes without any indication of what is to be given. The missing “content” of v. 4 is about to be provided, not as food but as the **scroll of a book**. This phrase (elsewhere

found only in Ps. 40:8; Jer. 36:2, 4) emphasizes the scroll's physicality. When it is unrolled, the **writing** is visible front and back: the scroll is full, just as Ezekiel soon will be (Ezek. 3:3). Its **words** are all audible, though their precise content remains unspecified.

3:1–2 The command to **eat** is now combined with the commission to **go** and **speak**.

3:3 **feed your belly.** Does this third instruction imply hesitation on the prophet's part? Finally, having tasted, the prophet gets another surprise: the words of mourning are not bitter, as one would expect, but **sweet as honey**. Ezekiel has taken a first step in obedience to the Lord.

3:4–11 Following Ezekiel's obedient response, the emphasis shifts from prophet to people, though both remain in view.

3:4 The command to **go** and **speak** is repeated in v. 11, framing this second speech. While the first speech emphasized divine sending (2:3–4), here the focus is on the prophet's going.

3:5–7 Contrary to expectation, Ezekiel is cautioned that a cross-cultural mission would be easier than taking words of God to his own people. There is nothing inherently derogatory about **foreign speech and a hard language**, although the terms could be negatively applied to a foreign oppressor (cf. Isa. 33:19).

3:8–9a **made your face as hard.** This equipping forms the necessary step to the final charge.

3:9b–11 The conclusion to the second speech echoes and expands on that of the first (2:6b–7). Despite the striking resemblance of the English texts, the Hebrew is cast quite differently in the two passages. This could simply be stylistic variation. If the Hebrew constructions are intended to carry a nuance, then 2:6b–7 has the force of an immediate instruction (“don't be afraid [now]!”) while 3:9b–11 has that of a blanket prohibition (“never fear!”). It could also

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INTRODUCTION TO

JONAH



Author and Title

The title of the book is the name of the main character, Jonah. The book is anonymous, and there are no indicators elsewhere in Scripture to identify the author. The foundational source for the book was likely Jonah's own telling of the story after his return from Nineveh.

Date

Since Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (782–753 B.C.; see 2 Kings 14:23–28), and since *Sirach* 49:10 (from the 2nd century B.C.) refers to the “twelve prophets” (namely, the 12 Minor Prophets, of which Jonah is the fifth), the book of Jonah was written sometime between the middle of the eighth and the end of the third centuries. No compelling evidence leads to a more precise date.

Theme

The Lord is a God of boundless compassion not just for “us” (Jonah and the Israelites) but also for “them” (the pagan sailors and Ninevites).

Purpose, Occasion, and Background

The primary purpose of the book of Jonah is to engage readers in theological reflection on the compassionate character of God, and in self-reflection on the degree to which their own character reflects this compassion, to the end that they become vehicles of this compassion in the world that God has made and so deeply cares about.

Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:23–28), who ruled in Israel (the northern kingdom) from 782 to 753 B.C. Jeroboam was the grandson of Jehoahaz, who ruled in Israel from 814 to 798 B.C. Because of the sins of Jehoahaz, Israel was oppressed by the Arameans (2 Kings 13:3). But because of the Lord's great compassion (2 Kings 13:4, 23), Israel was spared destruction and delivered from this oppression (2 Kings 13:5). This deliverance came through a “savior” (2 Kings 13:5), who may have been Adad-nirari III (810–783 B.C.), king of Assyria.

Jeroboam's father, Jehoash (798–782 B.C.), capitalized on this freedom from Aramean oppression and began to expand Israel's boundaries, recapturing towns taken during the reign of Jehoahaz (2 Kings 13:25). Though Jeroboam “did what was evil in the sight of the LORD” (2 Kings 14:24), he nevertheless expanded Israel even farther than his father did, matching the boundaries in the days of David and Solomon (2 Kings 14:25); this was “according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath hepher” (2 Kings 14:25). Thus Jonah witnessed firsthand the restorative compassion of God extended to his wayward people.

In God's providence, the expansion by Jeroboam was made easier because of Assyrian weakness. The Assyrians were engaged in conflicts with the Arameans and the Urartians. There was also widespread famine, and numerous revolts within the Assyrian Empire (where regional governors ruled with a fair degree of autonomy). Then there was an auspicious eclipse of the sun during the reign of Ashur-dan III (771–754 B.C.). This convergence of events supports the plausibility of the Ninevites being so responsive to Jonah's call to repent.

It was not until some years later that Tiglath-pileser (745–727 B.C.) would gain control and reestablish Assyrian dominance in the area, and his son Shalmaneser V (727–722) was the king responsible for the conquest of Israel and the destruction of Samaria in 722. Thus Jonah prophesied in an era when Assyria was not an immediate threat to Israel and when Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity because of the compassion of God.

Genre

The genre of Jonah is debated. The book has been read as an *allegory*, using fictional figures to symbolize some other reality. According to this interpretation, Jonah is a symbol of Israel in its refusal to carry out God's mission to the nations. The primary argument against this view is that Jonah is clearly presented as a historical and not a fictional figure (see the specific historical and geographical details in 1:1–3; 3:2–10; 4:11; cf. also 2 Kings 14:25). Another proposal is that the book is a *parable* to teach believers not to be like Jonah. Like allegories, parables are also based on fictional and not historical characters. Parables, however, are typically simple tales that make a single point, whereas the book of Jonah is quite complex and teaches a multiplicity of themes.

The book of Jonah has all the marks of a *prophetic narrative*, like those about Elijah and Elisha found in 1 Kings, which set out to report actual historical events. The phrase that opens the book (“the word of the LORD came to”) is also at the beginning of the first two stories told about Elijah (1 Kings 17:2, 8) and is used in other prophetic narratives as well (e.g., 1 Sam. 15:10; 2 Sam. 7:4). Just as the Elijah and Elisha narratives contain extraordinary events, like ravens providing bread and meat for the prophet (1 Kings 17:6), so does the book of Jonah, as when the fish “provides transportation” for the prophet. In fact, the story of Jonah is so much like the stories about Elijah and Elisha that one would hardly think it odd if the story of Jonah were embedded in 2 Kings right after Jonah's prophetic words about the expansion of the kingdom. The story of Jonah is thus presented as historical, like the other prophetic narratives.

There are additional arguments for the historical nature of the book of Jonah. It is difficult to say that the story teaches God's sovereignty over the creation if God did not in fact “appoint” the fish (1:17), the plant (4:6), the worm (4:7), and the east wind (4:8) to do his will. Jesus, moreover, treated the story as historical when he used elements of the story as analogies for other historical events (see Matt. 12:40–41). This is especially clear when Jesus declared that “the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah” (Matt. 12:41).

The story of Jonah is not, however, history for history's sake. The book is clearly *didactic* (as the allegorical and parabolic interpretations rightly affirm); that is, the story is told *to teach the reader key lessons*. The didactic character of the book shines through in the repeated use of questions, 11 out of 14 being addressed to Jonah, and the question that closes the narrative leaves readers asking themselves how they will respond to the story.

Key Themes

The primary theme in Jonah is that God's compassion is boundless, not limited just to “us” but also available for “them.” This is clear from the flow of the story and its conclusion: (1) Jonah is the object of God's compassion throughout the book, and the pagan sailors and pagan Ninevites are also the benefactors of this compassion. (2) The story ends with the question, “Should I not pity Nineveh . . . ?” (4:11). Tied to this theological teaching is the anthropological question, Do readers of the story have hearts that are like the heart of God? While Jonah was concerned about a plant that “perished” (4:10), he showed no such concern for the Ninevites. Conversely, the pagan sailors (1:14), their captain (1:6), and the king of Nineveh (3:9) all showed concern that human beings, including Jonah, not “perish.”

Several other major themes in the book include:

1. God's sovereign control over events on the earth
2. God's determination to get his message to the nations
3. The need for repentance from sin in general
4. The need for repentance from self-centeredness and hypocrisy in particular
5. The full assurance that God will relent when people repent.

History of Salvation Summary

Jonah's rescue from death provides an analogy for the resurrection of Christ (Matt. 12:39–40). The repentance of the Ninevites anticipates the wide-scale repentance of Gentiles in the messianic era (Matt. 28:18–20;



The Setting of Jonah

c. 760 B.C.

Jonah prophesied during the politically prosperous time of Jeroboam II of Israel (2 Kings 14:23–28). During this time the Assyrians were occupied with matters elsewhere in the empire, allowing Jeroboam II to capture much of Syria for Israel. The Lord called Jonah to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh to pronounce judgment upon it. Jonah attempted to escape the Lord's calling by sailing from the seaport of Joppa to Tarshish, which was probably in the western Mediterranean. Eventually he obeyed the Lord and traveled overland to Nineveh at the heart of the Assyrian Empire.

Luke 24:47). (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the Overview of the Bible, pp. 23–26. See also History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ, pp. 2635–2662.)

Literary Features

The book of Jonah is a literary masterpiece. While the story line is so simple that children follow it readily, the story is marked by as high a degree of literary sophistication as any book in the Hebrew Bible. The author employs structure, humor, hyperbole, irony, double entendre, and literary figures like merism to communicate his message with great rhetorical power. The first example of this sophistication is seen in the outline of the book (see below).

The main category for the book is satire—the exposure of human vice or folly. The four elements of satire take the following form in the book of Jonah: (1) the *object of attack* is Jonah and what he represents—a bigotry and ethnocentrism that regarded God as the exclusive property of the believing community (in the OT, the nation of Israel); (2) the *satiric vehicle* is narrative or story; (3) the *satiric norm* or standard by which Jonah's bad attitudes are judged is the character of God, who is portrayed as a God of universal mercy, whose mercy is not limited by national boundaries; (4) the *satiric tone* is laughing, with Jonah emerging as a laughable figure—someone who runs away from God and is caught by a fish, and as a childish and pouting prophet who prefers death over life without his shade tree.

Three stylistic techniques are especially important. (1) The *giantsque motif*—the motif of the unexpectedly large (e.g., the magnitude of the task assigned to Jonah, of the fish that swallows him, and of the repentance that Jonah's eight-word sermon accomplishes). (2) A *pervasive irony* (e.g., the ironic discrepancy between Jonah's prophetic vocation and his ignominious behavior, and the ironic impossibility of fleeing from the presence of God). (3) *Humor*, as Jonah's behavior is not only ignominious but also ridiculous.

Outline

The story of Jonah unfolds in seven episodes (see diagram, p. 1686):

- A. Jonah's commissioning and flight (1:1–3)
- B. Jonah and the pagan sailors (1:4–16)
 - C. Jonah's grateful prayer (1:17–2:10)
- A' Jonah's recommissioning and compliance (3:1–3a)
 - B' Jonah and the pagan Ninevites (3:3b–10)
 - C' Jonah's angry prayer (4:1–4)
- D. Jonah's lesson about compassion (4:5–11)

The first three episodes are paralleled by the second three. By this paralleling the author invites the reader to make a number of comparisons and contrasts, which will be drawn out in the notes. The final episode is unparalleled and thus stands out as the climax of the story, ending with the penetrating question, “And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

Seven Episodes in Jonah

<div>(7) Jonah’s lesson about compassion (4:5–11) <i>“Should not I pity Nineveh . . . ?”</i></div>	
<div>(3) Jonah’s grateful prayer (1:17–2:10) <i>How does Jonah respond to God’s grace toward him?</i></div>	<div>(6) Jonah’s angry prayer (4:1–4) <i>How does Jonah respond to God’s grace toward others?</i></div>
<div>(2) Jonah and the pagan sailors (1:4–16) <i>How responsive are the pagan sailors?</i></div>	<div>(5) Jonah and the pagan Ninevites (3:3b–10) <i>How responsive are the pagan Ninevites?</i></div>
<div>(1) Jonah’s commissioning and flight (1:1–3) <i>What will happen to Jonah?</i></div>	<div>(4) Jonah’s recommissioning and compliance (3:1–3a) <i>What will happen to the Ninevites?</i></div>

JONAH

Chapter 1

¹²2 Kgs. 14:25

²Gen. 10:11, 12; 2 Kgs.

19:36; Nah. 1:1; Zeph.

2:13; Matt. 12:41; Luke

11:30, 32 ^cch. 3:3; 4:11

³Rev. 18:5

³ch. 4:2 ^cSee 1 Kgs. 10:22

⁴See Josh. 19:46 ⁵Gen.

4:16; [Ps. 139:9, 10]

⁴[Ps. 107:25] ¹1 Kgs.

22:48; Ps. 48:7

⁵[Ps. 107:28] ¹Acts

27:18, 19, 38]

⁶[See ver. 5 above] ⁷[ch.

3:9]

⁷[Judg. 20:9]

Jonah Flees the Presence of the LORD

1 Now the word of the LORD came to ^aJonah the son of Amittai, saying, ²“Arise, go to ^bNineveh, that ^cgreat city, and call out against it, ^dfor their evil ¹ has come up before me.” ³But Jonah ^erose to flee to ^fTarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to ^gJoppa and found a ship going to ^fTarshish. So he paid the fare and went on board, to go with them to ^fTarshish, ^haway from the presence of the LORD.

⁴But ⁱthe LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened ⁱto break up. ⁵Then the mariners were afraid, and ^keach cried out to his god. And ^lthey hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. ⁶So the captain came and said to him, “What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, ^kcall out to your god! ^mPerhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.”

Jonah Is Thrown into the Sea

⁷And they said to one another, “Come, let us ⁿcast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸Then they

¹The same Hebrew word can mean *evil* or *disaster*, depending on the context; so throughout Jonah

1:1–3 Jonah’s Commissioning and Flight. This episode records Jonah’s call to prophesy and his flight from that call. Two questions drive the plot: (1) What will happen to the Ninevites? and (2) What will happen to Jonah? (See diagram, p. 1686.)

1:1 Jonah prophesied prosperity for Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:23–28). Jonah means “dove,” a symbol for Israel as silly and senseless (Hos. 7:11); Jonah will be true to his name. **Son of Amittai** means “son of my faithfulness”; Jonah will remain the object of God’s faithful love.

1:2 Nineveh sat on the east bank of the Tigris River about 220 miles (354 km) north of present-day Baghdad and over 500 miles (805 km) northeast of Israel.

Occurrences of the key word (*ra’ah*; “evil”/“disaster”/“discomfort”) in Jonah

1:2	The Lord confronts Jonah with the evil of the city Nineveh.
1:7	The sailors decide to cast lots to find the source of the evil they experience.
1:8	The sailors confront Jonah, wondering why evil has come upon them.
3:8	The Ninevite king calls for inhabitants of the city to turn from evil .
3:10	God sees the city turn from evil , and he relents from the disaster he was sending.
4:1	God’s gracious response to Nineveh displeased Jonah greatly.
4:2	Jonah’s anger arises from the fact that God relents from disaster .
4:6	The Lord appoints a plant to save Jonah from his discomfort .

Great (Hb. *gadol*) is used 14 times in Jonah. Nineveh was an important (“great”) **city** (see 3:3). **evil**. As the ESV footnote indicates, the same Hebrew term (Hb. *ra’ah*; used 9 times in Jonah [see chart to the left]) can mean “evil” or “disaster.” The Ninevites were evil, and they were in line for disaster.

1:3 To Tarshish is repeated three times in this verse to underscore that Jonah is not going to Nineveh. Tarshish, an unknown locale associated with distant coastlands, was somewhere in the western Mediterranean—the opposite direction from Nineveh. **From the presence of the LORD** is repeated at the end of this verse to underscore Jonah’s purpose in going to Tarshish. **Went down** (see also v. 5; 2:6; the same verb is used for **went on board**) is also a euphemism for death (e.g., Gen. 37:35). The suggestion is that each step away from the presence of the Lord is one step closer to “going down” to death (see notes on Jonah 1:5; 2:6).

1:4–16 Jonah and the Pagan Sailors. This episode highlights Jonah’s encounter with pagan sailors and raises the question, Who fears the Lord—Jonah or the pagans? The key repeated word is “fear”: at the beginning and end the sailors “fear” (vv. 5, 16); in the middle Jonah claims to “fear” the Lord (v. 9) while the sailors actually fear (v. 10a).

1:4–5 Hurled is used four times in this episode (vv. 4, 5, 12, 15). Just as God hurled the great wind, the sailors hurled the cargo. **cried out**. The sailors pray, evidently believing that a divine being could come to their aid. **had gone down**. In contrast to the sailors, Jonah goes down below deck, taking yet another step closer to death (see note on v. 3).

1:6 Arise, call out echoes God’s commission in v. 2. Ironically, the Israelite prophet has to be summoned to prayer by a pagan sailor. **not perish**. “Perish” is repeated in v. 14; 3:9; 4:10. Ironically, a pagan, not Jonah, is concerned that people not perish.

1:7 cast lots. Casting lots was used in the ancient world to discern the divine will (e.g., Num. 26:55; Josh. 18:6). Israelites believed that God controlled the outcome (Prov. 16:33). **Evil** (Hb. *ra’ah*) may here suggest “disaster” (see chart to the left).

said to him, “Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” ⁹And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear ^othe LORD, the God of heaven, ^pwho made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done?” For the men knew that ^hhe was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.

¹¹Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. ¹²He said to them, “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, ^afor I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.” ¹³Nevertheless, the men rowed hard¹ to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. ¹⁴Therefore they called out to the LORD, “O LORD, let us not perish for this man’s life, and ^llay not on us innocent blood, ^sfor you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.” ¹⁵So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, ^land the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, ^aand they offered a sacrifice to the LORD ^land made vows.

A Great Fish Swallows Jonah

^{17,2} And the LORD appointed³ a great fish to swallow up Jonah. “And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Jonah’s Prayer

2 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, ²saying,

^x“ I called out to the LORD, out of my distress,
and he answered me;

^yout of the belly of Sheol I cried,
^zand you heard my voice.

³ ^aFor you cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,

¹ Hebrew the men dug in [their oars] ² Ch 2:1 in Hebrew ³ Or had appointed

⁹Rev. 11:13 ^pPs. 146:6
¹⁰[See ver. 3 above]
¹²[Josh. 7:20]
¹⁴Deut. 21:8 ^l[Ps. 115:3]
¹⁵Ps. 65:7; Luke 8:24
¹⁶[Gen. 8:20; 31:54]
^aSee ch. 2:9
¹⁷Matt. 12:40; 16:4;
[Luke 11:30]
Chapter 2
²Ps. 3:4; 120:1; Lam.
3:55 ^lPs. 118:5 ^lLam.
3:56
³Ps. 88:6, 7

1:9–10 Hebrew is an ethnic term used to identify Israelites in international contexts (e.g., Gen. 40:15; Ex. 1:19; 1 Sam. 4:6). Jonah claims to **fear the LORD**, but his actions contradict his confession. **God of heaven** refers to the universal and supreme God (see Ezra 1:2; Neh. 2:20; Dan. 2:37). **made the sea**. Ironically, Jonah confesses to fear the God who controls the sea, which Jonah is crossing to escape from the presence of God (Jonah 1:3). The sailors who were “afraid” (v. 5) are now **exceedingly afraid**.

1:12–13 hurl. See note on vv. 4–5. **rowed hard**. It would have been natural for these pagans to hurl Jonah overboard immediately, but they did not. **The sea grew more and more tempestuous**, for God was not ready to have Jonah delivered to dry land.

1:14–15 called out. Whereas each of the sailors had prayed to his god (v. 5), they now pray to the **LORD**. The pagan sailors, not Jonah, are concerned that people **not perish** (see note on v. 6). **Have done as it pleased you** echoes the liturgical language of Ps. 115:3 and 135:6, and is thus the sailors’ confession of faith in the absolute sovereignty of God. The sailors’ actions are in harmony with God’s: as God had **hurled** the wind onto the **sea** (see note on Jonah 1:4–5) to start the storm, the sailors now hurl **Jonah** to stop the storm (see v. 12).

1:16 feared the LORD exceedingly. What started as a general fear (v. 5) grew into an intense fear (v. 10) and matured into the fear—that is, the reverent worship—of the Lord (v. 16). **sacrifice . . . vows**. The exact response expected from people who fear the Lord (2 Kings 17:32–36; Ps. 22:5; 61:5; 76:11).

1:17–2:10 Jonah’s Grateful Prayer. Jonah’s prayer (2:2b–9) is framed by an introduction (1:17–2:2a) and a conclusion (2:10), both of which mention the “fish.”

1:17 appointed. This is the first of four uses of “appoint” that underscore God’s sovereign control over creation (cf. 4:6–8). **Fish** (Hb. *dag*) is not limited

to what is called “fish” today (generally cold-blooded vertebrate sea creatures with fins and gills) but is a general word for an aquatic beast, which cannot be identified further. However, a large whale such as a sperm whale could easily swallow a man whole. **three days and three nights**. Though this may be a symbolic expression for a time of dying and rising (cf. Hos. 6:2), it more likely describes the actual number of days, or parts of three days, according to accepted reckoning of days at that time (cf. 1 Sam. 30:12; 2 Kings 20:5, 8). In either case it has associations with return from death or near-death—which perhaps is why Jesus likened the time between his own death and resurrection to Jonah’s time in the fish (Matt. 12:40).

2:1 Finally, Jonah prayed. He did not pray for God to save the *pagan sailors*, but he did thank God for saving *him*.

2:2–9 Jonah’s prayer is not a request to be saved *from* the fish but is thanksgiving for being saved *by* the fish. Verse 2 summarizes the prayer: Jonah **called** for help and God **answered**. Verses 3–6a expand on Jonah’s call for help; vv. 6b–10 expand on God’s answer.

2:2 Sheol refers to the realm of the dead, which one would enter by going through a gate made of “bars” (see v. 6 and Job 17:16; 38:17; Ps. 9:13). Jonah did not literally pray from Sheol but describes his near-death experience (see Ps. 30:2–3).

2:3–4 you cast me. Though it was the sailors who had hurled Jonah into the sea (1:15), he knows that God was working sovereignly through them, and so he can say that God cast him into the sea. **Look upon**, or “look toward,” refers to the ancient practice of praying toward the temple (see 2:7; 1 Kings 8:30, 35, 38, 42; Dan. 6:10).

2:6 I went down (see notes on 1:3; 1:4–5). Jonah’s descent to death is almost complete as he reaches the **roots of the mountains** at the bottom of the seas, where the gates of Sheol are located. Since the **bars** refer to the gates of Sheol (see note on 2:2), the **land** refers to the realm of the dead (see Ps. 63:9; Ezek. 26:20; 32:18, 24), as does **pit** (see Job 33:22–24; Ps. 49:9;

^{3b}Ps. 42:7

^{4c}Ps. 31:22 ^d[1 Kgs. 8:35, 38]

^{5a}[Lam. 3:54] ^fPs. 69:1

^{7a}[2 Chr. 30:27]

^{8b}Ps. 31:6; [2 Kgs. 17:15; Jer. 2:5] ^f[Jer. 2:13]

⁹Ps. 50:14; [Hos. 14:2; Heb. 13:15] ^gPs. 3:8

Chapter 3

²See ch. 1:2

³[See ver. 2 above]

- and the flood surrounded me;
^ball your waves and your billows
 passed over me.
⁴ ^cThen I said, 'I am driven away
 from your sight;
^dyet I shall again look
 upon your holy temple.'
⁵ ^eThe waters closed in over me ^fto take my life;
 the deep surrounded me;
 weeds were wrapped about my head
⁶ at the roots of the mountains.
 I went down to the land
 whose bars closed upon me forever;
 yet you brought up my life from the pit,
 O LORD my God.
⁷ When my life was fainting away,
 I remembered the LORD,
^gand my prayer came to you,
 into your holy temple.
⁸ ^hThose who pay regard to vain idols
ⁱforsake their hope of steadfast love.
⁹ ^jBut I with the voice of thanksgiving
 will sacrifice to you;
 what I have vowed I will pay.
^kSalvation belongs to the LORD!"

¹⁰And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

Jonah Goes to Nineveh

3 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ²"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." ³So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now ¹Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, ¹three days' journey in breadth. ²⁴Jonah began to go into the city, giving a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

¹Hebrew a great city to God ²Or a visit was a three days' journey

103:4). **you brought.** Jonah had done nothing to deserve being rescued; his salvation was by grace alone.

2:8–9 Those who pay regard to vain idols refers to the pagan sailors, who prayed each to his own god (1:5), but it is also a message to Jonah's idolatrous fellow Israelites. Ironically, these sailors ended up experiencing God's **steadfast love**, while Jonah ended up in the sea. **Sacrifice . . . vowed** recalls the actions of the sailors (1:16), whom Jonah is now like. **Salvation belongs to the LORD** is Jonah's confession that God is the sovereign source of salvation, though the rest of the story will show that Jonah believes God is free to save any, as long as they are "us" and not "them" (see 4:1–4).

2:10 Vomited can express disgust (Job 20:15; Prov. 23:8; 25:16), and some interpreters see here an indication that God was still displeased with the hostility toward the Ninevites that was still in Jonah's heart (as revealed in Jonah 4), in spite of the obvious gratitude of his prayer. Nevertheless, the fish's action brought deliverance to Jonah, an indication of God's favor.

3:1–3a Jonah's Recommissioning and Compliance. The fourth episode parallels the first (1:1–3) and focuses on the second question raised at the beginning of the story: "What will happen to the Ninevites?" (see note on 1:1–3).

to the Ninevites and to use Jonah in the process. **The message that I tell you** replaces "for their evil has come up before me" (1:2).

3:3a Jonah went to Nineveh instead of fleeing to Tarshish. He complies with God's will, but whether this compliance is from the heart remains to be seen.

3:3b–10 Jonah and the Pagan Ninevites. The fifth episode parallels the second (1:4–16) and focuses on how responsive the pagan Ninevites—like the pagan sailors—are to God's word. The structure follows the pattern of corporate repentance found elsewhere in the OT (cf. 1 Sam. 7:3–14; Joel 1–2): (1) message of divine judgment (Jonah 3:3a–5); (2) account of human repenting (vv. 6–9); and (3) record of divine relenting (v. 10).

3:3b an exceedingly great city (cf. ESV footnote, "a great city to God"; see 1:2; 3:2). Nineveh is *important* to God and will be the recipient of his *great* compassion. **three days' journey in breadth** (cf. ESV footnote, "a visit was a three days' journey"). In Jonah's day neither the circumference nor the diameter of the walled city of **Nineveh** (see plan, p. 1691) was a three-day walk. The phrase may refer to the time it would take Jonah to walk throughout the city, preaching his message. (Nineveh could also refer to the much larger administrative area including the city and the outlying villages, which was 30–56 miles/48–90 km across.)

3:4 Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown! "Overthrown"

3:1–2 The second time underscores God's determination to get his message

^{5m}And the people of Nineveh believed God. ⁿThey called for a fast and ^oput on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

The People of Nineveh Repent

⁶The word reached¹ the king of Nineveh, and ^phe arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, ^qand sat in ashes. ⁷And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor ^sbeast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, ⁸but let man and ^sbeast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. ⁴Let everyone turn from his evil way and from ^uthe violence that is in his hands. ⁹Who knows? God may turn and relent ^wand turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

¹⁰When God saw what they did, ^xhow they turned from their evil way, ^xGod relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

Jonah's Anger and the LORD's Compassion

4 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly,² and ^yhe was angry. ²And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? ^zThat is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are ^agracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ^arelenting from disaster. ^{3b}Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, ^cfor it is better for me to die than to live.” ⁴And the LORD said, ^d“Do you do well to be angry?”

⁵Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and ^emade a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. ⁶Now the LORD God appointed a plant¹ and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade

¹Or *had reached* ²Hebrew *it was exceedingly evil to Jonah*

^{5m}[Matt. 12:41; Luke 11:32] ⁿSee 2 Chr. 20:3 ^oSee 2 Sam. 3:31 ^{6p}[Job 1:20; Ezek. 26:16] ^qJob 2:8

^{7r}[Dan. 6:26] ^sch. 4:11; Ps. 36:6; Joel 1:18, 20]

^{8t}[See ver. 7 above] ^uJer. 18:11; 36:3 ^vIsa. 59:6

^{9w}2 Sam. 12:22; Joel 2:14

^xPs. 85:3

^{10y}[Jer. 18:8]

Chapter 4

^{1z}[ver. 4, 9]

^{2ch}1:3 ^aSee Joel 2:13

^{3c}[1 Kgs. 19:4] ^c[Eccles. 7:1]

^{4d}[ver. 1, 9]

^{5e}[Neh. 8:15]

is the same verb used for God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:21, 25, 29). Although the threat sounds unconditional, a condition was implied: If people repent, God will relent (see Jer. 18:7–8). Jonah knows this condition is included (see Jonah 4:2), and the king of Nineveh will hope that it is (see 3:9).

3:5 Believed is the first word in the Hebrew text of the sentence, and the grammar underscores the immediacy of Nineveh's repentance. To **fast** and wear **sackcloth** were ancient demonstrations of mourning (Neh. 9:1; Est. 4:3; Dan. 9:3).

3:6 The word that reached the king of Nineveh was the “word” of the Lord (see 1:1; 3:1, 3). The “king of Nineveh” was probably not the king of Assyria, since Nineveh was not an Assyrian capital in Jonah's day; he may have been a provincial governor who ruled from Nineveh.

3:7–8 issued a proclamation. It seems odd that the king would tell everyone to fast and put on sackcloth when they had already done so (v. 5). Therefore it is more likely that v. 5 and vv. 6–9 are in topical rather than chronological order. First the king issued the proclamation, and then the people carried it out (see a similar summons to repentance in Joel 1:13–14). By putting the people's response ahead of the king's proclamation, the author underscores the immediacy of the people's response and that they are responding to Jonah's message, not just to the king's command. The Ninevites each **turn from his evil way**, whereas the Israelites did not (cf. 2 Kings 17:13–14).

3:9 Who knows? expresses hope (see 2 Sam. 12:22) that **God may turn and relent**—the exact hope of the prophet Joel for the people of Judah (Joel 2:14). **we may not perish.** This is the third time a pagan has been concerned that people not perish (see Jonah 1:14 and note on 1:6); ironically, Jonah has not expressed any such concern.

3:10 evil . . . disaster. Both terms translate Hebrew *ra'ah* (see note on 1:2). The use of the same word underscores the close connection between human action and divine response. God did not carry out the threatened disaster because the Ninevites repented of their evil (see note on 3:4). From a temporal perspective, God responds to human action; from an eternal perspective, God chooses the means (human repenting) as well as the end (divine relenting). The repentance of Gentiles contrasts with the repeated lack of repentance on the part of Israel (see note on vv. 7–8).

4:1–4 Jonah's Angry Prayer. The sixth episode parallels the third (1:17–2:10) and focuses on Jonah's self-centeredness and hypocrisy. Both episodes have the same structure: (1) Jonah “prayed to the LORD” (1:17–2:1a; 4:1–2a); (2) Jonah's prayer (2:1b–9; 4:2b–3); and (3) “the LORD spoke/said” (2:10; 4:4).

4:1 it displeased Jonah exceedingly (cf. the *esv* footnote, “it was exceedingly evil to Jonah”). In the previous episode (see 3:10) the pagans got rid of their “evil” and God got rid of the “disaster” he had threatened (both Hb. *ra'ah*). The pagans are in harmony with God, but Jonah is not, as he alone is now characterized by “displeasure” (or “evil”; Hb. *ra'ah*).

4:2 This is Jonah's second prayer; the repetition of **prayed to the LORD** (see 2:1) invites the reader to compare the two. **gracious God . . . relenting from disaster.** These same words occur in Joel 2:13 as the basis for hope (see Ex. 34:6–7; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 145:8). Ironically, this standard confession of the compassionate character of God is the root of Jonah's anger. **Steadfast love**, when extended to Jonah, filled him with thanksgiving (Jonah 2:8), but when extended to the Ninevites, filled him with anger.

4:3 My life translates Hebrew *napshi* (“my soul”), and **to live** translates Hebrew *khayay* (“my life”). These two expressions occur in Jonah's first prayer, where he is grateful that his “life” was brought up from the pit (2:6) and his fainting “life/soul” was revived (2:7). Ironically, when God extends the same mercy to the Ninevites, Jonah wishes his “life” and “soul” to be taken.

4:5–11 Jonah's Lesson about Compassion. The seventh and final episode has no parallel and thus stands out as the climax of the story.

4:5 Jonah went out . . . till he should see. Apparently, Jonah hopes that God still will not relent but will destroy the city after all. **sat under it in the shade.** Jonah is hot—both emotionally (i.e., angry) and physically.

4:6 the LORD God appointed. This is the second use of the verb “appoint” (see 1:17). The kind of **plant** appointed is not known; the term (Hb. *qiqayon*) occurs nowhere else in the Bible, but a castor oil plant or a gourd plant, both of which have large leaves, are the most common suggestions. **Discomfort** (or “evil,” Hb. *ra'ah*; see *esv* footnote and note on 1:2), refers both to Jonah's outer “discomfort” and to his inner “evil.” **Jonah was exceedingly glad.** The grammar of this phrase is identical to that at

⁸Jer. 18:17 ⁶[Ps. 121:6]
⁷[Amos 8:13] ^c[See ver. 3
 above]
⁹[ver. 1, 4]
¹¹[See ch. 1:2 ^k[ch. 3:7]

over his head, to save him from his discomfort.² So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered.⁸ When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching^f east wind,⁹ and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he^h was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”⁹ But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.”¹⁰ And the LORD said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night.”¹¹ And should not I pityⁱ Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much^k cattle?”

¹ Hebrew *qiqayon*, probably the castor oil plant; also verses 7, 9, 10 ² Or *his evil*

the beginning of 4:1 (“It displeased Jonah exceedingly”) and underscores the contrast between Jonah’s anger at the salvation of the Ninevites and his joy at his own salvation.

4:7–8 God appointed a worm . . . God appointed a scorching east wind. These are the third and fourth uses of the verb “appoint” (see note on v. 6). The “east wind” is a drying wind from the desert.

4:9 angry for the plant. As God had questioned the justice of Jonah’s anger over the salvation of the Ninevites (v. 4), he now questions the justice of Jonah’s anger over the destruction of the plant.

4:10–11 perished. Finally Jonah expresses concern over something perishing

(see note on 3:9), but ironically it is a plant, not the **120,000** people **who do not know their right hand from their left**, an idiom for being morally and spiritually unaware, that probably refers to the entire population. Jonah’s compassion for the plant explains the rather odd expression that translates the final words in the Hebrew text, **and also much cattle**. The ironic question raised by these words is: If Jonah will not allow God to have compassion on Nineveh for the sake of the 120,000 people whom God created and cares for, will Jonah not allow God to have compassion on Nineveh for the sake of the animals, since after all, Jonah was willing to have compassion on a plant? The question is left unanswered so that the readers of the book may answer it for themselves.

The City of Nineveh

Nineveh, which was situated at the confluence of the Tigris and Khosr rivers (modern-day Mosul, Iraq), was first settled in the seventh millennium B.C. According to the Bible, Nimrod was the founder of the city (Gen. 10:11). Major excavations took place under the direction of Henry Layard from 1845 to 1854. The diagram below pictures the results of those excavations, especially as they reflect the period of the Assyrian Empire (1420–609 B.C.). Around 1000 B.C. there occurred a great revival of Assyrian power, and Nineveh became a royal city. It was a thriving city during the first half of the first millennium, and contained such luxuries as public squares, parks, botanical gardens, and even a zoo. One of the great archaeological finds of the period is the library of King Ashurbanipal (669–627 B.C.; called Osnappar in Ezra 4:10). The size of the city was approximately 1,850 acres. The book of Jonah reflects the flourishing nature of Nineveh at this time (3:1–5). Nineveh eventually fell to the Medes and Babylonians in 612 B.C. The invading armies dammed the rivers that supplied water to the city, causing a flood that broke through one of the perimeter walls giving the foreign armies access to the city.



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INTRODUCTION TO

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO

LUKE



Author

The third Gospel in the NT is anonymous. This is also true of the book of Acts, the author's second work. This does not mean, however, that the original readers did not know who wrote these two books.

The Lukan authorship of Luke–Acts is affirmed by both external evidence (church tradition) and internal evidence. Church tradition supporting Luke as the author is both early (from the mid-2nd century A.D.) and unanimous (it was never doubted until the 19th century). The “we” sections of Acts (16:10–17; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16) assume that the author was a companion of Paul and participated in the events described in those sections. Thus the author of Acts was probably one of Paul's companions listed in his letters written during those periods (Luke is listed in Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24) and not one of those referred to in the third person in the “we” sections (cf. Acts 20:4–5). It is known that the author was from the second generation of the early church, was not an “eyewitness” of Jesus' ministry (Luke 1:2), and was a Gentile (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.4.6, says Luke was “by race an Antiochian and a physician by profession”; cf. Col. 4:14). All of this confirms the tradition that Luke was the author of the third Gospel. Because Luke traveled with Paul, this Gospel was received as having apostolic endorsement and authority from Paul and as a trustworthy record of the gospel that Paul preached (Eusebius reports that Paul quoted from Luke by saying, “According to my Gospel” [*Ecclesiastical History* 3.4.7]).

Date

The earliest possible date of Luke–Acts is immediately after the events that Luke recorded in Acts 28, c. A.D. 62. In fact, Luke could have been written slightly earlier, and Acts could have been completed at that time. The specific date centers on two questions: would Luke have added to his Gospel later, and did he make use of the Gospel of Mark in writing his own Gospel? If Luke wrote Luke–Acts after the martyrdom of Paul (c. A.D. 64–67), some have suggested that the omission of the details of Paul's trial and death seems strange (see Introduction to Acts: Date). In addition, Luke makes no mention of the terrible persecution under Nero in A.D. 65 but gives a very positive picture of Paul preaching the gospel in Rome for two years “with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31), so he must have written sometime before 65. (Those who hold to a later date for Luke reply that ending with Paul preaching in Rome is natural, because it shows that the preaching “to the end of the earth” in Acts 1:8 has been fulfilled. Since a primary purpose of Luke–Acts is to tell the story of how the gospel spread to the Gentile capital of Rome, when that purpose is accomplished the story could come to a natural end, regardless of what happens to Paul.)

Concerning the relationship of Luke to Mark, the great majority of scholars believe that Luke made use of Mark in writing his Gospel. There is no real difficulty in dating Mark in the mid- to late-50s A.D. (see Introduction to Mark: Date and Location), which would allow for a date of Luke in the early 60s. Other scholars dispute this and claim that the predictions of the fall of Jerusalem in Luke 21:20–24 are so vivid that they could have been written only after the fact, which means that Luke and Acts were written after A.D. 70. These scholars would then date Mark somewhat before Luke, in the late 60s (after Peter's death). However, many evangelical scholars, who consider Luke 21:20–24 a predictive prophecy by Jesus, would hold to a date for Luke in the early 60s.

Theme

Luke wrote his Gospel so that his readers would understand that the gospel is for all, both Jews and Gentiles alike, since Jesus is the promised one of God, as prophesied in the OT and as attested through God's saving activity in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. In addition to this, Luke emphasized the truthfulness of the Christian traditions his readers had been taught, so that by believing in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, they would receive the promised Holy Spirit whom he gives to all who follow him.

Timeline

	10 B.C.	1 A.D.	10	20	30	40	50	60	70
John the Baptist is born (6 B.C.*)	●								
Jesus is born in Bethlehem (5 B.C.*)	●								
Jesus' family flees to Egypt, returns to Nazareth (4 B.C.*)	●								
Jesus, age 12, talks with teachers in temple (A.D. 8*)		●							
Jesus works as carpenter in Nazareth (8*–28/30)									
John the Baptist begins his ministry (28/29)					●				
Jesus begins his ministry (28/30)					●				
Jesus is crucified and resurrected (33 [or 30])†					●				
Luke accompanies Paul on second missionary journey (48/49–51*)							●		
Luke accompanies Paul on third missionary journey (52–57*)							●		
Luke accompanies Paul on voyage to Rome (60)								●	
Gospel according to Luke written, followed by book of Acts (62*)								●	
Paul is martyred in Rome (64–67*)								●	
The church in Jerusalem flees to Pella (67*)								●	
Destruction of Jerusalem temple (70)									●

* denotes approximate date; / signifies either/or; † see *The Date of Jesus' Crucifixion*, pp. ****_****

Purpose, Occasion, and Background

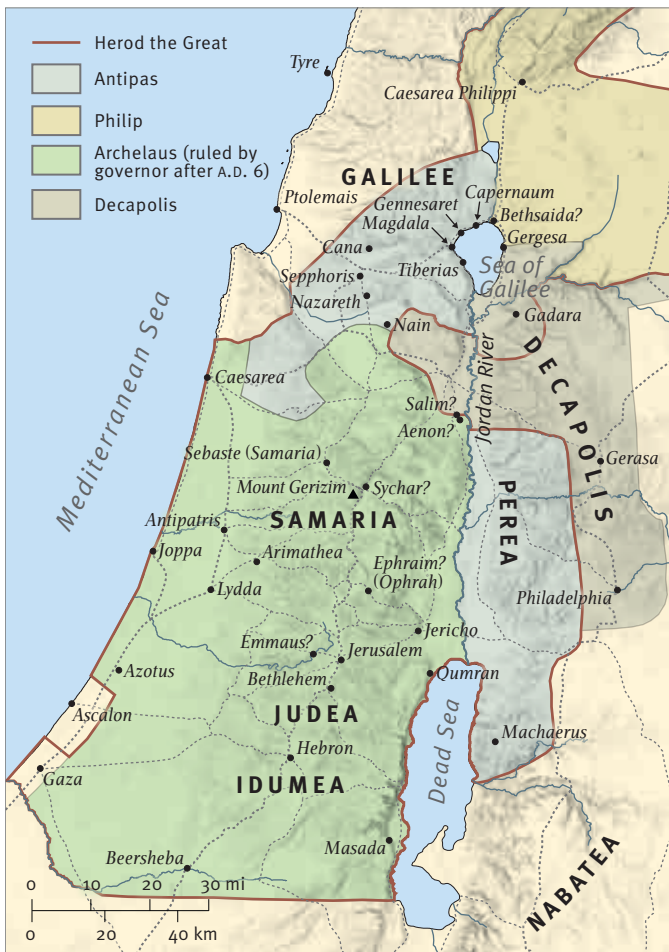
Both Luke (1:3) and Acts (1:1) are addressed to “Theophilus,” and there is no reason to deny that he was a real person, although attempts to identify him have been unsuccessful. Luke uses the same description “most excellent” (Luke 1:3) in the book of Acts to describe the Roman governors Felix (Acts 23:26; 24:2) and Festus (Acts 26:25). Theophilus was probably a man of wealth and social standing, and “most excellent” served as a respectful form of address.

Luke's broader intended audience consisted primarily of Gentile Christians like Theophilus who had already “been taught” (1:4) about Jesus. But Luke no doubt realized that his recounting of Jesus' life and message would also be useful for evangelism among non-Christians. Luke probably had several goals in writing:

1. *To assure his readers of the certainty of what they had been taught.* This is accomplished by demonstrating his credentials as a historian (cf. 1:1–4, where Luke speaks of having “followed all things closely for some time past” in order “to write an orderly account”). He also mentions that the material he is sharing is well known (24:18; Acts 26:26). The fact that the material in Luke comes from eyewitness testimony (Luke 1:2; 24:48; cf. Acts 1:8) further assures his readers that what they were taught is certain. Luke also seeks to assure his readers by demonstrating that the events recorded in Luke–Acts were the fulfillment of ancient prophecy (e.g., Luke 1:1; 3:4–6; 4:17–21; 7:22–23) and the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecies (e.g., 9:22, 44; 11:29–30; 13:32–34; 17:25; 18:31–33).

2. *To help his readers understand how Israel's rejection of Jesus and the Gentiles' entrance into the kingdom of God are in accord with the divine plan.* Luke emphasizes that Christianity is not a new religion but rather the fulfillment and present-day expression of the religion of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

3. *To clarify for his readers Jesus' teaching concerning the end times* by showing that Jesus did not teach that the



The Setting of Luke

The events in the book of Luke take place almost entirely within the vicinity of Palestine, an area extending roughly from Caesarea Philippi in the north to Beersheba in the south. During this time it was ruled by the Roman Empire. The opening chapters describe events surrounding Jesus' birth in Judea, where Herod had been appointed king by the Romans. The closing chapters end with Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension during the rule of Pontius Pilate and the tetrarchs Antipas and Philip.

parousia (return of Christ) would come immediately but that there would be a period between his resurrection and his return (9:27; 19:11; 21:20–24; 22:69; Acts 1:6–9). Nevertheless, Jesus would return (Luke 3:9, 17; 12:38–48; 18:8; 21:32) in bodily form (Acts 1:11), and believers should live in watchful expectation (Luke 21:34–36).

4. *To emphasize that his readers need not fear Rome.* Luke hints at this theme by highlighting Herod's and Pilate's desire to release Jesus and the Roman centurion's recognition of his innocence. Luke also records (in Acts) several occasions where Roman authorities came to Paul's rescue. When Roman officials *did* persecute, Luke explains that it was due to error and that the persecution ceased immediately when the error was discovered (cf. Acts 16:22–39).

History of Salvation Summary

Jesus comes as the messianic King to deliver the poor and needy and downcast (4:18–19). He fulfills the whole OT (24:44–47), especially its promises of everlasting salvation. The fulfillment of his mission comes with his crucifixion and resurrection. (For an explanation of the "History of Salvation," see Overview of the Bible, pp. ****–****.)

Literary Features

The narrative of Luke as a whole follows the chronology of Christ's life and death. No Gospel encompasses such a complete range of sub-genres as Luke: annunciation stories, birth narratives, lyric praise psalms, Christmas carols, prophecies, genealogies, preparation stories, temptation stories, calling stories, recogni-

tion stories, conflict stories, encounter stories, miracle stories, pronouncement stories, parables, beatitudes, sermons, proverbs, passion stories, trial narratives, and resurrection accounts. Stylistically, Luke is known for his vivid descriptive details and ability to make scenes come alive in the imagination.

The Gospel of Luke finds its fundamental unity in the person of Jesus Christ and in his mission to seek and to save the lost. From the first announcement of his coming to his ascension into heaven, Jesus is at the center of everything: the songs are for his praise, the miracles are by his power, the teaching is from his wisdom, the conflict is over his claims, and the cross is that which only he could bear. Luke gives his account further literary unity by intertwining the stories of Jesus and John the Baptist; by beginning and ending his story at the temple; by presenting the life of Jesus as a journey toward Jerusalem; and by following the progress of the disciples as they learn to count the cost of discipleship. The unity of the Gospel is also expressed in Jesus' pronouncement to Zacchaeus: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (19:10).

Key Themes

1. God's sovereign rule over history. The promises God made through the prophets are already being fulfilled.	13:33; 22:22, 42; Acts 1:16–17; 2:23; 4:28; etc.
2. The arrival and actual presence of the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, the consummation of the kingdom is still a future event, a blessed hope for which the church prays.	11:2, 20; 16:16; 17:20–21; 18:1–8; 21:27–28, 34–36; cf. Acts 1:11; 1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 22:20
3. The coming and indwelling of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus and his followers. The Spirit is present in the Gospel of Luke, from the births of John the Baptist and Jesus to the end. The Spirit is present at Jesus' dedication in the temple, his baptism, temptation, early ministry, and first sermon. The Holy Spirit is central to the message of John the Baptist, and Jesus at his ascension promises the Spirit's future coming in power.	1:15–17, 35; 2:25–27; 3:16, 22; 4:1, 14, 18; 5:17; 24:49
4. The great reversal taking place in the world in which the first are becoming last and the last are becoming first, the proud are being brought low and the humble are being exalted. Luke places great emphasis on God's love for the poor, tax collectors, outcasts, sinners, women, Samaritans, and Gentiles. In keeping with this concern, many of the episodes that appear only in Luke's Gospel feature the welcome of an outcast (the Christmas shepherds, the Prodigal Son, the persistent widow, Zacchaeus, etc.).	1:48, 52–53; 6:20–26; 13:30; 14:11; 18:14
5. Believers are to live a life of prayer and practice good stewardship with their possessions. In Luke's narrative, prayer occurs at every major point in Jesus' life: at his baptism; at his selection of the Twelve; at Peter's confession; at Jesus' transfiguration; in his teaching the Lord's Prayer; before Peter's denial; etc.	3:21; 6:12; 9:18, 28–29; 11:1–4; 12:33–34; 16:9; 18:1; 22:32, 40, 46
6. The danger of riches is constantly emphasized in Luke, for the love of riches chokes out the seed of the gospel and keeps it from becoming fruitful. This danger is so great that Jesus often warns his readers not to set their hearts upon riches and to give generously to the poor. The woes pronounced upon haughty rich people stand in sharp contrast to the blessings pronounced upon the humble poor.	6:20–26; 8:14; 12:13–21; 16:10–13, 19–31; 18:22 (cf. 5:11; 14:33; Acts 2:44–45; 4:32); Luke 21:3–4

Outline

- I. The Prologue (1:1–4)
- II. The Infancy Narrative (1:5–2:52)
 - A. The birth of John the Baptist foretold (1:5–25)
 - B. The birth of Jesus foretold (1:26–38)
 - C. Mary visits Elizabeth (1:39–56)
 - D. The birth of John the Baptist (1:57–80)
 - E. The birth of Jesus Christ (2:1–52)
 1. Jesus is born (2:1–20)
 2. Jesus presented in the temple (2:21–40)
 3. The boy Jesus in the temple (2:41–52)
- III. Preparation for the Ministry of Jesus (3:1–4:15)
 - A. John the Baptist prepares the way (3:1–20)
 - B. Jesus' baptism, genealogy, and temptation (3:21–4:15)
 1. Jesus' baptism (3:21–22)
 2. The genealogy of Jesus Christ (3:23–38)
 3. The temptation of Jesus (4:1–15)

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- IV. The Ministry of Jesus in Galilee (4:16–9:50)
- A. The beginning (4:16–5:16)
 - 1. Jesus rejected at Nazareth (4:16–30)
 - 2. Jesus begins his healing ministry (4:31–41)
 - 3. Jesus preaches in synagogues (4:42–44)
 - 4. Jesus calls the first disciples (5:1–11)
 - 5. Jesus cleanses a leper (5:12–16)
 - B. The beginning of controversy (5:17–6:11)
 - 1. Jesus heals a paralytic (5:17–26)
 - 2. Jesus calls Levi (5:27–32)
 - 3. A question about fasting (5:33–39)
 - 4. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (6:1–5)
 - 5. A man with a withered hand (6:6–11)
 - C. Jesus teaches the disciples (6:12–49)
 - 1. Jesus appoints twelve apostles (6:12–16)
 - 2. Jesus ministers to a great multitude (6:17–19)
 - 3. The Beatitudes (6:20–23)
 - 4. Jesus pronounces woes (6:24–26)
 - 5. Love your enemies (6:27–36)
 - 6. Judging others (6:37–42)
 - 7. A tree and its fruit (6:43–45)
 - 8. Build your house on the rock (6:46–49)
 - D. Who is this Jesus? (7:1–50)
 - 1. Jesus heals a centurion's servant (7:1–10)
 - 2. Jesus raises a widow's son (7:11–17)
 - 3. Messengers from John the Baptist (7:18–35)
 - 4. A sinful woman forgiven (7:36–50)
 - E. Jesus teaches in parables (8:1–21)
 - 1. Women accompanying Jesus (8:1–3)
 - 2. The parable of the sower (8:4–8)
 - 3. The purpose of the parables (8:9–15)
 - 4. A lamp under a jar (8:16–18)
 - 5. Jesus' mother and brothers (8:19–21)
 - F. Jesus, Lord of nature, demons, disease, and death (8:22–56)
 - 1. Jesus calms a storm (8:22–25)
 - 2. Jesus heals a demon-possessed man (8:26–39)
 - 3. Jesus heals a woman and Jairus's daughter (8:40–56)
 - G. Jesus and the Twelve (9:1–50)
 - 1. Jesus sends out the Twelve (9:1–6)
 - 2. Herod Antipas is perplexed by Jesus (9:7–9)
 - 3. Jesus feeds the 5,000 (9:10–17)
 - 4. Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ (9:18–20)
 - 5. Jesus foretells his death (9:21–22)
 - 6. Jesus teaches the disciples (9:23–27)
 - 7. The transfiguration (9:28–36)
 - 8. The healing of a boy with an unclean spirit (9:37–43a)
 - 9. Jesus again foretells his death (9:43b–45)
 - 10. Who is the greatest? (9:46–48)
 - 11. Anyone not against us is for us (9:49–50)
- V. The Journey to Jerusalem (9:51–19:27)
- A. The first mention of the journey to Jerusalem (9:51–13:21)
 - 1. The mission to Samaria (9:51–56)
 - 2. The cost of following Jesus (9:57–62)
 - 3. The mission of the seventy-two (10:1–24)
 - 4. The parable of the good Samaritan (10:25–37)

5. Martha and Mary (10:38–42)
6. The Lord's Prayer (11:1–13)
7. Jesus and Beelzebul (11:14–23)
8. The return of an unclean spirit (11:24–26)
9. Various warnings and teachings (11:27–13:9)
10. Jesus heals on the Sabbath (13:10–17)
11. The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven (13:18–21)
- B. The second mention of the journey to Jerusalem (13:22–17:10)
 1. The narrow door (13:22–30)
 2. Lament over Jerusalem (13:31–35)
 3. The healing of a man on the Sabbath (14:1–6)
 4. Various teachings and parables (14:7–17:10)
- C. The third mention of the journey to Jerusalem (17:11–19:27)
 1. Jesus cleanses ten lepers (17:11–19)
 2. The coming of the kingdom (17:20–37)
 3. The parable of the persistent widow (18:1–8)
 4. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:9–14)
 5. Jesus blesses the children (18:15–17)
 6. The rich ruler (18:18–30)
 7. Jesus foretells his death a third time (18:31–34)
 8. Jesus heals a blind beggar (18:35–43)
 9. Jesus and Zacchaeus (19:1–10)
 10. The parable of the ten minas (19:11–27)

VI. The Ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem (19:28–21:38)

- A. The triumphal entry (19:28–40)
- B. Jesus weeps over Jerusalem (19:41–44)
- C. Jesus cleanses the temple (19:45–48)
- D. The authority of Jesus challenged (20:1–8)
- E. The parable of the wicked tenants (20:9–18)
- F. Paying taxes to Caesar (20:19–26)
- G. Sadducees ask about the resurrection (20:27–40)
- H. Whose son is the Christ? (20:41–44)
- I. Beware of the scribes (20:45–47)
- J. The widow's offering (21:1–4)
- K. Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem (21:5–24)
 1. Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple (21:5–6)
 2. Signs before the destruction (21:7–9)
 3. Nation will rise against nation (21:10–19)
 4. Jesus foretells the destruction of Jerusalem (21:20–24)
- L. Jesus foretells the coming of the Son of Man (21:25–38)
 1. The coming of the Son of Man (21:25–28)
 2. The lesson of the fig tree (21:29–33)
 3. Watch yourselves (21:34–38)

VII. The Suffering and Death of Jesus (22:1–23:56)

- A. The plot to kill Jesus and the Passover meal (22:1–38)
 1. The plot to kill Jesus (22:1–6)
 2. Preparations for the Passover meal (22:7–13)
 3. The Passover meal and the institution of the Lord's Supper (22:14–23)
 4. Who is the greatest? (22:24–30)
 5. Jesus foretells Peter's denial (22:31–34)
 6. Scripture must be fulfilled in Jesus (22:35–38)
- B. The arrest and trial (22:39–23:56)
 1. Jesus prays on the Mount of Olives (22:39–46)
 2. The betrayal and arrest of Jesus (22:47–53)

3. Peter denies Jesus (22:54–62)
4. Jesus is mocked (22:63–65)
5. Jesus before the council (22:66–71)
6. Jesus before Pilate (23:1–5)
7. Jesus before Herod Antipas (23:6–16)
8. Pilate delivers Jesus to be crucified (23:18–25)
9. The crucifixion (23:26–43)
10. The death of Jesus (23:44–49)
11. Jesus is buried (23:50–56)

VIII. The Resurrection of Jesus (24:1–53)

- A. The empty tomb (24:1–12)
- B. Jesus' appearance on the road to Emmaus (24:13–35)
- C. Jesus appears to his disciples (24:36–49)
- D. The ascension of Jesus (24:50–53)

INTRODUCTION TO

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE

EPHESIANS



Author and Title

Pauline authorship of Ephesians was universally accepted until modern times. Today a number of scholars claim that it was written in Paul's name by an unknown follower or imitator of Paul, and they give two main reasons: (1) the letter's style and thought does not strike everyone as characteristically Pauline; and (2) the author of Ephesians does not seem to be familiar with the letter's recipients (see 1:15; 3:2; 4:21), which seems odd given Paul's extended stay at Ephesus (Acts 19:10).

However, there are sound reasons to affirm that Paul wrote Ephesians. First, the letter explicitly claims to be Paul's (1:1; 3:1), which should weigh heavily in the debate unless there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The early church—which rejected other spurious letters—unanimously accepted this letter to Ephesus as being written by Paul, and this was a city with a reputation for discernment regarding false apostolic claims (Rev. 2:2). Furthermore, letters in antiquity were usually transmitted through a person known by both author and recipient(s) who would have guaranteed the original copy's genuineness and elaborated on its details—see note on Ephesians 6:21–22 regarding Tychicus.

Second, analyses of an author's style are often subjectively based on incomplete evidence. With the aid of more sophisticated computer analysis, further careful study has shown that Ephesians has more similarities to Paul's accepted style than was earlier recognized. In addition, recent research suggests that the roles of secretaries in the composition of ancient letters should be given greater consideration than it has been given in the past. Ephesians does indeed demonstrate close similarity with Paul's forms of expression and thought. Critics have used this evidence to ascribe authorship to someone Paul had influenced, but it is more likely that these marks of Pauline thought and writing style confirm that he himself wrote the book.

The question of Paul's apparent unfamiliarity with his readers can easily be explained. Ancient archaeological evidence has shown that Ephesus controlled a large network of outlying villages and rural areas up to 30 miles (48 km) from the city. Also, Acts 19:10 reveals that reports of Paul's preaching during his stay at Ephesus had radiated out to “all the residents of Asia.” Hence, Paul would not have been personally acquainted with newer pockets of believers in the Ephesian villages and rural farms that had sprung up since his stay in the city a few years before the writing of this letter.

Moreover, many have suggested that Ephesians in its present form stems from the Ephesus copy of a circular letter to several Asian churches that Tychicus was delivering in the course of his journey to Colossae, along with the letter to the Colossians (Col. 4:7–9). Therefore, the absence of personal greetings is no cause for surprise.

Finally, it would be extraordinarily odd for someone to write so forcefully that his readers should “speak the truth” and “put away falsehood” (4:15, 25) in a letter he was deceptively forging! Consequently, it can be affirmed with good confidence that Paul wrote Ephesians.

The title “to the Ephesians” is found in many early manuscripts (see note on 1:1). It indicates that the letter was written to the churches in Ephesus and the surrounding dependent region.

Date

Because Paul mentions his imprisonment (3:1; 4:1; 6:20), this letter should be dated to c. A.D. 62 when Paul was held in Rome (Acts 28). Critics who date Ephesians later in the first century do so from doubts about Paul's authorship rather than from strong evidence against the earlier date.

Theme

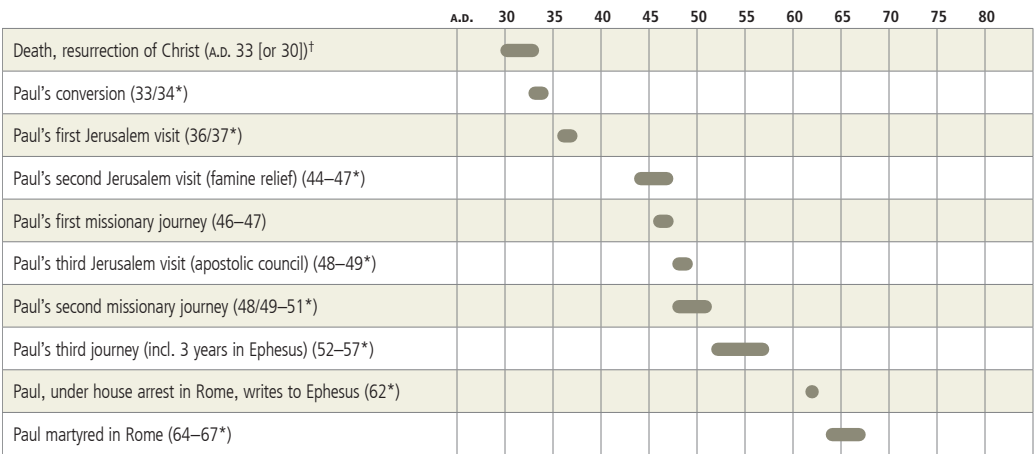
There are two main themes of Ephesians: (1) Christ has reconciled all creation to himself and to God, and (2) Christ has united people from all nations to himself and to one another in his church. These great deeds were accomplished through the powerful, sovereign, and free working of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and are recognized and received by faith alone through his grace. In light of these great truths, Christians are to lead lives that are a fitting tribute of gratitude to their great Lord.

Purpose, Occasion, and Background

There was no specific occasion or problem that inspired this letter, though Paul does mention that he desired the Ephesians to know how he was faring in confinement (6:21–22). Ephesians articulates general instruction in the truths of the cosmic redemptive work of God in Christ; the unity of the church among diverse peoples; and proper conduct in the church, the home, and the world. Unity and love in the bond of peace mark the work of the Savior as well as Christians’ grateful response to his free grace in their lives.

Ancient Ephesus forms an appropriate background to the book of Ephesians because of this city’s fascination with magic and the occult (see Acts 19:19, and below). This helps explain Paul’s emphasis on the power of God over all heavenly authorities and on Christ’s triumphant ascension as head over the church and over all things in this age and the next. The Ephesians needed to be reminded of these things in order to remain resolute in their allegiance to Christ as the supreme power in the world and in their lives.

Timeline



* denotes approximate date; / signifies either/or; † see *The Date of Jesus' Crucifixion*, pp. 1809–1810

The Ancient City of Ephesus

An important port city on the west coast of Asia, Ephesus boasted the temple of Artemis (one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world). Just a few decades before Paul, Strabo called Ephesus the greatest emporium in the province of Asia Minor (*Geography* 12.8.15; cf. 14.1.20–26). However, the silting up of the harbor and the ravages of earthquakes caused the abandonment of the harbor city several centuries later. Today, among the vast archaeological remains, some key structures date from the actual time of the NT.

The grandiose theater, where citizens chanted “great is Artemis of the Ephesians” (Acts 19:29–40), had been enlarged under Claudius near the time when Paul was in the city. It held an estimated 20,000 or more spectators. The theater looked west toward the port. From the theater a processional way led north toward the temple of Artemis. In the fourth century B.C. the Ephesians proudly rebuilt this huge temple with their own funds after a fire, even refusing aid from Alexander the Great. The temple surroundings were deemed an official “refuge” for those fearing vengeance, and it played a central part in the economic prosperity of the city, even acting at times like a bank. A eunuch priest served the goddess Artemis, assisted by virgin women. Today very little remains of that once great temple beyond its foundations and a sizable altar, although the nearby museum displays two large statues of Artemis discovered elsewhere in Ephesus.

Other archaeologically extant religious structures include a post-NT temple of Serapis and several impor-

tant imperial cult temples. Before Paul's day, Ephesus had proudly obtained the right to host the Temple of the Divine Julius [Caesar] and the goddess Roma. The city later housed memorials to the emperors Trajan (A.D. 98–117) and Hadrian (A.D. 117–138); and it possessed a huge temple of Domitian (A.D. 81–96), which may have been constructed during the time the apostle John was in western Asia. Luke testifies to Jewish presence in Ephesus (Acts 18:19, 24; 19:1–10, 13–17), and this is confirmed by inscriptions and by literary sources (e.g., Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.39; *Jewish Antiquities* 14.262–264).

Civic structures during the time of Paul included the state agora (marketplace) with its stoa, basilica, and town hall. This spilled out onto Curetes Street, which contained several monuments to important citizens such as Pollio and Memmius. Curetes Street led to the commercial agora neighboring the theater; this large market square could be entered through the Mazaeus and Mithradates Gate (erected in honor of their patrons Caesar Augustus and Marcus Agrippa). Shops lined this agora and part of Curetes Street. A building across the street from the agora has frequently been called a brothel, although some have questioned this. On the way to the Artemis temple from the theater, one would have passed the huge stadium renovated or built under Nero (A.D. 54–68).

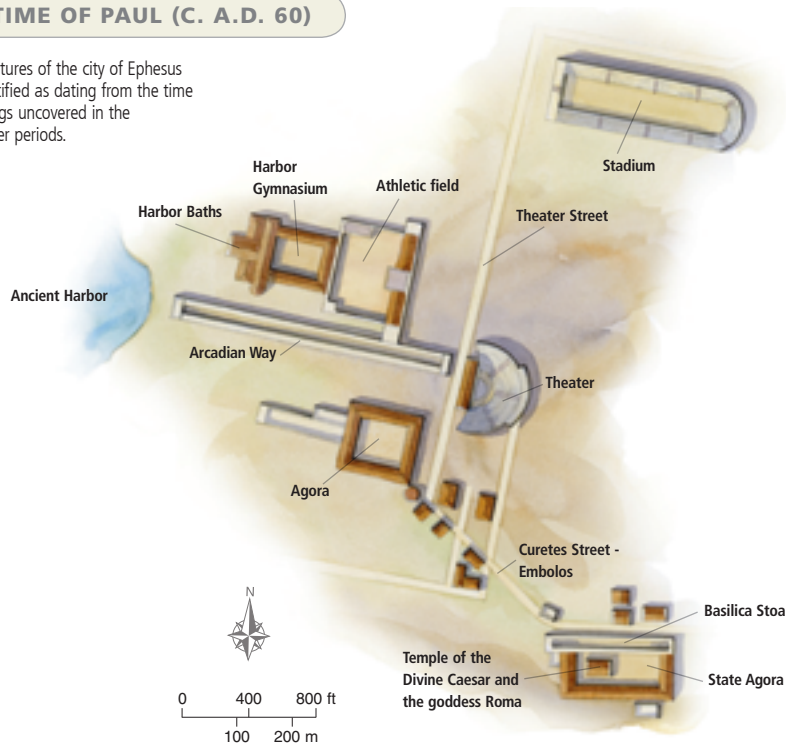
The wealth of some residents of Ephesus is apparent in the lavish terrace houses just off Curetes Street. Later inscriptions mention a guild of silversmiths and even give the names of specific silversmiths (cf. Demetrius the silversmith, mentioned in Acts 19:24). However, as in most Roman cities, many people would have been slaves, and others would not have claimed much wealth. By the end of the second century (after the NT period) many other monumental structures were added, including some important gymnasia and the famous Library of Celsus. Remains of the giant Byzantine Church of Mary remind one that this former pagan town later hosted an important church council (the Council of Ephesus, A.D. 431).

History of Salvation

Christians have experienced in Christ the salvation and blessings that God promised through the ages, and look forward to the consummation of God's purposes in Christ. (For an explanation of the "History of Salvation," see the Overview of the Bible, pp. 23–26.)

EPHESUS IN THE TIME OF PAUL (C. A.D. 60)

The city plan below shows those features of the city of Ephesus that archaeologists have so far identified as dating from the time of Paul. Many of the notable buildings uncovered in the excavation at Ephesus date from later periods.





The Setting of Ephesians

(c. A.D. 62)

Ephesus was a wealthy port city in the Roman province of Asia. It was a center of learning and was positioned near several key land routes in western Asia Minor. Paul probably wrote his letter to the Ephesians while under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28).

Key Themes

1. All people are by nature spiritually dead, transgressors of God's law, and under the rule of Satan.	1:7; 2:1–3, 5, 11–12
2. God predestined his elect to redemption and holiness in Christ according to the free counsel of his will.	1:3–14; 2:4, 8–9
3. God's rich mercy in Christ has saved sinners; this free gift is by grace through faith alone.	1:7–8; 2:4–14
4. Christ's earthly work of redemption was part of his cosmic reconciliation and exaltation in this age and the next.	1:15–23; 3:1–13
5. Christ's reconciliation entails uniting all people, whether Jew or Gentile, into his one body, the church, as a new creation.	1:23; 2:10–15; 3:1–21; 4:1–6
6. Christ's people are renewed to new lives of holiness in thought, word, and deed, and must reject their old, sinful lifestyles.	4:1–3, 17–32; 5:1–20
7. Holiness of life entails submission to proper authorities, and loving and considerate care for those in submission.	5:21–6:9
8. Christ has given powerful gifts to his church to bring about her unity, maturity, and defense against the onslaughts of the devil and his allies.	4:7–16; 6:10–19

Literary Features

Ephesians exemplifies the genre of the NT epistle, with its salutation (including sender, recipients, and greeting), thanksgiving, exposition, exhortation, and closing (including final greetings and benediction). The main argument of the letter is punctuated by several prayers and an interior benediction (3:20–21) that marks the transition from doctrinal affirmations to practical exhortations. Chapter 2 takes the form of a spiritual biography, in which Paul recounts the saving work of Christ in the life of every Christian, and especially in the lives of Gentiles who are now included in the one new people of God. In chapter 3 the apostle takes an autobiographical turn as he testifies about his calling to the Gentiles and his prayers for the Ephesian church. The *paraenesis* (series of moral exhortations) consists mainly of instructions for household conduct, both for the church as the household of faith and for individual believers in their domestic relationships. The famous description of the complete armor in the last chapter is an extended metaphor. Paul also catalogs the blessings of salvation in a lofty and exhilarating lyrical style.

Ephesians finds its central unity in the work of Jesus Christ and in the community of people (both Jews

and Gentiles) who are corporately united in him. The strong opening statement of praise and the absence of any theological polemics make Ephesians pervasively positive in tone. The clear division of the epistle into two halves of nearly equal length (namely, the doctrinal section in chs. 1–3 and the practical section in chs. 4–6) also provides a strong sense of structural unity.

Outline

- I. Introduction (1:1–14)
 - A. Greetings (1:1–2)
 - B. Spiritual blessings in Christ (1:3–14)
- II. Paul's Prayer of Thanksgiving (1:15–23)
- III. Salvation by Grace through Faith (2:1–10)
 - A. Hopelessness and helplessness without Christ (2:1–3)
 - B. Hope in Christ (2:4–10)
- IV. Unity and Peace of Christ (2:11–22)
 - A. Unity of Christ's people (2:11–15)
 - B. Peace with God (2:16–18)
 - C. Implications of Christ's peace (2:19–22)
- V. Revelation of the Gospel Mystery (3:1–13)
 - A. Paul's apostolic ministry (3:1–7)
 - B. The mystery and wisdom (3:8–13)
- VI. Paul's Prayer for Strength and Insight (3:14–21)
- VII. Unity of the Body of Christ (4:1–16)
 - A. Exhortation to unity (4:1–6)
 - B. The different gifts (4:7–10)
 - C. The gifts for edification of the church (4:11–16)
- VIII. Paul's Testimony (4:17–24)
- IX. Exhortation to an Edifying Lifestyle (4:25–32)
- X. New Life in Love (5:1–20)
 - A. Exhortation to self-sacrificial love (5:1–2)
 - B. Instruction in holy living (5:3–20)
- XI. Submission to One Another (5:21–6:9)
 - A. Submission in general (5:21)
 - B. Wives and husbands (5:22–33)
 - C. Children and parents (6:1–4)
 - D. Slaves and masters (6:5–9)
- XII. The Whole Armor of God (6:10–20)
 - A. The Lord's strength (6:10–13)
 - B. Standing firm (6:14–17)
 - C. Being constant in prayer (6:18–20)
- XIII. Conclusion (6:21–24)

EPHESIANS

Greeting

1 Paul, ^aan apostle of Christ Jesus ^bby the will of God,
 To the saints who are in Ephesus, and ^care faithful¹ in Christ Jesus:
^{2d}Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Spiritual Blessings in Christ

^{3e}Blessed be ^fthe God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing ^gin the heavenly places, ^{4h}even as he ⁱchose us in him ^jbefore the foundation of the world, that we should be ^kholy and blameless before him. In love ⁵he predestined us² for ^madoption as sons through Jesus Christ, ⁿaccording to the purpose of his will, ^{6o}to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in ^pthe Beloved. ^{7q}In him we have ^rredemption ^sthrough his blood, ^tthe forgiveness of our trespasses,

¹ Some manuscripts *saints who are also faithful* (omitting in Ephesus) ² Or *before him in love, having predestined us*

1 Cor. 1:30; (ch. 4:30) ³ See Acts 20:28 ⁴ See Acts 2:38

Chapter 1

^{1a} See 2 Cor. 1:1 ^b See 1 Cor. 1:1 ^c Col. 1:2

^{2d} See Rom. 1:7

^{3e} 2 Cor. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:3

^f See Rom. 15:6 ^g ver. 20;

ch. 2:6; 3:10; 6:12

^{4h} [ch. 1:2; 2 Thess. 2:13;

1 Pet. 1:2] ⁱ James 2:5;

[Deut. 7:6; 26:18] ^j 2 Tim.

1:9; See Matt. 13:35

^k ch. 5:27; Col. 1:22;

1 Thess. 4:7

⁵ ver. 11; Rom. 8:29, 30

^m See Rom. 8:15 ⁿ ver. 9;

[Luke 2:14; Heb. 2:4]; See

Luke 12:32

^{6o} ver. 12, 14 ^p [John 3:35;

10:17; Col. 1:13]; See

Matt. 3:17

^{7q} Col. 1:14 ^r Rom. 3:24;

1:1–14 Introduction. Paul opens his letter with greetings (vv. 1–2) and a lengthy blessing of God (vv. 3–14) where he expresses the two main themes of the letter: Christ has reconciled all of creation and has united the church in himself.

1:1–2 Greetings. This salutation is briefer than many in Paul's letters. Paul saves his richest introductory remarks for the long blessing of God in vv. 3–14.

1:1 apostle. See note on Rom. 1:1. Paul expresses his authority simply but powerfully: he is an apostle of Christ Jesus. **saints.** The saints ("holy ones" or "consecrated people") are the faithful members of God's people. In Ephesians, Paul clearly uses the term for all members of the church (Eph. 1:15, 18; 2:19; 3:8; 4:12; 6:18), who are directly called to be holy (1:4; 5:3) and are **faithful in Christ Jesus. in Ephesus.** It is best to read these words as original even though they are missing in several early manuscripts. The esv alternative footnote reading, "saints who are also faithful," is less likely because it is clumsy in Greek and because the phrase "saints who are" normally expects a place name like "in Ephesus," rather than "also faithful." Some scholars who believe Ephesians is a circular letter suggest that the words "in Ephesus" were deleted in the copies that were sent to places outside of Ephesus. On Ephesus, see Introduction: The Ancient City of Ephesus.

1:3–14 Spiritual Blessings in Christ. In the original Greek, this section is one long, elegant sentence. Paul shows that the triune God initiated and accomplished cosmic reconciliation and redemption for the praise of his glory.

1:3 Blessed be. The blessing that opens Paul's prayer is similar to those that began first-century Jewish prayers that were commonly recited throughout the day (cf. 2 Cor. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:3). **in Christ.** Paul's praise emphasizes the mediation of Christ for all God's blessings by repeating that these good things are ours "in Christ" (Eph. 1:3; 9), "in the Beloved" (v. 6), or "in him" (vv. 4, 7, 11, 13). **Spiritual** (Gk. *pneumatikos*) here communicates that the saving gifts of God are conveyed by the Holy Spirit (Gk. *Pneuma*), whose personal presence throughout this age is the guarantee of future heavenly blessings (see "spiritual songs" in 5:19; Col. 3:16). Hence, these blessings are in **heavenly places**, since that is the Christian's future abode in imperishable glory when he is resurrected in a spiritual body through the "last Adam," the "life-giving spirit" (1 Cor. 15:40, 44–50).

1:4 He chose us in him means that the Father chose Christians in the Son

(Christ), and this took place in eternity past, **before the foundation of the world.** This indicates that for all eternity the Father has had the role of leading and directing among the persons of the Trinity, even though Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are equal in deity and attributes. God's initiative in redeeming the believer from sin and death was not an arbitrary or whimsical decision but something God had planned all along "in Christ." Since God chose his people in his love, they can take no credit for their salvation. God was determined to have them as his own (see note on 2:8). **holy.** God chose them with the goal that they be holy and **blameless before him.** This goal is not optional for Christians—it is the purpose of election. Holiness here expresses moral purity, while blamelessness expresses freedom from the guilt of trespasses and sins in which the Christian formerly walked (1:7; 2:1, 5). **In love,** at the end of 1:4, properly belongs to v. 5, describing predestination, though the esv footnote indicates that "in love" can also be taken with the preceding phrase ("that we should be holy and blameless before him in love"). Versification was introduced into Bibles in the sixteenth century A.D. for convenience and is not part of the original inspired text.

1:5 predestined. Previously ordained or appointed to some position. God's election of Christians (v. 4) entails his predestining them to something—in this case to **adoption as sons** (see also v. 11; Rom. 8:29–30). Hence, election and predestination in this context refer to God's decision to save someone. All Christians, male and female, are "sons" in the sense of being heirs who will inherit blessings from their Father in heaven. Paul qualifies and stresses God's plan and initiation of redemption with the phrase **according to the purpose of his will** here and elsewhere in the passage (Eph. 1:9, 11). God cannot be constrained by any outside force, and his inexorable will for believers is to pour out his grace and goodness on them in Christ Jesus.

1:6 God's ultimate purpose is not redemption as such but the **praise** of his glorious name through redemption. This theme is repeated at key junctures in the argument (see vv. 12, 14).

1:7 Redemption denotes ransoming someone from captivity or from slavery. The supreme OT example was the exodus, where God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt (see Ex. 15:13; Deut. 7:8; 2 Sam. 7:23; Mic. 6:4). **Forgiveness of our trespasses** explains the nature of redemption: Christians are freed from slavery to sin and guilt. This was effected by Christ's **blood**, which means his death as an atoning sacrifice (see also Rom. 3:24; Eph. 1:14; 2:13; 4:30; Heb. 9:15).

^{9d}[ch. 3:8, 16; Col. 1:27]; See Rom. 2:4 ¹⁰See Rom. 16:25 ¹¹[See ver. 5 above] ¹²[ver. 11; Rom. 8:28; 9:11] ¹³See Mark 1:15 ¹⁴Col. 1:16, 20; [ch. 3:15; Phil. 2:9, 10] ¹⁵Deut. 4:20; 32:9; See ver. 14 ¹⁶ver. 5 ¹⁷ch. 3:11; [Rev. 4:11]; See Rom. 8:28 ¹⁸[Acts 20:27] ¹⁹2nd ver. 6, 14; [Phil. 1:11] ²⁰2nd Cor. 6:7; Col. 1:5; 2 Tim. 2:15; [Acts 13:26; 15:7] ²¹ch. 4:30 ²²See Acts 1:4 ²³2nd Cor. 1:22 ²⁴Acts 20:32; [ver. 18] ²⁵Titus 2:14; See ver. 7 ²⁶See 1 Pet. 2:9 ²⁷ver. 6, 12 ²⁸Col. 1:4; Phil. 5; See Rom. 1:8 ²⁹Col. 1:9 ³⁰Rom. 1:9; 2 Tim. 1:3 ³¹See Rom. 15:6 ³²[Col. 1:9] ³³[Heb. 6:4; 10:32; Rev. 3:17, 18]; See Acts 26:18 ³⁴ch. 4:4; [ch. 2:12] ³⁵ch. 3:8, 16; Col. 1:27; See ver. 7 ³⁶ch. 3:7; Phil. 3:21; Col. 1:29; 2:12 ³⁷ch. 6:10; [Dan. 4:30] ³⁸See Acts 2:24 ³⁹See Mark 16:19; Acts 2:33; 1 Pet. 3:22 ⁴⁰See ver. 3

⁴¹according to the riches of his grace, ⁴²which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁴³making known ⁴⁴to us the mystery of his will, ⁴⁵according to his purpose, which he ⁴⁶set forth in Christ ⁴⁷as a plan for ⁴⁸the fullness of time, ⁴⁹to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

⁵⁰In him we have obtained ⁵¹an inheritance, ⁵²having been predestined ⁵³according to the purpose of him who works all things according to ⁵⁴the counsel of his will, ⁵⁵so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be ⁵⁶to the praise of his glory. ⁵⁷In him you also, when you heard ⁵⁸the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, ⁵⁹were sealed with the ⁶⁰promised Holy Spirit, ⁶¹who is ⁶²the guarantee ⁶³of our ⁶⁴inheritance until ⁶⁵we acquire ⁶⁶possession of it, ⁶⁷to the praise of his glory.

Thanksgiving and Prayer

⁶⁸For this reason, ⁶⁹because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love ⁷⁰toward all the saints, ⁷¹I do not cease to give thanks for you, ⁷²remembering you in my prayers, ⁷³that ⁷⁴the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, ⁷⁵may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ⁷⁶having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is ⁷⁷the hope to which he has called you, what are ⁷⁸the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ⁷⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, ⁸⁰according to the working of ⁸¹his great might ⁸²that he worked in Christ ⁸³when he raised him from the dead and ⁸⁴seated him at his right hand ⁸⁵in the heavenly places, ⁸⁶far above ⁸⁷all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above ⁸⁸every name that is named, not only in ⁸⁹this age but also in the one

¹Or he lavished upon us in all wisdom and insight, making known . . . ²Or down payment ³Or until God redeems his possession ⁴Some manuscripts omit your love

²¹ch. 4:10; Col. 2:10; See John 3:31 ²¹1 Cor. 15:24 ²²ch. 3:15; Phil. 2:9; [Heb. 1:4] ²³[Matt. 12:32]

1:9 Mystery as used in Scripture (Gk. *mystērion*) refers to the revelation of something that was previously hidden or known only vaguely but now is more fully made known (see note on Col. 1:26–27). The mystery of God's will, now revealed in **Christ**, is "to unite all things in him" (Eph. 1:10; see also 3:3–11).

1:10 fullness of time. "When the time was ripe," i.e., the time for the fulfillment of God's plan. **unite.** This is the central theme of the passage: God has effected cosmic reconciliation in Christ. The work of Christ on the cross is the central axis for the history of creation, whether in heaven or on earth (see also Col. 1:15–20), since he has redeemed his people and silenced all hostile powers (see Eph. 3:10).

1:11 Obtained an inheritance seems the best rendering of the Greek verb that normally means "to allot [a portion]." Some believe the meaning is that God has claimed his own portion, the believing Jews (see v. 14). **predestined.** Making those who believe in him heirs with Christ was not an ad hoc event; God had planned it from all eternity. By definition God is sovereign, directing all things freely according to his royal counsel. This is in sharp contrast with the pagan gods of the time, who were understood to be often fickle or bound by an inscrutable and arbitrary fate. God's predestination gives his people tremendous comfort, for they know that all who come to Christ do so through God's enabling grace and appointment (see 2:8–10). **Who works all things according to the counsel of his will** is best understood to mean that every single event that occurs is in some sense predestined by God. At the same time, Paul emphasizes the importance of human responsibility, as is evident in all of the moral commands later in Ephesians (chs. 4–6) and in all of Paul's letters. As Paul demonstrated in all of his remarkable efforts in spreading the gospel (Acts 13–28; cf. 2 Cor. 11:23–28), he believed that doing personal evangelism and making conscious choices to obey God are also absolutely essential in fulfilling God's plan. God uses human means to fulfill what he has ordained. With regard to tragedies and evil, Paul and the other biblical writers never blame God for them (cf. Rom. 5:12; 2 Tim. 4:14; also Job 1:21–22). Rather, they see the doctrine of God's sovereignty as a means of comfort and assurance (cf. Rom. 8:28–30), confident that evil will not triumph, and that God's good plans for his people will be fulfilled. How God's sovereignty and human responsibility work together in the world is a mystery no one can fully understand.

1:12 praise. See note on v. 6.

1:13 Sealed can mean either that the Holy Spirit protects and preserves Christians until they reach their inheritance (see 4:30; 2 Cor. 1:22; 1 Pet. 1:5; Rev. 7:2–3) or that he "certifies" the authenticity of their acceptance by God as being genuine—they bear the "royal seal" (see John 3:33; Acts 10:44, 47). The first interpretation seems best here, though both ideas are biblically true.

1:14 God pours out his Holy Spirit on all of his children to **guarantee** (or to provide a "down payment" on [esv footnote]) their share in his eternal kingdom because he applies to them all God's powerful working in redemption. **until we acquire possession of it.** This phrase can also be rendered "until God redeems his possession" (esv footnote). In that case it means that, like the Levites in the OT, believers are the Lord's specially treasured possession (see Num. 3:12, 45; 8:14; Josh. 14:3–4; 18:7).

1:15–23 Paul's Prayer of Thanksgiving. This section, like vv. 3–14, is a single sentence in the original Greek. Paul prays that the church will gain deep insight into the Lord's powerful working and rich gifts in Christ.

1:15 because I have heard. See Introduction: Author and Title.

1:16 do not cease . . . in my prayers. See note on 6:18.

1:17 To name the **Father of glory** as the **God of our Lord Jesus Christ** is not to deny Christ's deity but to affirm his true incarnate humanity. Further, it expresses that Christians know God through the Lord Jesus as their mediator. **Spirit of wisdom** refers to the Holy Spirit's secret working in Christians to give them insights into God's Word and the saving knowledge of him (1 Cor. 2:6–12).

1:18–19 Paul prays that believers will comprehend the blessings that are theirs in Christ: (1) their future **hope**; (2) God's **inheritance in the saints**; and (3) their **power** in Christ. The "inheritance" here is not the Christian's inheritance but **his** (God's). This indicates how precious his people are to God. They are, so to speak, what he looks forward to enjoying forever. Paul piles up "power words" to express the **immeasurable greatness** of God's power, **working**, and **great might** toward believers. Power over supernatural forces through magic and the occult was a great concern in ancient Ephesus (Acts 19:19), but the power of the living God in Christ trumps all competing authorities (Acts 19:20).

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INTRODUCTION TO

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE COLOSSIANS



Author and Title

Paul and Timothy are explicitly named as the authors of Colossians (1:1). Timothy probably served as Paul's secretary (*amanuensis*) since the first person singular ("I") is used throughout the letter (e.g., 1:24). The title indicates that Paul wrote the letter to Christians living in the small city of Colossae.

Some scholars have doubted Paul's authorship based on (1) *a style of writing* that they deem inconsistent with his uncontested letters, and (2) *a set of theological statements* that they regard as more developed than what he wrote in previous letters. The latter objection is readily answered by the unique situation reflected in the letter, leading Paul to address these particular concerns with the most relevant theological emphases. There is nothing in the theology that is inconsistent with what he wrote elsewhere, and many of his statements are simply logical developments of previous thoughts. The argument about style is much weaker since there is, in fact, strong continuity of style between this letter and his other letters. It is also quite precarious to make a judgment about authorship based on such a small sampling of letters. It is inappropriate to expect an author to demonstrate stylistic uniformity throughout all his works.

Date

The letter was probably written c. A.D. 62. Paul wrote it at roughly the same time that he wrote Philemon and Ephesians. All three letters were sent with Tychicus (see Eph. 6:21) and Onesimus. This date assumes that the imprisonment Paul speaks of is his Roman imprisonment that followed his harrowing voyage to Rome (Acts 27–28).

Theme

Christ is Lord over all of creation, including the invisible realm. He has secured redemption for his people, enabling them to participate with him in his death, resurrection, and fullness.

Purpose, Occasion, and Background

The church at Colossae apparently got its start during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus (A.D. 52–55). During this time, a Colossian named Epaphras probably traveled to Ephesus and responded to Paul's proclamation of the gospel (see Acts 19:10). This new believer returned to his hometown and began sharing the good news of Christ, which resulted in the birth of the Colossian church (Col. 1:7). At the time of this writing, Epaphras is with Paul in Rome and has likely shared the bad news that there was a dangerous teaching threatening the church at Colossae (4:12). Paul writes this letter to respond to this situation and to encourage these believers in their growth toward Christian maturity.

Scholars have long been puzzled over the precise nature of the destructive teaching facing the Colossians. This uncertainty does not, however, hinder accurate interpretation of the letter's rich theological teaching. A previous generation of scholars thought that the problem at Colossae was Gnosticism, an early heresy that taught that the world was created by an inferior god, that the material world is evil, and (in some cases) that asceticism should be practiced. But an improved understanding of Gnosticism, aided in part by the discovery of Gnostic documents in Egypt, has led most scholars to discount this interpretation. Missing from Colossians is any polemic against the Gnostic view that there is an unknown god who is distinct from

the creator God. There is also no discussion of the Gnostic conviction that matter and material existence are inherently evil.

The fact that there are many distinctively Jewish elements to the false teaching (such as Sabbath observance, Jewish festivals, and an interest in angels; see 2:16–18) has led a number of scholars to contend that the competing teaching had something to do with Judaism. Some have suggested that a form of Jewish mysticism had influenced the church, resulting in Colossian Christians engaging in ascetic practices (such as fasting) in preparation for a visionary ascent to heaven where they would join the angels in worshipping God at his heavenly throne (see 2:18). This is a possibility, but it does not provide the most convincing explanation of the “worship of angels” and some of the other elements of the false teaching (2:18).

Others advocate a similar view, contending that the principal problem at Colossae was not a dangerous teaching from within the church but one coming from outside. They suggest that the local Jewish synagogue was mounting a campaign to discredit and denounce the Christian assembly, especially because this group of predominately Gentile believers was now claiming a Jewish heritage in the OT. One of the problems with this view, however, is that the role of the Jewish law is never mentioned in Colossians. It also does not adequately take into account the role of other syncretistic elements from other local religions.

The best explanation for this dangerous teaching is that it comes from the context of the local Jewish and pagan folk belief. A central feature of the local folk belief was a tendency to call on angels for help and protection from evil spirits. This characteristic is well attested in many inscriptions and ancient documents. For instance, a magical stone amulet designed to be worn around the neck for protection from evil spirits reads, “Michael, Gabriel, Ouriel, Raphael, protect the one who wears this. . . . Flee, O hated one, Solomon pursues you.”

What likely happened at Colossae is that a shaman-like figure within the church had attracted a following and was presenting himself as something of a Christian spiritual guide (cf. “his sensuous mind,” 2:18). This person probably claimed to have superior insight into the spiritual realm and was advising the Colossian Christians to practice certain rites, taboos, and rituals as a means of protection from evil spirits and for deliverance from afflictions. When Paul hears of the spreading influence of this teaching that devalues Christ and fails to appreciate the new identity of believers “in Christ,” he writes this letter of warning and encouragement. He does not minimize the threat presented by the demonic powers but emphasizes the supremacy of Christ over all powers. He asserts the unity of Christians with the exalted Christ, which entails their sharing in his power and authority.

Paul also takes the opportunity to encourage these believers to press on to maturity in Christ by continuing in their battle against sin, pursuing holiness in Christ, and learning to live as distinctively Christian households.

Key Themes

1. Jesus Christ is preeminent over all creation, Lord over all human rulers and cosmic powers.	1:15–20; 2:9–10; 3:1
2. God has worked through Christ to secure redemption and reconciliation for all who put their faith in him.	1:13–14, 20–22
3. Believers are in Christ and thus participate in a relationship of solidarity with Christ in his death on the cross, his resurrection from the dead, his new life, and his fullness.	2:9–14; 3:1–4
4. Christ has defeated the powers of darkness on the cross, and Christians share in his power and authority over that realm.	2:10, 15; see also 2:8, 20
5. Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish expectation, and Christians now share in the heritage of the old covenant people of God through their union with him.	1:12, 21–22, 27
6. Believers are called to grow in maturity in Christ by getting rid of sinful practices and cultivating Christian virtues.	1:10–12, 28; 3:1–4:6

History of Salvation Summary

Christians are to hold fast to the one way of salvation in Christ, in contrast to false teaching. (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the Overview of the Bible, pp. 23–26.)

Literary Features

Colossians closely follows the epistolary conventions of Paul’s other letters to congregations in the early church. The letter opens with the customary greetings, including thanksgiving and prayer. The main body of the letter is divided fairly equally between theological exposition and practical application (including household instructions), followed by personal greetings that reinforce the relationship between the writer

and his correspondents. Because of its polemical (persuasive and argumentative) thrust, Colossians also takes the form of a disputation in which the apostle argues the gospel side of a debate between the all-sufficiency of Christ and the spurious claims of man-made religion. The lines of praise given to Christ in 1:15–20 have the form of a hymn or creed celebrating him.

As one of the most thoroughly Christ-centered books in the Bible, Colossians finds its essential unity in the divine and exalted person of the preeminent Christ. The letter presents variations on this central theme, with Christ celebrated as the object of the believer's faith, the image of the invisible God, the creator of all dominions, the head of the church, the firstborn from the dead, the unifier and reconciler of all things, the Savior through his sufferings on the cross, the treasury of all wisdom and knowledge, the triumphant victor over sin and Satan, the exalted Lord of life and glory, and the true pattern for the life of Christian faith. The letter is also unified by Paul's pastoral concern to dissuade the Colossians from getting caught up in useless religious regulations and to awaken exaltation of Christ and exultation in him. Paul writes with stylistic flair and aphoristic brilliance.

Timeline

A.D.	30	35	40	45	50	55	60	65	70	75	80
Death, resurrection of Christ (A.D. 33 [or 30]) [†]	■										
Paul's conversion (33/34*)		●									
Paul's first Jerusalem visit (36/37*)			●								
Paul's second Jerusalem visit (famine relief) (44–47*)				■							
Paul's first missionary journey (46–47)				●							
Paul's third Jerusalem visit (apostolic council) (48–49*)				●							
Paul's second missionary journey (48/49–51*)				■							
Paul's third journey (incl. 3 years in Ephesus) (52–57*)					■						
Epaphras converted in Ephesus, evangelizes Colossae (52–57*)					■						
Paul under house arrest in Rome (62*)								●			
Paul hears from Epaphras, writes to Colossian church (62*)								●			
Paul martyred in Rome (64–67*)								■			

* denotes approximate date; / signifies either/or; † see *The Date of Jesus' Crucifixion*, pp. 1809–1810

Outline

- I. Greeting (1:1–2)
- II. Thanksgiving (1:3–8)
- III. Prayer (1:9–14)
- IV. Praise to Christ (1:15–20)
 - A. Christ is Lord of creation (1:15–17)
 - B. Christ is Lord of redemption (1:18–20)
- V. Reconciliation of the Colossians to God (1:21–23)
- VI. The Apostle Paul's Labor for the Gospel (1:24–2:3)
 - A. Paul's suffering and stewardship of the mystery (1:24–28)
 - B. Paul's labor for the Colossians (1:29–2:3)

VII. The Dangerous Teaching at Colossae (2:4–23)

- A. Warning about a deceptive teaching (2:4–8)
- B. Help for the danger: resources in Christ (2:9–15)
- C. Additional warnings about the teaching (2:16–23)

VIII. The Proper Focus: Christ and the Life Above (3:1–4)

IX. Instructions on Living the Christian Life (3:5–4:6)

- A. Dealing with the sins of the past (3:5–11)
- B. Putting on the virtues of Christ (3:12–17)
- C. Living in the Christian household (3:18–4:1)
- D. Persistence in prayer (4:2–4)
- E. Good behavior toward those outside the community (4:5–6)

X. Personal Greetings and Instructions (4:7–17)

- A. Remarks about the messengers carrying the letter (4:7–9)
- B. Greetings from Paul's associates (4:10–14)
- C. Greetings to the Christians in Laodicea (4:15–17)

XI. Letter Closing (4:18)

**The Setting of Colossians**

c. A.D. 62

Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians during a time of imprisonment, probably in Rome. The church at Colossae was likely established during Paul's third missionary journey as he ministered for three years in Ephesus. It appears that Paul did not personally establish the church there, but instead a Colossian named Epaphras traveled to Ephesus, responded to Paul's gospel message, and returned to share the good news in Colossae.

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE COLOSSIANS

Chapter 1

^{1a}See 2 Cor. 1:1 ^{1b}See 1 Cor. 1:1 ^{1c}See 1 Thess. 3:2
²Eph. 1:1; See Phil. 1:1
³Rom. 1:7
⁴Eph. 1:15, 16; Philem. 4
⁵See 1 Thess. 1:3
⁶Ver. 23; See Acts 23:6; Titus 1:2; Heb. 3:6 ⁷2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Pet. 1:4 ⁸See Eph. 1:13
⁹[ver. 23; Ps. 98:3]; See Matt. 24:14 ¹⁰John 15:5, 16; [Phil. 1:11] ¹¹[Rom. 16:26; Eph. 4:21] ¹²See Acts 11:23
¹³ch. 4:12; Philem. 23
¹⁴ch. 4:7
¹⁵[Rom. 15:30]
¹⁶ver. 4 ¹⁷2 Thess. 1:11
¹⁸[Eph. 1:17]

Greeting

1 Paul, ^aan apostle of Christ Jesus ^bby the will of God, and Timothy ^cour brother,
²To the ^dsaints and faithful brothers¹ in Christ at Colossae:
^eGrace to you and peace from God our Father.

Thanksgiving and Prayer

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,
⁴since we heard of ^fyour faith in Christ Jesus and of ^gthe love that you have for all the saints, ^hbecause of ⁱthe hope ^jlaid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in ^kthe word of the truth, the gospel, ^lwhich has come to you, as indeed ^min the whole world it is ⁿbearing fruit and growing—as it also does among you, since the day you ^oheard it and understood ^pthe grace of God in truth, ^qjust as you learned it from ^rEpaphras our beloved ^sfellow servant. ²He is ^pa faithful minister of Christ on your³ behalf ⁴and has made known to us your ^qlove in the Spirit.

⁵And so, ^rfrom the day we heard, ^swe have not ceased to pray for you, asking that ^tyou

¹Or *brothers and sisters*. The plural Greek word *adelphoi* (translated “brothers”) refers to siblings in a family. In New Testament usage, depending on the context, *adelphoi* may refer either to men or to both men and women who are siblings (brothers and sisters) in God’s family, the church ²Greek *fellow bondservant* ³Some manuscripts *our*

1:1–2 Greeting. Paul begins the letter in his typical fashion by calling on God to pour out his grace and peace upon the Colossians.

1:1 Paul, an apostle. Although Paul has likely never been to Colossae, he nevertheless feels a pastoral responsibility for this church. He writes to the Colossians with the authority of an apostle to assist the church in dealing with the problem of the dangerous teaching threatening its health (cf. 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1). **Timothy.** See Introduction to 1 Timothy: Purpose, Occasion, and Background.

1:2 Colossae. A city in Phrygia, in the Roman province of Asia, Colossae was located on the Lycus River just over 100 miles (161 km) east of Ephesus. A significant earthquake occurred in the Lycus Valley during the reign of Nero (c. A.D. 60). Surface surveys of the site of Colossae have discovered inscriptions, a theater, a cemetery, and other structures. Coins point to official worship of the main Roman deities, plus the presence of mystery cults. Jewish presence in the Lycus Valley was likely strong, given the extant inscriptions and the literary references to Jews in Phrygia during the second and first centuries B.C. (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 12.147–153; Cicero, *For Flaccus* 68).

1:3–8 Thanksgiving. Paul thanks God for the Colossians and their tangible expressions of faith, hope, and love.

1:3 God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul will place a significant emphasis on the lordship of Jesus Christ in this letter. He is careful to affirm, however, that Jesus is not a separate God, yet he has a close relationship with the Father, for he is the Son and agent of God.

1:4–5 faith . . . love . . . hope. Paul spoke frequently of the importance of these three Christian virtues (see Rom. 5:1–5; 1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5–6; Eph. 4:2–5; 1 Thess. 1:3; 5:8), which were seen as foundational to the Christian life (see also Heb. 6:10–12; 1 Pet. 1:3–8, 21–22). In this passage, faith and love are based on hope, which is presented not as the action of hoping but as something objective—in the sense of “the thing hoped for”—that

Christians can anticipate with confidence (see Col. 3:4). Because it is **laid up for you in heaven**, no earthly ruler or demonic power can rob believers of the reality of this hope.

1:5 the word of the truth. This contrasts with the false teaching Paul later describes as “empty deceit” (2:8).

1:6 in the whole world. It has now been roughly 30 years since Christ’s death and resurrection and Pentecost (see Introduction: Timeline). The gospel has indeed spread from Jerusalem into Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and likely into Egypt, North Africa, and Persia as well.

1:7 You learned it from Epaphras makes it clear that Paul did not plant the church at Colossae. The people heard the gospel from Epaphras (a shortened form of “Epaphroditus”), who is a fellow Colossian (4:12). The term for “learned” (Gk. *manthanō*) is closely related to the term “disciple” (Gk. *mathētēs*). More than merely listening to a simple gospel presentation, Paul makes it clear that the gospel involves systematic instruction in the faith and in how to live as a Christian. **on your behalf.** The ESV footnote indicates that some manuscripts read “on our behalf” (rather than “on your behalf”). If this is the original reading (as several scholars suggest), this would mean that Epaphras has been a faithful ambassador in place of (or on behalf of) Paul among the Colossians. The name T. Asinius Epaphroditus occurs in an inscription found at Colossae, showing that the name “Epaphroditus” (Epaphras) was in use in the region.

1:9–14 Prayer. Paul reports in summary fashion how he regularly prays for the Colossians. He prays that they will know God’s will and that God will give them the power to live it out. The prayer concludes with an expression of thanksgiving for God’s mighty act of deliverance and redemption.

1:9 Knowledge and wisdom were offered by the false teachers in Colossae (cf. 2:4, 8, 16–23). Paul prays that the Colossians will have the wisdom and understanding that comes only from God. **Spiritual** means given by the Holy Spirit.

may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all ^uspiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰so as ^vto walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, ^wfully pleasing to him, ^xbearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. ¹¹May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for ^aall endurance and patience ^awith joy, ¹²^bgiving thanks¹ to the Father, who has qualified you² to share in ^cthe inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³He ^dhas delivered us from ^ethe domain of darkness and transferred us to ^fthe kingdom of ^ghis beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

The Preeminence of Christ

¹⁵He is the image of ^jthe invisible God, ^kthe firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶For by³ him all things were created, ⁱin heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether ^mthrones or ⁿdominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created ^othrough him and for him. ¹⁷And ^phe is before all things, and in him all things ^qhold together. ¹⁸And ^rhe is the head of the body, the church. He is ^sthe beginning, ^tthe firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹For ^uin him all the ^vfullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and

¹ Or *patience*, with joy giving thanks ² Some manuscripts us ³ That is, by means of; or in

¹⁹ch. 2:9 ²⁰See John 1:16

⁹ch. 4:5; Eph. 1:8; [1 Cor. 12:8]
¹⁰[Ps. 1:1, 3]; See Eph. 4:1 ¹¹[2 Cor. 5:9; Eph. 5:10, 1 Thess. 4:1] ¹²ver. 6
¹³See Eph. 3:16 ¹⁴Eph. 4:2 ¹⁵See Matt. 5:12
¹⁶ch. 3:15; Eph. 5:20 ¹⁷See Acts 26:18
¹⁸¹ Thess. 1:10 ²Luke 22:53; Eph. 6:12 ³Pet. 1:11 ⁴Eph. 1:6
¹⁴See Eph. 1:7
¹⁵See 2 Cor. 4:4 ¹⁶See 1 Tim. 1:17 ¹⁷[Ps. 89:27]; See Rom. 8:29
¹⁸Eph. 1:10 ¹⁹Ezek. 10:11 ²⁰Eph. 1:21 ²¹Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:6
¹⁷[John 8:58]; See John 1:1 ¹⁸Heb. 1:3
¹⁹See Eph. 1:22, 23
²⁰Rev. 3:14 ²¹Acts 26:23; 1 Cor. 15:20; Rev. 1:5

1:10 so as. The “wisdom and understanding” (v. 9) would then lead to changed lives, for it would enable these Christians **to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord**. “To walk” is a Jewish metaphor for conducting or behaving oneself. It corresponds to the Hebrew term *halak*. The rabbis had an entire oral tradition, later written down (especially in the Mishnah and the Talmuds), called *Halakah*, that guided them in their behavior. As a former rabbi, Paul calls believers “to walk” not according to the oral traditions of Judaism but in a way that is **fully pleasing** to the Lord Jesus Christ. Although Christians are completely justified from the moment of initial saving faith, they are not fully sanctified, and they can do things that either please or displease God each day. **Every good work** is here viewed as the fruit of salvation in the life of a Christian, not as the prerequisite for entering a relationship with Christ. Paul’s reference to **bearing fruit . . . and increasing** brings to mind the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1–9, 13–20). The seed sown on the good soil bore fruit thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold.

1:11 be strengthened with all power. Spiritual power was a key issue in the Greco-Roman world. People sought power through connection with various gods and pagan rituals in order to protect them from evil spirits and to help them acquire wealth or influence. Paul wants the Colossians to know that he prays regularly that God would impart his power to them, not for selfish aims but so that they can live for God in a worthy manner. **for all endurance and patience with joy.** The purpose (as indicated by the word “for”) of this God-given power is to provide the divine strength needed for the believer to attain Christian virtues, to persevere in the faith, to resist temptation and deceitful teachers, and so to know the joy of the Lord.

1:12 who has qualified you to share in the inheritance. Paul has taken language normally reserved for the Jewish people under the old covenant (see Gen. 13:14–17; Num. 26:52–56; Josh. 19:9) and applied it to Gentiles under the new covenant. Gentiles now have equal access to the Father and are heirs to the inheritance he has promised his people. This is based on the fact that God has made Gentiles **saints** (“holy ones” or “consecrated people”) through the redemption he has procured through his Son.

1:13 He has delivered us. Just as God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt under the old covenant (Ex. 6:6; 14:30), he has delivered them now **from the domain of darkness**, that is, from the realm of Satan and the powers of evil (see Acts 26:18). **the kingdom of his beloved Son.** This kingdom is the same as the “kingdom of God” (or “kingdom of heaven”) that Jesus spoke of (e.g., Matt. 3:2; Mark 1:15; etc.), which was central to Jesus’ teaching throughout the four Gospels. Jesus is the agent of God who will presently reign (1 Cor. 15:24) until he hands his kingdom over to the Father, when the kingdom of God comes into its full manifestation at the end of the present age. The emphasis here is on the present lordship of Christ.

1:14 Redemption means deliverance or liberation, emphasizing here that believers have been delivered and have received **forgiveness of their sins**.

Paul praises the lordship of Christ in relation to both creation and redemption.

1:15–17 Christ Is Lord of Creation. Jesus is the Lord, the maker and upholder of all things in the universe.

1:15 the image of the invisible God. Paul depicts Christ in terms similar to the presentation of “wisdom” in Proverbs 8 (“When he established the heavens, I [wisdom] was there . . . I was beside him, like a master workman” [Prov. 8:27, 30]). In later Jewish wisdom literature, personified divine wisdom is described as the image of God. **firstborn of all creation.** It would be wrong to think in physical terms here, as if Paul were asserting that the Son had a physical origin or was somehow created (the classic Arian heresy) rather than existing eternally as the Son, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, in the Godhead. (See the article on The Trinity, p. 2513.) What Paul had in mind was the rights and privileges of a firstborn son, especially the son of a monarch who would inherit ruling sovereignty. This is how the expression is used of David: “I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth” (Ps. 89:27).

1:16 by him all things were created. Jesus did not come into existence when he was born of the virgin Mary. He was the agent of creation through whom God made heaven and earth (John 1:3 and note; 1 Cor. 8:6). Jesus cannot be the first thing created (as the ancient Arian heresy claimed) since “all things” without exception were created by him. **thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.** Paul is using the current Jewish terms for various rankings of angels (although he doesn’t explain their relative ranks). His emphasis here may be on the evil angels, since they play a significant part in this letter (Col. 2:8, 10, 15, 20). This would not mean, however, that Jesus created evil angels; all spiritual powers were **created** by Jesus, but some later chose to rebel against God and so to become evil. Jesus is not only the agent of creation but is also the *goal* of creation, for everything was created by him and **for him**, that is, for his honor and praise. Since Jesus is in this sense the goal of creation, he must be fully God (see notes on John 1:1; 8:58).

1:17 in him all things hold together. Christ continually sustains his creation, preventing it from falling into chaos or disintegrating (cf. Heb. 1:3).

1:18–20 Christ Is Lord of Redemption. Christ is Head of the church and has accomplished reconciliation at the cross.

1:18 he is the head of the body. Paul spoke elsewhere of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27), but he takes the image a step further here and envisions Christ as the head of the body (see also Eph. 1:22–23; 5:25). This metaphor conveys Christ’s leadership over the body and may also suggest his role in providing sustenance for it (see notes on 1 Cor. 11:3; Col. 2:10; 2:19).

1:19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. The “fullness” language here and throughout the letter is reminiscent of its use in the OT, where it was said that God “filled” the temple with his presence. For instance, the prophet Ezekiel exclaims, “I looked, and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the temple” (Ezek. 44:4). Jesus not only bears God’s glory, but all that God is also dwells in him. He possesses the wisdom, power, Spirit, and

1:15–20 Praise to Christ. In a strongly moving and poetic way, which some scholars think is a quotation from an early Christian hymn,

²⁰"See 2 Cor. 5:18; Eph. 1:10 ^aSee Eph. 2:14 ^y[Eph. 2:13]
²¹"See Eph. 2:1, 2, 12 ^q[Titus 1:16]
²²"[Rom. 7:4] ^cJude 24; See Eph. 1:4; 5:27 ^d1 Cor. 1:8
²³"See John 15:4 ^fch. 2:7; Eph. 3:17 ^ever. 5, 6 ^hMark 16:15; [Acts 2:5] ^gSee 2 Cor. 3:6
²⁴"See 2 Cor. 7:4 ^h[2 Tim. 1:8; 2:10] ⁱSee 2 Cor. 1:5 ^j[Eph. 4:12]
²⁵"ver. 23 ^kSee Eph. 3:2
²⁶"Eph. 3:9; See Rom. 16:25, 26
²⁷"[ch. 2:2] ^lEph. 1:18; 3:16 ^m[See ver. 26 above] ⁿ1 Tim. 1:1
²⁸"See ver. 22, 23 ^oSee Matt. 5:48
²⁹"1 Cor. 15:10; 1 Tim. 4:10 ^pch. 4:12; [ch. 2:1] ^qSee Eph. 1:19

"through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, ^xmaking peace ^yby the blood of his cross.

²¹^zAnd you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, ^adoing evil deeds, ²²he has now reconciled ^bin his body of flesh by his death, ^cin order to present you holy and blameless and ^dabove reproach before him, ²³^eif indeed you continue in the faith, ^fstable and steadfast, not shifting from ^gthe hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed ^hin all creation ⁱunder heaven, ^jand of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Paul's Ministry to the Church

²⁴Now ⁱI rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh ^kI am filling up ^lwhat is lacking in Christ's afflictions ^mfor the sake of his body, that is, the church, ²⁵ⁿof which I became a minister according to ^othe stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶^pthe mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. ²⁷^qTo them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are ^rthe riches of the glory of ^sthis mystery, which is Christ in you, ^tthe hope of glory. ²⁸Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that ^uwe may present everyone ^vmature in Christ. ²⁹For this ^vI toil, ^wstruggling ^xwith all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

¹ Or to every creature

glory of God. To say that all this divine fullness dwells in Jesus is to say that he is fully God (see also Col. 2:9).

1:20 to reconcile to himself all things. As the "Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6), Jesus will ultimately quell all rebellion against God and his purposes. For believers, this means present reconciliation to God as his friends. As for nonbelievers and the demonic powers, Christ's universal reign of peace will be enforced on them, for their rebellion will be decisively defeated by Christ as conquering king (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24–28; Rev. 19:11–21; 20:7–10) so that they can no longer do any harm in the universe. The basis for Christ's reign of **peace is the blood of his cross**. The cross truly is the pivotal point in human and cosmic history. On crucifixion, see note on Matt. 27:35. See also note on Phil. 2:8.

1:21–23 Reconciliation of the Colossians to God. This next section explains the meaning of reconciliation (see note on v. 20) for the church.

1:21–22 once . . . now. Paul presents a strong contrast between the Colossians' pre-Christian status and their favorable situation now as Christians. **alienated.** Sin has resulted in estrangement from God (Eph. 2:12; 4:18) and thus creates the need for reconciliation. This is due, in part, to the fact that nonbelievers are **hostile in mind** to God (Rom. 1:21). The result of reconciliation is that Christ is now working in all the believers **to present you holy and blameless** before God. This is the same language used in the OT to describe the unblemished animals that the Levitical priest would bring for a sacrifice to God. When Christ brings his followers to the Father for inspection, they will be found to be **above reproach**.

1:23 if indeed you continue in the faith. The form of this phrase in Greek (using the Gk. particle *ei* and the indicative mood of the verb *epimēnō*) indicates that Paul fully expects that the Colossian believers will continue in the faith; no doubt is expressed. Nevertheless, the statement shows that faithfulness to the end is essential in the Christian life (cf. Matt. 10:22). **not shifting.** The idea here is very similar to Jesus' story contrasting the person who built his house on the sand with the one who built his house on the rock (Matt. 7:24–27). Paul wanted the Colossians to build their house on the solid foundation of truth and not on the shifting sands of false teaching. **In all creation** is a general statement meaning that the gospel has gone widely throughout the Greco-Roman world, to both Jews and Gentiles (cf. Col. 1:6).

1:24–2:3 The Apostle Paul's Labor for the Gospel. Paul shifts the focus to describe his own work for the gospel generally and then more specifically for the Colossians.

1:24–28 Paul's Suffering and Stewardship of the Mystery. Paul's sufferings are the means God uses to extend the message of the gospel to others.

1:24 I am filling up (Gk. *antanaplēroō*) **what is lacking** (Gk. *hysterēma*) in

Christ's afflictions does not imply that there is a deficiency in Christ's atoning death and suffering on the cross, which would contradict the central message of this letter and all the rest of Scripture as well (cf. Heb. 9:12, 24–26; 10:14). Christ's sufferings are in fact sufficient, and nothing of one's own can be added to secure salvation. What was "lacking" in Christ's afflictions was the future suffering of all who (like Paul) will experience great affliction for the sake of the gospel, as Paul described, e.g., in 2 Cor. 1:8–10. (Cf. Phil. 2:30, where Paul tells the Philippians that Epaphroditus risked his life "to complete [Gk. *anaplēroō*] what was lacking [Gk. *hysterēma*] in your service to me".)

1:25 according to the stewardship from God. Paul views himself as a divinely commissioned "steward" or "administrator" (Gk. *oikonomos*), a word used widely in the Roman world for the administrator of a large household or estate. Paul's responsibility was to **make the word of God fully known**. The "filling up" (Gk. *antanaplēroō*, v. 24) of Christ's afflictions takes place as the proclamation of the word is made "fully known" (Gk. *plēroō*, v. 25). Paul suffers as he proclaims the gospel, and he declares that the basis of forgiveness of sins is Christ's once-for-all suffering and sacrifice.

1:26–27 The mystery does not refer to something mysterious or to a secret ritual. Rather, Paul is speaking of God's unfolding plan for the world and, above all, his plan of redemption through the Messiah (cf. 2:2; 4:3; Eph. 1:9; 3:3–4, 9; 5:32; 6:19). Although elements of God's design were already known through the prophets, key aspects of it were **hidden for ages and generations** and thus were a mystery, which could only be known and understood when they were **revealed** by God. This language occurs often in the book of Daniel. After God reveals to Daniel that Nebuchadnezzar's dream foretold four successive kingdoms culminating in the kingdom of God, Daniel tells the king, "there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days" (Dan. 2:28). At the heart of the mystery that God is now revealing through Paul is the amazing hallmark of the new covenant, **Christ in you, the hope of glory**. God himself, in the person of Christ, will be directly and personally present in the lives of his people, and his presence assures them of a future life with him when he returns. Moreover, Christ does not reside only in believing Jews but also in believing Gentiles, so that there is one unified people of God (cf. Eph. 2:11–22; 3:2–6).

1:28 that we may present everyone mature (Gk. *teleios*) **in Christ**. It was not enough for Paul to see people make a profession of faith in Christ, as important as this is. *Teleios* could be translated as "perfect," but full perfection will be attained only when Christ returns and believers are fully transformed. Until that time, the maturity Christians are to seek stands in contrast with the immaturity of infancy (cf. Eph. 4:14).

1:29–2:3 Paul's Labor for the Colossians. Paul ministers so that every person will be complete in Christ and will see that all wisdom and knowledge are in him.

1:29 Paul is struggling with all his [that is, Christ's] **energy** to help them grow and mature in Christ.

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